“Filthy Dreamers and Scurrilous Dreams”:
The Politics of Dreams in Seventeenth-Century England

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In seventeenth-century England the emergence of a ‘multitude’ of dreams and dreamers claiming to be prophets gave rise to heated debate. In 1655, John Wilson a minister of the ‘Church of Christ’ fervently preached from the pulpit, ‘there being to many filthy Dreamers crepe on among us who by their filthy dream blaspheme that worthy name.’ In this sermon, Wilson attempted to dissuade his parishioners from ‘hearkening’ to the dreams and visions of Quakers and Seekers he believed were leading the people into apostasy and sin. Concern with dreams as inciters of heresy and ‘rebellion’ amongst the populace was not confined to local ministers. In 1656 Henry More, a respected Cambridge Platonist and royalist, complained of the ‘mad and fanatical men’ who fancied themselves prophets and messiahs, as a result of ‘intoxicated’ and melancholic dreams.

Belief in dreams as supernatural and prognostic phenomena was widespread in seventeenth-century Britain across the spectrum of society. John Aubrey commented ‘there are millions of such Dreams too little taken notice of’. Other writers such as Francis Bacon were publicly sceptical of supernatural dreams, but privately recorded having experienced prognostic dreams. In his Essay On Superstition, Bacon argued contemporary belief in prognostic dreams ‘ought to be despised, and ought to serve but for winter talk by the fire-side’. However, in private, Bacon recounted to ‘diver’s English gentlemen’ a prognostic dream he himself had experienced of the death of his father. Whilst in Paris, Bacon dreamt ‘that my father’s house in the country was plastered all over with black mortar’ the very day his father was dying in London. On the defensive against critics, advocates of dream interpretation like Thomas Hill and astrologers Richard Saunders argued that dream interpretation was ‘most useful and pious’ practice. Why is it that supernatural dreams became so controversial in seventeenth-century England? This paper will seek to answer this primary question and explore in brief the cultural and historiographical issues which naturally emerge from a study of the politics of dreams in this period.

Seeing dreams as aligned with prophecy and astrology, and other ‘superstitious’, and diabolical practices, critics attacked dream interpretation as a dangerous spiritual and political ‘observation’ in need of reform. At the centre of debate surrounding dreams was the question of the orthodoxy and significance of dreams as spiritual experiences. In 1653 Richard Saunders carefully noted in his dream interpretation discourse, ‘we must be very cautious, and consider what dreams are properly Divine, and what are not so.’ Critics of dream interpretation and prophetic dreams condemned widespread beliefs and practices as the ‘superstitious’, ‘enthusiastic’ and ignorant ‘follies’ of the so-called ‘vulgar’. In 1620 Henry Howard [1614 –

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1 John Wilson, Sermon against Dreams and Dreamers of a Generation, (London: 1655), epistle. Note: Information on the life and character of John Wilson is scant.


3 John Aubrey included in his works an entire chapter devoted to supernatural dreams. See: John Aubrey, Three Prose Works, (Sussex: Centaur Press, 1972). ‘There are Millions of such Dreams too little taken notice of; but they have the truest Dreams, whose [Xth House 15] well dignified; which mine is not; But most have some Monitory Dreams. The Germans are great Observers of Dreams ... that he had many Warnings from them; that God had spoken to himself and others by them; for Warning [instruction or reproof]... ’ [p. 42]


5 For Bacon’s dream and an excellent compilation of other historical dreams recorded in European history see, Brian Hill ed., Gates of Ivory, Gates of Horn: An Anthology of Dreams, New York: Taplinger, 1968), p. 13
1687] contemptuously denigrated the ‘pliant readiness of brainsick fowles to cherish idle dreams and fancies.’ In the same year, John Melton writer and MI [d. 1640], urged: ‘nor must we believe these Negromancers in their devilish worke of working out our Fantasies by dreams, that they can doe any thing that is true ... we find it instantly to affirm with many old women that all dreames are true, for this is but a tricke of the devil to bring us into superstition.’

