

Looking into the Future

Evangelical Studies in Eschatology

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The Coming of the Kingdom and Sixteenth-Century English Bibles

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The sixteenth century was remarkable for its production of vernacular Bibles. In England alone, from the publication of William Tyndale's first New Testament in 1525–26 to that of the King James version in 1611, there were over three hundred distinct editions of the Bible or parts thereof printed in the English language. Although most of them are different editions of a few basic types like the Great Bible or the Geneva Bible, nonetheless they presented God's Word to the English-reading population in this period in a wide variety of formats and with different kinds of helps designed to direct the reader in the study of the Scriptures.¹

In the English text and its accompanying materials, these versions reveal the theological proclivities of those who produced them. Not surprisingly, as with most things religious in the sixteenth century, the major difference between versions is that between Catholic and Protestant Bibles. Even though

1. T. H. Darlow and H. F. Moule, *Historical Catalogue of Printed Editions of the English Bible, 1525–1961*, ed. A. S. Herbert (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1968). In this paper, references to items in this catalogue are designated by DM and an Arabic numeral. The first edition of the King James version is DM 309. Good introductions to the history of the English Bible in this period are F. F. Bruce, *History of the English Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1978), 24–126; and S. L. Greenslade, "English Versions of the Bible, 1525–1611," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 141–74.

Protestants were first in the production of English Bibles, English-speaking Roman Catholics produced a New Testament of their own in 1582 (DM 177) and an accompanying Old Testament in two volumes in 1609–10 (DM 300). These Catholic editions are distinct in the text they chose to translate (the Latin Vulgate and not the Hebrew and Greek), in the kind of English style they employ for the biblical text, and in the annotations that accompany the text.

To a much smaller but still significant degree, the Protestant versions also manifest differences between versions regarding text, English style, and accompanying matter. Although virtually all of them depend upon Tyndale's pioneering work in the 1520s and 1530s, they depart from it on account of different judgments about how the text should be translated and about what the reader should have available to him or her in addition to the sacred text itself. In this last respect especially—the nature and scope of prefaces, annotations, indexes, and the like—the Protestant versions, like the Catholic version, reveal the underlying convictions of those who translated and published them about which doctrines and beliefs they thought were most important for their readers to know and understand.

In short, the English Bibles of the sixteenth century were an important vehicle for the various religious parties to popularize their ideas and ideals. Since all of them affirmed the authority of the Scriptures, what better way to persuade English readers of their position on the vexed issues of the day than to present that position in immediate proximity to the biblical text? It is one thing to present a theological argument that is bolstered by Bible passages and still another to print a Bible that is glossed by theological observations. Both methods may have the same objective of persuading the reader to adopt a particular position, but an argument in the margins of a Bible attaches it directly to the church's sacred book.

Therefore, the marginalia and other accompanying matter of sixteenth-century English Bibles provide opportunities for assessing the significance of eschatology and the coming of the kingdom in the religious views and attitudes of Catholics and Protestants who produced them. Since an exhaustive study of all extant versions is beyond the scope of a paper, we propose to sample the opinions offered on the topic in just three of the more important versions from the period: Tyndale's New Testament (1534); the Catholic version, the Rheims New Testament (1582); and the Geneva Bible of 1560. Tyndale and Rheims are obvious choices because they represent the earliest Protestant and Catholic versions respectively. The Geneva version is also important, however, as a principal vehicle by which Elizabethan Protestants assimilated Reformed theology during the long reign of Queen Elizabeth (1558–1603).

In addition to limiting ourselves to these particular versions, it also seems reasonable to restrict our attention to particular portions of the Bible deal-

ing with eschatological themes. In this respect, I propose looking especially at that most eschatological of books, the Revelation of St. John, as well as 2 Thessalonians.

William Tyndale

The Tyndale version is dealt with most speedily.² Although one can hardly exaggerate the significance of William Tyndale for the history of the English Bible, his notes and notices regarding eschatology are neither extensive nor especially pointed in the portions of Scripture we are considering. With respect to 2 Thessalonians, Tyndale summarizes the second chapter in these words:

He showeth them that the last daye shuld not come, tyll there were fyrst a departinge (as some men thynke) from under the obedyence of the Emperour of Rome, and that Anti christ shuld set up him selfe in the same place, as God: and deceave the unthankfull worlde with false doctrine, and with false and lyenge myracles wrought by the workinge of Satan, untill Christ shuld come and slee him with his glorious commynge and spirituall preachinge of the worde of God.

