Bearers of Christ's Standard: The Apocalyptic Vision of the Scottish Covenanters, 1638-1651

With the religious reformation of the sixteenth century and the concomitant intensification of desires to endeavour the establishment of Christ's earthly kingdom there emerged within Protestant communities throughout Europe a heightened sense of apocalypse. Many of those who set themselves in opposition to the Church of Rome were drawn, almost irresistibly, to interpret their movement in the context of sacred prophecy. In the minds of Protestant reformers, theirs became the cause destined to achieve the ultimate triumph of the faithful; cast in the role of the forces of Antichrist, the "papistical" Church of Rome and all that sustained it would fall before the advancing tide of godly resistance in the unfolding of a grand apocalyptic drama. This growing tendency to view the reform movement in prophetic terms took strong root within many areas of Europe touched by Protestant doctrines, and indeed Scotland was no exception, for within that realm there emerged clearly defined and unique forms of apocalyptic thought.

That the reform movement gave rise in Scotland to a distinct and extended tradition of apocalyptic thought has been readily acknowledged by historians, but few have attempted to examine the evolution of the ideas that shaped that tradition. Of those who have, some, such as Mariorie Reeves and Katharine Firth, have placed their investigations within the wider British context, an approach that tends to de-emphasize the distinctiveness of Scottish apocalyptic thought and of the forces that influenced its development.¹ Others, such as Arthur Williamson and S.A. Burrell, have focused their studies almost exclusively upon the Scottish tradition, and it is through their works that an under-
standing of the factors underlying the emergence of unique Scottish apocalyptic visions is best provided. In Williamson's works, with particular stress on the effects of the 1603 union, the development in the age of James VI of perceptions regarding Scotland's role in the fulfilment of divine prophecy is admirably traced. And through the investigations of Burrell, the foundations and emergence of an enhanced apocalyptic vision among the Scottish covenanters of the mid-seventeenth century are amply demonstrated. Yet despite recognition of the fact that covenanting activity came to be viewed by the Scots in prophetic terms, little attention has been paid to elucidating the development of apocalyptic thought following the revolution initiated in 1638. The covenanting movement that engulfed Scotland from that year until 1651 indeed engendered an apocalyptic vision uniquely its own, a vision shaped by a legacy of three generations of frustrated aspirations and by the fortunes of the movement itself.

That inhabitants of so remote a land as Scotland should come to envision themselves as a people specially blessed with divine favour tends to evoke surprise. Indeed among the Scots themselves there were some, such as Andrew Cant, a prominent seventeenth century minister, who marvelled "that so great a God should shine on so base a soil." Yet undeniably, with the religious revolution of the mid-sixteenth century Protestant Scots came to regard themselves as an elect people, a people consigned by God to participate instrumentally in the struggle destined to eradicate the dominion of Antichrist. Such beliefs naturally led the Scots to envisage their ordained role in the unfolding of sacred destiny, but attempts to conceive that role in a specifically Scottish context proved untenable. Protestant Scots could readily envision themselves as being of the chosen, but in light of the prevailing apocalyptic thought of the age, they could not advance a forceful claim that theirs was the elect nation alluded to in prophecy, that nation destined to take the lead in the struggle against the forces of Antichrist. Mainstream apocalyptic thought of the sixteenth century conceived the elect nation as one capable not only of demonstrating in its past a continuity of election, but also of fulfilling its prophetic role under the leadership of a great Christian emperor, a "new
Constantine" destined to dominate the last age.\textsuperscript{4} Influenced by the belief that a nation's claim to distinct election was contingent upon satisfying such criteria, the Scots found it difficult to formulate an apocalyptic vision set in a Scottish context, for Scotland could satisfy neither. Her past offered little to demonstrate a continuity of election, and in the years immediately following the religious revolution of 1560 the throne was held by Mary Stewart, a confirmed Roman Catholic, and consequently, a most unlikely candidate to assume the role of the godly emperor.

In light of prevailing apocalyptic thought in the Reformation period, England could in fact forward a much stronger claim to distinct election than could Scotland. The English could advance more effective arguments to demonstrate a continuity of election in their past, and in Elizabeth I they could boast possession of a truly Christian monarch.\textsuperscript{5} Indeed many throughout Europe in the latter sixteenth century had come to consider England as the champion of Protestantism, and certainly the Scots in particular were inclined to regard her as such, for had English assistance been denied them in their religious revolution, it is most unlikely that the Protestant cause in Scotland would have emerged triumphant. Undeniably, the concept of an elect England was more plausible than that of an elect Scotland, a fact that precluded the development of a grandiose apocalyptic vision set in a distinctly Scottish context. Yet loath to deny themselves a prominent role in the unfolding of sacred destiny, the Scots determined to place their vision within an imperial British context wherein England and Scotland, embracing true religion together, would act jointly in the overthrow of Antichrist. Scottish apocalyptic thought in the period of the rise and establishment of Protestantism in Scotland came to be dominated by the concept of an elect Britain.\textsuperscript{6}

The decades following the religious revolution in Scotland indeed occasioned the emergence not only of closer Anglo-Scottish relations, but also of policies promoting conformity to Anglican practices in the government of the Scottish kirk. Yet by the latter sixteenth century the trend toward closer association with England began to fade, and with it, enthusiasm for a shared apocalyptic vision. The concept of an elect Britain clearly im-
plied the establishment of closer union with England, a union within which Scotland would naturally assume the subordinate position. An enhanced Anglo-Scottish alliance would undoubtedly threaten Scotland's political autonomy and the distinctiveness of her national identity, and as Williamson demonstrates in his *Scottish National Consciousness in the Age of James VI*, concerns regarding such issues led many Scots to resist the idea of identifying their interests too strongly with those of Britain as a whole. In the post-Reformation period, the Scots came increasingly to reject the imperial British context, a rejection which of course necessitated the abandonment of any apocalyptic visions in which Scotland was to play a significant role.