Learned attacks on beliefs in supernatural dreams may be situated within historiographical debates on cultural divisions and ‘popular cultures’. This paper will firstly explore the politics of supernatural dreams and secondly examine why certain beliefs in dreams were denigrated under the categories of ‘enthusiastic’, ‘superstitious’ and ‘vulgar’. I will argue that the controversy surrounding supernatural dreams and dream interpretation was a direct result of close cultural links between dreams and prophecy. The epidemic of dreamers and prophets in the period, particularly during the Civil War and Interregnum period, caused learned writers to view dreams as instigators of disorder, heresy, and rebellion. Furthermore, I will argue that by attempting to de-mystify dreams as natural phenomena, rather than as supernatural, reformists were endeavouring to reform and educate literate audiences. Finally I want to suggest that the denigration of belief in supernatural dreams as the province of the so-called ‘vulgar’, ‘superstitious’, and ‘enthusiastic’ persons referred not to the ‘common rabble’, or to a particular class, but instead to a particular world-view. This world-view was one deemed undesirable, dangerous and in need of reform.

Traditional shared belief in supernatural dreams held they were either sent or ‘injected’ by angels or demons. Dreams were therefore either demonic or divine and the difficulty was discerning between the two types. As Thomas Tyron and others asserted, angelic dreams were sent by good angels to warn them of ‘impending dangers’ — dangers such as death or personal had fortune.” Not all supernatural dreams were benign or god-sent. Seventeenth-century English people believed ‘evil dreams’ were sent by demons, or by the Devil himself to terrify, torment or mislead the dreamer into either sin, or illusion.” The difficulty for many dreamers, and a point of acute concern for critics and supporters of dream interpretation, was to be able to discern between ‘angelic’ and demonic, ‘true’ and ‘false’, prophetic and delusional dreams.” In a world-view 13

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6 Ibid., p.10. Note: this work originally published in 1583 was interestingly reprinted in 1620.
7 John Melton, The Astrologaster, or Figure-caster, (London: 1620), p. 67.
9 Note: This argument is linked with Ian Bostridge’s work on Witchcraft and demonology in early modern Europe and England. He argued that the figure of the witch and the phenomena of witchcraft functioned as embodiments of disorder to promote an ordered society. Bostridge also noted that elite writers of witchcraft discourse reflect elite anxieties about atheism and disorder. The criticisms of supernatural dream beliefs may be seen as part of this agenda [See: Ian Bostridge, Witchcraft and its Transformations 1656 – 1750, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).
12 See also for example: Thomas Hill, The moaste pleasante arte of the interpretation of dreames. (London: 1576).
13 Richard Saunders, Physiognomie and chiramanie, metaposcopie the symmetrical properties and signal moales of the body ... with the subject of dreams made plain, (London: 1653).
14 Moyse Amyrault, A Discourse concerning divine dreams mention’d in Scripture. (London: 1676), Gonzalo, The divine dreamer: or, a short treatise discovering the true effect and power of dreams confirmed by the most learned and best approved authors. (London: 1641). Anon. Apocalypsis: or, the revelation of certain notorious Advancers of Heresie: Wherein their Visions and private
which the Devil was perpetually attempting to mislead Christians into sin and diabolical illusion. the question of differentiating between divine and demonic dreams was a profoundly serious matter. ‘Evil dreams’ or nightmares could arise from the sins of the dreamer, or, could more terrifyingly for early moderns be sent by the Devil. Reflective of concerns with ‘true’ and ‘false’ dreams contemporaries believed the Devil could send dreams, which to the uninformed, or ‘vulgar’, seemed prophetic, but were in fact ‘diabolical delusions’13. For, as Richard Saunders and others soberly argued, the Devil could turn himself into ‘an Angel of light’.14

Fear of illusion, heresy, sin and apostasy appears as a major theme in dream writings in the period. Dreams were evidently elusive phenomena, which for seventeenth-century English embodied and extended their dichotomous world-view of the constant battles between good and evil, sin and piety, God and the Devil and the soul and the base or ‘animal’ nature. However critics were concerned not merely for the ‘souls’ of individual dreamers, but more emphatically with disillusioned or ‘enthusiastic’ people who mislead others and communities as ‘false prophets’, or ‘scurrilous dreamers’ leading ‘the people’ into apostasy, and culminating in social disorder and sectarianism. As John Wilson complained ‘there are many Dreams in these times, the Quaker hath his Dreames, and the Seeker hath his Dreams, and I cannot reckon up all of them: and one dream doth beget another’.15

