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The Significance of Apocalyptic Ideas in the Thought of Thomas Müntzer

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Abstract

This dissertation attempts to explore the apocalyptic dimension of the thought of Thomas Müntzer, a preacher and pastor of the early Reformation period in Germany who became embroiled in the “Peasants’ War” of 1525 and was executed that year following an abortive uprising in which he took a leading part.

Apocalyptic ideas surface frequently in Müntzer’s writings, and the aim here has been, against the background of his theology as a whole, to examine the form and content of these ideas, and particularly the function or rôle they appear to have had in his thinking and praxis.

The dissertation begins with a short introduction to Müntzer. This in no sense purports to be a comprehensive biography, but aims merely to outline the main events in his life, and provide a rudimentary background against which the main study may be read. Some indication of the context out of which Müntzer’s main writings emerged will also be offered.

The second chapter attempts to describe, in so far as this can be done in any schematic way, the main outline of Müntzer’s theology, in particular its firm roots in the soil of medieval German mysticism. A discussion like this is necessary because it is barely possible, and certainly not instructive, to attempt to understand any strand of Müntzer’s thinking, including the apocalyptic, in isolation from his thought as a whole. Furthermore, since the apocalyptic and mystical dimensions are very closely linked in Müntzer’s thought—a point made strongly in the final chapter—this discussion does some vital groundwork for that chapter.

The two longest chapters, three and four, contain the main body of the discussion. Chapter three examines in considerable detail the shape and content of Müntzer’s apocalyptic, and notes how he draws upon a wide range of biblical and other sources as he persistently warns his hearers of the imminent overthrow of the present world order, the separation of the elect from the godless, and the handing over by Christ of the kingdom to the former. The singular rôle Müntzer believes he will have in the upcoming drama is highlighted, as is his conviction that the reshaping of the world will be in accordance with the order of things (ordo rerum) instituted by God at the Creation.

The final chapter attempts to understand Müntzer’s apocalyptic within the whole framework of his theology, and, with the aid of modern computer technology, reveals how even those of his writings which might appear to be the most unambiguously apocalyptic contain a close interweaving of both mystical and apocalyptic themes. Presenting the fruits of a close linguistic analysis of some of these writings, the chapter argues that the mystical terminology Müntzer uses when describing the path to true faith in the individual believer also becomes incorporated into his apocalyptic. There is a close correspondence, in other words, between the mystical categories he employs to describe the reformation of the inner person, and those he adopts to interpret the external world and the signs of the times. A final conclusion of the chapter is that Müntzer’s apocalyptic had serious consequences for his ‘political’ programme: his certainty that the unrest he saw around him was a sign that God was now bringing about a ‘full and final reformation’ of the world gave him a misplaced confidence in the ultimate success of the peasants’ cause, and led him not to take seriously the actual scale of the opposition ranged against them.
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Peter nudged me in some new and unanticipated directions, one being towards the University Computer Centre where Mr Donald Ellis’s help proved invaluable in the production of the concordance upon which chapter IV draws extensively.

A good deal of recent scholarship on Müntzer is untranslated, and I am very grateful to three friends, Ina Elliott, Bruce Hamill, and Stephanie Howard, for their help with translating material, and their efforts to instil in me the rudiments of the German language. Ina, in particular, gave many hours of her time to working with me through some very important recent essays on Müntzer. I should mention here that where a footnote records ‘my trans.’ this should not be taken to mean that the work was done totally unaided or unchecked! Thanks are due, too, to Jocelyn Jacquiery, who very generously produced for me a copy of the manuscript of her forthcoming translation of a new and important biographical study of Müntzer by Hans-Jürgen Goertz.

I would also like to thank, for her no less valuable assistance, Madeline Sim, Secretary to the Theology Faculty, who will always know more about the Faculty’s word-processor than I will.

AWB
The primary sources used throughout this dissertation are:


I

Setting the Scene

Few figures in the early Reformation period have attracted as much scholarly interest, or been the centre of so much debate, as Thomas Müntzer. For the past two hundred years, since Georg Strobel’s *Leben, Schriften und Lehren Thomae Müntzers* published in 1795,¹ a stream—one might be inclined to say nowadays a torrent—of books and articles about him have rolled from the presses of Europe, the States, the USSR and elsewhere. For despite the shortness of his days—he died in all probability before reaching his thirty-seventh birthday—and the paucity of his writings (at any rate when placed alongside the outpourings of a Luther or Calvin) Müntzer continues, as he did in his own day, to fascinate, inspire and antagonise all who take the trouble to read him (and some who don’t!). There is a depth, a complexity, and an originality about his writings which seems continually to prompt new questions about who he was, what he believed, and what he achieved: ‘[t]hrough the thickets of Reformation controversy’, as Tom Scott has rather poetically written, ‘Müntzer has commonly been stalked as dangerous yet exhilarating prey, arousing in the hunter dread and fascination in equal measure.’² Our purpose in this dissertation is not to attempt another assessment of Müntzer’s life, nor to engage in the long-running (and now rather *passe*) debate about whether he was primarily a theologian, revolutionary, or whatever: rather it is to focus on one dimension of his thinking, the apocalyptic one, and to examine what form it took, the influences which may have shaped it, and the extent to which it informed Müntzer’s whole scheme of thought and action. In so doing the broad contours of Müntzer’s theology will be sketched, since no strand of his thought can be properly understood in isolation from the whole. This is undertaken in chapter two. The aim of this introductory chapter is simply to outline very briefly the important events in Müntzer’s life, in the hope of offering a rudimentary background against which the main study itself may be read. Some attempt will be made to describe the situations from which Müntzer’s main writings emerged, though very little by way of comment will be offered on either the events or the writings, since the remainder of this work is given over to this.

Despite the depth of feeling which Müntzer’s name evokes, very little in the way of biographical detail is actually known about him. As Hans-Jürgen Goertz has put it, all that seems to confront


the historian hoping to uncover something of Müntzer’s early years are *verwehle Spuren*, ‘blurred tracks’. We know from the opening words of the ‘Prague Manifesto’ (Larger German Version) that he was born in the quiet German hillside town of Stolberg, but it has been notoriously difficult to find any documentary evidence of his date of birth. Although Ulrich Bubenheimer, an authority on Müntzer’s early years, has suggested 1482 as a likely year of birth, the most commonly accepted dates are 1488 or 1489, the assumption being that Müntzer began his studies at Leipzig University in 1506 (a date about which we can be a little more certain) at the conventional age of seventeen.

Lack of certainty about the details of Müntzer’s birth means that we are also in the dark regarding his social background. At one time the view prevailed that his origins were humble and that he knew from an early age ‘all the bitterness of disgrace and injustice’, but this may have been rather romantic speculation. On the evidence of what remains of a letter Müntzer wrote to his father around 1521 it appears that the family had some means: Müntzer refers to some sort of inheritance which was originally part of his mother’s estate (perhaps the fruits of her labours), and which, following her death, his father is not allowing to pass to him. The inheritance was possibly not insubstantial, for Müntzer later notes, after the dispute with his father had (presumably) fallen out in his favour, that ‘I have much household goods left after the mother’s death...’ If his father had fallen on hard times, as Müntzer’s letter appears to indicate, this was in all probability a recent development, and not necessarily an indication that the family had always known poverty. Neither the occupation nor even the identity of Müntzer’s father is known for certain, though the etymology of the name suggests that his forebears might have been minters or goldsmiths. Until any further discoveries are made, however, it is probably better to refrain from trying to fashion too bold a picture of Müntzer’s

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3 Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer: Mystiker, Apokalyptiker, Revolutionär*, München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1989, pp.38ff. The translations of this work in this dissertation are from Jocelyn Jaquiery’s forthcoming English language edition (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), a manuscript copy of which was very kindly given to me by the translator.

4 CW 362.

5 See the discussion in CW 6, n.1.

6 For some recent discussions about Müntzer’s possible date of birth see Goertz, op.cit., pp.38ff; Scott, op.cit., pp.1ff; and CW 6, n.1.

7 This was the view of, for example, Ernst Bloch: see Goertz, op.cit., p.40.

8 CW 22.

9 CW 31.
early life with so few solid materials.

Between 1506 and 1512 Müntzer appears to have studied at Leipzig (if the ‘Thomas Munczer de Quedlinburgk’ in the university register for winter 1506 is in fact him), and then at Frankfurt an der Oder, gaining, or so it would seem, degrees in the arts and divinity. No extant graduation list of the period for any German university records Müntzer obtaining any degrees, but since he is frequently addressed in letters from both friend and foe as ‘Master’ or ‘Master of arts and Bachelor of sacred Scripture’, there are no real grounds for doubting his qualifications.10 Müntzer himself lays claim to both degrees.11 What effect Müntzer’s study had on his theological development is an interesting point, since the faculties at both Leipzig and Frankfurt would have been firmly in the scholastic tradition, committed to the pursuit of rational explanations for religious belief, and in their teaching could therefore have hardly been more removed from the mystical, experimental theology Müntzer was subsequently to embrace. Müntzer in any case seems to dismiss any learning he may have received as of no consequence: ‘I can testify with Christ and all the elect who have known me from my youth up, to having shown all possible diligence...in pursuing better instruction about the holy and invincible Christian faith’, he writes, but ‘instruction’ here is the kind directly mediated by God: ‘For at no time in my life (God knows I am not lying) did I learn anything about the true exercise of the faith from any monk or priest...I have not heard from a single scholar about the order of God implanted in all creatures, not the tiniest word about it...’12

This passage might be taken as implying that, from his earliest days, Müntzer intended to enter the church, though we cannot be certain of this. At any rate, he was ordained in 1514, and though he undertook teaching and tutoring from time to time to supplement his income, it was the only career he pursued. His first appointment was as a chantry priest at St Michael’s, Brunswick, a post he held until 1522 (though he cannot have spent much time in the parish after 1517). Something of the high esteem in which he was held at Brunswick may be gained from a letter written to him at the time, in which he is addressed as a ‘most learned, worthy, beloved lord, castigator of unrighteousness.’ The writer’s hope that Müntzer may ‘live in health and holiness before God Almighty in the fiery love of purity’ possibly reflects the influence of

10 cf. CW 36, n.223.
11 CW 406.
12 CW 357.
mystical writers in Müntzer’s circle of friends at this time.13

The autumn and winter of 1517 saw Müntzer at Wittenberg, attending lectures given by Johannes Rhagius Aesticampianus, and he may have stayed in the town for a period of some eighteen months, albeit interrupted by brief visits to other cities. This would have been a formative time for Müntzer, for we know that he spent some of his time there studying Plato—particularly the writings on asceticism which echoed Müntzer’s own developing concern with the mystical path of suffering—Quintilian, who deals in his Institution oratoria with the concept of a natural order of creation (ordo rerum), and most likely the Theologia Deutsch, an edition of which was prepared and published by Luther in 1518. Müntzer would also have come into contact with Luther himself at a crucial moment—the 95 Theses were published in November 1517—though it is not unlikely that he had become embroiled in the controversy over indulgences before that time.14 Also at Wittenberg at that time would have been Melanchthon and Karlstadt, and the latter may have stimulated in Müntzer an interest in Augustine.

Müntzer’s whereabouts in 1519 cannot be stated with absolute certainty. He appears to have spent a month or so in Orlamünde, almost certainly at the invitation of Karlstadt who was rector of that parish, and whilst there immersed himself in some writings which were to influence him greatly, those of the mystic Johannes Tauler. He was also in Jüterbog over Easter, standing in for the preacher, Franz Günther. Müntzer’s teaching at this time—to judge from a report by a friar who heard him, and was clearly offended by him—seems to have been close to Luther’s, and he was clearly very outspoken in his criticisms of the Pope, the bishops and some local priests.15 A third port-of-call for Müntzer in 1519 was Leipzig, where he attended the public disputation between Eck and the Wittenberg reformers. This experience may have helped Müntzer to put his disquiet about the present wretched state of the Church in an historical perspective, and prompted him to read the classical accounts of the Church’s origins to see from what heights she had since fallen. Certainly he lost no time after Leipzig in re-reading Augustine and acquiring copies of Eusebius, Hegesippus and Jerome.16 He would have had plenty of time to get to grips with this reading when he took up an appointment in December as

13 CW 6, 7.
14 See, for example, Scott, op.cit., p.9, and the letter from the Rector of St Martin’s School, Brunswick, to Müntzer in CW 9-12.
15 CW 447-450.
16 see CW 14, 15.
confessor to a house of Cistercian nuns at Beuditz, and indeed he makes mention himself of the 'ample time' the post afforded for his studies. His time there ended in April of the following year, however, when he was appointed preacher at St Mary's, Zwickau.

In Zwickau Müntzer continued to denounce and harangue the church and its priests. Something of the flavour of his sermons may be drawn from some comments he makes in a letter to Luther in July 1520. The monks and priests have 'seduced the church of God', he writes, though the laity are little better, having failed to pray for better leaders. Müntzer castigates all the hypocrites who promote not faith 'but their own insatiable avarice', and pledges himself to undertake God's work and 'combat them with unceasing groans and with the trumpet of the word of God.' Zwickau was already a tense place when Müntzer arrived, and his sermons can hardly have helped to ease things. Through his meeting with Nicholas Storch, a leader of the so-called 'Zwickau prophets', Müntzer also learned something of the resentment felt by the local working people, notably the clothmakers, about their conditions. He may have seen, too, how they stood to gain from a reformation of the Church. Storch's mysticism would also have impressed Müntzer, perhaps underlining for him the antithesis that existed between the elect, who relied on direct revelation from God, and the 'bookish' priests with their theology gained from learning rather than experience.

In April 1521, amid considerable uproar, Müntzer was dismissed from Zwickau, and from June until the end of that year he resided in the Bohemian capital of Prague, a well-known centre of radicalism and unrest where the ideas of Hus and Wyclif were still strongly felt. Initially he was well received, but as differences of opinion began to emerge between him and various sectors of the population his position there became less comfortable. Whilst in the city he set down his thoughts in what has become known as his 'Prague Manifesto', of which four versions are extant. Provoked, perhaps, by his unpleasant experiences in the city, but also by a desire to turn his audience to the right paths, Müntzer uses the manifesto to launch into a sustained attack against the 'hell-grounded priests' of the church, who know nothing of the true path to faith which begins with the fear of God, and who thereby deceive those who are placed in their charge. Their days, however, are numbered, for God will shortly call on his servants to

17 CW 14.
18 CW 18, 21.
19 For a discussion of the possible order in which these were written see CW 353-354.
sift out the wheat from the tares, and Müntzer himself has his sickle ready sharpened in anticipation of his call. Yet Müntzer’s appeal never reached its intended audience, for he was moved on from the city before he had a chance to nail up the manifesto: indeed, the Czech translation was never actually completed.

After a year spent going from pillar to post and being ejected from virtually every town he set foot in, Müntzer arrived in Allstedt in March 1523 to take up the pastorate of St John’s Church. Here he seems to have made an immediate impact, for within weeks of his arrival in the town, which had a population of perhaps only 600, reports were circulating that up to 2,000 people were flocking in from the surrounding countryside to hear him preach. Müntzer’s stay in Allstedt, which was to last until the August of the following year, was undoubtedly the most settled period of his adult life. In June he married a former nun, Ottilie von Gersen, and a son was born to them the following Easter. He had the time to give full rein to his not inconsiderable pastoral gifts, and the most striking of the many fruits of his ministry in Allstedt must surely be the new liturgy he fashioned for his flock to enjoy in their own language, the first of its kind in the German tongue. Something of Müntzer’s general concern for his people comes through in a rather touching sentence in a letter to a friend: ‘Dealing with people these days means the sort of work which a mother has when her children have dirtied themselves.’

Not that his sojourn in this quiet backwater dampened Müntzer’s zeal for reform within the church or his hostility towards all who were part of it. One particular focus of his anger was Count Ernst of Mansfeld, who was doing everything within his power to suppress the new doctrines of the reformers and ensure that the traditional teachings of the Catholic church were upheld. Count Ernst declined an invitation from Müntzer to come to Allstedt to debate the question of heresy, but appealed to the elector Frederick to take steps to bring Müntzer to order. Müntzer also wrote to Frederick requesting an opportunity to explain himself, and took the opportunity to remind the elector of the teaching of Daniel, chapter 7, that rulers may only expect to hold power so long as they take a stand against the godless: if they default in their duties, ‘the sword will be taken from them and will be given to the people who burn with zeal so that the godless can be defeated.’ Frederick did not immediately respond to Müntzer’s request for a hearing, but in November he spent a week in Allstedt with his court preacher

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20 CW 104.
21 CW 69.
Spalatin, and whilst there summoned Müntzer and his fellow preacher Haferitz to a disputation. In the wake of this, and in response to some questions directed to him by Spalatin, Müntzer published his *Protestation or Proposition* and *On Counterfeit Faith*, both of which were printed around New Year 1524. In both tracts Müntzer addresses the question of faith, pointing out that it is a gift of God and cannot be acquired through human effort. Of the two, *On Counterfeit Faith* is more directly a reply to Spalatin.

Müntzer’s preaching against the Catholic Church excited some sections of the community in Allstedt, and matters came to a head around Easter 1524 when a small chapel at Mallerbach, just outside of the town, was razed to the ground by fire. The chapel had become a popular place of pilgrimage following a miraculous appearance there by the Virgin Mary, but shortly before its destruction had been closed by the nuns at Naundorf in whose charge it lay. Although Müntzer’s preaching must have been indirectly responsible for this action, and he in no way dissociated himself from it, there is no evidence that he was directly involved. Attempts by the authorities to apprehend the perpetrators of the crime proved fruitless, and following a wrongful arrest of one of the town council members on suspicion of arson, civil war almost broke out in the town between the citizenry and the authorities. Müntzer played a prominent role in urging the people to defend themselves.

Not long after this episode, in July, Müntzer had opportunity to preach before John, the Duke of Saxony (brother of the elector Frederick), and his son Prince John Frederick. With considerable boldness he reiterated his views on the decline and deformation of the church from her original virginal purity, lambasted the false teachers responsible for her present adulterous state, and demonstrated how God is now revealing to the elect, through dreams and visions, ‘the great need for a full and final reformation in the near future.’ Müntzer took as his text the second chapter of Daniel, which recounts how only the prophet himself was able to interpret King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a multi-layered statue fashioned of different metals. Müntzer strove to present himself to the princes as a ‘new Daniel’, one able to interpret the signs of the times for them; and the signs were that the final layer of the statue, the Holy Roman Empire of which they were part, was very shortly to be destroyed by ‘the stone dislodged from the mountain’, namely Christ himself. The princes must obey the injunction of Romans 13 and

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22 CW 244.
'sweep aside' all those who obstruct the gospel. Their inaction following this appeal appears to have convinced Müntzer that the way forward to a reformation must lie in the creation of a new league or covenant between God and humankind. Müntzer actually formed two leagues during his time in Allstedt, with the intention of bringing the people together with a common purpose of overthrowing the wicked and preparing the way for God’s final transformation of the world.

Not for the first time pressure was building up against Müntzer. In July Luther wrote his famous Letter to the Princes of Saxony concerning the Rebellious Spirit, denouncing Müntzer, whom he had earlier called ‘that Satan in Allstedt’, in the strongest terms for being guided by an evil spirit, preaching a false gospel, and inciting the people to violence. In order to fulfil their God-given mandate to preserve the peace and punish the wrongdoer, Luther exhorted the princes to lose no time in banishing Müntzer and his followers from the country - a somewhat different interpretation of the Romans 13 passage from the one they had earlier received from Allstedt! The princes, for their part, though proceeding more cautiously than Luther had exhorted them, also felt driven to examine Müntzer more closely. On 31 July Müntzer and two councillors of the town of Allstedt were interrogated at Weimar, the residence of duke John. Müntzer came off badly, and was instructed to disband his league and refrain from preaching and publishing. Rather than obey these injunctions, however, he left Allstedt secretly on the night of 7 August.

He arrived shortly afterwards in the Reichstadt of Mühlhausen, where he quickly teamed up with the radical priest Heinrich Schwertfeger, known as Pfeiffer. Pfeiffer had already attracted quite a following, and some official opposition, as a result of his anti-clerical stand, and the two men began to draw up a programme of reform. They failed to win enough popular support, however, and in September, following a week of unrest, both were expelled from the city. Müntzer then seems to have gravitated towards Nuremberg, where he managed to secure the services of a printer and published A Manifest Exposé (of which there is also extant a shorter and rather milder version entitled The Testimony of the First Chapter of the Gospel of Luke), and A Highly Provoked Vindication and a Refutation of the Unspiritual Soft-Living Flesh in Wittenberg, both of which he had begun to draft shortly before his departure from Allstedt. The former is the longest of his writings, and treats, in a rather haphazard fashion which

23 CW 245-246.
possibly reflects the speed at which it was written, the main themes found in his earlier writings: the nature of true faith, the deceitfulness and arrogance of the priests and scholars who teach the people error, and the anticipated separation of the elect and the godless. The *Vindication and Refutation* is a savage and unrestrained attack on Luther, clearly intended as a riposte to the *Letter to the Princes*.

If Müntzer regarded his first stay in Mühlhausen as something of an anti-climax, his return to the imperial city in late February 1525 might have seemed more promising. The city had undergone a political change in the intervening months, and Müntzer was able to assume the post of rector of St Mary’s, with a degree of popular approval. The region of Thuringia, in which Mühlhausen was situated, had also become meanwhile one of the main centres of what we now know as the Peasants’ War, the wave of uprisings which took place in many parts of Central Germany in 1524-1525 as the peasantry and artisans responded to the hardship and oppression they were forced to endure. In Mühlhausen Müntzer formed another covenant, the Eternal League of God, but this time it had an offensive rather than purely defensive purpose, and an unambiguously military structure. This action, and Müntzer’s writings during this period, point unmistakably to the conclusion that he saw the peasants’ revolt as a sign that the world had come to the Last Days, and he was determined himself to be involved in the struggle. Filled with confidence that he was engaged in ‘the Lord’s fight’, Müntzer set out on 26 April to travel to Langensalza, accompanied by Pfeiffer and some 400 followers, under the banner of the Eternal League. In due course the party was joined by some peasants at Gormar to form a Mühlhausen-Thuringian army, and a further 700 people joined up at Ebeleben. *En route* a number of abbeys and nunneries were looted and pillaged by the troop, and in early May they indulged in a whole week of plunder and destruction, laying waste large numbers of castles, monasteries and other civic and religious buildings in the region of Eichsfeld in the west.

Following this campaign Müntzer and Pfeiffer headed back to Mühlhausen, while a smaller detachment went to Frankenhausen where the dukes of Mansfeld were preparing to do battle with the peasants. Realising the vulnerability of their situation the Frankenhausen contingent appealed to Mühlhausen for support, but inexplicably Müntzer waited several days before responding, and then set off on the two day march with just 300 men. Perhaps Müntzer’s supreme confidence in the success of the campaign he was about to mount - clearly demonstrated in his letters of the time - could account for the delay. In any case, it put the Frankenhausen army at a disadvantage, and lost them any tactical advantage they may have
earlier held. But in fact their whole campaign seems to have been doomed from the start, for in addition to being heavily outnumbered by Count Ernst’s troops, and pathetically ill-equipped, the camp to which they had withdrawn on the night before the battle, far from being a stronghold, left them in an extremely exposed position. Undeterred, Müntzer assumed command of the troops, dismissed with contempt a conciliatory letter from one of the counts, issued a threatening and abusive letter to Count Ernst, and continued to encourage his followers to see victory as theirs through the power of God. Somehow, though, a plea for mercy from the peasants did find its way to the princes the next morning, eliciting in response an offer that if the ‘false prophet Thomas Müntzer’ were handed over, alive, they might yet be spared. However tempted they might have been to take this escape route, Müntzer in the end prevailed, aided by the fortuitous appearance of a halo around the sun which seemed, in view of its similarity to the rainbow emblazoned on the flag of the Eternal League, to be an unmistakable sign that God was indeed with them.

