



NEW JERUSALEM

*The short life and terrible death of
Christendom's most defiant sect*

PAUL HAM

About the Book

In February 1534 a radical religious sect whose disciples were being persecuted throughout Europe seized the walled city of Münster, in the German-speaking land of Westphalia. They were convinced they were God's Elect, specially chosen by the Almighty to be the first to ascend to Paradise on Judgement Day.

And it would happen here, in 'New Jerusalem' (as they renamed the city), during Easter 1535, when God and Christ would descend and usher in the End Times.

But the 'Melchiorites', as they were called after their founding prophet, would be well prepared for the Apocalypse. They threw out the Catholics and Lutherans, 'rebaptised' their followers, destroyed all old religious icons, adopted a communist system of shared property, and imposed a law of polygamy that compelled all women and girls who'd reached puberty to marry. Many men would claim multiple wives. John of Leiden, who declared himself 'king' of New Jerusalem, had as many as sixteen wives – all according to God's exhortation in Genesis to 'go forth and multiply'.

Beyond the walls of the city, rumours of the blasphemy and depravity of the Melchiorites spread rapidly. The Catholic and Lutheran powers were determined to make an example of this dangerous mob of crazed heretics. The backlash against the sect would be long and brutal.

So began the siege of Münster. For eighteen months, it was shut off from the world, periodically attacked and then slowly starved. Yet the sect clung to their faith with astonishing resilience, even as they descended into hellish suffering.

In *New Jerusalem*, award-winning historian Paul Ham tells the story of religious obsession and persecution, of noble ideals trampled to dust, of slavish sexual surrender ... all in the name of Christ.



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PAUL HAM



Translations of original documents by Jonathan Schmidt and Sarah Markiewicz



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À Marie-Morgane

As [Christ] came near and saw Jerusalem, he wept over it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.'

Luke 19:41–44



North-Western Europe, early sixteenth century



Münster 1534

1

THE PREACHER

'You are the last of God's children in a godless world.'

Melchior Hoffman, to his followers in Strasbourg

He went happily to prison, the self-proclaimed prophet they arrested one fine spring day in Strasbourg in 1533. On the way to the cells he threw away his hat, tore off his shoes and cut his hose at the ankles, easing the job of the guards. He would've worn sackcloth had he had a sack, as befitted an Old Testament visionary. His name was Melchior Hoffman, and he was an itinerant preacher and furrier from Swabia. 'When Melchior saw that he was going to prison,' said a witness, 'he thanked God that the hour had come and he extended his fingers to heaven.'¹

Hoffman's followers thought of him as Elijah, the Biblical prophet whose incarnation he claimed to be. The prisoner swore by God that he would live on bread and water until 'the One' – a descending angel, an emissary of the Almighty – arrived to fulfil a prophecy that Jesus Christ would return and free him within six months, in time to witness the coming of the Apocalypse.²

The Strasbourg councillors knew him well. Hoffman had first visited their city in 1529. Initially made welcome – Strasbourg was a tolerant Lutheran town – he had fled the following year, fearing arrest because of his conversion to a peculiar sect known as the 'rebaptisers', or Anabaptists. There was a limit to Alsatian tolerance.

Yet here he was again, four years later, unrepentant, spreading his heretical ideas and inflaming his little band of disciples, who went by the name of Melchiorites. This time the city councillors would make an

example of their unwelcome guest. And this time they had a witness willing to testify against him.

While the burghers debated how best to proceed, Hoffman took to what he did so well: preaching. From his cell window in the prison tower, he addressed a crowd of followers who had gathered on the grass across the moat below.

‘Strasbourg is the New Jerusalem,’ Hoffman declared, ‘the holy city of the Elect, and witness of the Apocalypse!’ Here, God would descend, with Christ on His right, to judge the world. But there was no need for fear, Hoffman assured his followers: they were living on holy ground, a sacred island in a sea of heresy. ‘You are the last of God’s children in a godless world,’ he cried. ‘As Christ has said, so the last will be first, and the first will be last.’³

That was the sweetest music to a poor and persecuted people who believed they were about to witness the Second Coming: the Almighty was returning to save His chosen tribe, the Melchiorites. They swooned and raised their eyes to Heaven as Hoffman cited a favourite passage from the Book of Revelation:

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

‘See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.’⁴

The faithless and the evil-doers, the Catholics and Lutherans, would be struck down, Hoffman cried. The Emperor, the Pope, Luther, their priests and whores, the liars and cheats, the sodomites, the greedy and profane, the

rich who sucked on the blood of the poor – all would suffer terrible persecution in the apocalyptic tumult.

There was a special place in Hell for the Pope, he continued. Rome had usurped Christ's throne and perverted God's Word. As St Paul had written to the Thessalonians, Christ would return when 'the lawless one' who 'takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God', was vanquished.⁵ The lawless one, Hoffman assured them, was the occupant of the Vatican, whom he damned as the Antichrist.

'How will it end?' the crowd implored him.