Clearly, one can read this description as a testimony against the papacy, but in point of fact, Tyndale does not make the identification explicit. He does, however, strike a characteristically Protestant note by defining Antichrist's deception as "false doctrine" and describing our Lord's victory over him by "spirituall preachinge of the worde of God." Likewise, in a note on the second chapter, Tyndale comments, "Where no love is to the truthe [,] on them dothe the god let slype false prophetes to deceave them."³ Certainly, it would not take too much imagination for a Protestant believer to interpret this note in terms of his or her own times, but it would demand some imagination, since Tyndale does not say definitively that his times are the last times or that the pope is the Antichrist.

Tyndale's remarks on the Book of Revelation are even less pointed than those of 2 Thessalonians. For one thing, contrary to his usual practice, Tyndale does not introduce the book with a preface. Instead, he simply writes at the end of Jude, "Her after foloweth the Apocalyps." Second, his annotations are remarkably slight for such a difficult book, and the only annotation that reveals any theological predilections occurs in chapter 7, when in defining the term "angel" in the text, Tyndale notes:

2. Although Tyndale's first complete New Testament was the edition of 1526 (DM 2), it did not contain any marginal notes. The 1534 edition (DM 13) contains notes and prefaces, the latter based chiefly on the corresponding prefaces in Luther's German Bible. See Bruce, *History*, 36, 42-48.

3. *The New Testament Translated by William Tyndale 1534*, reprint of the 1534 ed., ed. N. Hardy Wallis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 433, 436.

Prophetes, preachers and the prelates of the churche are called angelles: that is to saye messengers, be cause their offyce is to bringe the message of god unto the people. The good angelles here in this booke are the true bysshopes and preachers, and the evell angelles are the heretyckes and false preachers which ever falsifye gods worde, with which the church of Christ shal be thus miserablye plaged unto the ende of the worlde as is paynted in these fygures.⁴

By implication, once again, Tyndale places his own times into an eschatological context, but there is hardly a sense of urgency nor even a sense of uniqueness, for the church of Christ is to be “miserablye plaged” by false preachers until the end of the world—obviously including the sixteenth century but not necessarily restricted to it.

Of course, Tyndale’s work represents an early stage in the story of English Bibles. Although his 1534 edition contains a response to the translation efforts of his erstwhile associate, George Joye,⁵ Tyndale did not otherwise feel compelled to use his Bible to answer alternative versions and interpretations. The situation was quite different when at length English Catholics produced a New Testament in 1582. By that time, well over one hundred different editions of the Protestant version had been published and, apparently, even Catholics found them appealing.

Catholic Reaction

For more than a generation following the publication of Tyndale’s New Testament, Catholic polemicists had been saying no to the English Bible; but in the 1560s they began to reassess their opposition due to the situation of their coreligionists in the Protestant England of Elizabeth I. In 1567, two leaders of the exiled English Catholic community, Thomas Harding and Nicholas Sanders, wrote to the cardinal-protector of England, Giovanni Morone, regarding the English Bible. When the whole country is “boiling over in heresy,” they argue, “. . . those who are compelled to drink poison everywhere ought not be compelled to defer a remedy until a doctor arrives when there isn’t one or else he is far away and always lies hidden.” The poison they are referring to is Protestant versions of the English Bible: “When heretics abuse the word of God for the sake of deceiving the rude and ignorant, they do this as much as possible by a perverse interpretation of the Bible.”

Furthermore, Harding and Sanders contend that the people found it so hard to put the Bible aside, even when Catholics were in control, that the more it was prohibited, the more persistently the people retained it. Once they

4. *Ibid.*, 530, 539–40.