Unquestionably, concerns essentially secular impaired the Scots' affinity for a strong Anglo-Scottish association, yet in the retreat from the concept of a common sacred destiny, it was the widening religious gulf between the two realms that became decisive. The Scots, professing the greater purity of their Reformation, had long acknowledged essential differences between the Scottish kirk and that of England, but with the rise of Presbyterianism in Scotland from the late 1570's, diversity increasingly became both manifest and insuperable. The eventual triumph of Presbyterianism established in Scotland an ecclesiastical settlement of a decidedly Calvinist stamp, a settlement that, unlike its Anglican counterpart, afforded the church independent jurisdiction over all spiritual affairs and rejected the authority of both crown and bishops in the government of the kirk. In the minds of the Presbyterian Scots of the late sixteenth century, they had come to possess the "best reformed kirk," whereas that of England was still contaminated by the "dregs of popery." Religious ties with an imperfectly reformed England, they feared, would pollute the "true" kirk with "popery," prelacy and worldliness. And since the attainment throughout Britain of religious and ecclesiastical uniformity along Scottish lines seemed unlikely, the Scots came to repudiate the idea of an Anglo-Scottish spiritual union, and consequently, of an elect Britain as well.

With rejection of the British context the enhanced apocalyptic vision of the Scots soon gave way to more sober spiritual goals. The Presbyterlan Scots, finding it difficult to envision themselves as a people destined to play a prominent role in the enactment of divine prophecy, came to adopt an isolationist
perspective in their quest to advance the glory of God. In their estimation, Scotland had performed the major part of her role in the struggle against Antichrist with the religious revolution of 1560; what remained to be done was to bring the kingdom completely to God. The Scots indeed retained their determination to wage war against the forces of Antichrist, but under the guidance of the Presbyterian church they became content to envision themselves doing so through the preservation of the "true" kirk and the purification of their realm, even at the expense of claims to a grandiose apocalyptic destiny shared with England.⁷

Yet despite the desire of the Scottish kirk to labour undisturbed in the promotion of spiritual purity throughout the realm, it was not to be, for following the union of the crowns in 1603, King James embarked on a programme designed to advance ecclesiastical uniformity throughout Britain, a uniformity based on conformity to Anglican practices.⁸ Throughout the remainder of the reign of King James and well into that of his successor, Charles I, the crown methodically pursued ecclesiastical reform in Scotland. The process, extended over the course of almost four decades, was indeed slow, but through it the face of the Scottish kirk was dramatically altered. Ecclesiastical government again fell under the sway of episcopal authority, and in the management of the affairs of the kirk, the voice of the crown became predominant. The suspension of the General Assembly in the years after 1618 deprived the church of its national convocation, thereby destroying the ability of the kirk to direct independently the spiritual affairs of the realm. Even forms of worship in Scotland came to be altered along English lines. In the estimation of Scottish Presbyterians, these alterations were simply corruptions unlawfully intruded and "popish" in nature. Their institution was indeed a source of growing discontent, but not until 1637 with the attempted introduction of a new prayer book based on the Anglican model did resistance become sufficient to incite a national movement.

In that year the Scots finally determined to take a stand in defence of their religious liberties; they made it clear that they were prepared to resist conformity to the ecclesiastical policies of the crown.
Recognizing that they might be proceeded against as insurgents for their defiance of royal authority, the Scottish dissidents sought a means of promoting the solidarity of their movement, and to that end in February of 1638 they formally leagued themselves together in a band known as the National Covenant, an act that earned them the name covenanters. Conceived as a compact between the Scottish people and God, the Covenant became the manifesto of the resistance movement. It was a sacred band that bound its signatories to provide mutual and unwavering support in the pursuit of a common cause, a cause avowed to be defence not only of true religion and the constitutional liberties of the realm, but, interestingly enough, of the King's person and authority as well. In November of the same year the covenanters resurrected the General Assembly, the only instrument, in their estimation, fit to resolve the realm's religious difficulties. Convened at Glasgow and continued despite royal orders to dissolve, the Assembly of 1638 enacted a sweeping series of reforms: the Scottish bishops were deposed, royal and episcopal ecclesiastical authority was dismantled and the alterations intruded upon the kirk over previous decades were repudiated. The covenanters had indeed initiated a second spiritual revolution, a revolution that would lead them not only to establish their own regime by force of arms, but also to adopt again an enhanced apocalyptic vision.

