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## Performing Commentary

### Preaching the Apocalyptic Drama in Early Modern England

On 12 November 1570, fifteen years to the day after Parliament had passed Queen Mary's Second Statute of Repeal, formally abrogated »such acts and statutes as had been made in parliament since the said twentieth year of said King Henry VIII against the supremacy of the see apostolic«<sup>1</sup> and returned England for three bloody years into the fold of the Catholic Church, preacher William Fulke addressed his hearers from the pulpit of the Chapel Royal at Hampton Court. His agenda was to plainly prove out of one verse of Scripture that the papacy was in fact Antichrist and he introduced his intention:

The greatest controuersy that this day troubleth the world, is wher the true church of God should be, the Papists making great brags, that it is on their side, & we affirming that it is on our side. This controversie will soone be cut of, and brought to an end, if it may be shewed that *Babilon* is *Rome*.<sup>2</sup>

Fulke was a Cambridge educated theologian of promising talent and had become chaplain to the Earl of Leicester the previous year. The printed version of his 1570 Hampton Court sermon was dedicated to his patron's brother Ambrose Dudley, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Warwick who had been one of Queen Elizabeth's trusted military leaders in the suppression of the Catholic Northern Rebellion earlier that year. The preacher, thus, addressed some of the champions of militant Protestantism in the Elizabethan court and his project was part of a growing phalanx of English Protestant divines who advocated a strongly historio-prophetic interpretation of St. John's visions.

This article seeks to demonstrate why sermons were the most effective weapon in the Protestant arsenal not to disseminate scriptural truths developed by theologians in their weighty tomes, but to perform a commentary of a biblical passage and thus work towards the salvation of its hearers in a way that ›mere‹ writing could never accomplish. My project aims to understand apocalyptic preaching in the reformed tradition as both event and text in which the spoken

1 Second Statue of Repeal, in: *Sources of English Constitutional History*, Vol. I, ed. by Carl Stephenson and Frederick George Marcham, New York 1972, p. 329.

2 William Fulke, *A Sermon Preached at Hampton Court*, London 1570, fol. Bi<sup>r</sup> f.

word of the ministers was the beacon of Christ's presence in the world in the middle of the final battle. Preachers were Christ's living witnesses, as Rodney Petersen has discussed in his study of Revelation XI as a central proof-text of the reformed self-image.<sup>3</sup> I am going to discuss the role of the sermon in early modern Protestant culture, introduce its salvational as well as rhetorical status and structural characteristics. This will include an assessment of the primacy of the spoken word characteristic of Puritan culture that made the sermon not only a site of instructing and exhorting the faithful, but the most important occasion for receiving divine grace. I will then go on to sketch out the key elements of Elizabethan apocalypticism which revolved around an interpretation of the Book of Revelation as a history of the afflicted true church of Christ from the crucifixion to the present and on to her final triumph which was at hand. Finally, I will return to Fulke's Hampton Court sermon as a contribution to this discourse. The biblical interpretation of the preacher was by no means considered secondary to the commentary of theologians but rather the other way around: learned volumes of commentary provided the frontline fighters in their pulpits with the raw material to forge the sharpest weapons in the apocalyptic battle.

Commentary can very broadly be defined as a text which explicitly draws upon form and/ or content of an older, authoritative text with the intention of clarifying its meaning or elaborating on questions and problems posed by the latter. It can do so by working more or less closely with the authoritative text it wants to elucidate, either taking its entirety or just a short passage as its object.<sup>4</sup> The interpretation of one to three verses from Scripture delivered orally to an audience of more or less eager listeners to whose lives carnal and eternal the meaning of the text was ›applied‹ and on whom the Holy Spirit might bestow saving grace can surely be considered the most important practice of commentary in early modern Protestant culture. As Mary Morrissey has expediently summarized it:

Because it simultaneously enunciated scripture and expounded its meanings, the sermon was a powerful vehicle for advancing particular interpretations of the Bible. The interpretative element of early modern preaching cannot be emphasized enough: the sermons [...] were essentially exercises in literary interpretation that were ›applied‹ to the circumstances of the sermon's hearers.<sup>5</sup>

3 Rodney L. Petersen, *Preaching in the Last Days: The Theme of ›Two Witnesses‹ in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Oxford 1993.

4 Jan-Hendryk de Boer, »Kommentar«, in: id, Marian Füssel, and Maximilian Schuh (eds.), *Universitäre Gelehrtenkultur vom 13. – 16. Jahrhundert: ein interdisziplinäres Quellen- und Methodenhandbuch*, Stuttgart 2018, pp. 265–318, here p. 265.

5 Mary Morrissey, »Ornament and Repetition: Biblical Interpretation in Early Modern English Preaching«, in: Kevin Killeen and Helen Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England, c.1530 – 1700*, Oxford 2015, pp. 303–316, here p. 303.

The historical and cultural context of a sermon must be studied alongside the religious content in order to understand its success. Stylistic assessment of rhetorical elegance, which has traditionally been the focus of the few literary scholars to take sermons seriously, can hardly explain why a preacher was popular or why a sermon hit a nerve.<sup>6</sup> Preaching of course also functioned as an instrument of the state to disseminate politically preferred readings on order, obedience and Protestant identity to vast numbers of the population across social and educational divides in a way no other mass medium could, but it was first and foremost an instrument of God »conveying saving grace to instruct, move, and convert«<sup>7</sup>. As the Elizabethan Church of England was a state church where all had to congregate, but only some would eventually be saved, the pulpit, not the altar, was the life raft to cling to.

