Prophetical Traditions in Northern Europe:

Introduction

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British Library MS Stowe 944 is a well-known eleventh-century manuscript, containing most notably the Liber Vitae of the New Minster at Winchester and the will of King Alfred. Written possibly in 1031 but certainly after Ælfwine was made abbot at the New Minster, the manuscript is a miscellany of lists of saints' resting places, kings' names, relics, and chronological commonplaces. The materials found in it are practical, historical, and could even be described as straightforward. On f. 40rv there appears a twelfth-century addition on an originally blank leaf, a text commonly known as the "Vision of Eadwine."[1] In some fifty lines, the monk Eadwine apparently sees Cuthbert while lying in his cell at noon, and thereafter leaves the monastery, in defiance of abbot Ælfwine's order, in order to visit the saint's shrine. Upon his return he rejoices in the leniency of his reception by the other monks, and comments at some length upon the agreement between the two minsters at Winchester, "clarifying" the absolute equality of the two houses. This spurious vision is generally taken as a twelfth-century forgery, an attempt by the monks of the New Minster to establish their title and authority with respect to the Old Minster. They wished to establish that title and authority by way of this prophetic vision, a vision in the biblical and early Christian tradition of the revelatory dream-vision. Today, attempts to establish land claims and ecclesiastical authority would take place by way of arguments from documents, testimony from individuals, and careful historical investigation. A dream-vision by an employee of one of the involved parties would be unlikely to have much evidentiary value, though it is possible that were the text of the eleventh century, as this one purports to be, it might establish an historical pattern of belief (or spurious belief).

How much value the "Vision of Eadwine" had in the medieval version of such proceedings is hard to determine.

What is perhaps more interesting than the political motives of the text is the apparent belief that cloaking the argument as a "vision" gives it supernatural authority; that is, by claiming the text as a vision Eadwine and his fellows at the New Minster claimed authority through its prophetic power. The "Vision of Eadwine," however, does not conform to the Anglo-Saxon tradition in any of its details.[2] The vision takes place at noon, not at night; it is short, not the more usual one day to three days in length; the dreamer is neither ill nor dead, but just taking a nap; the dreamer sees only one saint, who is Cuthbert, rather than the panoply of heaven or hell with the aid of a guide. The rest of the extant Anglo-Saxon visions have much more complex and interlinked plots with many of the following elements: a vision of the sky, heaven and hell, the bridge to heaven, a guide, the throne of judgment, the judging of some individual souls, and peril to the dreamer's soul. By the twelfth century, the Anglo-Saxon dream vision was remembered only as a genre with authority, but the details of the visions and the generic properties it had in the earlier period were, to judge by this text, long since gone. Remaining was only the impression that a prophetic vision granted a claim to authority that could be used in political matters.

In this sense the "Vision of Eadwine" is very much part of a medieval tradition, the tradition which uses prophecy for historical authenticity and claims to power. Grounded in the prophetic traditions of the Old Testament and their fulfilment in the New Testament, and in the apocalyptic prophecy best exemplified by the Book of Revelation, the prophetical traditions of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in northern Europe made clear legal and political claims. The papers in this cluster were originally delivered at a conference sponsored by the Medieval & Renaissance Seminar of the University of Western Ontario in April 1997, and entitled "The Laws and the Prophets in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance." Over twenty papers were given at the conference, which included plenary addresses by E.G. Stanley, "Trial by Jury, and How Later Ages Perceive its Origins, Perhaps in Anglo-Saxon England"; Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, "The Law and the 'Prophetia Petri': Legal Scribes, the Westminster Civil Service and the First Audience for *Piers Plowman*"; Sarah Foot, "Gender and Evidence in the Historiography of Anglo-Saxon Nunneries"; Nigel Smith, "Enthusiasm and Enlightenment: The Future of Prophecy in the Mid-Seventeenth

Century"; and David Ganz, "Charlemagne in Hell," a paper which was originally given as the Dark Age Lecture at the University of Canterbury.