As conceived by the covenanters themselves, the cause they embraced was unquestionably a godly one: they had joined battle against none other than the forces of Antichrist. Those deemed guilty of attempting to corrupt the "true" kirk they readily identified as the veritable minions of that great adversary, men whose efforts, as described in 1638 by Samuel Rutherford, a leading covenanting minister:

make and weave a web for the Antichrist...that, by the bringing in of the Pope's foul tail first upon us (their wretched and beggarly ceremonies), they may thrust in after them the Antichrist's legs and thighs, and his belly, head, and shoulders; and then cry down Christ and the Gospel, and up the merchandise and wares of the great whore.
In the minds of the covenanters, it was the stirring of Anti-
christ’s tail in Scotland that had incited the eruption of godly
resistance, resistance through which the realm was reemerging
from the darkness of antichristian tyranny to bask again in the
light of the glory of God. As Andrew Cant declared in a sermon
delivered at Glasgow following the promulgation and subscrip-
tion of the Covenant in 1638:

God be thanked, there is a sad winter over Scotland’s
head, and our figs are blossoming, and our trees are
budding, and bringing forth fruit, now is the turtle
singing, and his voice is heard in our land: now is
Christ’s voice heard, now is our Bridegroom stand-
ing waiting on our way-coming...12

The Scots, it was contended, were being delivered from the
yoke of their ungodly oppressors, or in the more colourful
language of Rutherford’s interpretation of the events surround-
ing 1638: “Our Lord is fallen to wrestle with His enemies, and
hath brought us out of Egypt...The Lord hath eaten up the sons
of Babel; He hath broken their bones and has pierced them
through with His arrows.”13

The Scottish covenanters undoubtedly regarded their efforts
as beneficial to the struggle against Antichrist, yet they were not
inclined to accept that they had engaged themselves in an
isolated confrontation. To them their activities seemed part of
some grander, albeit as yet incomprehensible, design of God. As
declared by the Scots in a remonstrance of 1639:

Though the depths of the Counsell of GOD, and
the secrets of the wayes of the most high cannot bee
founded nor found out by us, till they be discovered
and vnsecreted bg himself, yet so farre as we can
conceiue and consider of the course of divine provi-
dence in our present affaires, we begin to thinke,
that the LORD is about some great worke on the
earth.14

The covenanters became convinced that they had suddenly
been committed in a grand battle against the adversaries of
Christ, and with that belief, a sense of significant participation
was aroused. Intoxicated by the spirit of revolutionary religious
fervour, many covenanting Scots found it difficult to accept that their movement would have no impact beyond the borders of Scotland itself. Even prior to the promulgation of the National Covenant, Rutherford envisioned the events taking place in Scotland acting as a catalyst to reform outside the realm. Writing to certain ministers of Ireland on February 4, 1638, he avowed:

I know, and am persuaded, that Christ shall again be high and great in this poor, withered, and sun-burnt Kirk of Scotland; and that the sparks of our fire shall fly over the sea, and round about, to warm you and other sister churches; and that this tabernacle of David’s house, that is fallen, even the son of David’s waste places, shall be built again.¹⁵

In a letter penned later in the same month, the covenanting minister Robert Baillie also expressed optimism regarding the possibility of reformation begun in Scotland being spread abroad. In his estimation, resolution of the troubles plaguing the realm would serve a dual purpose: not only would it secure within the kingdom “true” religion, constitutional liberties and concord between King and subject, it would enable the Scots to assist other churches against the antichristian faction as well.¹⁶ With the covenanting movement the Scots indeed began to contemplate the possibility of enacting a prominent role in the struggle against Antichrist.

The plausibility of such an enhanced apocalyptic vision was greatly increased by the growing notion of the Scots as a covenanted people. The promulgation and public subscription of religious bands, or covenants as they came to be known, had in fact been practiced in Scotland since the latter sixteenth century, and through that practice the Scots had come to regard themselves as specially leagued with God in defence of true religion, religion which came to be identified with the Presbyterian kirk.¹⁷ With the National Covenant of 1638, the Scots resolutely reaffirmed their obligation to labour on behalf of the reformed faith, and in the minds of those who embraced the cause, the significance of their Covenant was such that it spread trepidation within the ranks of those throughout Europe deemed adversaries of Christ and His truth. In a remonstrance of 1640 directed to the Parliament of England by the meeting of the
Scottish Estates, the claim was made that both Rome and Spain, the two major pillars of Antichrist's tyranny, rightly feared Scotland's Covenant as the work of God:

they see the hand of God in it against their unjust usurpation and worldly pomp, and they feare, that as they have found it a wall of brasse to the Subiects of Scotland against the fury of their malice...so may it prove by example dangerous to them elsewhere, and at once put an end to all these plots and designes they have to overthrow the reformed Religion...\(^{18}\)

In the estimation of many Scots, the promulgation of the National Covenant became an event of apocalyptic significance, and the extension of covenanting activity a potential means of promoting the spread of godly resistance.

Closely associated with the covenant idea in the transition of Scottish apocalyptic thought was the belief that Scotland was particularly blessed with divine favour. God's special favour toward Scotland, it was argued, had been made apparent in the purity of the realm's religious reformation of the sixteenth century. Professing the superior godliness of Scotland's Reformation over that of other realms, Andrew Cant remarked:

How far other nations out-striped her in naturals, as far did she out-go them in spirituals. Her pomp less, her purity more: they had more of antichrist than she, she more of Christ than they: in their reformation something of the beast was reserved; in ours, not so much as a hoof.\(^{19}\)

But, it was contended, negligence in defence of the fruits of God's grace had allowed corruption to enter into the kirk of Scotland. Yet that negligence had not resulted in irrevocable divine abandonment, for with the rise of the covenanting movement the church was rapidly returned to its previous pristine state—a sign that God's favour had been restored. The covenanters, believing themselves possessed of divine favour, exemplary spiritual purity and an obligation before God to advance the work of reformation, were disposed to contemplate claims to a special status in sacred destiny. And as early as the late 1630's, there existed within the Scottish covenanting movement the
germs of both a crusading spirit and an enhanced apocalyptic vision.