The printed sermon entered the book market in force only during the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Sermons, prayer books, meditations, etc. make up some 50 per cent of the press output in early modern England and an estimated 1200 sermons had been published by 1603.<sup>8</sup> Some elegant folios aside, the vast majority were the products of pastoral daily work in slim, affordable quartos. Reprinting was also more frequent than in other genres: Fulke's oration for instance was available in its sixth edition in 1580. As W. Fraser Mitchell put it in his pioneering study:

For one person who witnessed a play or ten who happened to read it thousands may [...] be said to have attended sermons, or afterwards studied them [...] in printed copies.<sup>9</sup>

Just like Elizabethan drama, sermons have come down to us as texts, but were projected as oral events. The very quick publication – often, as in Fulke's case, just a fortnight after preaching – suggests a high demand and eager printers but also a clear connection with the public event still ringing in the buyers' ears. Translated into the medium of print, they became consumer commodities and served as a second wave of persuasion, to solidify what had been heard and to

6 Lori Anne Ferrell, »Sermons«, in: Andy Kesson and Emma Smith (eds.), *The Elizabethan Top Ten: Defining Print Popularity in Early Modern England*, Farnham 2013, pp. 193-202, here p. 196.

7 Jeanne Shami, »The Sermon«, in: Andrew Hiscock and Helen Wilcox (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern English Literature and Religion*, Oxford 2017, pp. 185-206, here p. 185.

8 Mary Morrissey, »Sermons, Primers, and Prayerbooks«, in: Joad Raymond (ed.), *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture – Volume 1: Cheap Print in Britain and Ireland to 1660*, Oxford 2011, pp. 491-509, here p. 491 and p. 503; cf. Peter McCullough, »Sermons«, in: Andrew Hadfield (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of English Prose, 1500 – 1640*, Oxford 2013, pp. 560-575, here p. 560.

9 W. Fraser Mitchell, *English Pulpit Oratory from Andrews to Tillotson: A Study of its Literary Aspects*, New York 1962 (1932), pp. 3 f.

spark application in further oral events such as discussion, catechism, prayer and of course future sermons by other preachers. To spread interpretations and reach those who had not been present was no more than a welcome side effect. While we can only study them as written texts, sermons were considered oral performances to be effective by hearing. Many Protestant ministers saw themselves first and foremost as preachers and were well aware of the pitfalls of medial translation from heard to read text as John Lawrence conceded in the preface to his *A Golden Trumpet* of 1624:

I must confesse [it] hath lost what it then had, for the dead letter cannot be so patheticall as the living voice, neither can the pen so set it forth in writing, as the tongue in speaking.<sup>10</sup>

Several shaping forces contributed to making the sermon the dominant vehicle for early modern Protestantism. The availability of the Bible in English is one of them. Interestingly enough, the more private vernacular reading of God's word became common, the more guidance was deemed imperative. Preaching was more necessary than ever to provide orthodox commentary and offer preferred readings where otherwise heterodox or idiosyncratic interpretations could take root and spread. The competing translations of the Bible, and most prominently the success and availability of the Geneva Bible with its hard-boiled Calvinist marginal glosses, made the voice of unity and order from the pulpit all the more urgent.<sup>11</sup> According to many early Reformers, the Bible was self-sufficient, and the right sense could readily be understood by the attentive reader without having to rely on glosses and learned commentary, as the Word of God was not dependent on the words of men. William Tyndale even leached out against the Catholic tradition that had turned Scripture upside down by making scholastic theologians the masters of the text.<sup>12</sup> However, when things got more complicated than this naïve enthusiasm suggested, it was the commentary of the preacher that readers would turn to for explication, illustration and as a crash barrier on the road to godliness.

In the Gospels, Christ repeatedly presses the duty to preach onto His disciples but unfortunately, He never tells them how to do it. In the Reformation's propagated return to the ways of the apostles and the far-reaching attempts to purge the church of manmade idols and rituals, the word of God had to take centre stage.

<sup>10</sup> John Lawrence, *A golden trumpet, to rouse up a drowsie magistrate: or, A patterne for a governors practise*, London 1624, fol. A4<sup>r</sup>; cf. Ferrell (as note 6), p. 199.

<sup>11</sup> Shami (as note 7), p. 188; cf. Maurice Betteridge, »The Bitter Notes: The Geneva Bible and its Annotations«, in: *Sixteenth Century Journal* 14:1 (1983), pp. 41-62.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Parish, »To Conseile with Elde Dyuyynis: History, Scripture and Interpretation in Reformation England«, in: Elaine Fulton and Peter Webster (eds.), *The Search for Authority in Reformation Europe*, Farnham 2014, pp. 127-146, here p. 127.

This primacy of the verbal over the visual corresponds with the sermon-based model of the new Protestant ministry. While visual tokens, symbolic ceremonies and mental images were emphatically rejected and excluded from public service and private devotion, the living word reached the parishioner primarily in spoken form.<sup>13</sup> A passage of Scripture was publicly read and explicated to him from the pulpit, then looked up, copied out, memorized, discussed with his peers, used in private meditation and finally in prayer, the second most important oral practice. Preachers frequently referred to how St. Paul stresses in Romans X:13-14 that the faith necessary for salvation comes first by hearing:

<sup>13</sup> For whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord, shall be saved.

<sup>14</sup> But how shall they call on him, in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, mere reading, even of the vernacular Bible, did not seem sufficient for salvation. The Bible was considered by many reformed clergymen not so much a written text, as a record of what had originally been spoken. After all, God had communicated with His people through the mouths of prophets. He had shown visions to the prophets and explained them with His spoken, not written words. God's habit of self-commentary in dynamics of showing and telling can be encountered throughout the Old Testament but is nowhere as apparent as in His revelation to St. John on Patmos.