Diverse dreams were reported by individuals from all ‘tiers’ of society. Oliver Cromwell dreamt an angelic woman appeared informing him he would become one of the most famous men in England.16 Sir Christopher Wren reported a curative dream in which a ‘woman in romantic habit, reached him dates’. Lady Harrison dreamt ‘two by me, clothed in white garments’ granted her wish to live to see her daughter a woman.” John Aubrey, the seventeenth-century biographer and antiquitarian, recounted in his collection of contemporary dreams, his neighbour ‘old farmer Good’ dreamt if he got up out of his sick bed he would die.18 Susanah Arch, a London widower was celebrated as receiving a divine dream in which her leprosy was cured ‘by faith’.19 Apocalyptic dreams were a common dream motif in the period. Individuals to report dreams of this genre include: Arise Evans a Fifth Monarchist, Ralph Josselin a cleric and farmer and his wife, astrologer Samuel Jeake of Rye, Mrs Pennington a Quaker visionary and William Lilly the famous astrologer and prophet of the period.”

Revelations by dreams, are discovered to be most incredible, blasphemies and enthusiastic dotages ... (London 1658).
17 Brian Hill, Gates of Ivory ..., pp. 15 - 16.
18 John Aubrey, Three Prose Works, (Sussex: Centaur Press, 19720, p. 43.
19 Nicholas Charles, A Relation of the Miraculous Cure of Susannah Arch, (London: 1695), p. 15. From the pamphlet aforementioned: ‘Upon the last day of May 1694 at Night, when I was asleep in my bed. I was pleasing with God to those Words of the Psalmist ... and then I thought I saw a Man standing by me, and laying his hand on me saying ‘I will thou be clean’. I answered ‘Lord if thou sayest the Word it is done’. To which, received this reply. ‘All things are possible to him that believeth: I answered, ‘Lord I believe, help thou my Unbelief. To which it was answered, ‘He that believes needs not to say, but it is whole every whit’... and thereupon I awokened and perceived that it was a Dream’.
Evidently, as critics complained, dream interpretation was popular amongst the literate. Hundreds of dream books, chapbooks, almanacs, fortune books and dream interpretation handbooks formed a lucrative market for publishing companies. Titles such as A greatsworth of wit for a penny, or the interpretation of dreams, (1670), The Golden Dreamer, The True Fortune Teller, The Dutch Fortune Teller (1600, 1650, 1693), Mother Bunch’s Closet Newly Broke Open, Erra Pater, or the Book of Knowledge, enjoyed lasting popularity in the period. The printing of Artemidorus’ Oneirocritica, one of the most popular dream handbooks, predated that of the first vernacular Bible and reached its 24th edition by 1740.21

The most controversial belief was that in divine dreams — direct messages from God. Both defenders and critics of supernatural dreams agreed that definitions between true and false dreams ‘ought diligently to be noted’.22 The cultural importance accredited to prophetic: dreams and the underlying political messages in many prophecies in the period explain why prophetic dreams formed the focus of religious fervour and also reformist suspicion. Basis for belief in divine dreams came from the Bible. From the dreams of Solomon and the other Old Testament kings to the terrifying visions of St John, the Bible provided ample examples of dreams as the medium for God’s messages to the people. To defend both the art of dream interpretation and the continuance of prophecy, authors quoted the Bible to authenticate their view. In 1576 Thomas Hill, a self-educated latter argued: ‘I see not now the rash judgement: of the ignorant, can rightly condemn the knowledge of this arte, seeing the learned, yea & holy Scriptures, do both allow and witness of Dreams.23

I want to suggest learned de-mystification of dreams is indicative of elite attempts to impose order on disorder. The move to de-mystify dreams was initiated by the fear that these beliefs facilitated religious radicalism, millenarianism and ultimately civil disorder. This argument follows and supports the work of Ian Bostridge on demonology and witchcraft in the early modern period. Bostridge has argued that discourse on witchcraft reflected elite preoccupations and anxieties with order/disorder and atheism.24 Evidently, these social anxieties and agendas extended to all areas of ‘popular’ or ‘vulgar’ beliefs deemed by elite writers to be dangerous inciters of heresy, rebellion, and consequently social and political anarchy. This approach can help us to understand the fervent attacks against ‘superstition’ and ‘enthusiasm’ and dreams.