5. Joye had published his own revision of Tyndale’s New Testament (DM 12) in which he had substituted phrases like “life after this life” for “resurrection”—an editorial freedom that Tyndale did not appreciate. See Bruce, *History*, 42–44.

had gotten a taste for the vernacular Scriptures, they refused to give them up. Accordingly, as a remedy for bad Bibles, these controversialists request a good one or at least parts of a good one:

To this evil [the Protestant vernacular Bibles] it seems to some a remedy can be offered if at least the historical and moral books of the Old Testament and the gospels and epistles would be published in vernacular speech by Catholics. For thus, at last it might be possible to persuade the people to discard their former books, corruptly interpreted, if new ones, accurately translated according to the Vulgate edition, were given to them.⁶

Not until fifteen years later would the English Catholic community be in a position actually to accomplish what Harding and Sanders had requested; but when at last the Rheims New Testament appeared, it was clearly aimed at answering Protestant criticisms of the old religion that had appeared in English Bibles and elsewhere. In fact, the title page of the Catholic version informs the reader that all kinds of helps have been provided "for the better understanding of the text" and "specially for the discoverie of the Corruptions of divers late translations, and for clearing the Controversies in religion, of these daies." Accordingly, using the preface, summaries of books, indexes, and annotations, the reader of this version finds the Catholic position on justification, the sacraments, sacred tradition, papal primacy, purgatory, and the cult of the saints affirmed and the corresponding Protestant positions repudiated.⁷

But what about eschatology?

By 1582, it was virtually a commonplace among Protestants that the church was in the last times and that the pope was the Antichrist.⁸ That conviction made it not only into Protestant confessions like the Schmalkald Articles of the Lutheran Reformation and the Scottish Confession of 1580 but, as we shall see, also into the marginalia of English Bibles. Given its apologetic purposes, therefore, the Rheims New Testament addresses this charge directly in its annotations on both 2 Thessalonians and Revelation and in so doing, tempers Protestant apocalyptic expectations.

Regarding 2 Thessalonians 2, for example, the Catholic annotators insist upon a literal reading of "the man of sin" and a partly political understanding of the great falling away. In both interpretations they also claim to be relying upon

6. Thomas Harding and Nicholas Sanders, Louvain, to Giovanni Morone, June 11, 1567, printed in Arnold O. Meyer, *England and the Catholic Church under Queen Elizabeth* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967), 475-78. Translation from the Latin is my own.

7. Rheims New Testament, DM 177, title page. For the Catholic character of this work, see my dissertation, "The Battle for the Bible, 1557-1582" (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 1991), 371-449.

8. *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, 4 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), s.v. "Antichrist."

the church fathers. Interestingly, although they are translating the Latin text, they are perfectly capable of referring to the Greek as here when they write:

The Heathen Emperours were many, Turkes be many, Heretikes have been and now are many, therefore they can not be that one great Antichrist which here is spoken of, and which by the article alwaies added in the Greeke, is signified to be one special and singular man.⁹

According to Richard Bauckham, this notion of the Antichrist being one single person had roots deep in the Middle Ages, going back at least to a tenth-century French abbot by the name of Adso, whose work *Libellus de Antichristo* was popular throughout the Middle Ages and was current in English translation among English Catholics of the sixteenth century. In this work, Adso describes the Antichrist as a Jew, born of the tribe of Dan and under the control of Satan, who will appear only after the Holy Roman Empire comes to an end and will rule the world for three and a half years, after which Christ will return.¹⁰

At least some of these details are present in the Rheims notes on 2 Thesalonians 2:

The particular stocke and tribe whereof he should be borne . . . [is] of the Jewes . . . and of the tribe of Dan . . . the time of his appearing so neere the worldes end: his short reigne . . . all these & many other arguments prove him to be but one special notorious Adversarie in the highest degree, unto whom al other persecutors, Heretikes, Atheistes, and wicked enemies of Christ and His Church, are but members and servants.¹¹

The point of these notes is to refute the Protestants who identified *the* Antichrist with the succession of persons who occupied the office of pope. In commenting on the biblical text at hand, they emphasize its literal meaning. Not only does it refer to a single individual, it also says that he will "sit in the temple of God." "Most auncient writers," they maintain, "expound this of the Temple in Hierusalem, which they thinke Antichrist shal build up againe . . . he shal be adored there by sacrifice and divine honour, the name and worship of the true God wholly defaced."¹² The Rheims editors acknowledge that Au-

9. Rheims New Testament, DM 177, 557. In the margin, they cite the Greek, "*ho antichristos*," "*ho huiois apoleias*," and "*ho antikeimenos*."

10. Richard Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse* ([Oxford]: Sutton Courtenay, 1978), 91–93. See also *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 13 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1982–89), s.v. "Antichrist."