The Reformation has frequently been described as logocentric, yet early modern English Protestant, and most emphatically Puritan, culture was not just revolving around the word, but more precisely in a »phonologocentric«<sup>15</sup> way around the *spoken* word. Thus, hearing was considered more important than reading in a frequently-stressed dichotomy of true ear-worship versus false eye-worship<sup>16</sup>, often calling St. Paul (1 Corinthians I:21) to witness:

For seeing the worlde by wisdome they knewe not God in the wisdome of God, it pleased God by the foolishnes of preaching to save them that beleue.

God has chosen preaching to make the Word operative in the Church and it is thus the primary road to salvation since faith is given while listening. If the Word is Christ, then the Bible is not just a record of His sayings, but a revelation of God hidden behind the written words. Consequently, elaborating on a passage

<sup>13</sup> Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and their Audiences, 1590 – 1640*, Cambridge 2010, pp. 19 f.

<sup>14</sup> All quotations from Scripture are taken from the 1560 Geneva Bible.

<sup>15</sup> Tom Webster, »Writing to Redundancy: Approaches to Spiritual Journals and Early Modern Spirituality«, in: *Historical Journal* 39:1 (1996), pp. 33-56, here p. 41; cf. Hunt (as note 13), p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> Hunt (as note 13), pp. 24 f.; Shami (as note 7), p. 197.

from Scripture in the sermon does not just inform on Christian doctrines but activates the written text's »latent force«<sup>17</sup> in the hearer. The Word of God only goes to the parishioner's heart, if carried thither by the living voice of preachers as the prophets' and apostles' latter-day successors. This insistence on the primacy of the oral was perfectly in line with Calvin's doctrine of the sacraments as »visible words«<sup>18</sup> presented to both eyes and ears. If they were only visual, they would be illusory, misleading dead images.

While Elizabethan Protestants shared an essentially Calvinist consensus that included the centrality of the Word of God and the need for a godly preaching ministry, the preference of the spoken word over the written was a distinctive feature of Puritan culture and reflects a dissenting view of the office and power of the preacher. This was articulated as a marker of difference in all major confrontations between Puritan and conformist divines from the 1570s on. In his feud with Thomas Cartwright, the future Archbishop of Canterbury John Whitgift tried to argue for an equal importance of the word read and heard:

But we may not make so light of reading, whereby so many have come to the knowledge of the truth, whereby also daily more are converted, even such as very seldom or never hear the word preached. Both preaching therefore and reading be means whereby God doth call to salvation those that be his[.]<sup>19</sup>

More than twenty years later, Richard Hooker went two steps further when he defined »the *worde of God* always to meane the *scripture onelie*«<sup>20</sup> and strongly advocated reading as the only way of knowing and understanding what is necessary for salvation.<sup>21</sup> Still, even harshest criticism from eminent theologians (Lancelot Andrewes went as far as preaching against excessive preaching) did not have the power to change the dominant practice of Protestant sermon composition.<sup>22</sup> It has frequently been argued that the early modern period marked a transition from an »age of the ear« to an »age of the eye« and the preaching/ reading debate can quickly be simplified to appear as symptomatic for the decline of an oral and the rise of a literate society around 1600.<sup>23</sup> This, however, grossly underestimates the oral features of early modern culture that did not disappear in a sudden,

17 Hunt (as note 13), p. 27.

18 Ibid., pp. 22 f.; Mary Morrissey, »Scripture, Style and Persuasion in Seventeenth-Century English Theories of Preaching«, in: *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 53:4 (2002), pp. 686-706, here pp. 689 f.

19 John Whitgift, *The Works*, Vol. III, ed. by John Ayre, Cambridge 1853, p. 36.

20 Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Policy*. Book V, ed. by W. Speed Hill, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977, p. 84.

21 Ibid., p. 99.

22 Morrissey (as note 18), pp. 697 f.

23 Hunt (as note 13), pp. 56 f.

modernising shift (just as manuscript culture did not go extinct with the introduction of the printing press). All the evidence points to a complex balance maintained that made the period an aural rather than oral culture.

In a typical Protestant sermon, the reading of the verses which the preacher was to expound and comment upon would be followed by a summary, making the connection with the occasion and the circumstances of the congregation apparent. The sermon then had to deliver an interpretation of the chosen verses in doctrinal and moral terms, application of those doctrines to the listeners' lives and experiences, and finally exhortation to accept and act according to what had been offered.<sup>24</sup> The last segment was usually the one most clearly and urgently appealing to the emotions and frequently disembodyed in prayer. Making Christ's presence in the Word operative through preaching was not considered the effect of the minister's talent, though.<sup>25</sup> Much rather, it is the Holy Spirit who gives grace to the hearers and enables them to benefit from the sermon. However, they are not passive recipients either, but must pay minute attention and pray for the grace that God might bestow on His elect. The preacher constructs his sermon around a scriptural passage and his aim must be to teach and exhort. Whether his hearers are actually moved to embrace and follow his calling is beyond his control because humans are incapable of believing without God's help (as stressed by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians III:7). In every sermon, there is thus a fragile triangular relationship at work between him, Him and them. Only if human misunderstanding is ruled out by the preacher's clear and plain style can his attentive hearers be ready, and the Word become effective through the Holy Spirit in some of them. Hence, a good preacher could not claim great performance in the pulpit as his own; the achievement was God's, not his. This also led to diverging opinions on the permissibility of quotations from sources other than Bible and Church Fathers. Profane learning and intertextual references were frequently frowned upon as signs of mere vanity of preachers eager to show off. Puritan theologian William Perkins urges modesty in his remarkable handbook *The Art of Prophecy* of 1592 (first English edition 1607):

Humane wisdom must be concealed, whether it be in the matter of the sermon, or in the setting forth of the words: because the preaching of the word is the Testimonie of God, and the profession of the knowledge of Christ, and not of humane skill: and againe, because the hearers ought not to ascribe their faith to the gifts of men, but to the power of Gods word. [...] it is also a point of Art to conceale Art.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> McCullough (as note 8), p. 566.