Many critics were members of the educated elite, university trained and respected members of the upper classes, or alternately others were reformist ministers. Francis Bacon [1561 – 1626] a member of the gentry and respected ‘new scientist’, argued the ‘multitude’ of dreams should be ‘despised’ for ‘they have done much mischief and hence deserved the severe laws against them’.25 Moreover, in a sermon of 1620, John Smith [1618 – 1652] a local minister, preached a warning to readers: ‘there are some of this sort who have sometimes such strange Phantasies, Dreams and Ecstasies, that they take themselves for Prophets ... and hence they fall into great confusions in many Theoretical matters of no small moment’.26 John Melton [d. 1640] a politician knighted in 1632 for his celebrated writings, presented a similar warning. ‘But in general, Dreams are not to be believed: for they are most wicked and odious in the sight of God’.27

The explosion of prophetic pamphlets and dream handbooks was the result of the breakdown of government control over publishing companies. When censorship and civil order disintegrated with the outbreak of Civil War, publishers began freely circulating hundreds of pamphlets of

22 Thomas Hill, The moste pleasaunte arte of the interpretation of dreames. (London; 1576), epistle.
23 Ibid.
thinly disguised political prophecies — many in the form of dreams. For example, a dream ascribed to Charles I was published in pamphlet form in 1650. According to this tract, Charles I dreamt ‘he espyed a poor spider, with one crown, as it were hanging over its head, transcribing and working her self lower and lower by a thread; at last he espyed two crowns, at the end of the thread’. 

John Melish’s vision appeared in pamphlet form in 1664, labelled as ‘England’s warning’. He received a vision in which he saw ‘a horrible sight in the Sky towards the East there came out of the Stars some bloody Rods, like unto Brooms ... flames and sparks of fire sparkling forth of them’. In 1648, radical prophet Elizabeth Poole also claimed to have experienced a vision she believed illuminated the fate of the nation in a period of Civil War. These are but a few examples of the ‘multitude’ of prophets and dreamers at large in England during the seventeenth-century who gave rise to heated controversy and elite suspicion.

Prophetic dreams, many writers argued, led to civil disorder and the spread of ‘superstition’ and ‘enthusiasm’. Thomas Hobbes warned his readers in 1651:

> For when Christian men, take not their Christian Sovereign, for God’s Prophet they must either take their own Dreams, for the Prophecy they mean to bee governed by, and the tumour of their own hearts for the Spirit of God or they must suffer to bee lead by their fellow subjects, that can betwixt them, by slander of the govt, into rebellion. 

Evidently, members of the elite were alarmed by the overt political propagandist agendas of authors of prophecies and dreams. Arise Evans, a fifth-monarchist prophet, published several political dreams or visions in the period. He urged his readers to ‘submit to Oliver your supreme Govener’, claiming to have had visions in which the ‘son of man bearing three wild beasts in his arms with a company of people shall pass many waters’. Dreams therefore acted in the hands of men like Evans as political propaganda, playing on collective millenarian fears and utilising the Biblical tradition of prophetic dreams to persuade readers to ‘submit’ to either Cromwellian or royalist loyalties.

William Lilly one of the most successful ‘prophets’ inspired numerous pamphlets denigrating his prophecies as ‘ridiculous pieces of folly’. Titles such as the Anti-Merlinus: or a confutation of Mr William Lillies Predictions and Against Mr William Lilly appeared in the late 1640s and 1650s. Lilly was accredited with predicting the political fall and death of William Laud, the great fire of London, and the unusual events of the Civil War and Interregnum period. Critics sometimes focused on ‘prophets’ or ‘great imposters’ such as Lilly, typically they attacked dreams and visionaries collectively without addressing themselves to any one individual.