11. Rheims New Testament, DM 177, 557. The proof here is Gen. 49:17 and citations from Irenaeus, Jerome, and Augustine.

12. *Ibid.*, 557. Their citations include Irenaeus (bk. 5 in fine); Hippolytus (*De consum. Mundi*); Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catech.* 15); Jerome on Dan. 11; and Gregory (bk. 31. *Moralia*, c. 11).

gustine and Jerome both understood "sitting in the Temple of God" as a reference to the Church of Christ and not the temple of Jerusalem; but even in this interpretation, Antichrist must still replace Christ literally so that he, Antichrist, "shal be adored in all the Churches of the world which he list to leave standing for his [own] honour."¹³

By taking a strictly literal approach to this text in 2 Thessalonians, these Catholic apologists are seeking to refute any Protestant identification of Antichrist with the pope whom, of course, they present as a paragon of Christian piety, "How then can the Pope be Antichrist, as the Heretikes fondly blaspheme, who is so far from being exalted above God, that he praieth most humbly not onely to christ, but also to his B. mother and al his Sainctes."¹⁴ It is not immediately evident that Protestants would find this last bit of evidence particularly persuasive, but followers of the old religion would certainly find it so, as well as the literal reading of the biblical text offered in the annotations. Second Thessalonians could not apply to the pope.

Besides protecting the papacy from Protestant attacks, an additional consequence of the approach to this text in the Rheims New Testament is a tempering of apocalyptic expectations. Although the annotators suggest that the increase of heretics and accompanying defections from Rome in the sixteenth century may presage the appearance of Antichrist, such opponents are not *the* Antichrist even if they are all "antichrists."¹⁵ Heretics pave the way for the Antichrist but they do so surreptitiously, deviously, under a cloak of piety, so to speak, but the great Antichrist shall reveal his opposition to Christ and his church openly. Commenting on the phrase "mysterie of iniquitie," the Rheims annotators say:

The mysterie of iniquitie is commonly referred to Heretikes, who worke to the same, and do that that Antichrist shal do, but yet not openly, but in covert and under the cloke of Christes name, the Scriptures, the word of the Lord, shew of holines, etc. Whereas Antichrist him self shal openly attempt and atchieve the foresaid desolation, and Satan now serving his turne by Heretikes *underhand* shal toward the last end utter, reveale, & bring him forth *openly*.¹⁶

13. Ibid., 558.

14. Ibid., 554.

15. Ibid., 556. "If the Adversaries had said that this revolt which the Apostle foretellet shal come before the worldes end, is meant of great numbers of Heretikes & Apostates revolting from the Church, they had said truth of them selves and such others, whom S. John calleth Antichristes. And it is very like . . . that this great defection or revolt shal not be onely from the Romane empire but specially from the Romane Church, and withal from most points of Christian religion. . . . Which revolt having been begunne and continued by Heretikes of divers ages . . . and being now wonderfully increased by these of our daies the next precursors of Antichrist as it may seeme, shal be fully atchieved a litle before the end of the world by Antichrist him self."

16. Ibid., 558.

Clearly, much had to happen before the end would come. Translating *discessio* in verse 3 as "revolt" (Gk, *apostasia*; NIV, "rebellion"), the Rheims annotations refer to "the general forsaking & fall of the Romane empire." Although the ancient empire had fallen as also Byzantium, the Holy Roman Empire existed still, so that one might conclude that the great falling away had not yet taken place. Furthermore, Antichrist would

abolish the publike exercise of *al other religions true and false*, and pull downe both the B. Sacrament of the altar, wherein consisteth specially the worship of the true God, and also al Idols of the Gentils, and sacrifices of the Jewes, generally al kind of religious worship, saving that which must be done to him self alone.¹⁷

This too had not yet taken place.

As far as the end times are concerned, therefore, the reader of the annotations on 2 Thessalonians in the Rheims New Testament might very well conclude that the last day was as yet some way off.

Regarding the Book of Revelation, the evidence is similar. Although the Rheims New Testament maintains that the purpose of the Apocalypse is to rehearse the "storie" of the church "to the end . . . by way of prophecie," there is little sense in the annotations that the end is imminent. The editors attempt to make the book relevant by applying its content to their own times and situation, but do not conclude that the Antichrist is present in the sixteenth century. So for example, regarding the blasphemies spoken by the beast in Revelation 13:6, the notes say, "No heretike ever liker Antichrist, then these in our daies, specially in blasphemies against Gods Church, Sacraments, Sancts, ministers, al sacred things";¹⁸ but being "like" Antichrist is not the same as "being" Antichrist.