This notwithstanding the inevitable happened shortly afterwards, and within moments the motley peasant band was routed and massacred. Some 6000 died in the onslaught, and a further 600 were captured. Müntzer was one of the few who managed to escape, but he was soon picked up in a house in Frankenhausen where he had been hiding, together with his ‘sack’ of papers. He was kept imprisoned in Heldrungen for a week, during which time he wrote a last letter to the community at Mühlhausen and was subjected to interrogation and torture. A ‘recantation’ was publicised on 17 May, though its authenticity may be doubted.24 Finally, on 27 May, both Müntzer and Pfeiffer (who had been captured fleeing as the princes attempted to overrun Mühlhausen) were beheaded, their heads and bodies being stuck up on pikestaffs for public edification. Müntzer’s widow Ottilie later petitioned the council of Mühlhausen and duke George for custody of her husband’s belongings, but apparently without success.

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We have retraced, albeit with haste, the milestones in Müntzer’s life - or at least the ones which history has allowed us to find; it is time now to begin to narrow our focus more closely towards our chosen theme. We shall begin by looking at the general outline of Müntzer’s theology, in so far as it is possible to do this in any systematic way, before moving to a close examination of the place within it of an apocalyptic, and the extent to which that may have

24 See CW 439; Scott, op.cit., pp.167-168.
underpinned an expectation of a 'full and final reformation in the near future'.
The Mystical Basis of Thomas Müntzer's Theology

Important though the apocalyptic element is in Müntzer's thought, it has to be understood within the context of the whole framework of his theology. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to sketch something of this framework, and to explore in particular its deep roots in medieval German mysticism. In this way some necessary groundwork will be done for a consideration of the main focus of this dissertation, the apocalyptic dimension of Müntzer's thought and activity.

Müntzer's indebtedness to what we might call the medieval mystical tradition is a commonplace of reformation scholarship. Hans Jürgen Goertz, for example, entitles an essay on Müntzer's theological basis for revolution 'The Mystic with the Hammer', and notes that 'the structural elements of [his] theology were derived from the practical (not the speculative) mysticism of the Middle Ages.'

Goertz's position, restated in his most recent studies of Müntzer, has consistently been that the 'basic premise' of his theology was mysticism: although other influences were clearly present, they 'contributed important content' to it 'only within the framework of its basically mystical pattern.' Werner Packull also stresses the centrality of the mystical element in Müntzer's theology: 'The theological significance of Müntzer lay precisely in the fact that he sought to answer the problems raised by Luther from the medieval mystical perspective', he writes. Against Luther's emphasis on 'the preached word of God' as the medium by which faith is communicated, 'Müntzer favoured the mystical explanation pinpointing [faith's] arrival in the soul', and 'reiterated the mystical emphasis on the

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2 '...dürfte es nicht abwegig sein, am mystischen Grundansatz festzuhalten...' (it may not be misleading to keep to the basic mystical premise...), Hans Jürgen Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer: Mystiker, Apokalyptiker, Revolutionär*, p.165. Cf. Goertz, 'Thomas Müntzer: Revolutionary Between the Middle Ages and Modernity', (trans. James M. Stayer), *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol.LXIV, January 1990, No.1, p.28: '...we have to say that in the first place Müntzer was a mystic and only in the second place was he apocalyptic.'
3 Goertz, 'The Mystic with the Hammer...', p.91.
transhistorical inner Word.’ Müntzer ‘implicitly accepted the mystical anthropology.’

Reinhard Schwarz, in his contribution to an important collection of essays on Müntzer published in 1989, has outlined the main points of contact between Müntzer and the early German mystics, particularly Johannes Tauler, Heinrich Suso and the author(s) of the *Theologia Deutsc.b.* Tauler’s influence on Müntzer has also recently been noted by Scott, Matheson, Fauth, Gritsch and Friesen. In his earlier and seminal study of Müntzer’s apocalyptic Schwarz was careful to argue that, while Müntzer clearly draws upon the German mystics for many of his ideas, he also differs from them at a number of points. His belief that the experience of being taught by the Holy Spirit will be universally enjoyed, for example, owes more to the apocalyptic ideas of the Taborites - an extreme chiliastic and anarcho-communist group which emerged in Bohemia in the 15th century - and Joachim of Fiore, than to mysticism. Schwarz also notes that a number of biblical references which Müntzer frequently uses - Isaiah 54:13, Jeremiah 31:34, John 6:45 - had no role for the German mystics. We must certainly concur that in so far as Müntzer becomes increasingly concerned with the transformation of the world, and with ameliorating the economic position of the common people, his theology takes off in a direction not generally followed by the ‘mainstream’ mystical tradition, yet even here we need to try to probe through to Müntzer’s motivation. He does in general display a ‘rigorist and mystical contempt for material things’, as

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9 ibid., p.24.
Matheson writes, and when he does take up the cause of the poor and oppressed it appears to be as much from a concern about the *spiritual* consequences of such oppression as anything else. Forced to work day in and day out to survive, the people have no time to attend to the health of their souls, and have to rely for ‘spiritual guidance’ upon the learned scholars and priests, who of course only *mis*lead them. Thus the people never get to hear about the possibility of receiving a revelation from God. Overall, then, the mystical underpinning of Müntzer’s theology is never far from the surface, and, as will be discussed later, also informs both his apocalyptic and his politics. We need, therefore, to begin by examining its contours.

What does it mean to say that mysticism was the foundation of Müntzer’s theology? Clearly it would not be appropriate to detail here the origin and development of the European, or even the German, mystical tradition, though some brief reference to its essential tenets would be useful. The origins of the word ‘mysticism’ can be traced to the Greek adjective *mous* (= closed), and the related verb *mouso* (= to shut or close (the lips or eyes)), from which emerged a group of terms associated with the Greek mystery religions like *mystikon*, *mysterion* and *mystes*. There is an important distinction, however, between the way these terms were defined in traditional Greek thought, and their usage in early Christian writings. As Andrew Louth explains, in the former ‘the use of such language [was] little more than a stylistic device to highlight the idea that truth is hard of access, less something discovered than something disclosed...’ whereas in the New Testament, *mysterion* refers rather more specifically to ‘the mystery of God’s love for us revealed in Christ’. Here the element of ‘mystery’ resides in the fact that it is *God’s* love which is being made known, and although Christ ‘makes it accessible to us’, it can never be *fully* comprehended or appropriated in the human experience: it ‘remains hidden in its revealing, inexhaustible and inaccessible in the very event of its being made known and accessible to us in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.’

From this central concern with the love of God and its, albeit restricted, accessibility to the believer, three main strands of meaning of the term *mysterion* emerged. These are set out particularly clearly in the influential sixth century writings of Denys the Areopagite (sometimes known as Pseudo-Dionysius), who was largely responsible for the introduction of the term

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'mystical' into the Christian tradition. 12 Firstly, there is the deeper or 'mystical' meaning of the Scriptures, which are the locus of God's revelation of the mystery of God's love; secondly, the 'mystical' significance of the sacraments, which are the means by which Christians enter into, and participate in, the mystery of Divine love; and thirdly, 'mystical theology', which focuses, unlike the preceding two, not on the ways in which God may be known, but on the effect such knowledge has on the life and the soul of the believer. Here the emphasis is on the surrender of the soul to God, and the outworking of a participation in the mystery of God in Christ in a life characterised by faith, hope and love. Also at the heart of Denys' teaching, and that of many subsequent mystical writers, is an emphasis on the 'three ways' or 'moments' of engagement with God: via purgativa, purification (from sin and ignorance inherited from the Fall); via illuminativa, illumination (or restoration to the 'life of grace'); and via unitiva, union, in which humankind regains the state of Paradise lost by Adam at the Fall. 13

We can be certain from his writings and what we know of his life that Müntzer was familiar with the mystical tradition which developed from Denys and the patristic writers. We know, for example, that he read the mystical treatise Theologia Germanica, which takes for granted the three-fold path towards union with God of purification, illumination and union. This work, which Müntzer knew in the version prepared by Luther in 1518, was originally compiled around 1350 by the German group known as 'The Friends of God', an associate of which was the Dominican Johann Tauler whose influence on Müntzer we noted earlier. Luther, in fact, attributed authorship of the Theologia Germanica to Tauler himself. Given Luther's very high opinion of Tauler's sermons and writings it is possible that Müntzer first encountered them during his visit to Wittenberg in late 1517, though we know with much greater certainty that he devoted much of his month-long stay in Orlamünde in the spring of 1519 to immersing himself in those works. 14 George Strobel, in his study of Müntzer first published in 1795, mentions that Müntzer carried around with him Tauler's sermons in two volumes, which, if true, gives

13 Louth, loc.cit., p.273. For a useful summary of these stages as they appear in the writings of a number of different mystics see Joseph Bernhart, 'Introduction' in idem (ed), The Theologia Germanica (trans. Susanna Winkworth), London: Victor Gollancz, 1950, pp.20ff. For a comment on Müntzer and these three ways see below, p.20.
some indication of their importance to him.  

A number of central themes in Tauler are echoed in Müntzer, particularly those dealing with the relationship of the soul to Christ. Tauler stressed, as did Müntzer, that true faith is attained only as the believer seeks conformity with Christ: 'no one can believe in CHRIST until he has first conformed himself to him', Müntzer writes in On Counterfeit Faith. To conform to Christ, to follow in his steps, means nothing less than to enter with him into his sufferings and tribulation. It is the 'bitter Christ' of the cross who is to be followed, not the 'honey-sweet' version preached by Luther and the scholars. In following the suffering Christ the soul gradually renounces all earthly desires, seeking instead to obey only the will of God, until it finally reaches a state where the flesh is fully overcome. This state is called by Tauler, Müntzer and many others in the mystical tradition Gelassenheit - yieldedness, or complete surrender to the will of God. For both Tauler and Müntzer this path of renunciation and suffering was not an option for the particularly 'spiritually minded' Christian, but the only way true faith and knowledge of God could be experienced. As Scott writes, bringing out the starkness of the alternatives Müntzer posits:

Those who receive the Spirit through tribulation and forsakenness will experience true faith; those who will not empty themselves of creaturely desires remain sinful and cannot experience God. In the contrast between experienced and inexperienced, true and counterfeit faith, Müntzer distinguishes the elect from the damned.

'Each man must have the spirit seven-fold', writes Müntzer in his 'Prague Manifesto' - echoing

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16 CW 223.

17 CW 220, 366. On Müntzer’s usage of the term ‘bitter’ see below, p.42, n.57.

18 Gelassenheit is used by Luther, Karlstadt, and of course many mystical writers, including Tauler in whose writings Müntzer may have first encountered it; cf. Rupp, Patterns..., pp.85, n.2, and 118-119, n.4; Gritsch, Thomas Müntzer: A Tragedy of Errors, p.13, n.42; Ronald J. Sider, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974, pp.209f; Steinmetz, op.cit., p.128; Schwarz, Die apokalyptische Theologie Thomas Müntzers, p.25. Schwarz (p.26) notes that Müntzer infused the term as he found it in Tauler with a sense of apocalyptic urgency. For further examples of similarity in terminology between Müntzer and Luther see below, p.20, n.34, and p.25, n.63.

19 Scott, op .cit., p.35.
Tauler’s doctrine of the seven stages of salvation - ‘otherwise he cannot hear or understand the living God.’

Tauler and the author of the *Theologia Germanica* were not the only mystical writers with whose work Müntzer was familiar. We infer from a rather jaunty letter to him from a nun called Ursula that he had read some Henry Suso (a contemporary of Tauler and a fellow Dominican), and Rupp makes a brief reference to the possibility that he may have come across three of Eckhart’s sermons in works ascribed to Tauler. Rupp and Scott also detect in Müntzer the possible influence of the *Book of Spiritual Poverty*, a very influential fourteenth century mystical work assumed in Müntzer's day to be a work of Tauler, but emanating almost certainly, like the *Theologia Germanica*, from the Dominican ‘Friends of God’ in the Rhineland. However, useful though it is to locate Müntzer within the broader mystical tradition, and to note themes within it upon which he drew, it is only by taking a step further and examining the particular emphases and interpretations he placed on some of these themes, notably what constitutes true faith and how it is obtained, that a proper understanding of Müntzer's theology may be formed. As Rupp summarises his relationship to the mystical tradition,

Behind Müntzer's pattern there is no doubt an echo of the classical mystical division: purgation, illumination and union; but these are not words he much uses... A great deal of Müntzer's polemic is concerned with Christian initiation, with the Advent or coming of true faith.

Müntzer has, in fact, only a limited interest in the illuminative aspect, and almost none at all in the unitive: his concern is largely with the purgative.

Before proceeding further perhaps a brief word of caution may be in order against an expectation of finding in Müntzer too highly developed or systematized a theology. Unlike

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20 CW 363.
22 Rupp, *Patterns...*, pp.277-8, n.2.
Luther or Calvin, beside whose volumes of collected works his own appear very slender indeed, Müntzer's life was summarily extinguished at an early stage, with the consequence that his extant writings span a period of somewhat less than six years. Further, they consist mostly of correspondence, tracts, sermons and liturgies, written largely in response to the pressing issues of the day, and whilst a good deal of other reformation literature which has come down to us was doubtless conceived under similar constraints, an understanding of the circumstances in which Müntzer produced his work should warn us, as Rupp puts it, against 'raking' them 'in terms of some pre-conceived ideological pattern, or with the categories of Lutheran orthodoxy.' Müntzer nowhere attempts a coherent exposition of his doctrines.25

In seeking to make his theological position understood Müntzer frequently chose to contrast it with what he termed the 'fraudulent' and 'perverse' teaching of his one-time mentor and later arch-enemy Martin Luther,26 and an examination of the major differences between the two would be a useful way forward towards an understanding of the former's teaching. It is worth noting at the outset, however, that the Luther whom Müntzer persistently and vigorously denigrates does not always appear to have much in common with the reformer of Wittenberg whom historians and theologians have reconstructed for us from his copious writings and numerous contemporary references. One factor impeding Müntzer from making any attempt to engage seriously with Luther's thinking was the extreme animosity each felt, from about 1523, towards the other, and to which each gave vent in the most vitriolic terms imaginable whenever the opportunity arose. (The graphic and often colourful imagery each uses to denounce the other is a highly entertaining feature of their writings.) In addition, Müntzer notoriously misunderstood, or chose to misunderstand and therefore parodied, certain of Luther's key themes, notably solafideism and his strong emphasis on the authority of the Word. Elliger has argued that Müntzer had a 'misunderstanding which prevented approach to the kernel of Luther's view', an opinion echoed by Stayer, who also goes on to point out that, in any case, 'No one in the Reformation era worked particularly hard to win a 'fair' and 'balanced' understanding of the theology of an opposing camp.' 27 Goertz also notes that the two men

26 CW 339, 332.
'faced each other uncomprehendingly' and 'were talking past each other'. Matheson is inclined to think that 'Müntzer read Luther's writings once and once only, and then proceeded to write a vindication of his own position, making no attempt at a systematic answer to Luther's provocative questions and arguments.' All of which suggests that perhaps we should approach some of the stark antitheses Müntzer likes to draw between his own religion of experience and the 'easily come by' faith of 'Brother Soft-Life' with a little caution. It does not, however, render invalid a comparative approach as a 'way in' to Müntzer's theology.

The key issue for Müntzer, as has been briefly noted already, is what constitutes 'authentic' faith in Christ and how it is to be appropriated by the individual believer. The qualification 'authentic' or 'real' is vital here, because there was, for Müntzer, another type of faith abroad, preached by the biblical scholars with their 'stubborn and ignorant minds', which he labels *geticht* - 'false', 'counterfeit', or 'imaginary'. This was nothing but 'the most potent poison', lulling those to whom it was preached into a false sense of security. Unlike true faith, which could be known only through testing and suffering, this other faith could be simply and painlessly appropriated by following the direction of 'pleasure-loving, ambitious' preachers who have no awareness of that 'true fear of God' of which the Bible speaks. They offer merely a 'speculative faith', because they know nothing of that faith borne of tribulation to which the entire Scriptures and the lives of 'the patriarchs, prophets [and] the apostles' bear eloquent testimony.

The faith which did know about 'distress', 'toil' and 'the pure fear of God' was for Müntzer the only true faith. Persistently and aggressively he expounded the necessity of an experimental faith, contrasting it with the 'untested faith' of the biblical scholars. Drawing on a rich supply of original and often vivid metaphors, and an even more impressive range of biblical texts, Müntzer castigated the perpetrators of the easily-come-by faith, and argued that God can only be
known through a long and painful process of extreme testing and inner turmoil (*anfechtung*), self-emptying, and discipline - of conformity, in other words, to Christ and his anguish and death.

...a man can no more claim that he is a Christian before his cross has made him receptive to God's work and word than a field can produce a heavy crop of wheat until it has been ploughed. The elect friend of God who yearns for and endures the word is no counterfeit hearer, but a diligent pupil of his master, constantly and ardently watching all that he does, seeking to be found conformable to him in every respect, to the best of his ability.

Müntzer writes at the beginning of his essay *On Counterfeit Faith*. 'No one is a son of God unless he suffers with him', Müntzer tells Luther in 1523, and no one can teach about conformity with God, he writes in the note 'On Following Christ', unless they are in conformity with Christ. Conformity with Christ (*christformige*) and with God (*gotformige*) was certainly an important teaching for Müntzer, as it was, for example, for Staupitz. Perhaps it could be argued that for Müntzer the second stage in the mystical path, after purgation, is more accurately to be understood as 'conformity' rather than 'illumination'. Müntzer's debt to the mystical tradition in which he steeped himself is further exemplified in the passage quoted above from *On Counterfeit Faith* - and not just inasmuch as the term *der ausserwelte freund Gottis*, which Müntzer uses very frequently, appears there. The metaphor of the soul as a ploughed field is a commonplace of mystical literature, and Müntzer draws upon it often. The picture is of God as the farmer who desires to see each field producing a good harvest. In its natural state, however, the field or soul is barren, full of 'weeds, thistles and thorns', and a fit breeding ground only for 'the raging devil in the guise of light and showy corn-cockles, etc'. If it is to produce anything 'good' it 'must suffer the sharp edge of the plough-share'. True faith, then, cannot be produced other than by God working

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35 CW 214; cf. 223.
36 CW 57, 396.
37 See CW 231, n.12, for a brief discussion of this term in Biblical and mystical usage; cf. 214, n.9.
38 CW 199.
in the believer, fashioning that person, through much distress and tribulation (*anfechtung*), into the likeness of God's Son. The profound contrast between this experimental faith, and the untried, untested version preached by the 'faithless, abandoned biblical scholars', could not be clearer. They 'blether on non-stop' about faith, but have no experience of that whereof they speak; they get it all from books, and then 'vomit it out undigested like a stork [disgorging] frogs to her young ones in the nest.' The true believers, however, feel the cutting edge of the spirit at work in their hearts, purging them of all desires and lusts of the flesh. Like Christ himself, the corner-stone, to use a different metaphor, they 'have to be knocked into shape by the master-mason if [they] are to grow into a true living building.'

Müntzer employs a quite distinctive mystical vocabulary when he speaks of this process of the soul breaking free from the lusts and desires of the flesh. A not uncommon literary device among the mystics was to add the prefix 'ent-' to many ordinary verbs to stress, as it were, the negating of all bad influences and evil desires, and Müntzer also engages in this practice. Schwarz quotes some examples of this mystical vocabulary—*entblößen* (to reveal, to lay bare), *entfremden* (to estrange, to place at a distance), *entgroben* (to purge), *entsetzen* (to alarm) and *entwerden* (to 'get away from' one's self, to 'dis-become')—and then discusses the extent to which these terms were significant for Müntzer. He highlights the one occasion on which Müntzer uses the term *entwerden*, in his undated letter to George. Here Müntzer contrasts the pious person with the 'mad biblical scholars': they like to 'display their wares', to make a public exhibition of their religion, whereas the followers of Christ can echo the words of the Psalmist as he speaks of himself being 'reduced to nothing'. 'How can I know what is of God or the devil', Müntzer asks rhetorically, '...unless I have got away from myself' (...das ich myr entworden byn.).

The term *entsetzen* appears rather more frequently in Müntzer, usually to describe the 'alarm' that the fear of man causes an individual before s/he is aware of the fear of God which can overcome it. 'Why be alarmed (*entsetzen*) by the phantom powers of men?' Müntzer asks the Princes during his Sermon on Daniel, when 'God is at your side, closer at

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39 *CW* 270, 358-359.
40 *CW* 220-221.
42 *CW* 106; F 426. *Entwerfung* also appears in Suso, who alludes to the process of escaping from the self by transcending the self, by 'dis-becoming'. He also employs the term *entbildet* (un-formed (from creatureedom)) to describe the state of the soul before it becomes 'formed (*gebildet*) with Christ and transformed (*überbildet*) in the Godhead'; Bernhart, op.cit., p. 90.
hand than you can credit...If we fear God, why should we be alarmed (entsetzen) by rootless, feckless men?'

Abraham is an example for Müntzer of ein entsetzer mensch, one who is freed from those desires which hold back the fear of God. When God appeared to him in a vision he was 'terribly alarmed' (entsetzt), but because he knew what it was to be 'caught up (in the fear of God)' (ein entsetzer mensch), he was able 'to draw the line between the impossible and the possible.'

Other 'ent-' terms Müntzer uses include entgroben, and two which Schwarz does not mention, entsin(c)ken (to collapse or sink) and entledigen (to release or acquit). In introducing his new German liturgy Müntzer defends his decision to follow 'the sense rather than the letter' on the grounds that, 'at a time like ours...we still need much formation in the things of the spirit if we are to be purged of (entgrbet) our traditional ways.' In the 'Prague Manifesto' Müntzer writes that, in order to be able to hear what God is, 'the elect man must clash with the damned and his forces must collapse (entsincken) before the latter.'

Entledigen Müntzer uses in an apocalyptic context: in these last days God will bring about a transformation of the world, and 'will release (entledigen) [the Christian people] from its shame, and pour out his spirit over all flesh...'

Luther, we must observe, treated with contempt the usage of these terms by those he dismissed as die Schwärmer (the enthusiasts), though Müntzer refuted his allegation that they were neologisms, claiming that his use of them was warranted by Scripture.