<sup>25</sup> Morrissey (as note 18), pp. 690 ff.

<sup>26</sup> William Perkins, *The Works*, Vol. II, London 1631, p. 670.

With this »sermonic sprezzatura«<sup>27</sup>, the preacher must be able to address all degrees, ages and backgrounds in his audience to make them all as receptive as possible for the working of the Word. This triangular relationship also makes obvious that preaching was neither considered an office requiring direct divine inspiration, nor a branch of rhetoric aiming to persuade its listeners. Preachers would of course since their grammar school days and throughout their undergraduate education have received a thorough training in classical oratory and were aware which rhetorical techniques could be profitably applied.<sup>28</sup> A successful sermon, however, required more than the humanist textbooks could teach.

Mary Morrissey quite rightly observes that novelty did not count as a virtue in preaching.<sup>29</sup> Much rather, the preacher was required to go over the fundamentals of faith again and again, reiterating points that had already been made before, stressing their importance for salvation and driving home points that his audience should have been familiar with for quite a while. However, he does not convert by originality and rhetorical skill, but must offer and repeat for his hearers to accept the calling. Thus, the message, the sense of a scriptural passage, must become as clear as possible. Style and formal as well as theological finesse might have been applauded, but they did not save a single soul if they could not be made receptive to the Word or were even confused by the complexity of the sermon. St. Augustine's immensely influential handbook *De doctrina Christiana* advocated the appropriation of the full arsenal of pagan rhetoric in the service of the sermon, and thereby argued at the same time against preaching being a part of the classical orders of oratory. Every rhetorical device known to mankind could be fielded, yet most sermons are no parading ground of tropes and figures. Preachers were well educated in rhetoric whose fireworks they unleashed sparingly, selectively, and only when they were certain of the effect. All preachers were thus aiming for ›plainness‹ in the sense of didactic clarity which must not be put at risk by displays of artfulness.

Fulke, too, claims a plain style in his sermon as the best way to the hearers' hearts instead of further confusing them with unnecessarily complex exposition:

For it is a shame, in thys place to flee vnto Allegories and further expositions of this [...] interpretation, which as I sayd before, if it be not cleare, playne and easy to be vnderstood, deserveth not the name of exposition: as when

27 Greg Kneidel, »Ars Prædicandi: Theories and Practice«, in: Peter McCullough (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon*, Oxford 2011, pp. 3-20, here p. 7.

28 Kate Armstrong, »Sermons in Performance«, in: Peter McCullough (as note 27), pp. 121-136, here p. 127.

29 Morrissey (as note 5), pp. 312 ff.

one unknown thing is expounded by another, as much or more unknown, it is vayne, superfluous, & ridiculous.<sup>30</sup>

The complex medieval thematic sermon that was based on a single scriptural passage but quickly digressed into a series of learned and logically demanding sub-sermons was frowned upon by Humanists and Reformers alike. Although Erasmus's Ciceronian handbook *Ecclesiastes* (1525) became quite influential in England too, its heavy reliance on pagan models made many Puritan ministers uneasy about structuring their sermons according to the principles of the *genus deliberativum*. The word-by-word explanation of a lengthy biblical passage characteristic of patristic homilies seemed more attractive, but its philological focus and relative dullness made it unsuitable for contemporary pastoral needs.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, Protestant preachers developed the ›doctrine-use‹ scheme focusing on only a few verses from scripture. These must be presented, language and historical context explained, the doctrinal message extracted and finally applied to the hearers' experiences.<sup>32</sup> The ›doctrine-use‹ scheme was a direct result of the dangers of heterodox reading experiences. The sermon's central task was (no matter what its genre or occasion might have been) the explication and application of a piece of Scripture. Therefore William Perkins reminded his colleagues »that a Minister must be a divine *Interpreter*, an *Interpreter* of Gods meaning«.<sup>33</sup>

Unfortunately, many difficult parts of Scripture seemed to offer more than one meaning. Yet allegorical interpretation had not fallen into disuse after the Reformation. It was still deemed indispensable to make sense of challenging biblical passages or entire books like Canticles or Revelation. However, allegory was now defined as a rhetorical figure and thereby (in sharp contrast to medieval scholastic tradition) as part of the text's conscious agenda and intention. Metaphor, parable, allegory were all seen as tools used by the author of the sacred text. Consequently, there were not several independent senses to be discovered, but one single sense that sometimes relied on certain rhetorical devices. Even where there was no obvious allegory, a text could point to something beyond itself, which would still be considered part of the one meaning. This allowed for a range of symbolical, typological and moral interpretations that added up to one ›literal‹ sense.<sup>34</sup> Hence, preachers were not meant to choose one of several meanings of a biblical text, but had to keep its one sense intact and deliver the whole ›package‹ to their listeners, not making the task of preaching on difficult passages of Scripture less challenging.