Medieval and early modern prophets garnered their power from their resemblance to biblical models. More specifically, since all spiritual authority derived from the Bible, the good Christian attempted to live a life which was an imitation of the life of Christ and the apostles in the New Testament, which was in its turn a fulfilment of the lives of the prophets and kings of the Old Testament. The Bible, then, was the repository of all authority—and especially of all prophetic authority. The various apocalypses, including that of John, more well-known today as the Book of Revelation, provided a paradigm for post-biblical visions—and the paradigm was a popular one. David Ganz, in "Charlemagne in Hell," considers the life of Charlemagne as it is presented by Einhard, and as it is commented upon in various prophetic visions just after his reign. He examines the intersections of royal law and divine law with notions of penance, and points out that categories of law, imperial legislation and prophecy can fall together when an emperor issues a demand for repentance, for a proper approach to penance. Thus, Ganz demonstrates that the Carolingian renaissance depended upon inculcating a sense of sin, since only sin can require a framework of grace. Hell must be made known so we can pray for our dead. The first, and perhaps the most important, focus for this development was Charlemagne himself. The purgatorial visions Ganz explicates remained popular for centuries. That their inception involved the urge to memorialise Charlemagne is certain. That they in addition incited a whole new approach to the Bible, something of a creative response to the Word, also seems likely. Whereas Charlemagne's own plan for the Carolingian renaissance was that of "learning as a preparation for Bible study," to quote the classic words of Beryl Smalley, the approach which developed after Charlemagne's death had more to do with prayer and Bible study as a preparation for death and the Judgment Day.[3] The visions other devout Christians had of Charlemagne suffering in hell, depending for their biblical authority on the Apocalypse of St Paul (later to be determined apocryphal), provided an exemplum. If the great ruler, the emperor Charlemagne, could suffer in hell, then others must live yet more exemplary lives, pray more prayers, and engage, as Charlemagne's son Louis did, in more public acts of penance.

According to two Anglo-Saxon poets, the living of an exemplary life involved only absolute acceptance of divine action. The role of the saint, as presented by the

poems *Andreas* and *Guthlac*, was to engage in no criticism or questioning, but simply to exemplify absolute acceptance of the Christian life, to be a latter-day apostle. Angela Abdou's innovative analysis of these poems addresses the ways in which speech act theory lays bare the differences between the Christian figure depending absolutely on the Word of God and the antagonists to that Word, whether devils, Mermedonians, or confused outsiders. Abdou's consideration of these conversion narratives reveals the ways in which individuals use biblical models for behaviour, and poets demonstrate those models by very carefully distinguishing the language of the protagonist saint from the language of the non-Christians. Where Guthlac and Andreas speak divine truth and their words represent their absolute faith, the language of the devils is impotent, frustrated, inadequate, prolix, and even uses the wrong register—that being heroic diction. In these creative re-enactments of biblical conversion scenes, the saints are Old Testament prophets, believers in conversion without having the truth value of God and the representatives of God in the poems.

Patricia Sunderland studies an early Middle English rendition of the life of St Katherine, and demonstrates the ways in which this version of the legend has Katherine explaining the truth of God's law. This rendition of one of the most well-known saints' lives of early Christianity focuses on Katherine's wisdom and intellect, on her exemplary recreation of the Old Testament prophets, and on her elucidation of God's law. Maxentius may propagate positive law, but this law has no force if it does not conform with the one law which is God's. Sunderland therefore proposes that this version of the Katherine legend focuses on the saint as herself a prophet and theologian, someone capable of explaining, not just believing, God's truth. Her martyrdom is linked explicitly in this version to the sufferings of the biblical prophets, and she speaks forth the truth of God, mirroring the actions of the Hebrew prophets.

Another figure who "speaks forth" the truth of prophecy, though with perhaps less success than Katherine in the vernacular saint's life, is John de Roquetaillade (also known as John of Rupescissa), the fourteenth-century Franciscan author of a number of prophetic texts. Mark Dupuy's analysis of John provides us with an example of the political use of prophecy, for the Franciscan produced all his works by analogy with current events, and the most logical interpretations of his sometimes impenetrably difficult Latin texts suggest that they are allegorical representations of the Valois. Like the visions of Charlemagne in hell, Roquetaillade's prophecies have as their focus the

preparation for the last days, for judgment. Following in the tradition of Joachim of Fiore, Roquetaillade unfolds an historical interpretation which allowed Franciscan Spirituals to see themselves as representing the ideal of absolute poverty. On the other hand, Roquetaillade's works were also seen as providing the Valois with specifically French prophecies, which would make him the first post-biblical national prophet. In either case, his writings were accomplished in the glare of fourteenth-century publicity, and though he rejected any comparison of himself with the Old Testament prophets, he in some ways embraced his public role (though not to his own advantage since he was declared *fantasticus* and lived his last years in detention at Avignon). Dupuy presents Roquetaillade's prophetic career as a kind of fourteenth-century revivification of the Hebrew prophets; he recreates the prophets in late medieval terms for those who care to comprehend his words.