In classic mystical style Müntzer stresses that it is only through direct encounter with God that the individual receives faith: 'you will never have faith', he writes, 'unless God himself gives it you, and instructs you in it.' He posits the need for a personally revealed faith over against the sort which blind guides like Luther imagine can be acquired through Scripture alone:

If someone had never had sight or sound of the Bible at any time in his life he could still hold the one true Christian faith because of the true teaching of the spirit, just like all those who composed

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43 CW 245, 251; F 257, 263.
45 CW 168; F 162.
46 CW 368; cf. 150. F 502; cf. 463.
47 CW 244; cf. 155. F 255; cf. 468.
48 Schwarz, 'Thomas Müntzer und die Mystik', pp. 286-287.
49 CW 199.
the holy Scripture without any books at all.\textsuperscript{50} 

It is not that Müntzer wants to minimise the value of the Scriptures, for those who have access to them, as a source of testimony about God: indeed, his quite overpowering array of quotations from across the whole spectrum of the Bible - he directly quotes from all but nine of its sixty-six books, as well as from four in the Apocrypha - testifies to the central place it held in his thinking.\textsuperscript{51} As Christopher Rowland writes, Müntzer 'did not despise the Scriptures. What he inveighed against was book religion.'\textsuperscript{52} A mere reading of the Scriptures alone was no substitute for experience in matters of faith: the Bible, as Schwarz notes, did not have the \textit{vermittelnde Funktion} (mediatory function) for Müntzer that it had for Luther.\textsuperscript{53} 'Even if you have already devoured all the books of the Bible', Müntzer can claim, 'you must still suffer the sharp edge of the plough-share.'\textsuperscript{54} Indeed, even if a person has 'devoured a hundred thousand Bibles...he can say nothing about God which has any validity': that person must experience 'the inward word which is to be heard in the abyss of the soul through the revelation of God.'\textsuperscript{55} 

Thus the gravest distorters of the truth were the so-called scholars of the Bible - among them Luther\textsuperscript{56} - who missed the whole point of Scripture through their blindness. Part of their problem was that they read the Scriptures selectively, drawing proof-texts from here and there to support a particular position, but ignoring the whole thrust of the book: 'They purloin one or two little texts but fail to integrate them with the teaching which gushes forth from the genuine source.'\textsuperscript{57} Müntzer, however, adopted what Matheson calls 'a new hermeneutic, an

\textsuperscript{50} CW 274.  
\textsuperscript{51} The nine canonical books he does not draw upon are Nehemiah, Esther, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Haggai from the Old Testament, and Philemon, II John and III John from the New. The three New Testament books comprise just one chapter each.  
\textsuperscript{52} Christopher Rowland, \textit{Radical Christianity: A Reading of Recovery}, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988, p.97; on Müntzer's attitude to the Bible see also Rupp, \textit{Thomas Müntzer: Prophet of Radical Christianity}, pp.476f.  
\textsuperscript{53} Schwarz, \textit{Die apokalyptische Theologie Thomas Müntzers...}, p.33.  
\textsuperscript{54} CW 199.  
\textsuperscript{55} CW 240. Commenting on this passage, Schwarz argues that by emphasising how the Spirit of God can be experienced without any mediation, including the sacraments and the gospel, Müntzer goes beyond others in the mystical tradition: Schwarz, 'Thomas Müntzer und die Mystik', p.291.  
\textsuperscript{56} cf. Goertz, 'The Mystic with the Hammer', p.91.  
\textsuperscript{57} CW 73.
interpretation of Scripture which reflects its wholeness and immediacy.58 But not only did the scholars miss the whole point of Scripture, they even had the gall to suggest that listening to them expound it was all one needed to do to procure faith. In their self-sufficiency they decried the possibility of direct revelation from God which for Müntzer was indispensable for true faith: 'Scripture amply stills our needs, thank you,' they say, 'we don't believe in any revelation; God no longer speaks like that.' Müntzer could not rebuke them too strongly: 'they tap around in Holy Scripture so blindly', he writes,

that they refuse to open their eyes and ears to the way in which it exhorts us in the most emphatic manner possible that it is by God alone that we should, and indeed must, be taught.59 They conveniently ignore the fact that the prophets always referred to God speaking in the present tense - 'Thus says the Lord' - and not the past - 'Thus said the Lord'. They need reminding, too, of the Scripture which says that we do not live by bread alone but by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God, noting, Müntzer adds, that this word proceeds from the mouth of God and not from books.60

This whole question of revelation is crucial for Müntzer. The biblical scholars deny that God any longer 'reveals his divine mysteries to his dear friends through genuine visions of direct words', and prefer to 'adhere to their bookish ways' (unerfahren weyse: literally 'without experience'). They even 'make a laughing stock of those who have experience of the revelation of God'.61 Yet for Müntzer it is axiomatic that the God who spoke to humankind in biblical times through dreams and visions should continue so to do today. A leitmotif of the Sermon to the Princes, for example, is not only the God-given ability of Daniel to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream aright, but the significance of gesichten and trewmen in general as channels through which God communicates to God's people. Müntzer presents in this Sermon a catalogue of biblical figures to whom God spoke in visions - the patriarchs Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph, and, from the New Testament, Peter, Paul and Joseph the father of Jesus - noting that in almost all cases they received a divine message during a time of great tribulation (betrübnis). And this, of course, is why the 'pleasure-loving pigs, the smart-alecs who have

59 CW 298.
60 CW 359-360, 44.
61 CW 235-236.
never been put to the test' (including Brother Fatted Pig and Brother Soft Life himself) reject the whole idea of revelations. Yet to expect visions, Müntzer continues, 'and to receive them while in tribulation and suffering, is in the true spirit of the apostles', into which the elect are now entering. Of what use, anyway, would all these biblical references to visions be if we were not to expect them in our own day, Müntzer asks. Thus it should not surprise anyone if the elect do receive direct messages from God, particularly in these last days when the prophecy to Joel - 'our sons and daughters will prophesy and have dreams and visions etc' - is beginning to come to pass. Indeed, God is already making God's purposes known: 'I know it for a fact...that the spirit of God is revealing to many elect and pious men at this time the great need for a full and final reformation in the near future.'

Another experience which the godless scoff at in their ignorance is the first movement (bewegung) of the spirit in the soul, which clears the ground, as it were, for God to work. '...so few people can say anything about the first movement of the spirit', Müntzer writes in A Manifest Expose; '...it is all so laughable to them because they have never tasted the patient endurance (langweyl) which is the only way to discover the work of God'. Experience of langweyl, a period of waiting, repentance, rejection of sin, and anticipation of the spirit, is another crucial distinguishing mark of the true child of God over against the false. It is not an option for the believer, for there are no two ways to faith, and no short cuts ('one does not sneak into a house by the window'). Thus the scholar will never be able to grasp the meaning of Scripture, even if 'the whole of it has been expounded to him in a human way', until

he has been trodden underfoot with all his habitual ways in the wine-press. There he will attain such poverty of spirit as to acknowledge that there is no faith in him at all; only the desire to learn true faith.

The metaphor here is typical of those Müntzer employs to demonstrate how tortuous and humbling is the path of true faith. It is indeed the narrow way. Yet Müntzer is clear from his

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62 CW 242-244.
63 Another expression found in Luther (see Rupp, Patterns..., pp.280-282).
64 CW 300/302.
65 CW 220.
66 CW 224.
reading of the Scriptures that the elect have to come to God this way, and in no other: if the
soul 'is to be filled with the good things of God which never pass away' then first it must be
emptied of all that pertains to self - and this cannot be achieved by simply responding, at an
intellectual level, to the exhortation 'Believe! believe! Be firm, be firm with a strong, strong
faith'.67 To begin there must be a movement of the spirit of God in the abyss of the soul
(Seelengrund) leaving the stricken person trembling before the very name of God because of
the worldly desires s/he has harboured there. This sense of awe and reverence as God's word
comes into the heart Müntzer speaks of in terms of Verwunderung.68 With the apostle the
stricken one cries out 'O, what a wretched man I am', and 'What on earth am I to do now? I
am at my wits' end, and receive no comfort from God or man. For God is plaguing me with
my conscience...'69 Then follows a process of self emptying, of purging out all evil desires,
which is characterised by continual trial, temptation and falling, yet also perseverance and
discipline. The seeker is now
tapping around after the true God in darkness and the shadow of
death. Falling time and time again, his feet will be led on the
way of peace while experiencing the very opposite. All his
desires will reach out towards the first sprinkling, the gentle
sighing breath of the holy spirit. But it demands the continued
application of all his diligence, for the holy spirit never allows
him to be complacent, but drives him on restlessly, pointing him
to the eternal good.70

Müntzer often speaks of the soul's experience in the dramatic language of storms and billows:
the believer will be buffeted by 'torrents of water' until the will to live is gone, but 'one should
not flee these waves but negotiate them skilfully....for the Lord only gives his holy testimony to
someone who has first made his way through perplexity.'71 Those who adhere to the path of
eyasy belief, of course, find all this unwholesome in the extreme, but they are no better than

67 CW 215, 298, 220.
68 Schwarz notes that this term was in common parlance in the late 15th and early 16th century, but did not
generally have quite the same meaning in the mystical tradition as it appears to have had for Müntzer;
69 CW 204.
70 CW 302.
71 CW 61.
'mad, lecherous swine....who shrink back from the ferocity of the winds, the raging of the waves, and from all the great waters of wisdom.' They have no inclination to abase themselves before God or lose their reputation, least of all 'Brother Soft Life or Father Pussyfoot' who rather fancied the idea of trying out all the pleasures he had planned, and of holding on to his status and his prosperity, and yet combining this with a well-tried faith... The true seekers after God, however, eventually find themselves emptied so completely of their 'creaturely lusts' that they 'must turn to God, for [their] natural self would collapse otherwise.' It is at this point that they will confess [their] unbelief and cry out for a doctor, whose boundless mercy is so great that he can never leave anyone in the lurch if he is poor in spirit like this. Thus like a person drowning, as Rupp graphically puts it, 'the believer comes gasping to the shore and there he rests.' 'Hostile to his sins and embracing righteousness with all sincerity', it is only now, Müntzer concludes, that the follower of Christ is assured of salvation and comprehends properly that God has driven him from the evil to the good by his unchangeable love, and from the sins through which his unbelief was detected; now he becomes altogether free... The soul has finally reached a state of complete renunciation of the world and commitment or yielding of itself to God, who in turn supports and strengthens the soul in its dependent state. The yielding of the soul to God Müntzer encompasses, as we noted earlier, in the familiar mystical term Gelassenheit: After the weakness experienced by the members of the elect in complete self-surrender [gelassenheit] he [the Lord] supports and endows them with the strength which flows from him. As one finds in Müntzer the soul pictured as a 'field' from which all worldly lusts and desires

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72 CW 217, 278/280.
73 CW 302.
74 Rupp, Patterns..., p.283.
75 CW 302/304.
76 CW 60.
have to be rooted out, so it is possible to trace in his writings an apocalyptic which understands humankind to be composed of both ‘wheat’ and ‘tares’, the chosen and the lost, growing together until the divine harvester instructs his labourers to begin the work of separating them out. Some writers, notably Goertz with his usage of the terms ‘inner and outer order’, have tended to over-systematize a connection in Müntzer between punishment of the soul and purification of the world, perhaps in a way to which his writing does not readily lend itself. Nevertheless, that there are strong links between the mystical and the apocalyptic in Müntzer cannot be denied: indeed, the two interweave very closely, as we shall observe in our final chapter. First, however, it is necessary to look in some detail at the basic form and content of Müntzer’s apocalyptic, and this will be our concern in the following chapter.

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Apocalyptic Ideas in Thomas Müntzer's Thought

One of the recurring debates in Müntzer scholarship has centred upon the relative importance of apocalyptic and mystical thought in his theology. In the previous chapter we argued that a realistic assessment of Müntzer's thought requires that both elements be taken seriously, with neither being given undue weight at the expense of the other, and in so doing reflected the approach most widely adopted by critics and scholars. Reinhard Schwarz, for example, has argued that 'Müntzer's Theologie und Aktivität kann nicht begriffen werden, solange Einflüsse Luthers oder der Mystik oder chiliastisch taboritischen Tradition gegeneinander ausgespielt werden,' and Gordon Rupp has noted how, apropos of Müntzer's social and political theology, his 'doctrine of renunciation and suffering runs on into his views of society, and mingles with his apocalyptic eschatology.' James Stayer writes approvingly of Rupp's general insight 'that Müntzer's mysticism was balanced by his apocalyptic vision', and Abraham Friesen also sees what he calls Müntzer's 'chiliastic expectation' providing a link between 'the mystical-religious and the social-revolutionary' elements in his thought. Hans-Jürgen Goertz is another who highlights the importance of both the mystical and apocalyptic in Müntzer, though he tends to give more prominence to the former. 'Apocalypticism did not give a fundamental stamp to Müntzer's thought and action', he writes, 'but it did accompany and strengthen everything he thought and did... Ulrich Bubenheimer plays down both the apocalyptic and the mystical in Müntzer, arguing that the 'ordo-Begriff' (concept of order) was the basic hermeneutical category of his theology. Richard Bailey offers a very different interpretation, arguing forcefully that Müntzer 'integrated his mystical theology into an

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1 'Müntzer's theology and activity cannot be understood as long as we try to play off the influences of Luther or of mysticism or of the chiliastic Taborite tradition against one another': Schwarz, Die apokalyptische Theologie Thomas Müntzers..., pp.125-126; [my trans.].
2 Rupp, Patterns, p.299.
5 Goertz, 'Thomas Müntzer: Revolutionary Between the Middle Ages and Modernity', p.28. cf. idem, Thomas Müntzer: Mystiker, Apokalyptiker, Revolutionär, pp.166-167.
apocalyptic framework: his basis for revolution developed not from 'his theology of the "inner word" but rather from his apocalyptic interpretation of scripture and current events.' An even more extreme version of this position is taken by Norman Cohn who suggests that the 'mystical nature of Müntzer's preoccupations' must not be overemphasized: 'Müntzer was a propheta obsessed by eschatological phantasies.'

Whatever importance one wishes to attach to the apocalyptic in Müntzer's scheme of thought - and this is a question to be addressed more fully in the final chapter - it may be sufficient just to note at this point that no reading of his works can fail to recognise that it had some role in shaping his praxis, and in sharpening his polemic against those who peddled a 'counterfeit faith'. It would be useful, however, in view of the confusion sometimes evident among Müntzer's commentators, to clarify exactly what it means to speak of his 'apocalyptic'.

The term 'apocalyptic' - which can be used either as a noun or an adjective - may be understood in at least two ways. Firstly, as its Greek root apokalypsis (= revelation) implies, it can speak of a divine 'disclosure' or 'revelation', and is thus often used as an alternative title for the final book of the New Testament, the Revelation ('...of Jesus Christ to his servant John', Rev.1:1). When defined in this way the actual content of any particular revelation or apocalypse is less significant than the fact of its being a disclosure of a heavenly mystery. In this sense an 'apocalyptic outlook' is characterised by a quest, as Hengel puts it, for 'higher wisdom in revelation'. Apocalyptic writing, the setting down of these 'revelations', developed from the late Old Testament period, the best known example being the Book of Daniel - 'the only true apocalypse in the O[ld] T[estament] canon' according to Bauckham - on which, of course, Müntzer draws heavily. Müntzer is very clearly an apocalyptic thinker in this sense, believing with the utmost conviction that only direct revelation from God can lead to an understanding of true faith and knowledge of God.

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Secondly, apocalypticism may be understood within the more specific context of Jewish eschatological belief. Here it encompasses, as Rowland writes, the views of 'those who have despaired of seeing the Jewish hope for a reign of God on earth being manifested in this world', and who look instead 'for a realm of a transcendent kind which could only be established as a result of a divine irruption into the present order to overthrow it and its evils.'\(^{11}\) Central to this way of thinking is a pessimistic attitude towards the present age, coupled with a firm belief in the imminent arrival of a new age in the form of the kingdom of God, and a somewhat deterministic view of history. In so far as apocalypticism does not necessarily conceive of this new 'other worldly' kingdom in terms of the thousand-year-reign of Christ and his saints, of which the Book of Revelation speaks,\(^{12}\) it differs significantly from eschatological belief systems such as millenarianism and chiliasm, and is not to be confused with them.

Müntzer is clearly apocalyptic in this second sense, too, though since there is no suggestion in his writings that he linked the new age, for which the elect were to fight, with the immediate return of Jesus Christ, or the inauguration of a millennial kingdom, it is incorrect to define his views as 'chiliastic'.\(^{13}\) This is a point which Friesen, for one, appears to have overlooked.

In fact Müntzer explicitly dissents from the view, which he found in Tertullian and Luther, that Christ's return in judgement will coincide with the appearance of Antichrist: alongside an exegesis of 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 in his copy of Tertullian's *De resurrectione carnis*, Müntzer appends the marginal note 'The judgement of Christ will be long in coming'.\(^{14}\) A similar thought appears in the first draft of his letter to the brethren at Stolberg written in mid-1523: 'Christ's true reign comes to pass only after the splendour of this world has been completely discarded.'\(^{15}\) Müntzer clearly saw a substantial interim period between the manifestation of Antichrist and the second coming of Christ, during which the elect were to take

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\(^{11}\) Rowland, 'Apocalyptic', p.29.

\(^{12}\) e.g. 20:6.

\(^{13}\) See Gordon Rupp, 'True History: Martin Luther and Thomas Müntzer', in Derek Beales and Geoffrey Best, (eds), *History, Society and the Churches: Essays in honour of Owen Chadwick*, Cambridge: CUP, 1985, p.83. The term 'chiliastic' occurs with some regularity in the literature on Müntzer, but its usage is not unproblematic. Although Müntzer clearly does share a number of ideas with chiliastic groups like, for example, the Taborites, he nowhere appears to subscribe to the idea of a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth before the final consummation of all things, which in precise terms is what is meant by the term 'chiliasm'. The (Greek) root of the word is *chilioi* (= a thousand). Cf. below, p.67, n.184.

\(^{14}\) CW 428.

\(^{15}\) CW 60.
up arms against the evil one and all his works, and prepare for the final 'cosmic confrontation' when the parousia finally arrived.\textsuperscript{16} The difference in the eschatologies of Müntzer and Luther also helps to explain their political differences, for Luther's expectation that the world would be wound up with the sudden, imminent appearance of Christ, did not give rise to any motivation on his part to change the world.\textsuperscript{17} For Müntzer, however, notwithstanding that he clearly saw salvation in supernatural terms, the 'Christianisation' of the world was a possibility. As Wolgast writes,

'Die entscheidende Differenz zwischen beiden lag in der Realisierbarkeit der Verchristlichung der Welt, die Müntzer, seinem apokalyptischen Weltverständnis folgend, für möglich hielt, während für Luther die Christen weit auseinander wohnten.'\textsuperscript{18}

Having defined our terms we need now to explore more fully the shape of Müntzer's apocalyptic hopes, and it would be useful to begin by noting the extent to which his thinking may have been influenced by prevailing eschatological ideas, in particular those of the 12th century prophet Joachim of Fiore, and of the later Taborite movement at Zwickau. Commentators have made much of the apparent signs of Joachite influence in Müntzer's writings, despite the fact that he himself only once refers to this teaching, and then to disclaim any indebtedness to it. 'I have every respect for the testimony of the abbot Joachim. I have only read his commentary on Jeremiah', Müntzer writes in a letter to John Zeiss in December 1523; 'But', he continues, 'my teaching is from on high; I do not have it from him but from utterances of God...'.\textsuperscript{19} Furthermore, the book by Joachim which Müntzer claimed to have read, the \textit{Super Hieremiam} first published in Venice in 1516, was not, in fact, a genuine work, but a later fourteenth century writing. This notwithstanding, Joachim's interpretation of history was still very influential in Müntzer's day, not least around Erfurt and Bohemia, and it would be surprising indeed if no traces of it had permeated his thinking.


\textsuperscript{17} See Goertz, \textit{Thomas Müntzer: Mystiker, Apokalyptiker, Revolutionär}, p.130.

\textsuperscript{18} 'The decisive difference between the two relates to the Christianisation of the world, which Müntzer, following his apocalyptic world-view, held as a possibility, while for Luther Christians were [too] few and far between': Eike Wolgast, 'Die Obrigkeits- und Widerstandslehre Thomas Müntzers', in Bräuer & Junghans, op.cit., p.206; [my trans.].

\textsuperscript{19} CW 71-72.
Central to Joachim's philosophy was the idea that history could only be understood, and its meaning and destiny laid bare, by reference to the three-fold work of the Trinity. Time, he argued, should be understood as passing through three discernible, though not entirely discrete, ages (or status; stages). The first, that of the Father, was characterised by the giving of the Law, and spanned the period from the Creation until the end of Old Testament times; the second, the age of grace represented by the Son, emerged with the appearance of Christ, and was still held to be subsisting in Joachim's own day; and the third, whose coming was widely held to be not far hence, would be the Age of the Spirit and of the preaching of the 'Eternal Evangel'. This age would be characterised, as Marjorie Reeves summarises it, 'by fuller spiritual illumination, by Liberty and Love.'20 Unlike some of his more radical followers, who missed the subtleties of his thinking, Joachim did not argue that in the Age of the Spirit the New Testament gospel of Christ or his church would be superseded, nor, despite the apparent suggestion in his scheme to the contrary, that only one Person of the Trinity could be discerned at work in any one age. Rather he considered that all three Persons operated in unity in every age, with the third age being that in which people would know the 'full freedom of the Spirit', before history was finally brought to a close with the Second Advent and the Last Judgement. Significantly for those who see echoes of this eschatological scheme in Müntzer, Joachim held that the period of transition from the second age to the third would be marked by intense activity on the part of Antichrist, this activity clearly portending the dawning of the new age.

The extent to which Müntzer adopts a Joachite interpretation of history has considerably exercised a number of scholars, and prompted some, like Friesen and Bailey, to argue, on the basis of circumstantial evidence and a considerable amount of reading between the lines, that Joachim's Eternal Gospel played a determinative role in his interpretation of Scripture. We should note, though, that Müntzer only once makes reference to this 'everlasting gospel' - one of the teachings for which Joachim was posthumously condemned at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 - and that in his aforementioned letter to Zeiss where he explicitly denies drawing on the abbot's work. Bailey argues that this denial is actually a device adopted by Müntzer for self-preservation, official distaste for Joachim's teachings still being strong in his own day.21 Whilst recognising that the evidence we have is far from irrefutable, and, indeed,

21 Bailey, loc.cit., p.33.
mostly circumstantial, Friesen also attempts to build a case for Müntzer's reliance on Joachim's teaching. Rather inconclusively he tries to develop an argument by piecing together known facts about Müntzer such as his employment of the services of the printer Johann Herrgott for his *Hochverursachte Schutzrede* in 1524, and the publication two years later of a tract by this same printer containing an opening paragraph which is 'a classic statement of the Joachist view of history.' He also attempts to draw some inferences about Müntzer's relationship to Joachim from the fascination both had with the Old Testament. Neither Friesen's nor Bailey's case, it seems to me, is well supported by the corpus of Müntzer's writings as we have it, and it would seem safer simply to recognise, with scholars such as Rupp, Scott and Ozment, that whilst there may be traces of Joachite influence in Müntzer, no stronger connection than that is apparent.

Part of the problem, it seems to me, centres upon Müntzer's interest in the multi-layered image of Daniel chapter 2 as a key to understanding the process and destiny of history. Müntzer expounds this unambiguously apocalyptic passage in his *Sermon to the Princes*, taking the different sections of the image or statue and showing how each represents a particular historical empire or dynasty: the golden head the Babylonian, the silver breast and arms the Median/Persian, the bronze belly and thighs the Greek, and the legs of iron the Roman. Somewhat unusually - for some interpreters, including Daniel himself, had lumped the legs and feet of the statue together and projected a *fifth* kingdom as the coming reign of Christ - Müntzer defines the feet, composed of iron and clay, in terms of a further corrupt earthly power, the Holy Roman Empire (or what G. H. Williams calls the 'feudal-papal Christendom') of his own day, which was based on force (the iron) and patched with the 'dung' of hypocrisy. For Müntzer it is specifically the unholy alliance of the Saxon princes and the leaders of the Church - the 'eels and snakes coupling together immorally in one great heap' as he puts it in his *Sermon on Daniel* - which the stone in Nebuchadnezzar's vision, cut from the mountain by no human hand, has in its sights. Müntzer is thus clearly prepared, at this point, to adopt, like Joachim, a

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25 CW 244.
dispensationalist interpretation of history, though it would be difficult to find any further point of coincidence between his six-stage scheme, and Joachim's trinitarian one. Thus it seems to me that Williams' typology of the differing eschatologies in circulation during the 'radical Reformation' is most helpful, drawing as it does a clear distinction between 'the Trinitarian scheme of Joachim of Fiore' and that, 'conspicuous in the prophetic Spiritualist Thomas Müntzer' and others, '...based upon the Danielic-Hieronymic conception of four [sic] empires or monarchies...'.

If Müntzer does not embrace Joachim's trinitarian understanding of history, neither does he appear to have tied himself very securely to any one particular scheme of his own, even one based on the statue of Daniel 2. At the end of his letter to Nicholas Hausmann, for example, he includes a reference to the 'fourth beast', an image which Franz quite plausibly suggests Müntzer drew from Daniel's vision recounted in chapter 7 of his prophecy. In this vision four beasts appear, each representing kings or kingdoms 'who shall arise out of the earth' (v.17), but the fourth is markedly more terrible than the others, and, in its day, will 'devour the whole earth' (v.23). Müntzer's reference to this beast, in terms taken straight from Daniel, suggests that at this point he could have accommodated within his thinking a more traditional 'fifth monarchy' position; though it might also suggest, and this would seem to be more likely, that any kind of rigorous interpretation of history into five, six, or however many stages, was considerably less important to him than a simple awareness that he was living at a crucial historical juncture. If this is the case, then we should perhaps do well not to try to delve too deeply whenever Müntzer borrows apocalyptic imagery from the Scriptures - the Fourth Beast, the Third Angel, the Antichrist, and indeed the Danielic statue - recognising that such imagery may be intended to serve no greater purpose than to underscore his general conviction that he was living at an apocalyptic moment.