30 Fulke (as note 1), fol. Ciii<sup>r</sup>

31 Kneidel (as note 27), pp. 10 ff.

32 Morrissey (as note 8), p. 507.

33 Perkins (as note 26), Vol. III, p. 431.

34 Morrissey (as note 5), pp. 308 f.

In terms of structure, Perkins summarized his »sacred and onely methode of Preaching« at the end of the *Art of Prophecyng*:

1. To read the Text distinctly out of Canonically Scriptures.
2. To give the sense an understanding of it being read, by the Scripture it selfe.
3. To collect a few and profitable points of doctrine out of the naturall sense.
4. To apply [...] the doctrines [...] to the life and manners of men, in a simple and plaine speech.<sup>35</sup>

Especially for sections two and three, preachers were expected to consult scholarly exegetical books which were available in print and parish libraries. In the name of »sermonic sprezzatura«, they would hide their dependence on all such sources, yet learned commentary had naturally been part of their university training and, as reading lists and library inventories attest, these included works by recent Protestant just as much as medieval and contemporary Catholic theologians.<sup>36</sup> However, they were all relegated to the status of auxiliary science, merely supporting, not structuring the sermon. In his highly popular handbook *The Faithfull Shepherd* (1607), Puritan Richard Bernard further specified Perkins's basic structure of a godly sermon to consist of prayer, preface, reading, analysis, doctrine, use, application, prevention of objections and conclusion<sup>37</sup>, which already underlies Fulke's discourse a generation earlier. After a short prayer, Fulke read out Revelation XIV:8, the one verse on which his exposition rested:

She is fallen, she is fallen, euen Babylon that great Citye, for of the wyne of the fury of her fornication, she hath made all nations to drinke.<sup>38</sup>

He then gives a preface, introducing his structure and guiding questions that he will address and clarify in the following:

Now this text of scripture [...] offereth mee three speciall thinges to be considered: First, what *Babilon* is: secondly, wat is become of her: And thirdly, what is the cause of her heauy decay.<sup>39</sup>

Fulke goes on to concentrate on the first half verse to prove that Rome must be meant by Babylon and more precisely Papal, not Imperial Rome. He does so mostly by commenting on one section of Scripture with the help of other biblical passages (chiefly from Revelation and 2 Thessalonians). This technique of

<sup>35</sup> Perkins (as note 26), Vol. II, p. 673.

<sup>36</sup> Carl Trueman, »Preachers and Medieval and Renaissance Commentary«, in: Peter McCullough (as note 27), pp. 54-71, here pp. 59 f.

<sup>37</sup> Kneidel (as note 27), p. 18; Richard Bernard, *The Faithfull Shepherd*, London 1609, fol. A2<sup>r</sup> ff.

<sup>38</sup> Fulke (as note 1), fol. Aiii<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., fol. Aiv<sup>r</sup>.

illuminating one dark passage of Scripture with the help of other verses – quoted seemingly out of context – was firmly rooted in Protestant modes of Bible reading. While many read in a linear way, taking on the entire text, book by book and chapter by chapter, they would at the same time read discontinuously for »sentences«. This meant looking at verses in isolation as moral aphorisms for a godly life or ammunition for religious controversy. This »propositional«<sup>40</sup> approach mirrored the Calvinist understanding of the Bible as the source of doctrine as no belief was to be accepted without scriptural legitimation.

For Fulke and his contemporaries, the identification of Babylon as Rome evidently implied the identification of the papacy as Antichrist. Although the word Antichrist occurs only once in the Bible (in 1 John II:22 where it is used for the deniers of Christ), the Church Fathers were quick to combine it with the »man of sin« of 2 Thessalonians II:3-9 and the false teachers of 1 Timothy IV:1-4. Since all these are clear signs of the end of times, it seemed natural to associate them with the second apocalyptic beast (Revelation XIII:11-18), and so the traditional image of Antichrist as Satan's coming agent took shape, culminating in Adso Dervensis's highly popular 10<sup>th</sup>-century *Libellus de Antichristo*. Throughout the Middle Ages, popes, emperors, and heretics frequently identified each other as antichrists in their political and theological disputes, and this abuse was also hurled in the early Reformation. However, Protestant writers, who rejected narratives of medieval legend, soon took a different direction. They no longer regarded Antichrist as an actual person to be expected on the eve of the final battle but saw him as a spiritual power opposed to Christ that had been working for a long time and was responsible for temptation, corruption and persecution of the true believers. Reformed theologians and controversialists, including William Tyndale, soon identified beyond doubt the papacy as that anti-Christian church and institution of Satan. This was not merely a defamation of the enemy anymore, but a theologically founded discovery of his true nature. The Book of Revelation rose to prominence among Protestant commentators and preachers who sought to hammer home this reading and thereby also disclose a radically new history of the Christian church. John Bale introduced his readers to the importance of the last book of the Bible in the preface to his commentary on Revelation *The Image of Bothe Churches* (1548):

Nowhere is the durable kingdom and priesthood of the said Jesus Christ more plenteously spread, more plainly proved, and more largely uttered, than in this holy oracle. Nowhere is the doctrine of health more purely

40 Mary Morrissey, »Nuts, Kernels, Wading Lambs and Swimming Elephants: Preachers and Their Handling of Biblical Texts«, in: Robert Armstrong and Tadhg Ó hAnnracháin (eds.), *The English Bible in the Early Modern World*, Leiden 2018, pp. 84-103, here p. 86.

taught, faith more thoroughly commended, nor yet righteousness more highly rewarded, than here. [...] Herein is the true Christian church, which is the meek spouse of the Lamb without spot, in her right-fashioned colours described. [...] He that knoweth not this book, knoweth not what the church is whereof he is a member.<sup>41</sup>