As in 2 Thessalonians, the notes on Revelation maintain that this apocalyptic figure is a unique human being and not the papacy. He will rule for three and a half years and Jerusalem will be his capitol. He will persecute the church and will put to death many, including Enoch and Elijah, who will literally return from heaven to preach against him. He will perform "wonders" to deceive many and will set up his own name, sign, and image in place of our Lord's. Hence, Protestant efforts in the sixteenth century to eliminate Christian images and altars from the churches can be said to prepare the way for Antichrist, but he has not arrived yet.

Of course, the pope is not the Antichrist. Nor should "Babylon" in Revelation 17 be identified as the church of Rome. Although the annotators of the

17. Ibid., 555, 557, emphasis mine. Tyndale too had referred to "adepartinge (as some men thynke) from under the obedyence of the Emperour of Rome" (1534 *New Testament*, 433).

18. Rheims New Testament, DM 177, 696, 722.

Rheims New Testament admit that the text could refer to ancient Rome, the seat of those who persecuted the church in its early days, they are adamant that what the term really represents is the “general societie of the impious, & of those that preferre the terrene kingdom and commoditie of the world, before God & eternal felicitie.” Nor do the “seven hills” of verse 9 persuade them, since John uses “seven” symbolically throughout the book to represent “universally al of that sort whereof he speaketh.” In this case, therefore, “seven hills” represents “al the kingdoms of the world that persecute the Christians,” one of which has not yet even appeared, the seventh and last, that is, “Antichrists state, which shal not come so long as the Empire of Rome standeth.”¹⁹

Although certainly a far different book from Tyndale’s 1534 New Testament, the Rheims New Testament agrees with its Protestant counterpart in playing down eschatological expectations. However much these Catholic translators may have been suffering from exile and the loss of their homeland to a Protestant regime, they were compelled in their annotations to read passages dealing with the Antichrist literally so as to refute Protestant efforts to discredit the papacy by portraying it as the great foe of Christ in the last days. But a literal reading of Antichrist passages meant also a diminished sense of an imminent judgment day. It was far otherwise in the Geneva versions of the Bible, to which we now turn our attention.

Geneva Bible

Originally produced by Protestant exiles during the reign of Queen Mary and so designated “Geneva” after their place of refuge, the Geneva Bible in its various editions became the most popular of all the Protestant Bibles printed during the reign of Mary’s successor, Elizabeth. These versions were heavily annotated and so they conveyed large doses of Protestant theology to their readers along with the biblical text.²⁰ The first complete Geneva Bible was printed in 1560, and its annotations provide a clear indication that as far as the Antichrist was concerned, they were definitely living in the last times because the pope was the Antichrist.

This is especially evident in the Genevan annotations on the book of Revelation; but it is not so evident in those attached to 2 Thessalonians. The latter do make the point that “that man of sinne” of verse 3 is not a single person. They write, “This wicked Antichrist comprehendeth the whole succession of the persecuters of the Church”; but there is no identification of this “succession” with the papacy, and there is no note at all on verse 4 regarding Antichrist’s exalting himself and sitting in the temple of God.²¹

19. *Ibid.*, 718, 721, 719, 722–24, 730, 731–33.

20. MacKenzie, “Battle for the Bible,” 20–54.

21. Geneva Bible 1560, DM 107, New Testament, fol. 96 (verso).

The reticence of the notes on 2 Thessalonians is more than made up for by those on Revelation since over and over they maintain that the pope is the Antichrist. The "Argument" or preface to the book indicates that "Antichrist" is one of the great themes of the Apocalypse, "The livelie description of Antichrist is set forth"; and regarding the "Angel of the bottomles pit" (9:11), a note remarks, "Which is Antichrist the Pope, king of hypocrites & Satans ambassadour." Likewise, the "great whore" of Babylon (ch. 17) is identified as "the Antichrist, that is, the Pope."²²