Müntzer's concern not to tie himself rigidly to any one interpretative framework, in his approach to the prophetic scriptures, is highlighted in what is another significant difference between his writings and those of Joachim, namely the absence in his work of any specific timescale concerning the end of the age. Joachim is noted for having calculated the approximate

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26 Williams, op.cit., p.858.
27 CW 35.
28 F 373, n.14.
duration of each of the three status of history in terms of 'generations', and for having placed enormous emphasis, in the light of this, on the number, if not exactly the year, 1260. Reeves assures us that Joachim 'took care to emphasize the uncertainty of all calculations of Last Things', but he was certainly widely believed to have held that the age of the Son - comprising 42 generations each of 30 years - would end not many years after his death in 1202, following which would emerge Antichrist and then the third dispensation, that of 'the full freedom of the Spirit'. Müntzer, despite attempts by Bailey to prove the opposite, nowhere explicitly adopts any formula for estimating the time when the elect will conquer. He is not in any doubt that the time is imminent, but that is not a conviction reached on mathematical grounds.

The key numbers 42 and 1260, both widely employed by prophets and seers of the Middle Ages and later, are drawn from references in Daniel and the Apocalypse. In these writings there are references both explicitly to the numbers themselves (42 months in Rev. 11:2 and 13:5; 1260 days in Rev. 11:3 and 12:6) and to the rather more cryptic period of 'a time, two times and half a time' (Dan. 7:25 and 12:7; Rev. 12:14), understood as three and a half years of 360 days each (= 1260 days). On the basis of Müntzer's letter to Hausmann, with its statement 'The time of Antichrist is upon us', and the fact that Müntzer had read Daniel, Revelation, and the Super Hieremiast, Bailey argues that 'we can speculate, with good reason, that Müntzer followed the basic biblical pattern of a seven-year tribulation divided into two three-and-one half periods.' This seems hardly plausible in the light of Müntzer's writings as a whole, for it is only in extremely rare cases that he makes a specific prediction about a future event. Bailey latches onto one of these - Müntzer's warning in the Shorter German Version of the 'Prague Manifesto' that God will allow his Czech readers to be 'struck down by the Turks in the coming year' if they refuse God to press the claim that Müntzer believed the Antichrist 'would be revealed', and the 'final and great tribulation would begin' 'following the Turkish overthrow of Bohemia in 1522.' Müntzer clearly is to be found here making a specific prediction, but it hardly seems a sound enough basis upon which to build an argument, as Bailey in fact does, that he held to a tribulation of 'two three-and-one-half-year periods', one stretching from mid-

30 Bailey, loc.cit., p.35.
31 CW 360.
32 Bailey, loc.cit., p.35.
1518 to 1522 (when the Beast or Turk was established in the land), and the other from then until 1525, a year which Müntzer would have expected to be significant even though he could not specifically have foreseen the decisive (for him) battle of Frankenhausen. Rather it seems more likely to be the case that the general turbulence created by the peasants' unrest brought Müntzer's apocalyptic hopes into much sharper focus, without his imposing on their protests and uprisings any rigid eschatological timetable.

If there is one area of overlap between Müntzer and the Joachites it is the central role that each assigns to Antichrist in the final drama. In the Joachite tradition the tribulation of the Church by Antichrist was an indispensable feature of that period of transition (through which many in the mid-13th century thought they were living) from the Age of the Son to the Age of the Spirit; and Müntzer, too, discerns that the time of Antichrist's raging is not far off. Writing to Hausmann on 15 June 1521, for example, he expresses his conviction that the events foretold in Matthew 24 concerning the Last Days are being fulfilled: 'the time of Antichrist is upon us...the abomination of desolation is revealed.' Müntzer corrects the impression which was popular in some circles that Pope Julius II had fulfilled the prophecy concerning Antichrist; he was 'a true proclaimer of the same', but the real Antichrist will have power far in excess of any pope's. '...the fourth beast will have dominion over the whole earth and his kingdom will be greater than all others.' That Müntzer here speaks synonymously of the Antichrist and the 'fourth beast' of Daniel's dream is interesting, suggesting again that he was tied to no one scheme for understanding the last times.

In his 'Prague Manifesto' written later that same year Müntzer returns to the apocalyptic theme, and articulates again (particularly in the Larger German Version) his belief that momentous times are ahead. References to Antichrist and to other characters and scenes from the

33 ibid., pp.35-36.
34 Antichrist was also expected to enjoy a brief revival at the end of the Third Age, 'before the winding up of history in the Second Advent and Last Judgment'; Reeves, 'Joachim of Fiore', p.228.
35 CW 35.
36 ibid.
37 I am assuming that the reference here is to the creature described in Daniel 7 (see above, p.35), though it is interesting to note the similarity between Müntzer's description of its powers, and that used by the writer of the Apocalypse of the beast which rises from the sea and to which was given 'authority over every tribe and people and language and nation...' (Rev.13:7). This beast had many horns, an image Müntzer uses at one point to depict the priests an scholars of his day, indicating their apocalyptic significance in his eyes! (CW 207, n.269.)
Apocalypse of John occur in this work, which Müntzer rounds off with a warning that, if his hearers do not join the fight against the 'high enemies of the faith', they are 'doomed to fall into the hands of the Turk', who will be quickly followed by 'the real Antichrist...'. This latter figure, the 'real opponent of Christ', will 'reign in person', but Christ will soon afterwards, 'give the kingdom of this world to his elect for all time'.

Further references to Antichrist, which again suggest his 'regime' to be imminent, appear in Müntzer's letter to Karlstadt of July 1523, in an earlier letter to Melanchthon, and in his marginalia on the pages of Tertullian, to which we have already made reference (see above, pages 31-32). In the Melanchthon letter the reference is not explicitly to Antichrist but to his work, 'the tribulation of Christians', and Müntzer rebukes the Reformer for thinking that this was still to come when in fact it is 'already at the door'. The phial of the third angel has already been sprinkled on the fountains of the waters (I know this and tremble) and the outpouring of blood has been accomplished, Müntzer asserts in this letter, a direct reference to an episode in the apocalyptic destruction of the earth described in Revelation chapter 16.

The Antichrist is clearly a crucial figure for Müntzer, though it is a matter of debate whether any firm parallels are to be drawn between his interpretation of it and that of Joachim. Antichrist, after all, was hardly the exclusive preserve of the Joachites, and Müntzer, with his thorough and comprehensive grasp of the Scriptures, would have been only too well aware of the prophetic warnings they contained about the last days, and well equipped to interpret them for himself - or rather, with the help of God. What one can say with certainty is that Müntzer shared with the followers of Joachim a conviction that the time of Antichrist's power had arrived, and that therefore, though they may still be some time off, the second advent of Christ and the reign of God were at least now on the eschatological horizon. But, and this is crucial for Müntzer, the elect cannot in the meantime sit back passively and await the unfolding of these events: Antichrist, and all who aid and abet him in his business of resisting the kingdom of God, must be destroyed, by the elect, in order for the full salvation of God to be manifested.

38 CW 371.
39 CW 66.
40 CW 46.
41 CW 45.
It should not be thought that Müntzer relies solely on the narrative in Daniel, or prophecies concerning Antichrist, to convey his conviction that the end of all things is at hand. In his letters and writings he draws on many other Biblical images of the last days, reflecting both his command of this literature and his love of variety of metaphor and analogy to express his ideas and aspirations. One image upon which he often draws is that of the harvest, a particularly suggestive one in view of the emphasis it lays on the role of God's people, as wielders of the reaper's scythe, in the final sifting of the faithful and the reprobate. Two passages in Matthew's gospel and one in John's form the basis of Müntzer's thinking on the harvest: Jesus' brief reference to the harvest being plentiful but the labourers few in Matt. 9:37-38; a slightly longer narrative in John 4:35f where Jesus exhorts his hearers to see that the fields are already white for harvest, and that to reap them would be to gather fruit for eternal life; and the parable in Matt. 13:24-30, (upon which, of the three, Müntzer lays most stress), of the wheat and the tares growing side-by-side in the farmer's field. We noted in the preceding chapter how Müntzer uses this parable to illustrate the work of God in the individual Christian's life, rooting out the 'weeds, thistles and thorns from the rich soil which is [the] heart' in order that true faith may grow there, and his comment that 'Even if you have already devoured all the books of the Bible you must still suffer the sharp edge of the plough-share.' Now he goes on to show how, in accordance with the explanation of the parable given by Matthew himself in verses 36f, the story also has apocalyptic overtones.

In the parable the tares, which are planted by an enemy of the farmer, spring up in the field at the same time as the intended crop, the wheat, but the farmer resists his servants' suggestion that the two be separated now on the grounds that, in plucking the weeds, the fledgling wheat may thereby be dislodged as well. Both are to grow together until the harvest, when the reapers are to gather the weeds first for binding and burning, and then the good crop for storing in barns. Müntzer follows Matthew in identifying the good seed as the children of God (this he makes explicit in his notes concerning the liturgy for German Church Services compiled in 1523), the weeds as the children of the devil, the field as the world, and the harvest as the end of the age. Müntzer's 'field' also includes (as Matthew's could not to the same extent) the church, which has also been subject to a pernicious planting operation by the devil. 'It was Christ who began true Christianity. But because of the idleness of the elect the godless were

42 CW 199.
43 CW 171.
able to pollute it', he writes in the foreword to his German Church Service Book, in direct reference to this parable.⁴⁴ The theme is taken up again near the conclusion of the Sermon to the Princes, where Müntzer reiterates his demand that those opposed to 'God's revelation' be strangled in the manner adopted by the Old Testament prophets in their dealings with the prophets of Baal. '...the Christian church will never return to its origins', Müntzer declares; 'the tares have to be torn out of the vineyard [sic] of God at harvest-time.'⁴⁵ Further references to this parable where the 'field' particularly embraces the church, occur in the Protestation and Proposition.⁴⁶

The central theme running through all Müntzer's allusions to the harvest is a conviction that the time for it to be undertaken, for the sword to be put to the godless, has arrived. This comes out clearly in the 'Prague Manifesto', for example, drafted in November 1521, where Müntzer speaks of the deeds of the 'elect and of the damned' flourishing freely 'until our time when God will separate out the tares from the wheat...'. 'The time of the harvest has come', he concludes: 'I have sharpened my sickle...'.⁴⁷ In the Latin version of the same tract Müntzer refers to 'the imminent harvest' when both the wheat and the tares will be 'winnowed out', to the 'slopes...whitening' with the harvest, and, again, to his own readiness to act as a reaper.⁴⁸ Interestingly, by March 1523, almost one-and-a-half years later, some of the sense of urgency about the need to begin harvesting has gone from Müntzer. In a letter to some fellow believers in Halle written that month Müntzer comments on the inevitability of the tares coming 'under the flail with the pure wheat', but then goes on to assert that 'the living God is sharpening his sickle in me so that I will later be able to cut down the red poppies and the little blue flowers.'⁴⁹ In his letter to Stolberg in July of that year Müntzer explicitly warns his followers against what might be termed a 'cheap apocalyptic', the mistaken belief that by speeding ahead with a campaign to bring down the tyrants, without having first purged themselves of ungodly desires, they will induce God to 'rush to their aid'. God's prophecies cannot be short-circuited; 'where there is no poverty of spirit, the kingdom of Christ cannot commence either.'⁵⁰

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⁴⁴ CW 166.
⁴⁵ CW 250.
⁴⁶ See especially s.5 (CW 190-191) and s.8 (CW 194-195).
⁴⁷ CW 370-371; emphasis mine.
⁴⁸ CW 377.
⁴⁹ CW 54; emphasis mine. Cf. 50.
⁵⁰ CW 60.
One explanation for Müntzer's more dispassionate tone at this time may be the somewhat more settled lifestyle he was temporarily enjoying during this period as pastor of the church of St John's in Allstedt, which perhaps made him feel a little more at ease with the world and less driven to feelings that its demise at the hand of God could not be far off. Whatever the reason, Müntzer is found some sixteen months later in A Manifest Expose making explicit again his conviction that work on rooting out the tares must begin now. Notwithstanding protestations from those represented by the tares that 'the time of the harvest has not yet come', Müntzer writes, 'the time of harvest is certainly with us.' Müntzer's field of vision again includes the Church, 'a real old whore' now where once she was a pure virgin, though she 'can still be put right...by burning zeal.' 'A true Christianity for our days will soon be in full swing despite all the previous corruption.'

One consistent feature of Müntzer's exegesis of the Matthean parable of the harvest is the particular role he discerns for himself as wielder of the heavenly sickle. We shall look more fully in due course at Müntzer's understanding of his singular prophetic role in the forthcoming apocalyptic drama, but it is important to note at this point the strong calling he feels to act as a reaper on God's behalf in the final judgement: 'the living God is sharpening his sickle in me...' we recall him writing to the group at Halle. In the 'Prague Manifesto' his sense of his divine calling to the task had been stated no less explicitly: '[God] himself has hired me for his harvest. I have sharpened my sickle...' he writes in the larger German version. The Latin version draws on the parable of the labourers in the vineyard who worked shifts of differing lengths for the same pay: 'I am sharpening my sickle to put it into the harvest, having been hired by heaven for a penny a day', Müntzer affirms. The reference to 'sickle' is interesting because of its unambiguous apocalyptic connotations: in the Book of Revelation (14:14f) the writer records how, in a vision, he hears the voice of an angel calling to 'one like a son of man' seated on a cloud, telling him that 'the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe' and calling him to put in the 'sharp sickle' which is in his hand. Subsequently an angel appears also carrying a sickle which he uses to reap the 'ripe grapes' of the earth. Müntzer

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51 See above, p.6.
52 CW 312, 313.
53 CW 54; emphasis mine.
54 CW 371.
55 CW 377.
would almost certainly also have had in mind some words from two Old Testament prophets upon whom he draws in his writings, Joel - 'put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe' (3:13) - and Jeremiah - 'Cut off from Babylon the sower, and the wielder of the sickle in time of harvest' (50:16).56

It is, of course, implicit in Müntzer's comments that he is himself only fitted for the task of wielding the final sickle because he has endured the harvesting work of God within his own soul by means of 'the sharp edge of the plough-share' which roots out the fruit of the devil to make way for the growth of true faith. Others who have endured in this way will also be called as reapers in these last days (for Müntzer does not envisage carrying out the task alone), but only those. Müntzer makes this clear in a passage in A Manifest Exposé where he speaks of those sent out to the harvest having been 'like a strong scythe or sickle...sharpened by God from the beginning of their lives.'57 'Not everyone can execute this office', he continues, only those who 'have the assurance of faith possessed by those who wrote the Scriptures...'.58 In the Sermon to the Princes, however, where Müntzer is intent on persuading his noble hearers to take up the sword themselves in apocalyptic fashion, he is somewhat more ambiguous in his

56 The Book of Jeremiah proved a particularly rich vein for Müntzer to tap - there are well over 100 allusions to it in his writings. In the Shorter German Version of the 'Prague Manifesto', and in the Sermon to the Princes, Müntzer identifies himself with the prophet's sufferings, particularly the contempt of the people he had to endure as he spoke of his revelations from God and sought to warn them of the dangers to come (CW 360-361, 236).

57 Müntzer's references to 'sharpness' have distinct echoes of the Via negativa of mysticism, and he frequently alludes to the bitterness of Christian experience: he can speak, for example, of the work of God being 'as bitter as the abyss of hell' (CW 387), of the faith tasting 'bitter' (CW 196), of the first experience of faith as 'a bitter time' (CW 84), of the elect as those who have tasted this 'bitter side of faith' (CW 62), of the soul being filled by God 'in bitterness' (CW 403), of the body of Christ as 'bitter food' (CW 389) and the necessity of tasting 'the bitter Christ' (CW 220), of the church needing 'to be rejuvenated by the bitter truth' (CW 300), and of himself as barley ground down (CW 135). Cf. Karlstadt's comments to Müntzer in his letter of December 1522: '...just like [Jeremiah] you seem to me to feel something of the bitterness of mustard...' (CW 52). Pater suggests that Müntzer's comments about the bitterness of Jeremiah' - which Karlstadt is here responding to - had led to a reference to Naomi, since she calls herself Mara, i.e. bitterness, in Ruth 1:20. (Calvin Augustine Pater, Karlstadt as the Father of the Baptist Movement: The Emergence of Lay Protestantism, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984, p.280, n.5.) Cf. references to Ruth and Boaz in Müntzer: CW 171, 457. The 'bitter faith', of course, stands in contrast to the faith of those who think they can achieve conformity to Christ by 'honey-sweet thoughts' (CW 366), and Müntzer warns that 'Any one who rejects the bitter CHRIST will gorge himself to death on honey.' (CW 220). (This contrast between the 'sweet' and 'bitter' Christ is found in other mystical writers, e.g. Tauler; see Rupp, Patterns..., p. 290.) Note, though, that to those who follow his teachings, Müntzer's name has 'the sweet savour of life' (CW 68).

58 CW 308/310; cf. 199.
interpretation of the angels. 'You are angels when you want to do what is right', he says at one point, and a little later, in an even more explicit reference to the separation of the wheat and the tares, he speaks of 'the angels who sharpen their sickles for the harvest' as being the earnest servants of God who execute the zealous wisdom of God. The overriding point is clear, though, that there can be no passive waiting upon God to perform the reaping of the earth unaided: the faithful, with Müntzer to the fore, are those whom the divine householder entrusts with the work of rooting up and burning the weeds so that the good crop may be gathered into the barn. And woe to 'the world and its scum, the biblical scholars, with their untested faith', who refuse to recognize that the faithful will be the angels of God to execute God's harvest, or even to take seriously the text in Matthew about the separation of the elect and the godless.

Although the harvest of the wheat and the tares is the image Müntzer employs most frequently to depict the trauma the world will shortly have to endure, it is not the only one in his arsenal: the stone of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, which smashed the statue representing the four great kingdoms, is another whose significance we need to examine more fully. We noted above that, in his exposition of Daniel chapter 2, Müntzer warned that the stone cut from the mountain is even now on its way to annihilate the ruling power of the present age, and earlier in this exposition, in introducing the image of the stone, he interpreted it explicitly as Jesus Christ. The powerful have discarded the 'foundation stone that was laid at the infant beginnings of Christianity' and 'have trodden the precious stone, Jesus Christ, completely underfoot'. ‘Alas!’, Müntzer writes,

Christ, the gentle son of God, is a mere scarecrow or a painted puppet in our eyes compared with the great titles and names of this world, although he is the true stone, hurled from the great mountain into the sea, into the pomp and affluence of this world.

Later, after expounding the dream of the five-tiered statue, Müntzer developed the metaphor of the stone in more detail. Just as in Daniel's account it grows to become a mountain filling the whole earth, so, for Müntzer, the stone Jesus Christ increases in power over time. In Daniel the transformation of the stone takes place after it fulfils its function of destroying the statue,

59 CW 246, 250.
60 CW 288.
61 CW 232-233.
62 CW 231, 234, 232. Note the reference to 'scarecrow' - Jeremiah again (10:5).
whereas in Müntzer it appears, almost snowball-like, to increase both in size and velocity as it rolls inexorably towards its ordained purpose. But of central importance for Müntzer is his belief that the time for it to fulfil that purpose, to usher in the new kingdom, has arrived: once the stone was small, though even then the world could not resist it; now it has become so powerful and unstoppable, striking and smashing the great statue right down to its old clay pots.\textsuperscript{63} Here the metaphors become mixed as Müntzer weaves into his discussion God's promise to the psalmist that the nations would be broken with a rod of iron and dashed in pieces like a potter's vessel.\textsuperscript{64} But the warning to the Princes of Saxony could not be clearer: know for sure that the stone is even now about its destructive work, and in response 'take up your stance resolutely on the corner stone', the foundation stone of the new kingdom, and let God's true, unwavering purpose be yours.\textsuperscript{65} Take the side of God's covenanted people and, on their behalf, destroy the powerful forces of the godless.

Another biblical image of the arrival of the kingdom which Müntzer employs is that of the approach of summer, and this he draws from references in both Matthew and Luke to Jesus' use of the flowering fig tree as a sign of the nearness of summer and metaphor for the arrival of the kingdom.\textsuperscript{66} The litany of future events which provides the context for Jesus' remarks at this point - wars, famines, earthquakes and other tribulations - acts, like the leaves on the fig tree, as a sign or portent: just as certainly as they, the leaves, announce the coming of the summer, so these catastrophes, when they begin to come to pass, will be a warning that the kingdom is near, 'at the very gates'. In one of his most apocalyptic letters, that to Philip Melanchthon dated 29 March 1522, Müntzer exhorts the Reformer to wake up to the fact that the tribulation (of Antichrist) is about to begin, and to delay no longer: 'the time has come...summer is at the door.'\textsuperscript{67}

There are other apocalyptic images in Müntzer's writings. At the beginning of the Larger German Version of the 'Prague Manifesto', which has very clear apocalyptic overtones, Müntzer announces himself as one 'fill[ing] the sonorous marching trumpets with the new

\textsuperscript{63} CW 245; cf 246.
\textsuperscript{64} Psalms 2:9, cf. Rev 19:15.
\textsuperscript{65} CW 245; see 107, 231, 233, for further references to Christ the corner-stone, and 117 for a reference to Christ as 'a stone of scandal'.
\textsuperscript{67} CW 46.
song' in praise of the holy spirit. 68 These words recall strikingly the 98th Psalm, in which the poet announces the coming judgement of the Lord (v.9), and exhorts his or her readers to 'sing a new song' to the Lord (v.1) and make a joyful noise before the Lord with trumpets' (v.6). Münzer also employs the imagery of the trumpet in two of his letters - those to Martin Luther and Duke Frederick - with the intent of demonstrating, on both occasions, that his message is to warn and alarm those who strive against the word of God or seek to blaspheme God's name. 69

Another interesting image, also from the world of music, is to be found in Münzer's letter to the people at Erfurt, written a few days before the Frankenhausen engagement. If you long for the truth, he writes, 'come and join us in the dance, for we want to tread it out evenly'. 70

Having two sentences earlier made a reference to the 19th chapter of the Book of Revelation, it seems safe to infer that in Münzer's mind here is the apocalyptic figure on the white horse described in verses 11-16, who represents the judgement of God on the nations, and who treads the metaphorical 'winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.' (v.15).

Some of the names Münzer hurls at Luther also appear to have apocalyptic significance: 'virgin Martin...the chaste woman of Babylon' Münzer draws from Revelation chapter 18, 71 and Stayer suggests the Letter of Jude may have provided the source for the expression 'the unspiritual soft-living Flesh in Wittenberg', Münzer's first reference to Luther in the Schutzrede the latter provoked him into writing. 72 "In the last time", says verse 18 of this short epistle, quoting an unknown saying of the apostles, "there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts"...worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions'(v.19). Matheson has pointed out how Münzer's reference to Luther as 'Dr Liar' (which worked as a pun in the German (doctor lügner)), has 'eschatological overtones'. 73 Münzer clearly saw in Luther's antagonism towards the 'true faith' signs that he was among the enemies of God whose appearance in the last days was predicted in the Scriptures. 74

68 CW 362.

69 CW 21, 68. Münzer's comments to Luther were later thrown back at him from Wittenberg by Agricola (CW 29).

70 CW 159; cf. Münzer's use of musical imagery to goad Luther in the Vindication and Refutation: CW 345.

71 CW 341.

72 CW 327; Stayer, Anabaptists and the Sword, p.81.

73 CW 328, n.22; F 323.

74 Goertz notes that Carl Hinrichs, in his Luther und Münzer: Ihre Auseinandersetzung über Obrigkeit und Widerstandsrecht, Berlin, 1952, wants to add to the 'chaste Babylonian woman' other 'apocalyptic metaphors' such as 'the lion' and 'the dragon': Thomas Münzer: Mystiker, Apokalyptiker, Revolutionär, p.130.
In the days leading up to Frankenhausen, Müntzer's sense of urgency about the situation seems to burst through nearly every line he writes: 'It is high time' he writes to the people of Allstedt at the end of April 1525; 'make a start and fight the fight of the Lord!' 'The master wants to set the game in motion', he continues, employing one of his original metaphors, 'the evil-doers are for it.' 'Go to it, go to it', he implores on three separate occasions in this one letter, 'while the fire is hot', 'while it is day'. 'The time has come...'  