Like other Reformers, he emphasized the edifying benefits of the apocalyptic text, as it captivately presented the conflict between godliness and sin. But Bale also introduced a new, historical interpretation that was to have tremendous influence on early modern Protestant culture. According to this, the Book of Revelation showed in the struggle of God's elect with the followers of the beast the whole history of the church since the Resurrection, crystallised as the conflict between the true church of Christ and the false church of Rome. It was Bale's achievement to have established St. John's visions as the key to a new, reformed understanding of the entire church history. He no longer read the Apocalypse as a prophecy of eschatological events, but as a clear account of the path of the church of Christ from its beginning to the Day of Judgment. In *The Image of Bothe Churches*, he revealed his chronology, identified the *dramatis personae* and revealed their true role in the struggle between Babylon and Jerusalem. History was pervaded by the eternal dualism between two churches: the true church of the Holy Spirit and the false church of the flesh. In the latter he recognized the church of the Bishop of Rome. Bale considered Antichrist not as a coming figure but as an institution that had been operating in the world for centuries. Hence, he was able to write a history of the Protestant movement, which started long before Luther. The Reformed church was therefore by no means a new one: it was indeed the true church of Christ, from which the Roman, as the real schismatic, had fallen away, and which it had since then persecuted and oppressed. Based on this discovery, Bale developed a chronology of the history of the church based on the seven apocalyptic seals.<sup>42</sup>

Popularized by the marginal glosses of the Geneva Bible (1560), expanded and exemplified by Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* (1563), and picked up by numerous commentaries, tracts and above all sermons, this reading quickly became commonplace in Elizabethan England. The Book of Revelation attained central importance to the self-image of English Protestants as members of the invisible true church, which now, in spite of all persecutions past and present, had entered the final battle with the forces of the Roman Antichrist. How perilous these latter

41 John Bale, *Select Works*, ed. by Henry Christmas, Cambridge 1849, pp. 251 f.

42 Paul Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon: English Apocalyptic Visions from the Reformation to the Eve of the Civil War*, Toronto 1978, pp. 17 ff.; Richard Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse: Sixteenth Century Apocalypticism, Millenarianism and the English Reformation, from John Bale to John Foxe and Thomas Brightman*, Oxford 1978, pp. 70 ff.

days still were could also be learned from St. John's prophesies. Although the beast from the sea, which clearly represented the papacy, had been seriously wounded (Revelation XIII:3), its wound healed, for the Protestant reforms were only half-heartedly implemented throughout Europe. As long as the idolatrous practices of Catholicism had not been completely eradicated, a community was vulnerable and the duty to bear witness to the truth, admonish against the deceptive ways of Antichrist and call as many as possible to embrace God's saving grace mostly rested upon the shoulders of the preachers. Accordingly, much effort was devoted to substantiating this finding with further scriptural evidence (frequently cross-referencing to Matthew XXIV:15-28, 2 Timotheus III:1-9, 2 Peter II and Daniel XI), which virtually became a subgenre in biblical commentary, popular tracts and sermons alike. The importance of the subject was insistently summed up Thomas Beard as late as 1625 when he opened his treatise:

Next unto our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, there in nothing so necessary as the true and solid knowledge of Antichrist.<sup>43</sup>

Fulke, after having established beyond doubt the identification of Rome as Babylon as the central doctrine of his verse, goes on to comment on the nature of her fall:

But if we will better vnderstand how she is fallen, we must consider more distinctly wherein she is fallen. [...] Well, *Babylon* is not fallen onely in wealth and riches, but also in power and authority.<sup>44</sup>

He perceived the Romish church of Antichrist as being in its last agony because princes and nations had begun to turn away from her and more and more witnesses to the truth were rising and preaching the Word of God throughout Europe. The hidden, true church of Christ had finally become visible again.

He then analyses the sins that have led to Babylon's fall and explains those in a metaphorical application to two common vices that preachers never tired to chastise:

She hath deceiued all the world with false doctrine, which he compareth unto two kindes of vices, whereby men are so deceiued, that they loose all right iudgement: *Dronkennes* and *Fornication*. For as these two vices do allure men to cōmit them, by coueting of vayne delectacion that is in them, euen so *Babylon* hath enticed all men lyke another *Circe*, to drinke the cup of her delectable errors, and to commit most filthy fornication with her idolatrous religion.<sup>45</sup>