The seeds of Scotland’s crusading spirit and her apocalyptic vision germinated with the rise of the covenanters’ involvement in English affairs. In fact, in the eyes of the covenanting regime, involvement in England was consequential to the mission to defend the “true” faith by rooting out “false” religion and its influence. Following the cessation of hostilities between crown and Scots in the Bishops’ Wars of 1639 and 1640, the establishment in Scotland of covenanting authority and the religious reforms it promoted was virtually assured. Yet so long as the powers of the crown and bishops remained unaltered in England, the continued security of Scotland’s spiritual revolution, and indeed of the covenanting regime itself, would remain uncertain. The covenanters determined that the remedy to the problem lay in exploiting in their own interests the political and religious crisis emerging in England. The best means of ensuring the security of their revolution, so it seemed, was to export it into England: throughout Britain, as in Scotland, the power of the crown must be reduced and episcopacy destroyed. To protect the gains made in Scotland, the covenanters felt compelled to involve themselves in English affairs, and through that involvement sought to endeavour the realization of closer political and religious bonds between the two kingdoms. The extension of covenanting activity into England would provide impetus to the growth of an enhanced Scottish apocalyptic vision, and beyond that, opportunity to implement it as well. By necessity that vision would be set in a British context, but unlike the British context advanced in the Reformation period, this revised version would cast the Scots in the dominant role.

Central to the covenanters’ pursuit of closer union with England was the advancement of ecclesiastical uniformity throughout Britain. In this the covenanters indeed sought an objective not dissimilar to that promoted by the crown’s ecclesiastical policies since 1603, yet there was of course one major difference: Presbyterian church government, not episcopal, would provide the basis for that uniformity. In the period of negotiations following the hostilities of the Second Bishops’ War of 1640, the covenanters initiated their crusade to influence the
course of the emerging ecclesiastical reform movement in England. To encourage English acceptance of a Presbyterian polity, the covenanters dispatched a number of their most prominent ministers to serve on the commission appointed to represent the Scots at the negotiations held at London from November of 1640 to June of the following year. These ministers, including Alexander Henderson, Robert Blair, George Gillespie and Robert Baillie, regarded as the most effective proponents of Presbyterianism, were charged with the task of indoctrinating the English in the virtues of the Scottish model of church government and of promoting spiritual unity throughout Britain. That mission they indeed pursued with great diligence, but despite their lobbying, preaching and writing of tracts expounding the righteousness of the Presbyterian polity, English concurrence could not be attained. The English Parliament resolved in 1641 to reject the covenanters’ demands for church union, for at that time the desire to retain the good will of Scotland was insufficient to warrant allowing her to dictate the nature of a revised Anglican ecclesiastical settlement.

Parliament’s reluctance in 1641 to accept the ecclesiastical solution forwarded by the covenanters became greatly diminished within two years. Engaged in open civil war against the forces of the crown since August of 1642, the English Parliament eagerly began soliciting that good will which had been spurned earlier; as a result of the desire for Scottish assistance the Parliamentary faction came to view more favourably the idea of closer union. In the summer of 1643, commissioners appointed by the English Parliament presented a number of propositions to the General Assembly convened at Edinburgh. These commissioners officially declared that it was England’s desire to pursue with Scotland closer union and uniformity in both church government and worship. And in the interests of advancing such ends it was proposed that both realms enter into a formal league in the cause of godliness and that Scottish military aid be provided in a joint venture against Antichrist and his adherents.

The proposal to league with England in the pursuit of a godly cause was enthusiastically received by the Scots, for it appealed to their sense of importance in the unfolding of sacred destiny
and afforded them an outlet for their crusading spirit. Expressing approval of the propositions presented to them, and also expectation of a great reformation, the members of the Assembly avowed:

So it is our confidence, that the begun Reformation is of GOD, and not of man, that it shall increase, and not decrease; and that he to whom nothing is too hard, who can make mountaines, valleyes, crooked things, straight, and rough ways, smooth, shall lead along and make perfect this most wonderfull Work, which shall be remembered to his glory in the Church throughout all generations.23

With alacrity the covenanters resolved to support the Parliamentary faction in England, a decision indeed influenced by the spiritual aspirations of the Scots. Yet from the profane perspective, it was equally essential that the forces of the crown be denied victory, for the security of the covenanting regime hung in the balance.

The alliance between the Scots and the English Parliamentarians received formal expression in the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643, an alliance that created both spiritual and secular bonds. Those who subscribed the Solemn League and Covenant obliged themselves to the preservation of the church of Scotland and the reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland "according to the word of God, and the Example of the best Reformed Churches."24 And as might be expected, the covenanters presumed without question that the Scottish Presbyterian kirk would be regarded as the finest example. The Solemn League and Covenant further bound its subscribers to pursue the extirpation of "popery" and prelacy, superstition, heresy, schism and all things contrary to sound doctrine and godliness.25 And as did those who entered into the National Covenant of 1638, the signatories of 1643 swore to provide mutual and resolute defence in the interests of religion and of the rights and liberties of the kingdoms. By 1643, covenanting activity was extended throughout Britain; finally the Scots had exported their revolution.