Two weeks later he writes a little more soberly to the folk at Eisenach, but the message is the same: 'Now...God has moved the whole world in a miraculous way towards a recognition of the divine truth, and (the world) is proving this by its great and earnest zeal against the tyrants', he writes. As with all his writing Müntzer backs up his case by appeals to Scripture, and, particularly, by demonstrating that the prophecies of both the Old and New Testament about the end time are about to be fulfilled. His readers in Allstedt are referred to a number of biblical references - including the wholly apocalyptic twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew upon which we have already commented - where 'the whole business can be read up'. Ezekiel chapters 34 and 39, with their powerful apocalyptic themes, also loom large in his thinking, the former not least on account of its focus on God's promise to the prophet about the rescue of God's people, his 'sheep', from the hands of their corrupt shepherds whose only interest is in feeding themselves. The Magnificat of Luke chapter 1, which also treats of the liberation of the oppressed from the hands of the mighty, is another scripture Müntzer sees becoming reality before his eyes. He refers to this in the letter to Eisenach, and in two written from Frankenhausen three days later to the Counts of Mansfeld. In both of these latter communications he warns his noble readers that God is about the business of casting down the mighty from their seats, adding, in the letter to Count Albert, that 'the lowly (whom you despise) he has raised.' Müntzer had himself raised the spectre of a 'ploy' to 'tear the godless from their judgement seats and raise up humble, coarse folk in their place' in A Manifest Expose written during the preceding year, and noted how, to the faithless,

However, on the occasions when Müntzer employs these images, at least in the Vindication and Refutation, they have no obvious apocalyptic connotations.

75 CW 141-142. The 'game' metaphor had earlier been introduced in a letter of July 1524, where Müntzer spoke of the growing number of leagues and covenants being formed: 'The same game will be set in motion in every country'; (CW 84).

76 CW 150.

77 CW 142.

78 CW 157.
such a notion seemed 'pure fantasy.'\textsuperscript{79}

If Müntzer identified the unrest building up around him, the inchoate resistance of the peasants to the tyranny of their rulers, with the apocalyptic drama foretold in Revelation, Daniel and other scriptures, he also discerned for himself a particular role as that drama unfolded. Precisely how he saw that role is difficult to determine, for he cast himself, over time, as a latter-day incarnation of a number of different biblical heroes of the faith. There is a parallel here with his approach to prophecy and history. In that area, we noted, he was not concerned to commit himself to any one particular scheme for interpreting the past and projecting the future, but employed all prophetic models loosely to convey the general point that history was indeed climaxing before him. With regard to his own prophetic role \textit{vis-à-vis} that climax Müntzer similarly eschewed identification with any one particular apocalyptic figure, and, as if to demonstrate unequivocally the seal of divine approval he felt on his own mission, took the mantle of a variety of prophets who each, in their own lives, showed clear signs of a calling by God.

Müntzer testifies in a general way to his having been called by God in a number of places. 'It is not my work I am doing, but that of the Lord', he writes to Luther in 1520.\textsuperscript{80} Perhaps the most explicit of his claims to special status as an agent of God appears at the beginning of the 'Prague Manifesto'. By 'special diligence' and 'the utmost industry', he claims, he has reached a better understanding of the basis upon which ongoing Christian faith is built than anyone else.\textsuperscript{81} As Müntzer reminded us in his comments on Joachim, he owes none of his learning to any human agency.\textsuperscript{82} '...no tar-salved priest, no spirit dissimulating monk was able to tell [me] anything about the ground of faith, not the tiniest point', he continues in his Prague statement.\textsuperscript{83} The reason, of course, is that these people do not actually know \textit{themselves} anything about the 'solid ground' on which the elect stand, namely the fear of God: they are, by contrast, 'hell-grounded'.\textsuperscript{84} Hence on something so fundamental as the order God has established for the creation, they have nothing to say: 'I have never heard any donkey-farting

\textsuperscript{79} CW 286/288.
\textsuperscript{80} CW 21.
\textsuperscript{81} CW 362; cf. 357, 372.
\textsuperscript{82} See above p.32.
\textsuperscript{83} CW 362.
\textsuperscript{84} CW 363.
doctor whisper the tiniest fraction or slightest point about the order (established in God and all creatures)..."^85

Other general references to his special divine calling appear in some of Müntzer's later writings. In his letter to Frederick the Wise of October 1523, for example, he states that 'the almighty God made me an earnest preacher', and goes on to suggest that his name has a special significance for oppressed and oppressor alike.

My name (as is proper) is bound to excite alarm, disgust and contempt among the worldly wise. To the little band of the poor and needy, however, it has the sweet savour of life, while to those who pursue the pleasures of the flesh it is a gruesome abomination presaging their speedy downfall.^86

In a communication some two months later to Zeiss, Müntzer makes the claim, noted earlier, that he received his instructions not from the abbot Joachim but 'from on high...from utterances of God'.^87 A more forceful claim appears in his letter of July 1524 to Duke John, where Müntzer appears to believe that he has a duty to teach 'the knowledge and faith of God' to the people of his day just as Paul did to the first century community at Rome - 'following the unambiguous directions given me by the testimony of God'.^88 Gritsch argues, on the basis of texts such as these, that Müntzer 'portrayed himself as the prophet who, like Jeremiah or Ezekiel, must save Christianity by proclaiming the true Word of God manifested in the crucified Christ', and even, in the light of the remarks at the beginning of the Prague Manifesto, that he saw himself 'as the last of God's prophets...initiating the final age of the world'.^89 This is perhaps to read rather too much into the text, though it is true that Müntzer saw himself as a John the Baptist figure. Rupp makes the rather more measured judgement that 'there is nothing of the crackpot megalomania of a Bader or a Bockelson, or even a Hofmann' in Müntzer, and that, compared with these radicals '...indeed compared with some of Luther's claims about his own achievements (by the grace of God!), Müntzer is reserved about claims for his own prophetic mission'. He notes, too, how 'soberly expressed' is Müntzer's claim to

^85 ibid. Müntzer toned down his language considerably in the other two versions of this ManifestO.

^86 CW 67-68.

^87 CW 72.

^88 CW 82.


^90 CW 296/297, 308; see also below, p.51.
'direct inspiration' in respect of his translations of the Psalms: 'in order to improve matters [for the poor people]', Müntzer writes, I have translated the Psalms in accordance with German style and form but under the intimate and direct leading of the holy spirit'. Nevertheless, as Rupp concludes, 'it is part of Müntzer's apocalyptic view to be conscious of his own prophetic vocation', and this seems clear, for example, from his announcements that he is sharpening his sickle, that God had hired him for the harvest, and, as Rupp himself notes, from his allusions to himself as 'the Servant of God' - '(but sometimes in the history of the Church the most arrogant of titles!)' Goertz also sees Müntzer's 'self-consciousness as a "Servant of God" as a vital aspect of Müntzer's apocalypticism, though with Rupp argues that his was 'not an exaggerated sense of mission...but a reforming self-consciousness.'

An examination of some of the other designations Müntzer claims for himself may give an insight into the developing nature of the role he saw himself called upon to play as the end drew near. Under letters written during his 'settled' period at Allstedt in 1523 he signs himself 'a messenger of Christ' or 'willing courier of God'. By September of that year, when he has gotten into a dispute with Count Ernst von Mansfeld, he becomes Thomas Müntzer, a disturber of unbelievers'. In the Manifest Expose of mid-1524 he is 'Thomas Müntzer with the hammer' - which, like Jeremiah, he is to use against those so-called prophets who treat dishonourably the Word of God. In the days preceding the 'final battle' he is 'a servant of God against the godless'. Finally, for the battle itself, he takes the sword of Gideon.

Gideon is one of the key biblical figures upon whom Müntzer models himself - indeed, whom he becomes, for certainly the wielding of his sword was no symbolic or rhetorical gesture. Just as Gideon, with a mere three hundred men, took on the vast armies of the opposing Midianites, so Müntzer leads his followers, outnumbered and inadequately armed, against the mighty forces of the Princes at Frankenhausen. 'A hundred thousand people will not make me afraid, even if they are camped all around me', he writes to the brethren at Schmalkalden in early May 1525,
echoing some words of the Psalmist David, though with clear Gideon-esque overtones. He identifies with the slayer of Midian in three further letters written that week, signing off in each case 'Thomas Müntzer with the sword of Gideon'. And as Gideon relied on God to give him the victory, so also Müntzer. 'You need fear no one', he writes to the people of Frankenhausen just days before the fighting began:

'The voice of the Lord says: Look, the strength of my needy people will be increased, who will dare attack them? So be bold and put your trust in God alone, and he will endow your small band with more strength [than] you would ever believe.'

If Müntzer was Gideon, the scourge of the armies of Midian, so also was he filled with the spirit of Elijah, another mighty man of God who once slew four hundred and fifty prophets of the false god Baal in a single day. The significance of Elijah for Müntzer is two-fold. He is a model of one called by God at a particular point in history to destroy those who oppose God, and Müntzer began to draw support for his position from Elijah as early as his letter to Hausmann, and the shorter German version of the 'Prague Manifesto' in 1521. He also speaks approvingly of Elijah's action in destroying the priests of Baal in his Sermon to the Princes in 1524, and in the Manifest Expose calls for 'a servant of God...endowed with the spirit of Elijah' - implicitly himself - to 'step forward'. Müntzer also issues his Vindication and Refutation in response to Luther's vitriolic attack 'from the cave of Elijah, whose zeal spares no one', identifying himself with the prophet when he had occasion to steer clear of his persecutors. But Elijah is also an important messianic and apocalyptic figure. The gospel writers recall several times the prophecies concerning his role as the forerunner of the Son of Man, and Matthew, Mark and Luke each show these to have been fulfilled in the person of John the Baptist. In the Transfiguration narrative which follows in the accounts in Matthew and Mark, Elijah also represents the fulfilment in Jesus of Israelite prophecy concerning the Messiah. In his marginal comments on Tertullian's De Resurrectione carnis, Müntzer notes

95 CW 151, 156, 157.
96 CW 144.
97 CW 34, 360.
98 CW 250, 300. A leitmotif of the Manifest Exposé is the call Müntzer feels himself to have had to 'launch himself' into the godless (see, e.g. 262).
99 CW 327.
Elijah's apocalyptic role as a fore-warner of the coming day of judgement, his words clearly echoing those of Malachi 4:5 where the prophet quotes the Lord's promise to send the people 'Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day the LORD comes'. The case has often been made for identifying Elijah as one of the 'two witnesses' of Revelation chapter 11: they are recorded as being able 'to shut the sky that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying', and to bring forth fire and consume their foes, and Elijah demonstrated both of these powers during his lifetime. Their responsibility is to effect the conversion of the world in the end-time through their preaching, a task Müntzer, as one possessing the 'spirit of Elijah', clearly understood had been entrusted to him in these last days.

The close identification in the New Testament between John the Baptist and the prophet Elijah is interesting in so far as John is another figure whose mantle Müntzer is eager to claim. 'If...the Christian people is to be set on its feet again', he writes in A Manifest Exposé, they 'must learn to sigh, to pray and long for a new John...!' 'Therefore someone must arise who will point men to the revelation of God's little lamb, who comes from the father as the judgement of the eternal word.' The clear implication, as with the references later in this same document to Elijah, is that the someone is Müntzer himself: who else has a faith 'solidly based on the experience of his unbelief', or one which 'is a match for the industry of lust'? The reference to 'judgement' (urteyl) in this context is significant in the light of Gottfried Maron's study suggesting that Müntzer's usage of the term always has eschatological and in fact apocalyptic overtones. As Rupp comments, the Bible functions for Müntzer 'rather like the English Common Law, a volume of cases and precedents...and the figures of Elijah and John the Baptist are examples of divine judgement which have a univocal relation to the divinely authenticated judgments (John 7 and 8) of Müntzer

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100 CW 425.
101 The other witness is usually understood to be Enoch, who, like Elijah, did not see death 'because God took him': Gen 5:24, Heb 11:5; cf. Jude 24. Müntzer appears to refer to Enoch only once: CW 98. See also below, p.66.
103 CW 296.
104 CW 296; Ozment, op.cit., p.94.
and his comrades as they await the inauguration of the New Age.\textsuperscript{106}

Yet the work of John is not only linked with the final judgement of the world. He is, in contrast to the 'pleasure-loving, ambitious types' who do not practise what they preach, 'an angel testifying to Christ, one mirrored in all true preachers.' He is, in other words, a model for Müntzer of a preacher who, by his example, leads people into that true faith which comes through suffering and self-denial, and which knows the Movement of the Spirit in the depth of the soul. Preachers like John, Müntzer declares, 'must be praised...not for their meritorious deeds, but for their earnestness, a fruit of the undaunted sobriety by which they aim to set all lusts aside, allowing the powers of the soul to be disclosed, so that the abyss of the spirit may emerge through all the powers and the holy spirit can then have his say.\textsuperscript{107}

Their task today, though, is even harder than it was in John's own day, thanks to the pernicious influence of the scholars and preachers of the false gospel: in John's day people's minds were not so completely and resolutely closed as they are at the present time. Because of the scoundrelly biblical scholars the Christian people has not the least intention of believing that its God is nigh at hand...\textsuperscript{108}

Other figures whose cause Müntzer sees himself taking up are Josiah, Daniel - to whom we have briefly referred already - and Jehu. Josiah is Müntzer's model as he forges his first alliance: in his letter to Zeiss in 1524 he makes a reference to the 'holy king' and the covenant the people made with God in his time, and in their statement rejecting Müntzer's overtures to join their covenant the Orlamünde community cite his appeal to Josiah to support his action. Josiah's attack on the idolatrous priests of his time also receives commendation from Müntzer twice in his Sermon to the Princes.\textsuperscript{109} The need for a new Daniel - the central theme of this sermon, of course - is essential, Müntzer argues, in the light of the princes' failure, like Nebuchadnezzar before them, to understand the events happening around them. As

\textsuperscript{106} Rupp, 'True History...'; pp.82-83.
\textsuperscript{107} CW 308.
\textsuperscript{108} CW 296.
\textsuperscript{109} CW 100, 93, 246, 250.
Nebuchadnezzar could not grasp the significance of the image of different materials and its impending destruction at the hands of the stone loosened from the mountain, so the Saxon princes could not see that the last of the kingdoms of which the statue spoke, the one which they served, was shortly to meet its end. Hence the need for a new interpreter to explain the dream and show them what their response must be, the annihilation of all who obstruct the coming of the new kingdom, the reign of God. Müntzer's attraction to the figure of Jehu should not surprise us in view of the account in II Kings chapter 9 of his obedience to the Lord's command to slay three of the Lord's enemies, Joram, Ahaziah and Jezebel. As Müntzer writes to Christopher Meinhard in 1524, the emergence of a new Jehu will be a sign to the godless, 'with their senseless violence, to shrink back before such a one', whose own violence, by clear implication, will be, as in the case of Elijah and Gideon, sanctioned by God to deal a final avenging blow to the adversaries of God's people.

'A new Jehu', 'a new Daniel', 'a new John', 'a servant of God...of the spirit of Elijah', 'Thomas Müntzer with the sword of Gideon'...Müntzer was the last in the line of an illustrious band of warriors renowned for their unflinching obedience to the Lord's command to disturb - or in most cases destroy - the faithless: and the military prowess of these men, at least those of the Old Testament, is crucial for Müntzer, with his deep conviction that, in these last days, the godless, the tares in the divine field, must be rooted out and utterly destroyed. (In the guise of John, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, his duty was to arouse the Elect and prepare them for their role in this work.) Thus as he takes on these roles, subsumed in the generic designation 'a servant of God against the godless', Müntzer makes it plain to his followers that theirs was not simply a human struggle against earthly powers, but, as Scott puts it, 'a transcendent battle in the name of God, a holy war against the reprobate and obdurate.' Müntzer's close identification with apocalyptic figures like Daniel, Elijah and John bears clear testimony not only to this fact, but to the singular role he, as a chosen vessel of God, had to play in the dismantling of the old kingdom and the ushering in of the new.

Singular, we should note, but not solitary, for Müntzer never envisaged fighting the last battle alone. Indeed, the role which those whom Müntzer termed die Auserwelten - 'the elect' - would play in the final drama is central to an understanding of his whole apocalyptic. The

110 CW 77.
111 Scott, op.cit., p.154.
concept of a specially chosen or elect people of God derives from the doctrine of predestination, which understands humanity to be divided into two distinct groupings, the godly or 'elect', and the godless or lost. Such a doctrine is clearly to be seen underpinning biblical parables such as those featuring the wheat and the tares - whose importance we have already noted for Müntzer - and the sheep and the goats, to which surprisingly, in view of its clear apocalyptic tone, he never refers. But how is one to know to which camp a person belongs? Who are the sheep, the goats, the wheat, and the tares? The key to such knowledge is, for Müntzer, to be found in the concept of urteyl, judgement, a gift of God to the elect by which they are enabled to know themselves to be among the chosen, and to recognise those who are the ungodly. This concept is essential for Müntzer, and vital for an understanding of his leagues, his apocalyptic, and his participation in the peasants' struggle.

If the centrality of the elect as a category in Müntzer's thinking can be clearly discerned in his writings, his definition of the term, whom he actually saw coming within its bounds, suffers, as Matheson says, from 'an ominous lack of clarity': were they 'a tiny persecuted minority or the suffering masses'? The most straightforward thing to say would be that Müntzer's position changed or developed over time. Essentially the elect were those who had been

112 There is no doubt that Müntzer does subscribe to a doctrine of predestination, though not, unlike Karlstadt, in the full Augustinian (and later Calvinistic) sense. That God has chosen an elect underpins his whole apocalyptic, yet he cannot, as it were, hold to a 'double' predestinationism which would attach responsibility to God for the presence of evil in the world. He makes this explicit in one of his tirades against the 'arch-devil' of Wittenberg: you distort scripture, he accuses Luther, 'and make God the cause of evil...You...try to blame God for your being a poor sinner...You have conjured up such fantasies from your Augustine...' CW 345, cf. 375. On Karlstadt see Sider, op.cit., pp.38-40. On the general question of predestination in Müntzer cf. the comments by Rupp, and later Scott, that it is the 'clasp', the 'overarching doctrine' in his thought; Rupp, 'True History...', p.84, Scott, op.cit., p.183. Baylor seems nearer the mark when he says that 'Müntzer shows almost no interest in the doctrine of predestination as such': Michael G. Baylor, 'Theology and Politics in the Thought of Thomas Müntzer: The Case of the Elect', Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte, 79, 1988, p.87.

113 Cf. CW 105, n.821.

114 Urteyl has the additional meaning in Müntzer of 'pronouncement' (or Hinrichs suggests 'form'), i.e. of Scripture; cf. CW 159, 296 n.204, 332; F 471, 297, 327, and below, p.74. Note the similarity in the meaning of the Latin terms iudicium and testimonium.


116 As, indeed, did his conception of who were the 'godless': see Tom Scott, 'From Polemic to Sobriety: Thomas Müntzer in Recent Research', Journal of Ecclesiastical History, Vol.39, No.4, October 1988, p.561, and Stayer, 'Thomas Müntzer in 1989', pp.665-666. Goertz, among others, has recently argued that the godless were not the ignorant folk who continued to deny his message, but the spiritual and secular
shaped by God into the image of God's son, who had experienced the painful and tortuous journey to true faith, and therefore what distinguished them from the ungodly was not so much their outward deeds - for the elect can still fall into sin - but their inner sensitivity to the movement of the spirit in the ground of their soul. As Müntzer writes in *A Manifest Exposé*, making the contrast plain:

    However great a sinner he may be, the conscience of the elect man will direct him away from his sins, as long as he senses the movement of the spirit during his time of tribulation, as Psalm 39 testifies. But the conscience of the godless does not do this, as Psalm 35 points out.117

'Only those who had experienced the inner cross and obeyed the inner Word', as Packull summarises Müntzer's position, 'were fit instruments for God's programme which envisaged the punishment of the wicked.'118 Yet Müntzer was not a sectary, in the sense that he gathered round him a small band of saints which he believed could single-handedly carry through God's will in the last days, nor did he propose a 'dictatorship of the spiritually illuminated'.119 Like Luther, Müntzer recognized that 'Christians are not so many that they can get together in mobs',120 and so initially he allowed into his league both the pious and the evil-doers. Yet it is difficult to deny that at Mühlhausen, where he formed the Eternal League of God and where he rallied his troops for the battle at Frankenhausen, Müntzer implicitly equated the elect with the German volk, the 'common folk, the poor, the materially oppressed';121 that he made, in other words, the peasants' cause his own. This was not, of course, unproblematic, not least because of the tension it sets up with the notion that the elect are only those who have known *Anfechtung* and *Gelassenheit*. Stayer argues that 'the main reason that Müntzer equated the revolutionary peasants with the elect was that they responded to his correct doctrine',122 though as Bailey pertinently asks, 'How many of the peasants who took part in the rebellion and who had suffered a type of social Anfechtung, had truly experienced the birth of faith in

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117 CW 290.
118 Packull, *Mysticism and the Early South German-Austrian Anabaptist Movement 1525-1531*, pp.31-32.
120 Quoted in Rupp, *Patterns*, p.299.
122 Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, p.89.
their soul...? Whatever Müntzer's thinking at this time he attributed the collapse of his enterprise and his own downfall to his misplaced faith in the peasant hordes, and came to regret it bitterly. The people did not understand me properly, he wrote from prison while awaiting his execution: 'they sought only their own interests and the divine truth was defeated as a result'.

The full significance of this will be discussed more fully in due course, but more needs to be said in general about Müntzer's Bünde, his leagues or covenants of the elect, which provided the whole dynamic of his apocalyptic. Müntzer's view, reduced to its essence, was that the Church, once pure and undefiled, had been corrupted by faithless and godless clergy, but now a new age was about to dawn in which the elect, on the basis of their God-given capacity for judgement (urteyl) would utterly destroy the enemies of God. And the sign of this would be the forging of a new covenant between God and humankind. Thus the term Bund in Müntzer suggests not merely a league or pact made by men and women among themselves, but a covenant of the kind God made with God's elect, the people of Israel. Thus, as Rupp puts it, whether we think of his small dedicated company in Allstedt or the later peasant army with its white banner and Rainbow [sic] (the Noachic covenant being one of the primary Biblical covenants) it seems important that it was not in the first place a covenant or association between men, but a solemn oath 'Coram Deo'.

The implications of this are two-fold: firstly, the task for which a Bund was brought into being was not of human origin, but divine; and, secondly, the elect do not expect success on the basis of their own strength, but because of their obedience to God's calling. The implication of this will be assessed in the final chapter.

Before moving to that analysis one final point about Müntzer's apocalyptic needs to be observed, namely the scant attention he pays to the form society will take in the new age. It is true that, under torture a few days before his execution, he confessed that 'he had launched the rising with the aim of making all Christians equal and of expelling and doing to death the

123 Bailey, loc.cit., p.42.
124 CW 160.
125 Rupp, True History...', p.85.
princes and gentry who refused to support the Gospel', and that a common article of faith among those supporting the insurrection was that 'All things are to be held in common and distribution should be to each according to his need, as occasion arises'.