For critics of divine dreams, the greatest obstacle for successfully justifying the unorthodoxy of contemporary belief in divine dreams and dream interpretation was that there was a Biblical

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28 Hill, The World Turned Upside Down, p. 95.
30 John Melish, England’s warning, that is three remarkable visions of Stephen Melish. an inhabitant of Breslaw, the chief city of Silesia Englished in the year 1664, (London: 1664), p. 3.
31 Elizabeth Poole, A vision, wherein is manifested the disease and cure of the kingdom, Being the summe of the Armes, Decemb. 29, 1648. Together with a true copie of whata was delivered in writing ... to the said General Council [sic] of divine pleasure concerning the King in reference to his being brought to trial ... (London: 1649).
32 Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, p. 469.
36 As exampled in the work of Thomas Bromhall, A history of apparitions, oracles, prophecies and predictions, (London: 1658) and A treatise of spectres, or, AN history of apparitions, oracles, prophecies and predictions, (London: 1658), and John Brimley, A discovery of the impostures of witches and astrologers, (London: 1680).
precedent. The Bible could support either a positive or negative view of dreams as supernatural phenomena. Seventeenth-century English moralists were acutely aware of this contention. Supporters of dream divination and prophetic dreams quoted Joel 2:28 to defend their assertion that dream interpretation was a pious practice. ‘Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions’. This passage was also utilised by prophets as evidence of the continuation of true divine revelations. On the flipside, critics seeking to undermine the authority and orthodoxy of dream interpretation facilitated negative Biblical exegesis. In his sermon against ‘filthy dreamers’ John Wilson quoted [Jeremiah 29: 8] ‘let not your Prophets, and your diviners ... deceive you, neither hearken to your dreamers which ye cause to be dreamed’.

Apart from falsely guiding the ‘vulgar’ into heresy, ‘ignorance’ and ‘superstition’, many writers claimed dreams might also lead the populace into rebellion. The success of political prophecies and religious ‘enthusiasm’ inspired by dreams alarmed many of the elite. Many believed the extreme social and religious disorder was initiated or encouraged by ‘crafty’ and dangerous political prophets like William Lilly, Lady Eleanor, Arise Evans and Mrs Pennington. Thomas Hobbes surmised ‘if this fear of spirits were taken away and with it prognostics from dreams, by which crafty and ambitious persons abuse the ... people, men would be much more fitted than they are for civil obedience’. To support this accusation, reformists argued divine dreams had ceased with the end of the Old Testament period.

The direct attacks of reformists against divine dreams and visions is therefore indicative of learned desire to quell rebellion by undermining the spiritual authority of prophets and ‘dreamers’ who had led the people into both religious radicalism and civil rebellion. Thomas Bromhall published a scathing attack on the ‘cunning delusions of the Devil’ promoted by ‘Magicians. Necromancers, Soothsayers, fortunetellers, Gipsies, Juglers, Prognosticators, and predictors’ in 1658. In addressing the question ‘whether these true signes of false prophesying, serve not sufficiently to discern falseness’, Bromhall argued ‘if it tend to heresie, error, innovation, schism, and faction in the Church of Christ’, then indeed, the former was true. It becomes clear from surveying the arguments and criticisms of reformist discourse that they sought to impose or re-establish order in English society and viewed dreams as one of the key instigators of disorder. Although many learned authors accepted the possibility of prophetic and prognostic dreams, they argued that they were at best rare experiences. For how could all the multitude of prophets at large in England be ‘true’ messengers of God?

Dreams therefore, lay at the core of much of the disorder. Victims of ‘idle and sick braines’, the populace fell deeper into ‘superstition’ and ‘enthusiasm’, unlearned and therefore susceptible to dangerous ‘follies’. In the preface of a pamphlet denigrating ‘false, ‘superstitious’ practices, John Brimley stated: ‘the consideration of these things was the great motive, that stirred me up to these undertakings, in which I design nothing but the good of my poor illiterate Country-men, whom I daily see imposed upon by such Deluders’. According to critics, the ‘vulgar’ followed ‘enthusiasts’ like William Lilly, Anse Evans, and Quaker and Seeker visionaries. How could the ‘rabble’ of the ‘vulgar’ receive such sublime messages? Critics argued that the Bible had