In the minds of the Scots, the promulgation of the Solemn League and Covenant was, as was that of the National Covenant
five years earlier, an event of great apocalyptic significance. It marked the first substantial victory in Scotland’s crusade to extend the work of God beyond her borders and the moment upon which the godly of Britain united in their campaign against the forces of Antichrist. Even before the league with England was officially ratified, the prospect of church union had moved the General Assembly convoked at Edinburgh on August 2, 1643, to assert:

We trust in the Lord, that as once it was prophesied of Israel and Judah; so shall Scotland and England become one stick in the hand of the Lord, they shall ask the way to Sion, with their faces thitherward, saying, Come, let us joyne our selves to the Lord in a perpetuall Covenant, that shall not be forgotten; And so shall come to passe, that the Lords Jerusalem in this Island, shall be a cup of trembling, and a burthensome stone to all their enemies round about.26

And speculating with assurance on the gravity and impact of the Solemn League and Covenant itself, Alexander Henderson, at the time of its subscription, remarked:

Had the Pope at Rome the knowledge of what is doing this day in England, and were this covenant written on the plaister of the wall over against him, where he sitteth, Belshazzar-like in his sacrilegious pomp, it would make his heart to tremble, his countenance to change, his head and mitre to shake, his joints to loose, and all his cardinals and prelates to be astonished.27

The extension of covenanting activity throughout the realms of Charles I, it was believed, would create a force powerful enough to shake the foundations of the kingdom of Antichrist.

Although their attentions were focused on British affairs in the 1640’s, the covenanters did not relinquish thoughts of extending their spiritual crusade throughout Europe. In fact in the Solemn League and Covenant itself the subscribers expressed the desire that, should God bless them with success, other churches would be encouraged by their example to join in
the same or a similar Covenant in order to remove the yoke of antichristian tyranny. Writing from London in 1644, long before the results of the efforts to reform England were apparent, Baillie declared:

We are thinking of a new work over sea, if this Church were settled. The times of Antichrist’s fall are approaching. The very outward providence of God seems to be disposing France, Spaine, Italy, and Germany, for the receiving of the Gospell. When the curtains of the Lord’s Tabernacle are thus far, and much farther, enlarged, by the means which yet appear not, how shall our mouth be filled with laughter, our tongue with praise, and our hearts with rejoicing?

The extension of covenanting activity throughout Britain indeed fired dreams of embarking on an international Presbyterian crusade, dreams that became firmly entrenched in the apocalyptic thought of the Scottish covenanters. It became their desire to provide aid and encouragement to churches throughout Europe, for they regarded themselves as members of a universal church, not just a national one, and ultimately looked forward to a time when all churches would be reformed and governed under a great international Assembly elevated above all national secular authorities. Of such an international Assembly George Gillespie remarked:

Such a Synode is of speciall utility, peradventure also such a Synode is to be hoped for, surely tis to be wished, that for defending the orthodox Faith, both against Popery and other Heresies, as also for propagating it to those who are without, especially the Jews, a more strait and more firm consociation may bee entered into.

By means of an ecumenical church organization the covenanters envisioned the establishment of godly rule on an international scale.

In their apocalyptic vision the Scots came to view themselves as more than a mere component part of the forces arrayed against the kingdom of Antichrist: they perceived themselves as
being in some sense special. Yet they did not envision Scotland as the elect nation destined to predominate in the struggle that would bring about the destruction of the ungodly. The idea of casting Scotland in the role of the elect nation as traditionally conceived was both untenable and unacceptable. The very concept of a distinctly elected nation or people had become almost inseparable from the ideal of the Christian emperor who would serve as the focus of godly resistance, and Charles I, viewed as a major threat to the institution of reformation, was an unlikely candidate to assume such a role. Even if he could be accepted as a “new Constantine” of the covenanting movement, his greater affiliation with England would promote the subordination of Scottish interests to those of her more powerful neighbour to the south. Closer union advanced under the auspices of the crown would certainly be marked by English dominance, leaving the Scots susceptible to Anglican influence. Under neither a monarch unreformed nor one shared with England could the Scots envision themselves performing a significant role in sacred destiny. And with a crown inherently hostile to their cause and an England not yet fully reformed, the Scottish covenanters could not visualize the advancement of a Presbyterian crusade in an imperial British context. Circumstances dictated that the Scots reject in their apocalyptic vision the ideal of the godly emperor and any notions of Scotland as the elect nation.

As was the idea of an elect Scotland, so too was the concept of an elect Britain repudiated. Indeed the covenanters realized that Scotland could not participate effectively in the promotion of the kingdom of Christ as a completely independent nation, for the Scots were not in themselves powerful enough to meet, with any reasonable prospects of success, the forces of Antichrist—they could not even ensure the continuity of their own reformation. Undoubtedly, closer union with England was required, a necessity that compelled the covenanters to adopt some form of British context in their apocalyptic thought. Yet in so doing they did not advance a conception of a distinctly elect British people, for to do so would be to deny the Scots not only a vision uniquely their own, but a claim to special status in sacred destiny as well. The covenanters viewed the Anglo-Scottish
alliance as instrumental in the advancement of the cause of godliness, but refrained from ascribing to Britain as a whole a position of unrivalled significance among the forces of Christ. The covenanters in fact came to reject entirely the application of divine prophecy to any particular nations or peoples; in their view, the elect of all nations, as members of a universal church, would strive together in the struggle to overthrow Antichrist. There was to be no imperial British vision, no Christian emperor and no distinct elect nation or people.

It was only within this framework that the Scots could create for themselves a special role in the apocalyptic drama. As self-perceived, the covenanters were indeed distinct among the elect of Europe. Believing themselves possessed of the “best reformed kirk” and a special compact with God to advance the work of reformation, they determined that it was their destiny to take the lead in the struggle against Antichrist—they were to be instrumental in the rise of godly resistance.