We need, of course, to exercise caution when evaluating statements made on the rack, though Rupp has argued that we should take Müntzer’s communism seriously, on the basis of his familiarity with Plato (including the *Republic*), and the frequency with which he uses the term Gemeinnutz, or 'common interest', in the manifestos and letters he circulated during the build up to the final campaign. Vogler has recently agreed that by the late Middle Ages Gemeinnutz had come to characterise the ideal urban community, but that although Müntzer invested the term with religious meaning, and saw it as the basis of a new social order, he never spelled out what form that new order would take.

A further article to which Müntzer subscribed under torture - and which should also be treated with some care - was that 'Any prince, count, or gentleman who refused to [accept common ownership and distribution according to need] should first be given a warning, but then one should cut off his head or hang him.' Müntzer further confessed that, if things had turned out as intended, he would have 'appropriate(d) all the land within a forty-six mile radius of Mühlhausen and the land in Hesse, and...deal(t) with the princes and gentry as described'.

It is also clear from the confessions he made voluntarily under interrogation that he harboured ideas of creating a 'theocratic republic', whose general framework would be communitarian but which would not wholly discard differences of rank or even private property. (The 'Constitutional Draft', a peasant manifesto drawn up in South West Germany in the winter of 1524/5, contained similar ideas, though whether Müntzer had a hand in its production is

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126 CW 436-437.
127 Rupp, *Patterns*, pp.301-302; idem., *Thomas Müntzer: Prophet of Radical Christianity*, pp.484-485. Cf. Cohn, op.cit., p.240. I am unable to substantiate Rupp's claim, made in both the works cited here, that the phrase *gemein nutz* 'recurs' in Müntzer's final letters. The term *gemein* appears often enough (as in *gemeinen volck* (common people) CW 112, 150, 151, 159, and *gemeine Gottes* (congregation of God) CW 149, 150), but *gemeinen nutz* only once (CW 133). By contrast *eigemut nutz* (own self-interest) appears on four occasions in Müntzer's final letter (CW 160/161). We should note, however, that *gemein nutz* was a term very widely used in political discourse of the time, as Rupp himself points out.
129 CW 437.
disputed.)\textsuperscript{131} That the elect would rule in this new state was set out as early as 1521 in the Prague Manifesto, and is echoed later in, for example, Müntzer's letter to the brethren at Stolberg in 1523. Yet as Scott concludes,

his blueprint was clearly intended as provisional. It covered the interim in which the kingdom of the Elect would reign supreme before the ultimate true kingdom of God. In that sense, therefore, he had no real 'theory of society'.\textsuperscript{132}

Müntzer's theology, as Goertz has recently written, 'was really only a theology of revolutionary transformation and not a theology of the construction of a postrevolutionary state of affairs.'\textsuperscript{133}

Müntzer writes with rather more certainty, however, about his conviction that the world is shortly to be reshaped in accordance with the order of things (\textit{ordo rerum}) instituted by God at the creation of the world. For the framework of his ideas on the \textit{ordo} Müntzer may have been indebted to Quintilian's great rhetorical work \textit{Institutio oratoria}, though he infused the concept with his own theology to the extent that it can be seen, as Matheson says, as 'the most original part of his thinking'.\textsuperscript{134} What precisely Müntzer meant by the term has been the subject of considerable debate, though it is clear that he understood from the Genesis accounts of creation that God had established a hierarchical pattern of relationships between Godself, humankind, and the creatures, which, as a consequence of the Fall, had become grossly distorted, and would remain so until the world was transformed. A clue to how Müntzer saw this 'order' is contained in some sermon notes he penned in 1523:

\begin{quote}
This is what is meant by contemplating and sorting out the order of things; first the four elements and the heavens, then the plants, then the animals, then man, then Christ, then God the Father Almighty, who is uncreated.\textsuperscript{135}
\end{quote}

Müntzer comes close at times to developing a natural theology: at the beginning of the 'Prague Manifesto', for example, he appears to suggest that the order of God is 'implanted in all

\begin{footnotes}
\item[133] Goertz, 'Thomas Müntzer: Revolutionary Between the Middle Ages and Modernity', p.30.
\item[134] Matheson, 'Thomas Müntzer's Marginal Comments on Tertullian', p.85.
\item[135] CW 387.
\end{footnotes}
creatures'. Yet this order is not really to be comprehended without divine revelation: faith comes to a person, as he writes elsewhere, 'because God discloses and reveals himself through the order established in him and in all the creatures.' Perhaps one should pay more attention to the hints of a creation theology in some of Müntzer's writings: clearly Müntzer could have read an *ordo dei* out of the Genesis accounts of the creation of the world, and the 'hierarchy' outlined in Müntzer's sermon notes, at least from the elements to humankind, bears a striking similarity to the order of creation set out in Genesis chapter 1.

Schwarz, whilst underlining the importance of Genesis 1 in Müntzer - it is the 'key' to his concept of the *ordo rerum* - has also drawn attention to the hint in the *Vindication and Refutation* of a connection in Müntzer's mind between that passage, Psalm 19 - which stresses the purity of the law of God - and Isaiah 11 - which speaks of the spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord resting in Christ. This connection is not clearly spelled out, though Müntzer seems to have coupled the restoration of the *ordo* with the indwelling in humanity of the pure fear of God: the soul must ultimately be 'bound' to the pure law of God, not as at present to creaturely things. 'I strive for the purity of the divine law, Psalm 18', Müntzer writes,

by pointing to the beginning of the Bible, to what its first chapter says about the ordering of creation, and explain how all the sayings of the Bible point to the fulfilment of the spirit of the fear of God, Isaiah 11.

'I confess Christ with all his members as the fulfiller of the law', Müntzer continues - and again the reference is Psalm 18 - 'for God's will and work must be completely carried out by

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136 CW 357.

137 CW 357, 106. The idea that there might be a natural theology in Müntzer, suggested by Rupp (*Patterns...* p.277, and *Thomas Müntzer, Hans Huth and the 'Gospel of all Creatures';* pp.495ff.) and recently revived by Bubenheimer ('Thomas Müntzer und der Humanismus' in Bräuer & Junghans, op.cit., pp.302-328), has been contested by some scholars, for example Ozment (op.cit., p.88).

138 The occasional excursus by Müntzer into 'scientific' areas is also interesting; see, for example, his notes on the nature of the elements, scribbled on the back of a letter in 1521 (CW 403). As Matheson writes, "Müntzer is fascinated by the wonder of creation, by the dynamic relation between God and the "works of his hands"; 'Thomas Müntzer's Marginal Comments on Tertullian', p.86. Müntzer would have been aware of Tertullian's hostility to the gnostics' 'low view' of matter, as exemplified by Marcion.

139 In the version of the Bible with which Müntzer was familiar this Psalm appeared as '18', and is so numbered whenever it is referred to in his writings.

140 Schwarz, *Die apokalyptische Theologie Thomas Müntzers...*, pp.110f.
observance of the law, Psalm 1, Romans 12.' In his letter to Meinhard of May 1524 Müntzer also weaves an argument from these passages: as Schwarz summarises it, 'Dem "Geist der rechten reinen Furcht Gottes" wird nach Müntzers Interpretation von Ps. 18 durch das Gesetz Gottes zur Klarheit verholfen, so daß "ein Mensch seinen Hals für die Wahrheit setzt, wie Christus sagt Lucae 12.'

Müntzer also draws on the early chapters of Genesis in A Manifest Exposé as he explains, with some emphasis, that God's 'ordering of things' - the nature of the relationship between God and humanity and between humanity and creation - is to be understood in terms of 'dominion' and 'possession'. The word he uses in each case is besitzung, implying possession or ownership, and as Bräuer summarises Müntzer's position,

Gott ist der unmittelbare »Besitzer« des Menschen, d.h., er hat die direkte und uneingeschränkte Verfügungsgewalt. Der Mensch wiederum ist der »Besitzer« der Kreaturen.

Schwarz also notes that Müntzer identified a 'doppelte Besitzverhältnis', double 'relationship of possession' in Genesis. A further hint that Müntzer understood God as having proprietorial rights over the creation is found in some notes he added at the end of his sermon 'On Following Christ', where he highlights a number of Scriptures which treat of God possessing us, God's people, even down to our own individual 'inmost being'. The point is, though, as Müntzer writes in some other notes for sermons, that this hierarchy of relationships in the created order became distorted when Adam 'entangle[d] himself with creaturely things': the intimate communication between God and humankind was lost, and fear of one another replaced fear of God. And this happened, as Bräuer says, on a world-

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141 CW 332,333; cf. Schwarz, op.cit., p.111.
142 The law of God gives us clarity about "the spirit of the real, pure fear of God", which comes from Müntzer's interpretation of Psalm 18, so that "a man risks his neck for the truth Luke 12." Schwarz, op.cit., p.111; CW 78; [my trans].
143 CW 316.
144 'God is the direct "owner" of humankind, i.e., he has direct and unrestricted power to control (them). Humankind, on the other hand, is the "owner" of the creatures.' Siegfried Bräuer, 'Konturen des Theologen Thomas Müntzer', Ich Thomas Müntzer, eyn knecht gottes, (Historich-biographische Ausstellung des Museums für Deutsche Geschichte Berlin 8. Dezember 1989 bis 28. Februar 1990), Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1989, p.81; [my trans.]
145 Schwarz, op.cit., p.110.
146 CW 398.
147 CW 388.
historical scale, for since the Fall all the relationships which exist within and between humanity, nature, and the divine - spiritual, social, natural, political, salvific - have become out of joint and in need of restoration to their rightful order. We long for the time when the voice of its true owner (warhaftigen besitzers) is heard in the soul.

This complete restoration of the ordo will not be realised until evil is finally overcome in the world, but there is a sense, Müntzer argues, in which Christ has already made good the damage caused by Adam's sin and repaired the broken order of things. 'The opposite to Adam is Christ', he writes in his notes for sermons to which we referred earlier, 'for just as [Ad]am distorts the order of things...so Christ held fast to the highest and despised creaturely things.' Christ has fulfilled the law. This christological dimension in Müntzer's conception of the ordo rerum also emerges clearly in his marginal comments on Tertullian, and in a letter to Zeiss in December 1523. 'The disobedience of the creatures is cancelled out by the obedience of the word which became flesh in nature,' he writes in the latter. '...Christ has atoned for all the damage done by Adam, so that the parts may hold together with the whole...'

In the margin of his copy of Tertullian's De carne Christi and De resurrectione carnis, Müntzer again notes the contrast between the first Adam and the second: Christ has redressed Adam's sin by his innocence, and restored the order of things, but - and this is crucial for his apocalyptic - omnia propter hominem, 'all for the sake of man'. The re-creation of the ordo rerum is, for Müntzer, a this-worldly event, not something that will happen only after the second appearance of Christ and the inauguration of the reign of God. The dualism of the gnostics is rejected, and Tertullian himself is also taken to task for 'let[t]ing the coming of Antichrist coincide with the

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148 '[...]zwar in weltgeschichtlichem Ausmaß.' Bräuer, loc.cit., p.81.
149 Matheson, Thomas Müntzer's Marginal Comments..., p.85.
150 CW 77 (cf. 46 n.293); F 403. This reference appears during a remarkable exegesis of Psalm 78:65 and John 6:16f. in Müntzer's letter of 30 May 1524 to Christopher Meinhard. In the passage in the Psalm the Lord is likened to a warrior waking from a heavy, alcohol-induced sleep, and Müntzer merges this image of him rising up and leaving his bedroom with that of Christ, in the John passage, rising after being awoken by the disciples to still the storm which was threatening to sink the boat in which they were all travelling. There are obvious apocalyptic overtones here, accentuated by Müntzer's comment that 'the time has come' for 'us to urge our case' and awaken the slumbering Lord, and by the way in which he adds to the complexity of the imagery by transforming the warrior of the Psalm into a bridegroom, a common metaphor in the New Testament for the eschatological Christ; see also below p.84.
151 CW 388.
152 CW 70-71.
153 CW 412. Matheson, Thomas Müntzer's Marginal Comments..., p.87.
day of judgment like the monk Martin Luther.' It is the elect, the restored and renewed people of God, who exercise judgement on Antichrist and all his followers here and now. 'The judgement of Christ will be long in coming'.

Luther's and Tertullian's position - and this is of course one reason for Müntzer's jibe at them - allows a human passivity with regard to the Last Things: for Müntzer the elect are called to act in the intervening period.

Müntzer's remarks to Zeiss reveal another dimension of his conception of the reformation of the world in the last days. Müntzer saw the relationship of the created order to God in terms of 'parts' to a 'whole', an understanding which he drew from passages in the Psalms and Paul's letter to the Colossians (and, Rupp adds, probably from a reading of Nicholas of Cusa and Plato as well). 'The will of God is that of the whole over all his members', he writes to Weiss in a later letter:

- to recognise the knowledge and the judgements of God is to explain his will, as Paul writes to the Colossians in chapter one and as is written in Psalm 118, but the work of God flows out from the whole and from each of his members.

In the 'Prague Manifesto' Müntzer berates the 'thieves of Scripture', the priests, for not ever making known the 'tiniest fraction' about the order God established in the creatures, or having understood in the slightest how 'the whole...[is]...a unity of all the parts' - or rather, is greater than the sum of its parts. 'It is in its entirety that all knowledge of created things must be approached', Müntzer writes in 1521: or, as Rupp translates it, 'All knowledge of the Creatures is to be related to the Whole...'. Yet, as Müntzer's comments to Zeiss make clear, Adam's fall broke up the unity of the parts, which must now await their true restoration into the whole through the redemptive work of Christ.

Schwarz identifies Einfältigkeit and Mannigfaltigkeit as further terms Müntzer employs to convey the distinction between the unity or wholeness of Christ and the broken nature of

154 CW 428.
155 Rupp, Patterns, p.294.
156 CW 97.
157 CW 363, 357.
158 CW 403; Rupp, Patterns, p.294; cf. p. 329. The original Latin reads: 'In toto exordienda est omnis scientia creaturarum...' (F 534).
humanity. The expression ‘*einfeltigkeyt Christi*’ (simple, undifferentiated Christ) occurs in the *Vindication*, and is drawn from II Corinthians 11:3, which Münzter translates as ‘See that your mind is not distracted from the simplicity of Christ.’ As Schwarz points out, Münzter wants to present a contrast between the ‘simplicity’ of Christ and of God, and the *Mannigfaltigkeit* (multi-faceted nature) of the created order. In *On Counterfeit Faith* Münzter refers to ‘the distinction between the directness (*einfeltigkeyt*) of God and the deviousness of the creature laid down in the order between God and the creatures’, a distinction manifested in the fact that humankind has ignored the one command of God (Genesis 2:16) and been seduced by creaturely desires. As the passage in the *Vindication* puts it, humankind has become prey to many lusts and desires, despite the Scriptural injunction (Psalm 37:4), ‘*In Gott solt dich belüsten*’ (‘You will find your delight in God’). Münzter goes on to underline God’s warning to Adam of the harm that would befall him ‘if he allowed himself to be distracted (*vermachteltigt*) by the creaturely lusts, instead of finding his sole delight in God...’

Münzter’s letter to Zeiss of December 1523 also gives a clue as to how this reconstitution of the parts into the whole, and the restoration of the *ordo rerum*, can proceed: the starting point is the transformation of the elect. ‘...by the working of faith, our fleshly nature must partly fade away in us who are part of him, as was the case with the whole Christ, our head’, Münzter writes. The point is that the relationship between humankind and the creatures can only be made right after that between humankind and God has been restored, and that is only possible as people experience true faith, become conformed to, or ‘follow in the footsteps of’, Christ, and are no longer controlled by worldly lusts but ‘possessed’ by God. ‘One has to understand’, Münzter writes in *A Manifest Expost*, ‘how the heart of the elect is always moved by the power of the Most High to return to its origin.’ But this is only the start of what will

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159 Schwarz, ‘Thomas Münzter und die Mystik’, p.289; idem, *Die apokalyptische Theologie Thomas Münzters...*, p.115. The terms were also familiar to Karlstadt, who published a tract in 1523 entitled *Von manigfaltigkeit des eynfeltigen eynigen willen gottes*; cf. Sider, op.cit.

160 CW 340; F 334.

161 CW 217; F 219.

162 CW 340; F 334.

163 CW 70; emphasis mine.

164 See Matheson’s helpful summary of Münzter's thinking on this point in CW 357, n.6.

165 CW 290.
become an apocalyptic scenario: as Gritsch writes,

Müntzer verbindet seine mystischen Aussagen über den Geistbesitz im Abgrund der Seele mit einer Art kosmischen Theologie, die von der Bewegung des Herzens zu Gott als Bewegung von der Einheit aller Teile mit dem Ganzn [sic] spricht.166

Or as Schwarz summarises Müntzer's position,

Die Entleerung der Seele von den kreatürlichen Begierden soll unter dem possessor supemus das neue Besitzverhältnis über die Kreaturen herbeiführen.167

Incorporated into Müntzer's vision of a universe of rightly-ordered relationships is a church restored to the pure, unadulterated condition it enjoyed at the time of the apostles. On the basis of his reading of the historians Hegesippus and Eusebius, Müntzer believed (as we noted above, pages 39-40), that the church as originally established by Christ was holy and undefiled, but, due to the idleness of the elect who allowed the enemy to sow his tares among the wheat, continued in that state for only a generation or two: 'the holy bride of Christ', he writes, employing the sexual imagery he frequently uses when speaking of the church, 'remained a virgin until after the death of the followers of the apostles, but from that moment on became an immoral adulteress'.168 In some notes Müntzer jotted down in Latin on the back of a letter, he describes the church of his day as 'the hangman's church' and 'the executioner's church', references to it being well and truly in the pocket of the princes, whom he regularly referred to as executioners on account of their 'right' (which he of course came to dispute) to bear the sword.169 Yet it will not forever remain so, and Müntzer clearly envisaged that a restitution of

166 'Müntzer connected his mystical statement about the possession of the Spirit in the depths of the soul with a cosmic sort of theology, which speaks of the movement of the heart to God as movement from the unity of all parts with the whole.' Eric W. Gritsch, 'Thomas Müntzers Weg In Die Apokalyptik'. Luther, 60, 2/1989, p.58; [my trans.].

167 'The emptying of the soul of creaturely desires should bring about, under the higher possessor, a new relationship of possession over the creatures.' Schwarz, Die apokalyptische Theologie Thomas Müntzers..., p.119; [my trans.].

168 CW 166-167. Note that the sexual imagery continues farther on in this paragraph from the Foreword to the German Church Service Book: speaking of the need for a translation of the church's liturgy from Latin into the vernacular, Müntzer asks if we are 'to regard God as so impotent that he cannot progress further in this matter?' (CW 167).

169 CW 405-406; nb. 405, n.10. Cf. 339, n.156.
the church to its apostolic purity would be a feature of the new age: a new community of the elect would rise from the ashes of the old order, and the church, the body of Christ, would become a perfect society, the basis for all worldly social relationships which would be ordered almost along theocratic lines.170

Amongst the apocalyptic imagery at the conclusion of all three versions of the 'Prague Manifesto' there appears a reference to a 'new apostolic church', beginning in Bohemia and spreading 'everywhere', and in the Latin version Müntzer warns that 'the Lord will build up, console and reunite' the present Roman church in its 'fragmented, derelict and scattered' state, 'until it sees the God of gods dwell in Zion from eternity to eternity'.171 But the new church would be a qualitatively different one: the elect, including many drawn from among the heathen, will be 'far superior to us lazy, negligent Christians.'172 As Nipperdey writes, '(Müntzer's) aim is not the restitution of the primitive church, but the real freedom of God's children, so that the "earthly life may be transformed into heaven."'173 Scott notes Müntzer's vision 'of a purified and perfect Christian commonwealth of the elect.'174 'We must believe that we fleshly, earthly men are to become gods!', Müntzer writes in A Manifest Exposé: through Christ's incarnation we 'become God's pupils with him - to be taught by Christ himself, and become divine'.175 Müntzer may be close to the ideal, popular in the late Middle Ages, of the *viri spirituales*, whose adherents expected, Reeves tells us, 'not so much a recapturing of the life of the first Apostles...as the creating of the life of new apostles.'176 Bräuer has argued that even Müntzer's liturgical experiments can be seen in this light, as 'an important stage towards the anticipated lordship of Christ by means of a purified congregation of the truly faithful'.177 Schwarz also points to Müntzer's stated intention in the foreword to his new German liturgy that through it 'all the elect should be instructed by God'.178

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171 CW 378.
172 CW 314.
175 CW 278.
177 Quoted in Scott, 'From Polemic to Sobriety...', p.566.
178 Schwarz, *Die apokalyptische Theologie Thomas Müntzers...*, p.32; CW, 168.
Schwarz suggests that one clue to understanding this idea of the qualitatively new life which the elect could expect soon to enjoy is to be found in the longer version of Müntzer's letter to Zeiss of 22 July 1524. In a 'postscript' to this letter, where Müntzer appears to be responding to some questions raised by his reader, he briefly alludes to the common mystical experience of the heart being wrenched away from the world to which it is clinging, and then comments that the person who has achieved this state 'can choose good days (gute tage) rather than bad with a good conscience, as is clearly indicated by the evangelist John and by Elijah [and] Enoch.' 179 Schwarz points out that, according to a medieval legend based on a reading of John 21:22-23, the Apostle John did not die, but, like Elijah and Enoch who were also transformed without seeing death, was called by Christ into his kingdom. 180 For Müntzer, then, the notion of gute tage might be linked, Schwarz suggests, with the experience of being swept up to a terrestrial paradise of the kind enjoyed by Enoch, Elijah and John. If so, then it is also linked to the concept of a restored prelapsarian state of innocency which the pious will enjoy as their reward. 181 But the reference to Elijah and Enoch also has a more precise apocalyptic function for Müntzer since, as we have noted already, it is they who will take on the role of the 'two witnesses' spoken of in Revelation 11:3. Following the destruction of Antichrist by Christ, they, through their preaching, will bring about the conversion of the whole world. 182 Thus the 'good days' might also encompass that time when the world has been purged of all the godless and the ordo restored. Schwarz argues that in some respects Müntzer's views here are close to those of the Taborites: 'Müntzers Hinweis auf die "guten Tage"', he writes,  

die sich dem bewährten Gläubigen in Analogie zu Henoch, Elia und dem Evangelisten Johannes eröffnen, bleibt unverständlich, wenn man ihn nicht in Zusammenhang bringt mit der taboritischen Hoffnung auf eine chiliastische Wiedergewinnung paradiesischer Unschuld. 183

Müntzer, however, as Schwarz recognises, did not expect that the new age would be ushered in

179 CW 98.
180 Schwarz, op.cit., pp.46-47.
181 ibid., p.55.
182 That Müntzer saw himself as an Elijah-figure has already been noted: see above, p.50.
183 'Müntzer's reference to "good days", which will be revealed to the faithful in analogy to Enoch, Elijah and the Apostle John, remains incomprehensible unless one sees it in the context of the Taborite hope for a chiliastic restoration of paradisaical innocence', Schwarz, op.cit., p.59. On pp.80ff. Schwarz offers a list of eight similarities (followed by a few differences) between the eschatological beliefs of Müntzer and the Taborites.
by a visible return of Jesus, nor, as the Taborites also believed, that the elect would gather in five cities at that time. Nevertheless, he writes, 'In dem MaBe, wie sich die "neue Kirche" aufbaut im Prozeß des Gleichförmigwerdens der Erwählten mit Christus, verwirklicht sie sich auch in ihrer chiliastischen Gestalt.' \(^{184}\) One should not also ignore the strong mystical element in Müntzer’s thought here, for the elect cannot enjoy good days in the new age without first having their ‘heart...torn away from clinging to this world by wretchedness and pain,’ \(^{185}\) and, indeed, without being prepared to step into the struggle against godless unbelief. This is a necessary part of the final purification process the church must experience at the hands of the spirit if it is to return to its original state; all the elect must come to true faith and learn the ‘pure fear of God’. It is in this context, Schwarz concludes, that one should understand the good days signalled by Enoch, Elijah and John.\(^{186}\)

In the end what is important for Müntzer is that the kingdom is for the elect, however he finally came to understand the term. His message about the mighty and the wise being brought low, and the poor uplifted, found a ready hearing among the common people, who rallied to his call for a transformation of both the church and the world. Müntzer’s 'anticlerical invective', Scott has written, 'tapped a ready vein of popular resentment', though his conclusion that Müntzer’s lack of success in leading the Thuringian rebellion was the result of his refusal ‘to articulate, legitimate and advocate the wider social, economic and political demands of the common people’ needs some qualification.\(^{187}\) Clearly the people did misunderstand Müntzer’s motives to some extent, as he himself acknowledged in his final letter,\(^{188}\) but neither they nor he drew any sharp distinction between 'religious' and 'secular' goals - or as Goertz puts it, between 'the reformation of the church and the underlying transformation of their environment'\(^{189}\) - in the way Scott seems to imply. Thus Müntzer’s call for rule by, of and for the elect was also a demand, which the people were already articulating, for a better world - 'a world of

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\(^{184}\) To the extent that the 'new church' is built up through the conformity of the elect to Christ, it takes a chiliastic form'; op.cit., p.59. On Schwarz's usage of 'chiliastic' see above, p.31, n.13.