37 John Wilson, A Seasonable watch-word unto Christians against the Dreams and Dreamers of this Generation, (London: 1665, 1677), epistle.
40 Ibid.
42 Henry Howard, A defensive against the poysyon of supposed Prophecies ... (London: 1620), epistle.
43 John Brimley, A discovery if the impostures of witches and astrologers, (London: 1680), preface.
forewarned that in the last days, when anarchy and chaos covered the world, false prophets would appear. To cement their arguments, several writers denigrated all belief in supernatural (dream) explanations all dreams were natural. Thus, increasingly from the mid-seventeenth century onwards, learned writers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, John Melton and Robert Burton began propounding a predominantly natural theory of dreams. For example, according to Locke writing in 1690, dreams were merely ‘all made up of the waking man’s ideas, though for the most part oddly put together’. Similarly, Hobbes had asserted in 1651, dreams were simply ‘the phantasms of them that sleep’, arising as by-products of the body on the mind – natural and meaningless. What better way to impose order on disorder than to extract the divine and supernatural out of dreams and instead assert, as was suggested by classical lore, that all dreams were natural – neither magical nor mysterious.

Who were the so-called ‘vulgar’ accused of the most base and ignorant ‘superstition’ and ‘enthusiasm’? In 1643 Thomas Browne discussed the acute social dangers of ‘superstition’ and ‘enthusiasm’ in his Religio Medici. He commented that included amongst the ‘multitude’ of the ‘base or minor sort’ were members of the gentry. A careful collation of moralist attacks on the so-called ‘vulgar’ strongly supports Browne’s perspective that the ‘vulgar’ included people from all ‘tiers’ of society. Moreover, in many attacks on prophecy and dream interpretation, writers were more emphatically criticising individuals who misled the populace – individuals who in many instances included elite members (for example William Lilly, or Elias Ashmole). Returning to the important historiographical issue of ‘popular culture’ and the reform of ‘popular culture’, I believe the reform of dream beliefs may be understood as an example of reform from within. I will suggest that critics intended to reform literate, educated audiences, rather than the ‘popular’ beliefs of lower classes. Their primary aim was therefore to educate those members of the elite, or literate classes who had been misled.

Moralist use of the term ‘vulgar’ was therefore a slanderous critique not of a specific social group, but instead of an undesirable and unorthodox world-view – one in which supernatural dreams featured. This world-view was characterised by beliefs deemed irrational, ignorant, heretical, un-godly and dangerous. ‘Vulgar’ was therefore a term of abuse deliberately used to separate learned groups and orthodox beliefs from the ignorant masses and their ‘scurrilous’ false beliefs. What is evident here, rather than the withdrawal of the elite, is the withdrawal of a select group of learned authors attempting to convert other literate people to their ordered and rational world-view. A clear example of this agenda may be derived from the introduction of Sir Thomas Browne’s eminent work Psuedodoxia Epidemica (1672). This important work ‘endeavoured to illuminate ‘truth’ from ‘error’ and ‘superstition’, appealing diplomatically to the learned audience for which it was intended.

Nor have wee addressed our penne or stile unto the people but unto the knowing and leading part of Learning, as well understanding (at least probably hoping) except they be watered from higher regions, and fructifying meteors of knowledge, these weeds must lose their alimental sapse and wither of themselves; whose conserving influence, could our endeavours prevent, wee should trust the rest unto the sythe of time, and hopeful dominion of truth 47

The reform of dreams and the subsequent promotion of natural and secular aetiologies of dreaming was therefore the direct result of elite social agendas to impose order on disorder. A study of the reform of dream beliefs in seventeenth-century Britain can help shed further light on limited ‘two-tier’ models of culture and reform in the early modern period, and suggests instead a more complex portrait of the fluid reality of culture and attempted reform in this period. It would

appear that the elite classes were less concerned with the reform of lower class culture than previously asserted by historians. Rather, a careful study of the controversy on dreams reveals reformists were more intent on reforming the ‘superstitious’ beliefs of members of their own class. The social anarchy, religious radicalism and factionalism of the Civil War and Interregnum periods caused critics to view dreams as a force for disorder. In their aim to eradicate beliefs in supernatural dreams, writers were largely unsuccessful. Shared belief in supernatural dreams persisted well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, they achieved a limited success in reforming beliefs in dreams amongst learned audiences. The British empiricists of the eighteenth-century would continue to de-mystify dreams and condemn prophecy.