In many contexts, the terms "pope" and "Antichrist" are used synonymously. For example, an annotation on 13:16 says, "this *Antichrist* wil accept none but such as wil approve *his doctrine*: so that it is not ynough to confesse Christ, & to believe the Scriptures, but a man must subscribe to the *Popes doctrine*." Similarly, one note on 11:13 refers the reader to "the power of *Antichrist*" but the next note on the same verse talks about those who "fall from the *Pope*." Notes on Revelation 10:8; 13:18; 16:13; 16:19; and 19:4 exhibit the same sort of easy identification between the two.²³

Unlike the Rheims New Testament, the Geneva Bible readily identifies Babylon in the text with Rome, and not just the Rome of the Caesars (as even Rheims might acknowledge) but the Rome of the pope, as for example in a note on Revelation 14:8: "Babylon the great citie," the editors write, "signifying Rome, for asmuche as the vices which were in Babylon, are founde in Rome in greater abundance . . . as Babylon the first Monarchie was destroyed, so shal this wicked kingdome of Antichrist have a miserable ruine."²⁴

Routinely, references to the pope, Rome, and the "Romish" church dot the margins of the Geneva text in chapters 8 through 19. Sometimes they draw correlations between the symbolic details in the text and the Roman papacy, as for example, in the note that explains the angel with the "keye of the bottomles pit" (Rev. 9:1), "This autoritie cheifly is committed to the Pope in signe whereto he beareth the keyes in his [coat of] armes." Even 666 (Rev. 13:18) receives a papal interpretation: "this number is gathered of the smale number, λατρευος, which in the whole make 666: & signifieth Lateinus, or Latin, which noteth the Pope or Antichrist who useth in all things the Latin tongue."²⁵

Frequently, the notes exhibit a certain historical understanding to make sense of the text. For example, the editors interpret chapter 17 as the record of papal Rome succeeding ancient Rome in its hostility to the church. When the

22. Ibid., 114 (verso), 117 (verso), 120 (recto).

23. Ibid., 119 (recto), 118 (recto), 119 (recto), 120 (recto), 121 (recto).

24. Ibid., 119 (recto). Also 119 (verso). See also Rheims New Testament, DM 177, 730-31.

25. Geneva Bible 1560, DM 107, New Testament, 117 (recto), 119 (recto). Actually, this interpretation of 666 can be found in Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.30, although he does not regard it as conclusive.

text describes the “whore of Babylon” sitting upon a “skarlat coloured beast” (Rev. 17:3), the notes explain, “The beast signifieth the ancient Rome: the woman that sitteth thereon, the newe Rome which is the Papistrie, whose crueltie and blood shedding is declared by skarlat.” Later, the “seven mountaines” and “seven kings” (17:9) are explained in terms of ancient Rome and seven emperors from Nero to Nerva. Likewise, regarding the two beasts of chapter 13, the first that rises from the sea (v. 1) represents “the Romaine empire” and the second “out of the earth” (v. 11) the “Popes kingdome.” According to the notes, this chapter also teaches that the “first empire Romaine was as the paterne, & this seconde empire is but an image & shadowe thereof.”²⁶

But in what specifically does papal Rome resemble ancient Rome? The notes tell us, “The Pope in ambition, crueltie, idolatrie, and blasphemie did folow & imitate the ancient Romaines.” The last two items refer, of course, to the teaching and practices of the Roman Church, described by another note as “devilish doctrine . . . mans traditions . . . things contrairie to God and his worde.” Besides false doctrine, however, the notes strongly indict the papacy for its cruelty to the elect, “Antichrist sonne of perdition destroiet mens soules with false doctrine, & the whole worlde *with fyre & sworde* [emphasis mine].”²⁷

On account of their situation as exiles from a monarch called “bloody” for her treatment of Protestants in the name of Rome, it is understandable that the Geneva annotators might emphasize religious persecution as a principal characteristic of the Antichrist, and they do.²⁸

The pope overcomes the two witnesses of chapter 11 by “cruel warre”; chapter 12 is described as a vision of how the “Church . . . is persecuted of Antichrist” and in verse 6 the devil is depicted as “red with the blood of the faithful”; and in chapter 14, Rome is said to surpass ancient Babylon in “persecution of the Church of God, oppression & sclaverie with destruction of the people of God,” as well as “confusion, superstition, idolatrie, and impietie.”²⁹

As one reads the Geneva notes, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the translators believed themselves to be in the last days, since virtually all the signs of the end in connection with Antichrist were being fulfilled in their very own times. Satan had already been bound for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1)—explained as the period of pure doctrine “after a sorte” between the birth of Christ and the reign of Pope Sylvester II (999–1003)³⁰ but now he was loose

26. *Ibid.*, 120 (recto), 118 (verso)–119 (recto).