A similarly turbulent figure of the late Middle Ages was Sir John Fortescue, who attempted to address the issue of the legitimacy of kings in his tract *De Natura Legis Naturae*. In 1406 Henry IV issued a statute attempting to guarantee the English throne to the "Heirs of his Body." During the Wars of the Roses in England, the issue of succession was the single most important political issue, and Fortescue's attempt to consider it starts from the premise that natural law must solve issues of succession. Presenting an hypothetical case involving three claimants making their cases to a judge, Fortescue derives his origin of property from the Fall of Adam and Eve, as a consequence of the first sin. E. Kay Harris analyses this tract, considering the inherited role of men and women as deriving directly, for Fortescue, from the masculine and feminine identities of Adam and Eve. The law of the king and the resulting account of kingship depend on the origin of sin and punishment in the Fall. Fortescue has a fluid approach to masculine and feminine identities which effectively explains the legal process of attainder as a feminisation, a dispossession which shows that the man is actually a woman, his blood having been corrupted by rebellion against the natural order. As Harris concludes, Fortescue's own attainder was reversed because his knowledge of the law was needed by Edward IV (the target of the tract). His retraction of the argument, placing himself in the feminine and subjective role of Eve, actually allows him to regain the legal mastery and dominion of Adam—and his property to boot. For Fortescue in Harris' comprehensive discussion, scriptural authority was the sole foundation of natural law, but its meaning and interpretation could well be fluid.

This fluidity would be utterly rejected by the last of the figures studied in this cluster, John Knox. Whereas Harris recuperates a work whose significance is not generally acknowledge and which is available only in a very obscure edition, John Knox's reforming texts are well-known, including what Peter Auksi calls his "notorious diatribe of 1558." Knox's *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* returns to the vexed question of where authority vests. For Knox, as for Fortescue, it does not vest with women; for Knox, as for Fortescue, the Bible—particularly Old Testament texts—provides the necessary scriptural authority. Auksi approaches Knox by way of his rhetorical strategies, and analyses both the way in which the Scottish prophet allies himself with the prophets of Israel and also his use of inflammatory rhetoric to awaken those feminised males in his audience who do not automatically recognise the truth of his argument. The tract culminates with an Old Testament example, that of Athalia in 2 Kings, which demonstrates the relevance of the scripture to current events, to the sin of promoting women as queens. Later in life, Knox uses another biblical method of presentation, the chronicle, to elaborate this relevance of biblical history in his *History*, interweaving biblical allusions and parallels so casually into his account of present-day wrongdoing that they achieve tremendous interpretive force. For Knox, the Bible, particularly the laws and injunctions in the Old Testament prophets, provides the only touchstone for adequate interpretation of history and politics. For Knox in Auksi's account, scriptural authority is absolute.

"Prophet" comes from the Greek "pro" meaning "for" and "phetes" meaning "speaker." A prophet speaks for another, whether a person, a community of people, a nation, or a God. Old Testament prophecy, and its New Testament counterpart, was almost inevitably associated with the political, and particularly with advice to kings. The analyses of prophetical traditions in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance given here certainly demonstrate that the fundamental principles of prophecy held through the first millennium and a half of Christianity. Old Testament prophets were particularly good at commenting on historical developments taking place in the present (and especially national disasters): certainly John Knox, John de Roquetaillade and Sir John Fortescue fall in that tradition. New Testament prophets and the early Christian saints who followed in that tradition were specialists in mediating divine revelation: their inheritors include the vernacular poets of *Andreas* and *Guthlac*, the thirteenth-century redactor of *Seinte Katerine*, and the Carolingian visionaries who saw Charlemagne in hell. Of course, drawing distinctions among these figures cannot be

so simple. The ninth-century visions analysed by David Ganz served a serious spiritual purpose, inculcating a sense of sin and advancing the church's position. John de Roquetaillade disclaimed any prophetic role, though his position as a proponent of French Joachimism and his emphasis on what seems to many to be a peculiarly national prophecy in favour of the Valois kings of France might suggest otherwise. While John Knox explicitly modeled his own prophetic persona after the biblical prophets, and Sir John Fortescue developed his law of the king from biblical models, both men used their models for specific local issues—and especially to draw conclusions about the legal roles of women in royal inheritance and in the exercise of regal power. St Katherine demonstrates that she can articulate the pattern of God's providential laws and win arguments, in the biblical tradition, with the priests of other gods—converting them in the process. Conversion is also central to the Old English *Andreas* and *Guthlac*, poems in which the protagonists, an apostle and an Anglo-Saxon saint, are tempted with torture and visions of hell, yet continue to behave as good Christians, fulfilling their vows and rejecting the devils. These papers approach the questions of prophetical traditions from many different vantage-points and they reach conclusions which are specific to the text and figures studied—but they are at one in concluding that prophecy makes political claims as much or more than it makes spiritual claims.

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Notes

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1 N.R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), **274 art. f**. The only edition of the "Vision of Eadwine" is that in F.E. Harmer, *Anglo-Saxon Writs* (Oxford, 1959; rep. Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1989), pp. 401-3.

2 The best discussion of the practices in Anglo-Saxon dream visions is in Patrick Sims-Williams, "The unseen world: the monk of Wenlock's vision," chapter 9 in his *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600-800* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), pp. 243-72.

2 Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1964), p. 37.