The Scots envisioned themselves ordained to function as initiators of the great contest destined to undermine the forces of Antichrist and as examples to others in the ways of godliness. Their efforts alone would not bring down the adversaries of Christ, but rather incite and inspire others in the struggle to do so. Writing from London in 1644 regarding the difficulties faced by the Protestant cause in Europe, yet expressing great hopes for that cause and for the role of the Scots in it, Baillie remarked:

> Difficulties are lett fall in, for the greater glory of Him who will make out this great work, and I think, by his providence, is making way for it in the kingdoms over sea. The poor Scots are lyke to be his chiefc standard bearers, not onlie here, but further off, ere long.\(^{32}\)

The covenanters rejected the idea of Scotland as the elect nation, yet they did not deny themselves an enhanced apocalyptic vision. Belief in the exceptional purity of their kirk and the covenant idea provided a substitute for the concept of distinct Scottish election.

Although the alliance concluded between Scotland and the English Parliament eventually achieved its primary secular ob-
jective—victory over the forces of the crown—equal success was not realized in the pursuit of ecclesiastical uniformity. The task of working out the details of England’s reformed religious settlement was entrusted to an Assembly of Divines convened at Westminster in June of 1643, and to facilitate the establishment of uniformity, a number of delegates representing the Scottish kirk were invited to attend.\footnote{33} Deliberating throughout the remainder of the decade, the Westminster Assembly made a number of advances in the interests of church union. A Directory of Public Worship, a Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms were prepared, and each was readily adopted by the Scottish kirk.\footnote{34} But the establishment of complete ecclesiastical uniformity was obstructed by two forces that became not only increasingly potent in England throughout the 1640’s, but also increasingly hostile to the introduction of Presbyterian church government: Erastianism and Independency.

The English Parliament was less willing than its Scottish counterpart to see established throughout the realm a form of clericalism based on a hierarchy of ecclesiastical courts independent of the civil authority. And as the determination of England’s ecclesiastical reforms remained contingent on Parliamentary sanction, efforts to prescribe a Presbyterian form of church polity were thwarted. Frustrated by the obstacles of this English Erastianism, Baillie, one of the Scottish commissioners to the Westminster Assembly, exclaimed: “The Pope and the King were never more earnest for the headship of the Church than the pluralitie of this Parliament.”\footnote{35} Yet so long as Scottish assistance was required in the struggle against the royalist forces, the bait of a Presbyterian ecclesiastical was left dangling before the Scots. Their desires for the realization of such a settlement continued undiminished throughout the 1640’s, but by the latter years of the decade it was becoming increasingly apparent to many that the institution of desired reforms was unlikely through alliance with Parliament.

The emergence throughout the 1640’s of an influential faction within the ranks of the English clergy advocating the separateness or independence of each congregation created yet another major obstacle to the Presbyterian crusade of the Scottish covenanters. Those who came to favour Independency
were naturally averse to the idea of establishing within the church gradations of authority and jurisdiction through a hierarchy of ecclesiastical courts. According to Baillie, the Independents, by pressing for recognition of the powers of separate congregations, became the greatest hinderers of the efforts of the Westminster Assembly to institute godly reform in England. Regarding their opposition he declared:

Such a Reformation, though expressly according to the National Covenant, to them is a deformation which they cannot wish, much lesse pray for or endeavour, but with all their strength must crosse it, as a corruption unsufferable, where they have power.\textsuperscript{36}

The opposition of the Independents frustrated the realization of ecclesiastical unity and uniformity throughout Britain, and in the estimation of the Scottish covenanters, the failure to suppress that opposition gave rise to sectarian tendencies and the intrusion of error.

The Scots who laboured on behalf of reformation in England were appalled by the rise of sectarianism within that kingdom. As early as 1644, Rutherford, another of the Scottish commissioners attending the Westminster Assembly, wrote:

There is nothing here but divisions in the Church and Assembly, for besides Brownists and Independents (who, of all that differ from us, come nearest to walkers with God), there are many other sects here, of Anabaptists, Libertines who are for all opinions in religion, fleshy and abominable Antinomians, and Seekers, who are for no church-ordinances, but expect apostles to come and reform churches; and a world of others, all against the government of presbyteries.\textsuperscript{37}

Condonation of such diversity of opinion precluded the very idea of instituting godly rule, and, it was contended, left a door open to the entrance of errors, heresy and schism. Baillie asserted that whatever promoted or preserved “these mischiefes” was ungodly in its very nature, and in his opinion, Independency did just that.\textsuperscript{38} The Scots maintained that the incoming of errors must be opposed and that toleration of sects must be denied. But
the English civil arm demonstrated little interest in curbing sectarian tendencies, and the church, lacking both effective and independent government, was in no position to enforce such policies.

The defection of England from the Solemn League and Covenant was a serious blow to the Scottish Presbyterian crusade, but it was not entirely unexpected. As John Spalding noted, the alliance was sought by the English Parliament chiefly in the interests of gaining aid against the King: from the first, England’s desire to pursue uniformity in religion was at best lukewarm. Even Baillie, who laboured so hard to advance that uniformity, demonstrated his awareness of England’s insincerity. He clearly recognized in 1643 that whereas the Scots were for a religious covenant, the English were for a civil league and for keeping a door open to Independency. Yet it was hoped that once bound to the service of God through the Covenant, England would meet her obligation to advance the work of reformation as prescribed. Her failure to do so was greatly lamented by the Scots, for it not only hindered the realization of Scotland’s apocalyptic vision, but threatened the security of her reformation as well. As the Scottish Parliament declared in April of 1648:

> It can hardlie be marvelled at be any persone of prudence and discretioune Iff wee be full of such feares and apprehensioues as vse to be in these who dwell neir a hous sett on fyre or a famalie infected Especiallie being taught by the sadd experience of the prelaticall tymes how easilie a gangreene on the ane halff of this lleand may spread throw the whole...