27. *Ibid.*, 119 (recto), 117 (verso).

28. For the Genevan exiles, their story and their theology, see Dan G. Danner, *Pilgrimage to Puritanism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

29. Geneva Bible 1560, DM 107, New Testament, 118 (recto), 118 (verso), 119 (recto).

30. According to Bauckham (*Tudor Apocalypse*, 218, 49, 230), this dating reflects the interpretation of John Bale. Otherwise the Genevan notes on Revelation demonstrate dependence on Heinrich Bullinger.

for a little while, during which the “true preaching of Gods worde is corrupt” and Gog and Magog were appearing, explained as “divers and strange enemies of the Church of God as the Turke, the Sarazins, and others . . . by whome the Church of God shulde be grievously tormented.” Since “the Pope and the worldlie princes shal fight against Christ, even until this last day,” the church can only look forward to that moment of the “seconde coming of Christ.” Indeed, the second last note of the entire book, while counseling against using “our owne imagination” in contemplating how long until our Lord returns, nevertheless reminds the faithful that “*seing the Lord is at hand*, we oght to be constant and rejoyce [emphasis mine].”³¹

Comparisons between Translations

Given the strong sense of imminent eschatology in these Geneva notes, it is interesting to compare them with both Tyndale and Rheims. In spite of the fact that the Geneva and Tyndale versions originated on the same side of the sixteenth-century religious divide, their differences in tone—if not in content—regarding eschatology in notes on 2 Thessalonians and Revelation are striking. Of course, this may be due in part to the fact that Tyndale’s annotations are far fewer. However, it is also clear that the Geneva translators had a greater appreciation for the relevance of such texts to their own situation than did Tyndale. Tyndale’s notes could characterize any era in the history of the church, but Geneva’s notes especially in their identification and description of the pope as Antichrist, persecutor of the church as well as false teacher, demand a conclusion that the last days have come.

According to Richard Bauckham, apocalyptic fervor was strong in Elizabethan England (and elsewhere as well, for that matter);³² and certainly, there were many reasons for this, not the least of them the continuing hostility between Catholics and Protestants that sometimes resulted in conspiracies and attempted overthrows of the queen.³³

Nevertheless, when people tried to make sense of their circumstances by referring to the Geneva Bible, the notes on Revelation directed them to understand the antagonism of Rome as the enmity of Antichrist, and the presence of Antichrist as a sign of the last times. Thus, situation and text would combine to heighten apocalyptic expectations.

On the other hand, for some English readers, after 1582 the Rheims New Testament offered an alternative vision. In spite of the fact that English Catholics were in a much more precarious position politically and legally than English Protestants during the reign of Elizabeth, their Bible did not encourage

31. Ibid., 121 (recto-verso), 122 (recto).

32. Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse*, 11.

33. See, for example, Penry Williams, *The Later Tudors: England, 1547–1603* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 255–61, 299–324.

end time expectations nearly so much as Geneva, since a strictly literal reading of the biblical texts led them to look for Antichrist in a single individual who would suppress all outward forms of religion except his own and who would set up his temple in Jerusalem.

Of course, more people read Geneva than Rheims since there was only one reprint of the Rheims New Testament before 1611 and more than 120 of the Geneva version.³⁴

However, the purpose of this essay is not to argue that one version had more influence than any other, but simply to show how religious communities already divided from each other by fundamental issues of soteriology and authority also differed in their understanding of eschatology as it pertained to the figure of Antichrist. In spite of certain outward similarities between the two communities of religious exiles that produced the Geneva and Rheims versions, they understood their circumstances much differently, at least as this is evident in their annotations on 2 Thessalonians and Revelation. For the one, it was a matter of living in the end times and surviving the oppression of Antichrist; for the other it meant remaining faithful to the old and true church under the vicar of Christ. For them, the end times were still a long way off.

34. Lloyd E. Barry, introduction to *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 14. The Rheims second edition came out in 1600. See Darlow and Moule, *Historical Catalogue*, 118.