\(^{185}\) CW 98.

\(^{186}\) Schwarz, op.cit., p.56.


\(^{188}\) CW 160.

neighbourly love and brotherhood nurtured from the depths of the divine gospel.'

And this demand, as both Müntzer and the people also recognized, could not be accommodated within the existing socio-economic structures, but was achievable only after a revolutionary overthrow of these. Müntzer does not therefore enter the peasants' struggle, as some historians have argued, as a leader taking the people where otherwise they would not have gone, but neither is he deluded by any sort of false assumption that the peasants shared a common aim with him to introduce a 'kingdom of God' predicated on a conquering of all fleshly desires. What Müntzer did introduce to the Aufruhr was a conviction that it was ultimately of eschatological significance, and could not therefore be in vain. This was a propitious moment, a kairos, in which God would act to avenge God's people. 'Make a start and fight the fight of the Lord!', is Müntzer's appeal to the Allstedters in April 1525. If the odds against success in human terms were overwhelming, that was no reason to be deterred, for

God is with you, as it is written in 2 Chronicles. This is what God says, 'You should have no fear. You should not shrink from this great host; it is not your fight, but the Lord's. It is not you who fight; stand up like men. Above you, you will see the Lord helping.'

In ultimate terms the success or failure of Müntzer's - and the peasants' - cause rested on the will of God: what the implications - and consequences - of that were must now be examined.

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190 ibid, p.170.
191 CW 141-142.
IV

Müntzer's Apocalyptic in Perspective

Anyone surveying the flood of scholarly treatises which greeted the quincentenary of Müntzer’s (assumed) date of birth in 1989¹ might suppose the ideological conflict which once clouded so much research into his life to be over. For generations Müntzer had been the unwitting subject of claims and counter-claims by both Marxist and Christian academics who, with their own pre- cast interpretative models, had seemingly been all to ready to claim him as their own, and produce skewed images of him according to their own particular presuppositions. Thus Müntzer was either essentially a hero of the peasants' and workers' movement, a ‘forerunner of revolutionary class-consciousness’ and a sixteenth-century ‘Che Guevara’; or else he was primarily a mystic, an exegete, a liturgist, and a pastor, who found himself, at a late stage, cornered by events, and the logic of his own position, into preaching violent insurrection against the rulers and princes. Synthesis between these positions seemed difficult. Now, however, as Stayer, for one, points out, an important watershed appears to have been reached in Müntzer studies: scholars on the left can be found acknowledging Müntzer’s theology as the foundation of his action, and thus taking an almost conservative position alongside Hans- Jürgen Goertz, for example, who has long argued that Müntzer should be understood as a ‘theologian of revolution’.² For Stayer this represents ‘an ebbing of polemical exuberance from the one area of Reformation studies in which ideological conflict still stood in the way of even a loose scholarly consensus.’³ Matheson has also observed a growing movement among both Marxist and non-Marxist historians towards a recognition that an understanding of Müntzer is not advanced by reducing him to the ‘fragmented analysis of twentieth century discourse, by making him a purely religious figure, or essentially a humanist, or in essence a

¹ Two comprehensive and stimulating reviews of this literature are Stayer, ‘Thomas Müntzer in 1989’ and Werner Packull’s contributions in Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte, Supplement, Literature Review 1990, s.26 ‘Täufertum und heterodoxe Richtungen’.


social reformer.¹⁴

This tendency towards a less rigid or categorical understanding of Müntzer - which presumably is unlikely to be reversed in our post-modern times! - opens the way towards the construction of a more rounded picture of him, one which takes account of the complexity and originality of much of his thinking, and the way in which it emerges from an interweaving of a number of influential strands, none of which may be said to predominate. In any case, questions predicated on an assumption that Müntzer can only be understood as primarily a 'mystic', an 'iconoclast', a 'revolutionary', and so on, are hopelessly anachronistic, since neither Müntzer nor his contemporaries would have been conscious of such distinctions in his thought. His goals, like those of his followers, were both secular and religious, and he would not have understood attempts to tease out 'mystical', 'apocalyptic' or 'political' strains in his thinking. As Matheson says, apropos of Müntzer's use of the imagery of hammers, sickles and rainbows,

> each and every image...carries a trail of associations and allusions - personal, biblical, mystical, apocalyptic, and communal - which we can never wholly recover, however much we sharpen up our mine-shaft methodology, or broaden our interpretative net.⁵

A multi-faceted approach has implications for a study such as this which purports to focus on the significance of just one element of Müntzer's thought, the apocalyptic. It exposes the limitations, for a full understanding of Müntzer's thought, of a hermeneutic committed to isolating single dimensions of it for independent analysis, based on a supposition that there was a point at which Müntzer underwent a transition from, say, 'mystic' to 'apocalyptic', or (as some earlier Marxists argued) from 'theologian' to 'outright political agitator'.⁶ A more dynamic approach now seems open, which attempts to discover Müntzer through exploring how each strand in his thinking might inform, augment and sharpen the whole body of his ideas and his praxis.

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¹⁴ Matheson, 'Christianity as Insurrection', p.315.


⁶ Engels, of course, was one: Frederick Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1956 (orig. German ed. 1850), pp.54-55.
An examination of Müntzer's most unambiguously apocalyptic and revolutionary writings - the 'Prague Manifesto' of 1521, the Sermon to the Princes, and his last twenty or so extant letters - bears out the value of this approach. That these writings do have a strong apocalyptic and insurrectionary message is clear enough, even from a most cursory reading. Time and again Müntzer is to be found railing against the wickedness and treachery of the present ungodly politico-religious order, and prophesying in the clearest terms its imminent downfall at the hands of God's elect. He is living in the time when the ending of the fifth Empire of the world is in full swing, and when the Princes, or if they will not do it, the common people, must sweep aside the evil-doers who obstruct the gospel. Antichrist will have his day, but before long Christ will give the kingdom of this world to his elect for all time. Each of these writings points forward to the coming conflict between the godless and the elect, and some positively bulge with denunciations of the former and warnings and exhortations to the latter. Yet, despite the emphasis in these writings, it can hardly be argued, on the basis of a close reading of them, that Müntzer therein abandons his mysticism in favour of a wholly 'apocalyptic' or 'revolutionary' position.

The discussion which follows is based on a close linguistic analysis of the writings mentioned - the German versions of the 'Prague Manifesto', the Sermon on Daniel, and Müntzer's last twenty letters - undertaken with the aid of modern computer technology. At first it may seem somewhat bizarre to subject Müntzer's thoughts, often hastily jotted down in notebooks or on the backs of envelopes, to analysis by the latest in twentieth century electronic gadgetry, but some provocative and stimulating findings can emerge, as this chapter will testify. The basic text used was the Franz edition of Müntzer's works (Thomas Müntzer: Schriften und Briefe, 1968), and the selected texts were scanned on to an Apple Macintosh computer using a Text Recognition Programme (Omnipage). This created a computer readable text file, which was used to input to an Oxford Concordance Programme. This programme first produced a frequency/information table, a list, in other words, of every different word appearing in the scanned pages, sorted into alphabetical order, each with a figure indicating the number of occasions it was found in the text. Key words for analysis were then selected from this list, and a concordance-style print-out produced for each selected word. The number of the line in

7 CW 244, 246, 141, 371.
8 The help of Mr Donald Ellis of the University of Otago Computer Centre proved invaluable throughout the process described.
which each word appeared was provided in the print-out, and this was matched to a compatibly numbered print-out of the scanned material. The total number of words in the selected writings was 20,243, which produced 1826 lines of text when scanned on to the computer. The total vocabulary of the texts was 5,025 words, from which 762 were chosen for detailed analysis and inclusion in the concordance print-out. The total number of references provided by this print-out was 1,641.

Using this method to examine the frequency with which key mystical themes and terms are to be found in the writings we have selected will demonstrate how far Müntzer is from dropping his mysticism as he increasingly takes up 'apocalyptic' and 'revolutionary' themes. We might start with the example of the term *forcht Gots* (the fear of God), which appears some twenty times in these writings. In the ‘Prague Manifesto’ it is often expanded to *der geist der forcht Gots* (the spirit of the fear of God). This fear, rather like the Law in Luther, is what brings a person to recognise their need of God’s Spirit, and is therefore a *sine qua non* of true faith. It is experienced directly by the individual without the mediation of any priest. In the longer German version of the ‘Prague Manifesto’ (where the term *geist der forcht Gots* appears five times) and the shorter version (where it appears twice) it clearly functions for Müntzer as an important criterion according to which the elect can be identified over against the godless. The latter are those who have never been seized by the spirit of the fear of God, whereas it is ‘the sole aim and solid ground of the elect’.

In talking of the experience of the elect Müntzer not infrequently couples *forcht Gots* with *anfechtung*, another very familiar mystical concept. ‘...you will have to endure a heavy cross and a time of trial (*anfechtung*), so that the fear of God (*die forcht Gottis*) may be manifest to you’, he tells the princes in the course of exhorting them to prepare themselves to do the work of God. The godless, however, do not ‘suffer any trials of faith (*anfechtunge*) in the spirit of the fear of God (*im geist der forcht Gots*) - indeed, they deride them - and so do not discover the wholesome trials (*anfechtunge*) which are the lot of the predestined. Thus to those opposed to the living word of God, the spirit of the fear of God is a cause of alarm; but those who know it experimentally become, as it were, ‘the

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9 CW 363; cf. 366. In one of many references to *der forcht Gots* in the Sermon on Daniel Müntzer writes that ‘...God is unable to have mercy upon us...unless we fear him, and him alone, from the bottom of our hearts’; (CW 235).


11 CW 366, 363; F 499, 496.
paper or parchment on which God writes the real holy scripture with his living finger'. On no fewer than seven occasions in his last twenty letters Müntzer greets his readers with the desire that the pure (and upright) fear of God be upon them, not least because it is only that which will drive out the fear of the devil, with which Müntzer often contrasts it.

The locus of God's writing 'with the stylus of his spirit' is 'the abyss of the souls' (abgrund der selen), another highly mystical expression to which Müntzer regularly alludes, particularly in his Fürstenpredigt. In a central passage in this sermon he refers four times to the abyss of the soul or heart, emphasising its importance as the place where the word of God is heard and received. A further mystical concept, the movement of God (die bewegung von Got) which 'invades' the heart to make room, as it were, for God's spirit to work there, also appears in this passage and in many of Müntzer's later letters. The movement of the spirit, which marks the arrival (anfang) of faith, hints strongly again at the presence of a 'natural theology' in Müntzer, for it can lead to the beginning of faith even in 'someone...born a Turk'.

Müntzer's numerous references - notably in the sermon on Daniel - to dreams and visions as a means by which God communicates to humankind, underline further his deep roots in the mystical tradition. In this sermon the terms geheimnis (vision or mystery), gesicht (vision), trewme (dreams), offenbarung (revelation), and uberschwangk (ecstatic vision) appear in total over sixty times, as Müntzer, in seeking to gainsay the biblical scholars who deny that God speaks through these media, argues that just as they were used by God to speak to God's chosen servants in biblical times, so in these 'last days' God will fulfil the prophecies to Joel.

12 CW 366, 365.
13 CW 110, 140, 143, 148, 150, 154/5.
14 CW 106.
15 CW 239-241; F 251-253.
16 CW 240, F 251.
17 CW 111; F 431. For a comment on the presence of a 'natural theology' in Müntzer see above, pp.58-59.
18 Uberschwangk has a much broader and deeper meaning than the one cited here, suggesting also the experience of being 'over-shadowed', e.g. by the Holy Ghost, and of being 'transported' into heaven; cf. CW 278, F 281: '...to be totally transfigured into him, so that this earthly life swings up into heaven (...schwencke in den hymel)'.

and 'our sons and daughters will prophesy and have dreams and visions etc.' One of the gifts which God gives to the elect through revelation is that of *recht urteil*, right judgement. 'Learn true judgement (*urteyl recht*) from the mouth of God himself', Müntzer exhorts the princes at one point. '...without God's revelation no man can make any judgement (*urteyl*) which he can justify before his conscience', he had written earlier. *Urteil* appears on ten occasions in all in the sermon, and twice in Müntzer's later letters.

Finally, it is very noticeable how Müntzer describes in unambiguously mystical terms those who receive these dreams and visions from God: they are 'his dear (or beloved) friends' (*seyen lieben/geliebten freunden*). The expression also appears on two further occasions in the sermon, once in a letter to Count Ernst of Mansfeld, and on a number of occasions (including in the shorter version of the 'Prague Manifesto') as the *elect friends of God* (*dye auserweleten freunde Gots*). The elect are also 'the earnest servants of God', *die ernsten knechte Gotts*, an appellation which Müntzer, perhaps not surprisingly, is happy also to adopt himself. In nearly all of the letters Müntzer sends between September 1524 and early May 1525 he introduces or signs himself off 'eyn knecht Gottes'. This term had by no means the significance in the mystical tradition that 'friends of God' enjoyed, though the expression 'faithful servant(s)' is to be found in, for example, John Ruysbroeck and Heinrich Suso.

Merely to identify certain mystical terms in those of Müntzer's writings which treat particularly of apocalyptic and insurrectionary themes is, of course, to do no more than establish a *prima facie* case for the co-existence of all three strands in his thought at certain periods in his life. It leaves nothing said about any relationship or inter-connection between them. Yet I believe it is possible to go on to argue for such a relationship, for it appears that as Müntzer's concern about the state of the corrupt, godless world deepened, and his conviction about the imminent annihilation of the despisers of the faith grew, so he employed the mystical categories which

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19 CW 244; for a more detailed discussion of the significance of dreams and visions in Müntzer see above, p.24.
20 On *urteil* in Müntzer see above p.54.
21 CW 245, 239; F 256, 250.
22 CW 236, 242; F 247, 253.
23 CW 251, 156, 360, 60, 62, 180; F 262/263, 468, 494, 21, 22, 163.
24 CW 250, 113; F 262, 432.
25 Rapdold, op.cit., p.51; Kelley, loc.cit., p.36.
provided the key to his understanding of the reformation of the inner person, to interpret the external world and the signs of the times.

One clear example of this is Münzer's usage of the term *absundern*, meaning to separate, differentiate, or cut oneself off from. Within mysticism the idea was strong that the person of God must experience the working of God (*das werck Gottis*) in the heart, separating off and putting to death all the evil, lustful desires lurking there. The image of the soul as a field overrun with weeds, waiting to be ploughed by the divine farmer, was popular. Thus we find Münzer, in his Sermon on Daniel, arguing that 'if a man is to receive the revelation of God he must cut himself off (*absundern*) from all distractions...' Using the term in another sense Münzer contrasts the followers of God, with their God-given ability to tell good from evil, with the 'accursed monkish dreamers' who have no experience of the holy spirit, the fear of God, or divine wisdom, and therefore 'are unable to differentiate (*absundern*) the good from the bad (when it masquerades as goodness).’ When Münzer goes on in his sermon to exhort his principal hearers, the princes, to begin to exercise God's judgement against the godless, he uses the same term. ‘Sweep aside...take...out of circulation’ (*weckt/Jun und absundern*) the evil ones who obstruct the gospel, he pleads. Earlier, in the ‘Prague Manifesto’, Münzer had also spoken of God at work, this time in the field of the world, where he will separate out (*absundern*) the tares from the wheat, a clearly apocalyptic reference drawn from Matthew 13.

The concept of *bewegung*, movement, is another which Münzer incorporates into his apocalyptic. We noted earlier how, in the mystical tradition in which Münzer stood, the movement of God in the heart was a necessary precursor to the arrival of true faith, and there are many references to this in Münzer, especially in his later letters. A letter written possibly during the winter of 1523/4 is a particularly good example, Münzer bringing out there how it is God, and not the individual, who stirs up faith (*bewegung des glaubens*), how the ‘great mountain of our self-seeking’ must, by faith, be ‘cast...down into the ocean of all our agitation’ (*ins mehr aller unser bewegung*), and how, with the prospect of meeting Jesus in view, all the elect, like Peter when beckoned by the Lord during the storm (Matt.14:28f.), ‘are happy to

26 CW 240; F 252.
27 CW 238; F 249.
28 CW 246; F 258.
29 CW 370; F 504.
endure all the agitation of the waters' (*wollen gerne all solche bewegunge tragen*). In May 1525, however, as he becomes increasingly aware that the judgement of God will not be long in coming, he employs the same term to speak of God's activity in these last days: 'Now...God has moved the whole world in a miraculous way (*Nachdem Gott ytzt dye ganze welt sonderlich fast bewegt...*) towards a recognition of the divine truth...'

The mystical concepts *anfang* and *ankunft* - 'beginning' or 'arrival' - also appear in some of the apocalyptic passages in Müntzer. In the mystical tradition a crucially important moment in the believer's life is that of the arrival of true faith, following the painful and testing experience of *anfechtung*.

It is a mark of the elect (even, as we have noted, if they are born a heathen) that they have 'the beginning of the...faith (*den anfang des...glaubens*), that is, the movement of the holy spirit'. They must also be able to testify of this experience, and their ability to do this distinguishes them from those who only know about faith from the Scriptures, who 'have no experience of the coming of the holy spirit' (*ankunft des heyligen geystes*), and who therefore will 'never be prepared to teach about how they came to faith' (*dye ankunft yres glaubens*).

In some passages where Müntzer remarks on the judgement soon to befall the evil-doers he also employs these terms, particularly to give emphasis to the way in which that judgement will bring to an end the state of affairs which has existed 'from the beginning' in which wickedness has held sway, and the will of God resisted, in the world. In one of his last letters he writes of God allowing his adversaries to be punished 'in respect to their property, by which they have hindered the kingdom and the righteousness of God from the very beginning' (*vom anfang*). These 'abandoned reprobates', Müntzer had noted in the 'Prague Manifesto', have been 'found throughout the whole world from the very beginning' (*vom anbeginne*). Warning, in the Sermon on Daniel, about the false interpreters of dreams (the 'clever soothsayers') Müntzer notes how 'from the very beginning (*vom anfang*) up to now the whole world has been led astray by [them]'. The elect must show diligence in tackling wickedness, Müntzer had earlier

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30 CW 105; F 424/425.
31 CW 150; F 463.
32 Cf, Rupp, *Patterns...*, p.280. Note that Müntzer also uses this term when speaking of the origin of Christianity: Christ is 'the foundation stone that was laid at the infant beginnings of Christianity' (*im anfang der newen christenheit*), CW 231; F 243.
33 CW 111, 112, 238, 105; F 431, 249, 425.
34 CW 151; F 463.
35 CW 364; F 498.
remarked, as 'has been done by all our dear fathers from the beginning of the world (vom anfang der welt).36

Finally we may note how, for Müntzer, dreams, visions and revelations can be channels by which apocalyptic messages, as well as those which speak to the condition of the inner soul, can be received. 'The inward word...is to be heard in the abyss of the soul through the revelation (offenbarung) of God', but God has also revealed (offenbart) to us that we should 'show no pity' to the godless evil-doers. In his Sermon on Daniel Müntzer also observes how God is at this time revealing (offenbart) to many of the elect 'the great need for a full and final reformation in the near future.'37 It is for Müntzer a crucial apocalyptic sign that dreams and visions from God should increase at this time. In this section of his sermon he cites the prophecy of Joel (2:28), which Peter quoted on the day of Pentecost, that in the last days God will pour God’s spirit on all flesh, sons and daughters will prophesy, old men will dream dreams, and young men shall have visions. That God is revealing at this time to 'many elect and pious' people the need for 'a full and final reformation in the near future' should not be surprising.

In a sense this brief survey merely underlines what scholars such as Ozment and Oberman have already noted about the inherently revolutionary potential of mystical theology.38 It also in part complements Goertz’s long-held view that Müntzer’s apocalyptic expectations augment his revolutionary programme by giving added ‘emphasis’ and ‘dynamism’ to it.39 Goertz actually argues that Müntzer’s apocalyptic only gives emphasis to his programme, and adds no new content to it. I want to suggest shortly that it might be possible to say more about Müntzer’s apocalyptic than that, but in so far as Goertz argues that it sharpens Müntzer’s praxis he is clearly supported by a close analysis of Müntzer’s writings.

36 CW 236-237, 235; F 248, 247.
37 CW 240, 141, 244; F 251, 454, 255.
39 Goertz has most recently stated this view in Thomas Müntzer: Mystiker, Apokalyptiker, Revolutionär, pp. 166-167; cf. idem, ‘The Mystic with the Hammer...’, p. 110, and 'Thomas Müntzer: Revolutionary Between the Middle Ages and Modernity', p.28.
Central to Müntzer's whole weltanschauung is a dualism involving good and evil, and the godly and the godless, and his employment of apocalyptic terminology, as he sees the day approaching when the conflict between them will finally come to a head, gives his treatment of the theme a much sharper and pronounced emphasis. Müntzer's writings are full of opposites and polarisations. There is authentic faith, which he himself has experienced, and which has its beginning (anfang, ankunft) in the movement of the Holy Spirit, and counterfeit faith (eynem getychten glauben), peddled by those who 'originate from the devil' (vom teufl ist yhr anfang) and which has to be ruthlessly wiped out. There is the abyss of the soul (abgrund der selen) in which the word of God is received, and the abyss of the pit or hell (abgrundt des pfuls, abgrundt der helle) into which the teachers of the false faith should be propelled. There is the authentic vision (die unbetrüglichen gesicht) which should be distinguished from the false (vor den falschen), and dreams which are from God, and 'the poisonous, accursed dreams of the monks (der gantz vorfluchen, vorgifftigen mönchtrewme)' and of the 'deluded dreamers (die falschen trewmen)' A person can know the fear of God (der forcht Gots), or the fear of men (der menschen forcht) and of the devil, and must 'venture...body, goods and honour for the sake of God' or 'will lose all of them for the sake of the devil.' A person is either, in other words, a servant of God (eyn knecht Gottes), or among the servants of Antichrist (des entchristis knechten).