And in the same year, reproaching those in England who impeded the struggle against Antichrist through advocacy of liberty of conscience, Rutherford warned: “posterity will know to the second coming of Christ, from whence came the first stirring of the wheeles of Christs Chariot in Britaine, and who first sounded the retreat to return back again from Babulon.”

The realization that the establishment of Presbyterianism in England was unlikely through alliance with Parliament caused a rift to develop in the ranks of the Scottish covenanters. Many,
despite England's defection, contended that they should honour the letter of the Solemn League and Covenant by maintaining peaceful relations with Parliament in the hopes that reform could yet be attained. But others, who emerged in 1648 as the dominant faction, determined to honour the spirit of the Covenant and to conclude in defiance of Parliament a separate peace with the King, who, it was believed, could be employed as an alternate instrument through which reform could be realized. Held prisoner in the hands of the English since January of 1647, Charles I had become more willing to consider, in return for Scottish assistance, advancing the covenanting cause throughout his domains, and recognizing alliance with the crown as potentially advantageous, the majority of Scottish covenanters determined to lend their support to an agreement made with the King. That agreement, known as the Engagement, pledged Scottish military aid on behalf of the crown on condition that, once restored, Charles would confirm the Solemn League and Covenant by Acts of Parliament in both kingdoms, suppress Independency and the rise of religious sects, establish Presbyterian church government in England for a period of three years—its continuation beyond that contingent upon the approval of an Assembly of Divines—and endeavour a closer union of the kingdoms. In compliance with the terms of their agreement the Scots declared war on their former allies, and in July of 1648 the army of the Engagement launched its ill-fated invasion of England. The decisive victory of Cromwell's forces at Preston in the following month utterly destroyed the royal cause, resulting in the disgrace in Scotland of those who supported it. The effort to restore King Charles to power was indeed a disaster, yet that failure did not cause the Scots to relinquish their attachment to the crown or to alter their perception of it as a potential means of reformation and closer union.

Following the defeat of the Engagers, peaceful relations between the two realms were restored, but with the execution of Charles I in January of 1649, circumstances dictated that the Scots again defy the English. Scotland could not accept the constitutional solution adopted by England, for without the King, the one sure link of a union the covenanters wished to make stronger would be removed. Adhering to the monarchy,
the Scots elevated Charles II to the royal dignity, and with his subscription of the Covenants on June 23, 1650, Scotland finally attained a godly prince. Finding themselves possessed of a covenanted monarch strongly affiliated with Scotland, the covenanters could more readily accept royal leadership in the pursuit of their spiritual aspirations, and under Charles II the Scots determined to risk all in a desperate attempt to revive the Presbyterian crusade and to achieve closer union. Again the covenanters resolved to advance their cause in England by force of arms, but in the ensuing war their hopes were crushed at Worcester on September 3, 1651, under the weight of the forces of Cromwell. Military defeat resulted in the outright conquest of Scotland, and through defeat were the Scots brought to experience closer union, the nature of which was far different from that which the covenanters had desired. It was a union thoroughly dominated by England, and as such, destroyed the very things that the Scots had intended to facilitate through closer association with England: the security of the covenanting regime and the advancement of its interests.

The Cromwellian conquest brought an end to visions wherein Scotland played a special role in the unfolding of sacred destiny. In the years after 1651 the covenanting tradition began to turn in upon itself and came to adopt a more isolationist perspective as ideas of universality faded. Scotland could indeed still do battle against the forces of Antichrist, but the contest came to be viewed primarily as an internal struggle conducted in the interests of purging the realm of ungodliness. This isolationist perspective was strongly reflected in a work originally published in 1658: James Durham’s *Commentary upon the Book of the Revelation*. In Durham’s interpretation, the Scriptures indeed revealed the Pope and the Church of Rome as Antichrist. He wrote:

> it may be confidently concluded...that the Popish Kingdom, is the very kingdom the Pope the very King and the Angel of the bottomlesse pit, the Popish Clergie the very Locusts and Armies and their Doctrine the very noisome smoke of the pit..."44

The kingdom of Antichrist would undoubtedly be overcome, but in Durham’s scheme there would be no elect nation taking the lead in the struggle against that kingdom, nor any realm
specially destined to the service of God. Rome and the forces of Antichrist would be ruined as a result of the undefined efforts of a number of kingdoms.⁴⁵ Durham provided no special role in the apocalyptic drama for either Scotland or Britain.

In preparing his work, Durham’s major concern was the encouragement of righteousness. His aim was to demonstrate that those who succumbed to antichristian influence would not only be denied the rewards of godliness, but be subjected to the plagues and punishments prepared for the wicked as well. To urge compliance to the will of the Almighty, Durham endeavoured to make all aware of the nature of hell and eternal damnation, a nature, he declared, “If it were believed, men would rather put their head in the fire than sin.”⁴⁶ Of those who refused to commit themselves wholly in the ways of godliness, he asked:

Can ye abide hell and the company of devils for ever? what, is there any choice here? why halt ye between heaven and hell, as if there were any equality betwixt all things and nothing (no, not a drop of water) betwixt God with all good, and the devil and all sorrow, and that for ever? O the screechs and yels that will be in hell, whereas there is no cry in heaven! Can ye go about doubting what to choose here? Why then is there so little faith, so little wrestling and holiness? Knowye not what dependeth on the event, and can ye abide to lose it, yea, to hazard it, or to be secure while it is so?⁴⁷

The apocalyptic thought of Durham was indeed a reflection of a growing isolationist perspective and as such closely resembled that which had prevailed in Scotland in the late sixteenth century. In Durham’s work there was no trace of a vision wherein the Scottish people assumed a unique role in the struggle against Antichrist. On the national level the idea of a Presbyterian crusade had vanished.