43 Thomas Beard, *Antichrist the Pope of Rome: or, The Pope of Rome is Antichrist*, London 1625, fol. \*1.

44 Fulke (as note 1), fol. Eiv<sup>v</sup> and Fi<sup>v</sup>.

45 Ibid., fol. Giii<sup>r</sup> f.

Elizabethan Protestants continued to live under the traumatic shadow of the burning stakes of Mary Tudor's reign. Although the country had returned to its covenant with the Lord under the new monarch, there was still an awareness of the menace posed by the Catholic powers of Europe and a recusant fifth column at home. This siege mentality was kept alive by early Elizabethan writings in many genres that drew on John Bale's historical reading of the Book of Revelation. The greatest contribution to popularizing the new understanding of the Apocalypse, the Geneva Bible (1560) whose annotations and commentaries guided three generations of English readers in their study of Scripture. They also included prominently John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* (or ›Book of Martyrs‹) and the most complete commentary on the Book of Revelation were the sermons that Heinrich Bullinger had preached to the English exiles at Zurich in 1557 and that were translated into English as *A Hundred Sermons on the Apocalyps of Jesu Christe* in 1561. Apocalyptic preaching and writing returned in force after the Northern Rebellion of November 1569 and Elizabeth's excommunication by Pope Pius V three months later and was again boosted by the shocking massacres in France in 1572.<sup>46</sup> First to appear were a new printing of John Bale's *The Image of Bothe Churches* and the revised edition of Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* in 1570. Bullinger's sermons saw a revised edition three years later, the same year William Fulke published his Latin commentary on the Book of Revelation, which was immediately translated as *Prælectiones upon the Sacred and Holy Reuelation of S. John*. The translation of Augustin Marlorat's *A Catholike Exposition upon the Reulationation of Sainct John* (1574) was to have great influence on the marginal glosses of the revised version of the Geneva Bible under the editorship of Laurence Tomson. Over 100 texts dealing with the identification of Rome as Babylon and the Pope as Antichrist were printed between 1588 and 1628 alone.<sup>47</sup> Hence, anti-Catholic controversialist John Fielde observed in 1581 that »to proue the Pope Antichriste [appears to] be needles, considering how it is a beaten argument in euery booke.«<sup>48</sup> But this was, after all, one fundamental truth that urgently needed to be conveyed, for outwardly, both churches had the same claim to holiness, and it was vital to the salvation of every man to be able to distinguish the church of Christ from that of the Antichrist, as Fulke stressed at beginning of his sermon. Already the famous frontispiece of Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* shows impressively the external characteristics of the two churches and preaching the Word of God is the very foundation of the

46 Katharine R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain 1530 – 1645*, Oxford 1979, pp. 84 f.; Bauckham (as note 42), pp. 99 f.

47 Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought 1600 – 1640*, Cambridge 1995, p. 93.

48 John Fielde, *A Caveat for Parsons Howlet*, London 1581, fol. Bi<sup>v</sup>.

true church. For Foxe, Revelation not only contained the entire history of the church, it underlies it as an ordering pattern. Following the biblical guidelines, Foxe divided his chronicle in 1570 into five sections of about 300 years each: the first phase corresponds to the persecutions of early Christianity, which ended with Constantine's victory of 324. According to Foxe's interpretation, this was the binding of Satan for 1000 years from Revelation XX. His release coincided accordingly with the persecutions of the followers of Jan Hus and John Wyclif in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, thus ushering in the last phase of Satan's fury against the faithful, which meant that the end was nigh indeed.<sup>49</sup>

As we have seen, by far the largest body of apocalyptic writing was not made up of scholarly commentaries, but popular historiography and sermons that exposed the signs of Antichrist to an immense audience.<sup>50</sup> Also Fulke stressed, that the fall of Babylon, although it could clearly be witnessed in the present time, was a reason for hope, but most definitely not a sign of imminent peace for the faithful, as the raging of Antichrist still intensified.

Even in the mydst of her tyranny and persecution, great multitudes dayly are lightened with the bright beames of the Gospel, that for all Inquisitions, imprisonments, exquisite torments, and cruel burnings they neuer a whyt diminish, but rather increase, as God hath prouided, that the blood of the Martyrs should be the seede of the church. [...] For the word of God must conquer and preuail in the last age, & Antichrist must be consumed by the spirit of the mouth of *CHRIST*, which is hys holye word, and vtterly be abolished by the glorious brightness of the coming to iudgement [...]. Therefore it is in uayne that they seeke to vnderprop the doctrine of *Babylon* by cruelty and tyranny, for all will not serue, seeing the tyme of her finall fall approacheth[.]<sup>51</sup>

»Victory over Antichrist was not victory as the world understood victory, but victory in and through persecution«, as Richard Bauckham puts it.<sup>52</sup> This did

49 F. J. Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought*, San Marino, CA 1967, p. 100; Bauckham (as note 42), p. 84.

50 Unfortunately, most of the invaluable studies of English Protestant apocalypticism from the 1970s focus near exclusively on biblical commentary and theological tracts, while hardly making any references to the rich output of sermons. With the notable exception of Bauckham (as note 42), Bryan Ball (*A Great Expectation: Eschatological Thought in English Protestantism to 1660*, Leiden 1975), Christianson (as note 42), Katherine Firth (as note 46) and the volume edited by C.A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (*The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature: Patterns, Antecedents and Repercussions*, Manchester 1984) ignore sermons by all but the most senior clergymen.

51 Fulke (as note 1), fol. Fii<sup>r</sup> f.

52 Bauckham (as note 42), p. 146.

not mean that English Protestants could sit back and watch the drama unfold. The recent troubles had shown that a wounded Antichrist was even more active and dangerous. The purity of Christian doctrine had to be defended at all cost and the reformation had to be pushed further to prepare the realm for the anticipated Day of Judgement.

Fulke, like most of his colleagues, firmly believed that preaching the Word of God was the best or even only way to get ready and save as many as possible. He consequently further expands on the item of application when he warns his hearers against the wasteful vengeance that shall strike them for clinging on to or just tolerating Catholic idolatry:

For howsoever ignorance before her fall, though it were inexcusable, yet seemed to diminish the greatness of the crime. Now that her wickednes is openly displayed, no pretence can saue men from the extremity of Gods wrath, if they will still obstinately continue in her heresies.<sup>53</sup>

This was not just meant as an individual warning, for as long as the idolatrous practice existed in their midst, the entire commonwealth remained vulnerable to backsliding and the Old Testament was full of instances where God had withdrawn from the whole people because of the lapse of some. Stamping out Catholicism in England became a necessity to guard against God's wrath and Fulke closes his sermon accordingly with a communal prayer:

Let vs therefore pray vnto almighty *GOD* instantly, that all men in their vocation may seeke the vtter overthrow and destruction of *Babylon*: that Princes and Magistrats may [...] hate her with a perfect hatred, and vtterlye abolishe what soeuer belongeth to her: [...] That Preachers and Ministers of Gods word, may plainly and without dissimulation or halting, discover her wickedness: and earnestlye to vrge, whatsoeuer hath yet neede of perfect reformation, that all subiectes may continue in holy obedience, first to *GOD*, and then to their Prince[.]<sup>54</sup>

Mary Morrissey has convincingly shown that anti-Catholic preaching assumed a new tone in the 1570s that reflected a change in the perceived sympathies of the audience: from misguided followers soon after the end of Mary Tudor's reign, to potential backsliders in the aftermath of the Northern Rebellion, and finally, following the Armada crisis of 1588, to hard-boiled opponents of everything remotely smacking of Popery.<sup>55</sup> But this was a long process in which the Catholic element in England had to be reduced and excluded. Attacks on the church of

<sup>53</sup> Fulke (as note 1), fol. Hii<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., fol. Hii<sup>v</sup> f.

<sup>55</sup> Mary Morrissey, *Politics and the Paul's Cross Sermons 1558 – 1642*, Cambridge 2011, p. 161.

Rome as an institution of Satan lent a heightened sense of urgency to the rejection of traditional religious practices. Fulke's sermon is relatively early in this new wave of fiery oratory that started immediately after the Northern Rebellion had been crushed. The new tone could be tested when preaching to the converted, as it were, in the relative safety of Hampton Court, but it had to stand the test in more public preaching venues from Paul's Cross to countless country parishes. The new official *Homilie against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion* of 1570, which virtually all church-going English men and women would have been exposed to on numerous occasions, refers to the Pope as the »babilonically beast of Rome«<sup>56</sup>. And when Edwin Sandys addressed the crowd from St. Paul's Cross in 1573 on 1 Peter IV:7 (»Now the end of all things is at hand. Be ye therefore sober, and watching in prayer.«), he called his listeners to rejoice at the fact that England had »left that man of sin« behind and went on to denounce

that rose-coloured harlot with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, that triple-crowned beast, that double-sworded tyrant, that thief and murderer, who hath robbed so many souls of salvation, and sucked so much innocent blood of Christian martyrs, that adversary unto Christ, that pretended vicar, who hath displaced the person, not only taking upon him Christ's room and office, but also boasting himself as if he were a god, and being content of his parasites so to be called. This wicked man of sin is at length revealed by the sincere preaching of the gospel. Daniel in his prophecies, Paul in his epistles, and John in his revelations, have most lively described and pointed him forth as it were with the finger.<sup>57</sup>

The bishop of London seems to assume here that Catholic sympathisers were absent or a silent marginalised minority in his audience. During the 1570s and 80s, Protestant group identity was indeed increasingly strong and the attacked enemy mostly absent.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, anti-Catholic diatribes became a standard ingredient in sermons on nearly any occasion and the commonplaces became highly conventional and predictable with certain proof-texts appearing over and over.<sup>59</sup> Many Elizabethan Protestants would have been so familiar with the Bible and especially the commonplaces recurring in sermons, catechisms and other devotional literature that preachers did not have to expressly draw parallels to current affairs or politics. The biblical idiom functioned as sufficiently political

56 *Certain Sermons or Homilies (1547)* and *A Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion (1570)*, ed. by Ronald B. Bond, Toronto 1987, p. 244.

57 Edwin Sandys, *The Sermons and Miscellaneous Pieces*, ed. by John Ayre, Cambridge 1841, p. 389.

58 Morrissey (as note 55), p. 175.

59 *Ibid.*, pp. 185 f.

language and typology facilitated the application of episodes from Scripture to the present day.<sup>60</sup>

For Bishop Sandys, chaplain Fulke and countless ministers in parish pulpits, the survival of the nation seemed at stake and it was not so much threatened by the violence of Catholic armies as by the wrath of the Lord, should idleness prevail and make the English (once more) forgetful of their covenant. Hence, frequent preaching was vital for prevention of sin and thereby of divine vengeance.<sup>61</sup> By identifying the workings of Antichrist in the history of the church of Rome, the primacy of Scripture over ecclesiastical tradition could be further strengthened and the apocalyptic books of the Bible seemed to provide plenty of ammunition if read philologically and historically precise.<sup>62</sup>

In the aural culture of early modern English Protestantism, the voice of the preaching minister delivered a commentary that cleared the way for the Word of God to take effect in the hearts of the well-disposed hearers and work towards their salvation. Fulke, Foxe and many other theologians did compile learned Latin commentaries on the Book of Revelation. Yet they did so first and foremost as educators of future ministers. The books were meant as additions to the arsenal of exegetical material used in university education and provide valuable resources for preachers who could draw on their expositions to translate them into a medium that was considered the frontline of biblical commentary and decisive weapon of spiritual warfare. Published sermons certainly reached larger audiences than the voice of the preacher and familiarised them with patterns of reformed biblical interpretation they could follow in their private reading and devotional practices. But the live sermon was the real thing where the Christian man could hear the Word of God expounded and partake in His grace.

60 Kevin Killeen, »Veiled Speech: Preaching, Politics and Scriptural Typology«, in: Peter McCullough (as note 27), pp. 387-403, here pp. 388 ff.

61 Natalie Mears, »Paul's Cross and Nationwide Special Worship, 1533 – 1642«, in: Torrance Kirby and P. G. Stanwood (eds.), *Paul's Cross and the Culture of Persuasion in England, 1520 – 1640*, Leiden 2014, pp. 41-60, here p. 53.

62 Parish (as note 12), p. 129.