Perhaps the central distinction Müntzer makes, and which follows on from this, is between die außerwelten, the elect, and dye vordampten or vortumpte (menschen, pfaffen, etc), the abandoned or damned. In the writings to which we are paying close attention alone there occur no fewer than thirty-four references to the former and ten to the latter, and on three occasions they are specifically posited one against the other. This whole dichotomy is thoroughly apocalyptic: the elect are the chosen of God who are forming the new kingdom established by Christ and who will escape the punishment of God in the last day; the damned are those condemned on that day to eternal torment and punishment. The elect are analogous to the

40 CW 105/106, 364; F 425/426, 497.
41 CW 239, 240, 366, 370; F 251, 500, 503.
42 CW 240, 237, 244; F 252, 249, 255.
43 CW 84; cf. 90, 97, 115. See also Matheson, 'Thomas Müntzer's Idea of an Audience', p. 194.
44 CW 359; F 493.
45 CW 365, 368, 369; F 498, 502.
46 CW 366.
wheat in the field gathered in by the Son of Man (Matthew 13), the sheep who stand at his right hand (Matthew 25), and the 144,000 pure souls who worship the Lamb before the throne (Revelation 14). The damned are the tares (das unkraut) and the goats, destined for the furnace of fire (Matthew 13:42, 25:41), and the ravenous, ravaging wolves (dyre reyssende wolfe) which attack and scatter the sheep of God (John 10).47

Müntzer expresses his dualist conception of humanity in other ways. He talks frequently of der christenheit, sometimes der armen christenheit, the (poor) Christian people, die freunde Gottis (the friends of God), and die knechte Gottis (the servants of God), and of their adversaries (ihr widdersacher) die gotlossen (the godless), die bösen (the evil-doers), and dye ungleubigen (the unbelievers). Müntzer’s word-pairings are interesting: sometimes he will speak of die gottloßen boßwichter - the godless evil-doers - or of dye außerwelten freunde Gotes - the elect friends of God.48 The priests who deny the gospel can be gottlose vordampte menschen and vordampte bosewichte - godless, abandoned men, and abandoned reprobates.49 It is also worth noting, in passing, the sharp and often original invective Müntzer reserves for these learned scribes and false teachers, whom he sometimes gathers under the generic term die schriftgeleerten. They purport to teach the faith of Christ to the people, but in reality they have stolen from the Bible its real message, and so only seduce their hearers into wandering farther away from the truth.50 In their attitude to the Bible they are therefore like confidence tricksters and cruel murderers (wye dye tukyssen diebe unde grausamen mordere). They are leisterer (blasphemers), vorzweyfelten (abandoned scoundrels), tier des bauchs and schwein (beasts of the belly and swine), vorkarten fantasten (perverted phantasts), and burnhengestiger pfaffen] (whore-riding priests).51 Like the carved wooden idols they serve they are ‘oak-blocks (voreychenblocchesse) of men, hardened against all that is good’, and who know ‘much less about God than a block of oak or a pebble.’52 Perhaps most seriously of all Müntzer calls them ungetreuen vorretherischen schriftgeleerten, bosewichtisschen vorretherisschen pfaffen,

47 CW 116, 230, 232, 368; cf. 343, 166. F 434, 242, 244, 501; cf. 337, 161.
48 CW 141, 142, 60, 62; F 454, 455, 21, 22.
49 CW 116, 364; F 434, 498.
50 CW 363, 235.
51 CW 159, 364, 234, 141, 368; F 471, 497, 246, 245, 454, 501.
52 CW 234, 364, 292; cf. 101. F 245, 497, 294; cf. 421. Note also the references to the Pope as ‘the wooden high-priest of Rome’ and ‘most wooden pope and chamber-pot’; CW 376, 369; F 509, 502.
and teuffel (treacherous, traitorous biblical scholars, criminal turn-coat priests, and devils).53

Müntzer’s language, as he reflects on the treatment these blind teachers will shortly receive at the hands of the elect, is also unambiguously apocalyptic. We have already noted that the chosen and the damned are to be separated (absundern), and that is the most gentle of his terms: generally his language is much more severe, uncompromising and ruthless. At one point he writes of the tares being ‘torn out’ (aufbreufen) of the ground at harvest-time,54 and the violent and bloody end of the godless - anticipated by the earnest servants of God who are sharpening their sickles in readiness - is a theme to which he returns frequently. The evil-doers are to be swept aside (weckhun und absundern), driven away from (treibt...von) the elect, and killed (todten), namely, strangled without mercy (erwürge on alle gnade) and eliminated (vertilgen) by the sword.55 The counterfeit faith they peddle must be ruthlessly wiped out (myt aller unbarmer herzykeit muß ausgerrot werden).56 In the case of Count Ernst, whose heart (like Pharaoh’s of old) God has hardened, he is to be ‘handed over to destruction’ (gewalt der verterbunge ubirantwort).57

Müntzer’s terminology, like that of any apocalyptic writer, has echoes of battle, of victory and defeat. The ordinary Christian people (gemeiner christenheyt) are to fight (zustreyten) against the godless, wicked tyrants.58 The mighty, in fulfilment of Mary’s song of praise, (Luke 1:46f), are being ‘forcibly cast down (gefstoßen)’ from their seats,59 and the godless scholars (gotlosen gelerten) go to their downfall (yrem untergang).60 The elect, on the other hand, if they are not seduced into showing a fraudulent clemency (beschüßnen barmherseycket) will surely prevail (bestheeen).61 Their cause is spoken of in the language of power (gewalt), which

53 CW 151, 365; F 464, 498.
54 CW 250, F 261; cf. CW 155, F 468: ‘you [Count Ernst] 'will be..wiped out...': ‘Das soltu...ausgereutet werden...’ Note that Müntzer uses the self-same expression when speaking of God rooting out ‘weeds, thistles and thorns from the rich soil’ of the heart: ‘...Got selbern dein unkraut, disteln und dorner aus deinem fruchtbaren lande, das ist aus deinem hertzen, reutet.’ CW 199, F 233.
55 CW 246, 247, 251, 250, 247; F 258, 259, 262, 261, 258.
56 CW 106; F 426.
57 CW 156; F 468.
58 CW 158; F 471.
59 CW 151, 156, 157; F 464, 468, 469.
60 CW 111; F 430; (their downfall is at the hands of Satan).
61 CW 144, F 458.
is soon to be given to the common folk, the sword (das schwert), punishment (peynigen) of their adversaries and the unspeakable wickedness (unaußsprechliche bößheyt) they perpetrate, vengeance (rache), nullification (schwechen), and - in one of Müntzer’s favourite terms - unuberwintliche, best translated invincible, unconquerable or unstoppable. Müntzer uses this adjective in relation to a number of different themes in his writings, and his frequent employment of it betrays the strength of his certainty that both his theological and political convictions enjoyed, as it were, divine sanction. Thus for Müntzer the holy Christian faith can be spoken of as ‘invincible’, as also can the testimony of the elect - given them by the Holy Spirit - that they are the children of God. Müntzer draws a strong contrast between the ‘proof’ of his faith which he can present to unbelievers, and that offered by the ‘strawbrained little doctors’. The only explanation they can give to the world of their belief is ‘one from books’, from a Bible whose teachings they know but of which they have no first-hand experience. Müntzer’s tried and tested faith, however, stands on ‘invincible ground’ (unuberwyntlichen grundt), of which the Turks and Jews would like very much to hear - as would the elect themselves, if only the ‘devil’s priests’ didn’t keep condemning them. Importantly, the reformation which the world is shortly to experience will also be unuberwintliche. Müntzer’s confidence spills over as he reflects on this in his Sermon on Daniel: ‘I know it for a fact’, he writes, ‘that the spirit of God is revealing the great need for a full and final reformation in the near future (eine treffliche unuberwintliche zukünftige reformation). This must be carried out.’ A month later, referring to the need for the Christian people to accept the painful and testing way to faith as a preparation for the end, Müntzer writes that it ‘must be scandalised much more than it ever has been since its origins for the sake of the progress which nothing will be able to stop (umb der unuberwintlichen besserung wegen).”
Müntzer does not forget, of course, that the battle will not be won in his strength, nor that of the elect, but by the power of God (*die kraft Gottis*). His letter to his followers in Allstedt in April 1525 perhaps bears the clearest testimony to this, though numerous references in other of his writings show that, whilst it is God's people who physically engage the enemy, the power upon which they depend for victory comes from on high. In his Sermon on Daniel Müntzer quotes the example of Joshua, who, though he led the children of Israel into a successful battle to capture the promised land, 'did not win the land by the sword, but by the power of God (*die kraft Gottis*), but the sword was the means used..."\(^{70}\) The militant dimension of Müntzer's mysticism again comes to the fore: both human instrumentality and divine endorsement are necessary if the people of God are to overcome their adversaries. '...don't let us have any of these hackneyed posturings about the power of God (*die kraft Gottis*) achieving everything without any resort to your sword', he had earlier written in the same sermon.\(^{71}\) 'The very clearest wisdom of God...which can only spring from the pure unfeigned fear of God...alone can equip us with its mighty arm (*mit gewaltiger hand*) to exercise vengeance on the enemies of God..."\(^{72}\) Count Ernst is reminded that he is to be 'handed over to destruction by God's mighty power (*durch Gottes kraftige gewalt*)'.\(^{73}\) Indeed, according to the Magnificat, it is the Lord who brings down the mighty from their thrones (Luke 1:52), as Müntzer of course recognises.\(^{74}\) It is God, too, who separates out the tares from the wheat, who pours out 'his invincible anger' (*seinen unuberwindlichen zorn*) against the godless, and who has 'moved the whole world (*die ganze welt...bewegt*)...towards a recognition of the divine truth'.\(^{75}\)

Müntzer's frequent usage of this expression *die ganze welt* is also clearly apocalyptic. He speaks of 'the world' fifty-one times in the 'Prague Manifesto', the *Fürstenpredigt* and his last letters, and on eighteen of these occasions qualifies it with the adjective 'whole'. What God is doing in Allstedt and in Mühlhausen, has significance for all of humankind everywhere. The 'whole world', Müntzer writes, has been led astray and seduced by the Biblical scholars and deaf priests, who 'set themselves up as instructors to the whole world', but who in fact are an

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\(^{70}\) CW 250; F 261.
\(^{71}\) CW 247/248; F 259.
\(^{72}\) CW 234; F 246.
\(^{73}\) CW 156; F 468.
\(^{74}\) CW 151, 156, 157; F 464, 468, 469.
\(^{75}\) CW 370, 364, 150; F 504, 497, 463.
Therefore he, Müntzer, must ‘broadcast [the true] Christian faith to the whole world by word and writing’; if it appears in print it will be ‘for the whole world to see’. He warns that he will lift up his voice against Count Ernst ‘for all the world to hear’. Now, in these last days, the tide is turning: ‘the accursed monkish dreamers...are being exposed to the whole world for the idle good-for-nothings that they are’. God is moving ‘the whole world...towards a recognition of the divine truth’. There is almost certainly a connection between Müntzer’s emphasis on the ‘whole world’ and his concept of the ordo dei, discussed in the previous chapter. As we noted, Müntzer used the analogy of ‘the parts’ and ‘the whole’ to picture the relation of the created order to God. The Fall destroyed the unity of the parts, but in Christ they become fully restored to ‘the whole’.

Müntzer understands the events in which he is caught up to be of world-historical importance, and some of his comments may even specifically echo biblical prophecies concerning the end time. In speaking of his message being preached to the whole world Müntzer may be harking back to some words of Jesus recorded by Matthew: ‘This good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world...and then the end will come’ (24:14). Müntzer had earlier referred to this passage in a letter to Nicholas Hausmann in 1521, his comments there clearly suggesting that he thought the time for ‘the preaching of the Gospel of the kingdom throughout the world’ had begun. In A Manifest Exposé, penned shortly after he delivered the Sermon to the Princes, Müntzer wrote that, in his day, ‘the gospel will spread even more fully than in the time of the apostles’. Müntzer’s reference to Christ, the stone, filling the whole world, may recall the statement in Revelation 1:7 that ‘every eye will see him’ [Christ] when he comes. Finally, a comment early in the Larger German Version of the ‘Prague Manifesto’, about the spirit of the fear of God which the elect enjoy being something ‘the world cannot abide’ (dye welt nicht erleiden mag), brings to mind another saying from Matthew in which Jesus indicates that his followers ‘will be hated by all nations because of my name’ (24:9). In a later letter, possibly written around 1523, Müntzer had acknowledged that those who believe themselves to

76 CW 236/237, 247, 371; F 248/249, 258, 504.
77 CW 112, 133, cf. 362, 188; F 431, 448, cf. 495, 225.
78 CW 155; F 468.
79 CW, p. 238, cf. 133; F 249, cf. 448.
80 CW 150; F 463.
81 CW 35, 314.
82 CW 363; F 496.
have been 'chosen before the world was constituted', the elect, will be regarded as lunatics by the world. His reference here is to John chapter 17, presumably verse 14. 83

Another apocalyptic image may be in Muntzer's mind when he refers in the 'Prague Manifesto' to the priests 'deny[ing] the voice of the bridegroom, which is the real and certain sign that they are devils pure and simple.' 84 Matheson suggests that Muntzer may be thinking here of the man calling to his bride in the Song of Solomon, but the reference could also have apocalyptic overtones. In the gospels the wedding banquet is often employed as a metaphor for the kingdom of God. Matthew 25:1-13 records the parable of the 'foolish' bridesmaids (or virgins) who were caught unawares by the arrival of the bridegroom and thus denied entry into the festivities. Luke 12:35-36 also admonishes the followers of Jesus to be among those who are ready for the groom as soon as he returns from the wedding banquet. 85 In Matthew 22:1f appears the story of the king who prepared a wedding feast for his son, but found that all those whom he had especially invited declined to attend. In both cases those absent from the apocalyptic banquet might, for Muntzer, constitute those who had rejected the true faith taught by the bridegroom himself. 86

Finally it might be worthwhile to reconsider the argument we noted earlier, put forward by Goertz and others, that Muntzer's apocalyptic should be understood as giving a sharp edge to his revolutionary programme, and the mystical piety from which it emerged, but not as contributing any new content to it. Goertz's thesis rests on an assumption that Muntzer's motivation to overthrow the wicked was rooted largely in his mystical beliefs, and that the apocalyptic perspective he later adopted served only to emphasise the 'necessity', in his eyes, and urgency of staging an insurrection. His apocalyptic did not materially affect the shape of the reformation he proposed, nor its basic mystical premises. A similar point has also been made very recently by Abraham Friesen and endorsed by James Stayer. Muntzer would have been led into making calls for the elimination of the godless 'to protect his Reformation and his followers even if he had not had...apocalyptic beliefs', Stayer writes. 87 But it does appear possible to argue that Muntzer's apocalyptic impacts on his programme at a rather deeper level.

83 CW 47.
84 CW 365.
85 For Muntzer's references to this passage - 'gird up your loins...' see CW 63, 199, 310.
86 See also above, p.61, n.150.
than this.

Broadly speaking, it seems possible to argue that if, as we have suggested, Müntzer saw the peasants' struggle which was gaining momentum around him as an event of far-reaching significance, then this was in large part a consequence of the apocalyptic interpretation he placed upon it. Although he was not tempted into trying to discern from the Scriptures the times and the seasons when certain events would occur, it does seem clear from his writings that he saw in the drift of contemporary events signs that he was living at a momentous, decisive point in history, a *kairos*.

These signs, generally speaking, were the fallen and adulterous condition of the church, the degenerate state of the Holy Roman Empire, and the increasingly militant response of the poor people to the tyranny and injustice under which they lived. The first two signs came together for Müntzer in his interpretation of the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream. The fifth and bottom layer, the empire 'we see before us', is, like the fourth, made of iron, but is 'patched with dung...that is, with the vain schemings of hypocrisy, which swarms and slithers over the face of the whole earth.' In case we are left in any doubt as to what is in Müntzer’s mind here, he gives us the graphic image of 'all the eels and snakes coupling together immorally in one great heap', with the explanation that the former are the secular lords and rulers, and the latter the priests and evil clerics. 88 From Eusebius and Hegessipus Müntzer had learned that very early on in its history - in fact not long after the death of the apostles - the church had lost her pure virgin state by engaging adulterously with the rulers and kings of the world. 89 Müntzer prophesied against manifestations of this adultery in his own day, but the stiff-necked nature of the church's leaders, both in Rome and Wittenberg (!), seemed to him, as Gritsch remarks, portents that the last struggle before the end time was near. 90

Yet there were other unmistakable signs that the church would shortly be felled by the stone from the mountain, and a new one emerge in its stead. The gospel, unlike in the days of the apostles, was being preached far and wide - *vor der ganzen welt*: 'from many lands and

88 *CW* 244.
89 *CW* 232; cf. above, p.64.
strange nations great numbers of the elect will appear...'\(^91\) Coupled with this, the faithful today are much more courageous and conscientious in attacking the idolatrous practices of the ungodly. The early church was lax in this regard because St Peter was a 'timid man' who, fearing for his safety, 'dissembled when among the pagans', and thereby set a bad example for all the apostles. Now the followers of Christ were beginning to fulfil the injunction of Deuteronomy chapter 7 to break down and destroy the altars and images of the godless, which had always been God's command to God's people.\(^92\) Thus, as Stayer puts it, 'the Church of the last days was superior to the Apostolic Church in its crusading character and in its universality',\(^93\) and for these reasons Müntzer had no doubt that it was the church of the last days.

The growing rebellion of the peasants against the corrupt form of government they had to suffer also appeared to Müntzer to be a sign that God was beginning to move the world towards a final transformation. 'The revolutionary spirit', George Huntston Williams writes, 'betokened for him the fullness of time.'\(^94\) 'Der Bauernaufstand von 1525', as Gritsch puts it, 'wurde von Müntzer als Werkzeug der von Gott geforderten Reinigung der Welt gedeutet.'\(^95\) Müntzer was impressed both with the speed at which resistance grew, and at the form it took. It had both anti-clerical and communal dimensions, and furthermore the protagonists seemed open to the possibility that the end of their oppression might lie in the formation of a new Christian community. Müntzer was heartened as he heard of the activities of the peasants in the north, and of the spread of the revolt, in Holy Week 1525, to Fulda and towards Thuringia and Mühlhausen. With infectious enthusiasm he sent a letter to the Allstetders encouraging them to participate:

The whole of Germany, France, Italy is awake;...At Fulda four abbeys were laid waste during Easter Week, the peasants in the Klettgau and the Hegau in the Black Forest have risen, three thousand strong, and the size of the peasant host is growing all the time,

\(^{91}\) CW 314.

\(^{92}\) CW 249.

\(^{93}\) Stayer, Anabaptists and the Sword, p.84.

\(^{94}\) Williams, op.cit., p.76.

\(^{95}\) 'Müntzer saw the Peasants' Revolt of 1525 as a tool in the purification of the world called for by God.' Gritsch, 'Thomas Müntzers Weg In Die Apokalyptik', p.65; [trans. S.H.].
he wrote, following with the exhortations to 'go to it', 'show no pity', 'don't let your sword grow cold', and so on. The basis of Müntzer's entreaty was that this was the fight of the Lord. God was giving the orders, as in the days of Moses of old, and God would give the victory. 'God goes before you...do not be deterred. God is with you.' Echoing the experience of Gideon, Müntzer encouraged them to believe that even if there were only a handful of them 'whose trust in God is unperturbable' they 'need have no fear of a hundred thousand.'

The continued success of the peasants' uprising only served to convince him further of the divinely-ordained nature of the campaign. From Görmar near Mühlhausen he wrote to reassure the people in Frankenhausen that they 'need fear no one'.

The voice of the Lord says: Look, the strength of my needy people will be increased, who will dare attack them? So be bold and put your trust in God alone, and he will endow your small band with more strength than you would ever believe.

In a similar vein he wrote to the Christians at Schmalkalden preparing for battle:

...it is rather weak of you to be so very afraid, when it is as plain as a pikestaff that God is standing by you. Be of good courage, and sing with us: 'A hundred thousand people will not make me afraid, even if they are camped all around me.'

Perhaps Müntzer's most dramatic show of confidence in the outcome of the struggle was at Frankenhausen itself. Whilst some of the assembled bands of peasants prevaricated in the face of an offer from the princes of a peaceful end to the conflict (involving the handing over of Müntzer to them, alive), he reiterated his conviction that God would be their strength. At the same time a corona or 'halo' appeared around the sun. Its similarity to the rainbow emblem the

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96 CW 141/142. Despite his pacifism Karlstadt can also, on occasions, call for the destruction and burning of idolatrous images in the interest of a reformation, 'a genuine and Christian order': Andreas Karlstadt, Von Abtibung der Bilder; Kleine Texte für theologische und philologische Vorlesungen und Übungen 74, ed. H. Lietzmann, Bonn, 1911, 3/14, 4/1,20/16; see Peter Matheson, 'Truth Between Dialogue and Polemic' in Maurice Andrew, Peter Matheson and Simon Rae (eds), Religious Studies in Dialogue: Essays in Honour of Albert C. Moore, Dunedin: Faculty of Theology, University of Otago, 1991, p.112.

97 CW 142, 141.

98 CW 144.

99 CW 148/149.
peasants bore on their standards left Müntzer in no doubt it was a divinely-given portent of success, and enabled him to carry the doubters with him too.

That literally within hours of this occurrence the peasants had been routed in the most bloody fashion serves to underline the tragic consequences that can ensue when one particular historical struggle becomes identified, as it were, with apocalyptic events described in the Scriptures. Müntzer's confidence in the success of the peasants' uprising, we have to conclude, rested ultimately upon an misplaced belief that the time had come, that in some sense the eschatological promises of God concerning the overthrow of the mighty and the separation of the tares from the wheat were being fulfilled in the Europe of his time, and, indeed, throughout 'the whole world'. In this sense Müntzer's apocalyptic can be said to have impacted on his revolutionary agenda in a significant and dramatic way.

One must be careful not to overstate this argument, however. Müntzer was clearly justified in drawing from his observation of the contemporary scene the conclusion that 'the transformation of the world...is now at hand.' Whatever the root cause of Müntzer's failure, it seems fair to acknowledge, with Goertz, that his 'lack of success on no account implies that [his] instinct for necessary changes deceived him. There was too much amiss, not only in the church, but also in the temporal jurisdictions and in social structures.' It was an instinct he shared with many of his contemporaries, and in so far as he sensed a general movement of God abroad in the world he merely tapped into the widespread expectation and hope of the time. He parted company with many of his peers, however, by putting his faith in the disorganised and inchoate peasants' movement, and in his conviction that, since it had apocalyptic significance, its struggle could not fail, even if there were rational grounds for believing otherwise.

Müntzer's equation of the peasants with the elect, and assurance that now God was shortening the time the elect would have to suffer, led him to sadly naive conclusions about their invincibility in the face of all opposition, however mighty or overpowering that opposition might appear. 'Müntzer's apocalyptic', as Scott writes, 'gave him assurance...that the handful of the elect would vanquish the legions of the damned.' But, as Scott goes on to point out, it

100 CW 100.
102 See, for example, Gritsch, *Thomas Müntzer: A Tragedy of Errors*, pp. 96/97; Matheson, 'Thomas Müntzer and the Sword of Gideon', p. 109.
was 'at that point that his grip on reality faltered.'

His identification of the peasants' struggle with the last apocalyptic battle freed him, in other words, from any necessity to relate his political ambitions to the concrete process of history. He failed to take into account the realistic possibilities of the given historical moment, and thus his ideas, as Turner has put it, 'fell stillborn from the womb, because they had not come historically to term.'

It is easy, of course, with hindsight, and from our university departments, to expose the shortcomings of one caught up in the heat and dust of the battle; and it would be a sour note on which to leave a study of a figure with such remarkable gifts and qualities, a preacher, pastor, liturgist and rhetorician *par excellence*. After all, Müntzer was hardly the first or the last to believe himself to be living in the last days, and he himself ultimately recognised (as his last letter shows) that, as Stayer puts it, 'the Peasants' War had been a false start in the realization of the Kingdom.' Müntzer even has a word for his armchair critics at the end of his *Protestation or Proposition* which we would do well to heed: 'I would appreciate [it]', he writes, 'if those of you who have not been put to the test did not turn up your noses in derision...'. There is much in Müntzer's writing to stimulate and encourage as well as shock and scandalise, and as we read him now, nearly 500 years on, he, though dead, still seems to speak to challenge and provoke. 'Are you listening, world?' his words still seem to echo: 'I preach to you...Jesus Christ, he who was crucified, and you and me with him. If it appeals to you accept it, if not, cast it aside.'

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106 CW 208.
107 CW 188.
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