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NOTES


3 "Mr. Andrew Cant's discourse and exhortation to the people, at renewing the National Covenant, 1638," in *A Collection of Several Remarkable and Valuable Sermons, Speeches and Exhortations, at the Renewing and Subscribing the National Covenant of Scotland: and at Enterinq into and Subscribing the Solemn League and Covenant of the three Kingdoms of Scotland. England and Ireland* (Glasgow, 1799), p. 16.

4 On these concepts and their impact on Scottish apocalyptic visions in the latter sixteenth century, see Williamson, *Scottish National Consciousness*.


6 This vision of Scotland and England united in a common sacred destiny pervaded the works of Scotland's most eminent sixteenth century reformer, John Knox. [See John Knox, *The Works of John Knox*, ed. D. Laing (Edinburgh, 1846-1864), 6 vols.] The promotion of such a vision was also a major theme of Antony Gilby's *Admonition to England and Scotland*, to call
them to Repentance. [See Knox, Works (Edinburgh, 1855), IV, 553–571.]

This isolationist perspective was reflected in a tract on the apocalypse produced by King James VI himself in 1588 and in John Napier’s more substantial work which appeared five years later. [See James Stewart, A Fruitefull Meditation, containing a plaine and easie Exposition of the 20 chap. of the Revelation, in the forme and maner of a Sermon (Edinburgh, 1588); John Napier, A Plaine Discovery of the Whole Revelation of Saint John (London 1611).] Neither of these tracts provided the Scots with an apocalyptic vision distinctly their own, and neither in its interpretation of divine prophecy advanced the notion of a nation specifically elected to assume, under the headship of a godly emperor, a leading role in the fulfilment of sacred destiny. Both were intended essentially as means to bolster Scottish Protestant unity against the forces of Catholicism that threatened the security of the realm, and as such promoted the perception of Scotland’s struggle against Anti-christ as primarily an internal one.

For some Scots, the 1603 union became the occasion of revived enthusiasm for apocalyptic visions in a British context, and in the early decades of the seventeenth century a number of tracts advancing such visions appeared. [See John Gordon, England and Scotland’s Happinesse: In being reduced to unitie of Religion. under our invincible Monarke King James (London, 1604); James Maxwell, Admirable and Notable Prophesies, uttered in former times by 24 famous Romain-Catholickes concerning the Church of Romes defection (London, 1615).] In the minds of some the union of the crowns became a significant step in the realization of the common destiny of the British people. But such thought was largely confined within the ranks of Scottish Episcopalians who could more readily accept closer spiritual ties with England. The Presbyterians, fearing the effects of such ties, tended to retain an isolationist perspective in their spiritual goals.


“Mr. Cant’s Sermon at Glasgow, after renewing the National Covenant, 1638,” in *Remarkable and Valuable Sermons*, p. 51.


“To Mr. William Spang,” dated February 27, 1638, in Baillie, *Letters and Journals*, I, 49.


“Cant’s discourse and exhortation to the people,” pp. 16-17.

out that by 1642 the English Parliamentarians had come to recognize that they required Scottish aid to attain their ends as much as the Scots needed to export their revolution into England to assure the security of the covenanting regime. Alliance with England was not pursued and achieved through solicitation on the part of the covenanters alone, nor, as Ferguson demonstrates, did all within their ranks view favourably the prospect of joining the Parliamentary faction against the crown. [See W. Ferguson, *Scotland's Relations with England: A Survey to 1707* (Edinburgh, 1977), pp. 122-126.]


25 Ibid., pp. 5-6.


27 “Mr. Alexander Henderson’s speech and exhortation to the House of Commons and Assembly of Divines, at taking the
Solemn Leaque and Covenant, 1643,” in Remarkable and Valuable Sermons, p. 117.

28 Solemn Leaque and Covenant, p. 8.


30 As E.J. Cowan aptly points out, a significant streak of internationalism had existed within the Scottish reform movement since the sixteenth century, and through the influence of such men as Andrew Melville there had emerged in Scotland the ideal of an international Presbyterian crusade. The Presbyterians, he argues, would have been prepared in the late sixteenth century to welcome a “protestant, or presbyterian, imperium” under James VI as the “new Constantine,” but the emerging struggle against the idea of kingly rule by divine right had made this unacceptable. [See E.J. Cowan, “The Union of the Crowns and the Crisis of the Constitution in 17th Century Scotland,” in S. Dyrvik, K. Mykland and J. Oldervall, eds., The Satellite State in the 17th and 18th Centuries (Bergen, 1979), p. 128.] Not until the Scottish kirk and state had freed themselves from the threat of royal absolutism, and not until the prospects of extending reformation throughout Britain had become favourable, did the implementation of an international Presbyterian crusade seem feasible.


33 The General Assembly of Scotland selected in August of 1643 seven commissioners to attend the Westminster Assembly of
Divines. Among those commissioners were four ministers (Alexander Henderson, Samuel Rutherford, Robert Baillie and George Gillespie) and three elders (Sir Archibald Johnston of Wariston, Lord Maitland and the Earl of Cassillis). Cassillis never actually attended the Westminster Assembly, but throughout the years of its meeting, Lord Balmerino and the Earls of Argyll and Loudoun did participate. (See Campbell, *Triumph of Presbyterianism*, p. 94.)


Baillie, *Dissasive from the Errours*, p. 213.