Two prophets would appear, Hoffman replied, dressed in sackcloth: the reincarnations of Elijah and Enoch. For 1260 days they will prophesise, as John the Divine told in Revelation.⁶ They would turn the waters to blood, and strike the earth with every kind of plague.⁷ And then the prophets would be crucified, and night would descend upon the world. And for another 1260 days the hellish trinity of Pope (the beast), Emperor (the dragon) and the monks (the false prophets) would attack the Lord's spiritual temple, the New Jerusalem – Strasbourg.⁸

'But the Lord's city will stand,' Hoffman cried. 'And signs of the coming of the Son of Man will appear in the sky. And Rome and the false church will be destroyed. And the second phase of the Eschaton, God's reign before the end of the world, will begin. Christ will return in His glory and unleash His father's wrath against the godless – and 144,000 Apostolic messengers will go forth and preach the gospel of perfection ... seven years after the Sixth Trumpet in the Book of Revelation!'⁹

And all this was about to start, in 1533, in Strasbourg.

'So go in peace,' Melchior implored. 'And do not take up your sword against the heretics. At the end of the world, the Brethren must serve as sentries and defenders: the Word of God will be your only weapon.'¹⁰

Rejoicing at these glad tidings of their salvation, the Melchiorites decided that Melchior Hoffman *was* the new Elijah, the miracle-worker of the Old Testament and the first witness of the Apocalypse.

Hoffman saw fit not to disabuse them of this notion. For many years he had styled himself a prophet. And, plainly, the spirit of Elijah did seem to possess him during his soaring sermons. If the world was about to end, why

shouldn't he be its harbinger? Was it not written in the Book of Malachi that the coming of Elijah would herald the return of the Messiah?

'Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of children to their parents; so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.'¹¹

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Whence came this swaggering, self-taught preacher? What was the source of his extraordinary ideas and his interpretation of faith? The people of Strasbourg set about investigating him.

Melchior Hoffman was born of uncertain date into a poor family, in the town of Swabian Hall, and baptised and raised a Catholic. In 1522 he converted to Lutheranism, and took to the road as a lay preacher to spread the new teaching. Like many of his contemporaries, this earnest young man had read the Bible in the vernacular, and felt a burning desire to share the Word of God. He found in the Gospels a good and loving message that was at odds with the brutality of the society around him. How, he wondered, could one reconcile Christ's teachings with the injustices and cruelty of the world?

The most glaring offender was the Catholic Church, he believed, whose wealth and power seemed grotesquely unchristian. In this, of course, Hoffman was following Luther's lead: Christ's encomiums to charity and compassion, the very lessons of the Sermon on the Mount – where were they amid the rapacity of Rome? And why had people been denied the Word of God for so long? The Bible's lessons and warnings were everyone's to read and share, not an obscure Latinate mystery preserved for popes and prelates!

As the vernacular Bible spread, thousands were astonished by what they read. Its revelations shattered their faith in ancient institutions. Whole communities began to rethink their faith, emboldened by their sudden understanding of the Word of God. Questions flooded their minds. In what do we truly believe? How should we worship? Whom should we exalt? What is truth? The Catholic Church had twisted and perverted Christ's

message, they believed. A vast and corrupt institution, which traded salvation for a tithe, had taken the place of Christ and the Apostles.

Martin Luther's incendiary words – notably his *Ninety-five Theses* and his pounding polemical essays – lit the kindling. His demand for reform spread like wildfire. The financial and liturgical foundation of the Catholic world was under unprecedented assault. But for all Luther's fiery rhetoric, his proposals were moderate, appealing to respectable society and the stout common sense of the German-speaking people.

Radical preachers such as Hoffman aimed to go much further. They saw themselves as the real 'protestants'. They demanded root-and-branch change. They wanted to cauterise a thousand years of Catholic teaching as though it were an open wound. They gave voice to the spiritual confusion of a forgotten people: the peasants and journeymen, farmers and guildsmen.

Hoffman longed for the restitution of Christ's Word, the return of the Apostolic church in all its simplicity and primitive beauty: the church of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, a church of compassion and charity. By contrast, the great Satan in Rome worshipped painted saints and graven images. The papists cannibalised the body of the Lord, and blackmailed the common people. The Pope's monstrous lies were dragging the world into darkness. And so Hoffman set off to rescue it, spreading the true Word of God as a wandering preacher.

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Like Adam after his eviction from Paradise, Hoffman would be the Lämmlein Christ, or Jesus clad in lambskin, as Genesis recounted: 'And the Lord God made garments of skin for the man and for his wife, and clothed them'.¹² This seemed fitting to a furrier.

His mission took him first to Wolmar, in Livonia, the old fur country of the Teutonic Knights, where he would do a little business while also preaching to communities who had never heard the Bible spoken in their local tongue. Hoffman swiftly found his metier. He could speak with astonishing power, and he mastered the art of the popular sermon.

And, to the delight of his parishioners, he could read! This was a time, remember, when the written word was a new frontier. In the early 1530s books were not readily available, not even to the rich. In 1533 the Bishop of Utrecht possessed just 180 books in his library, said to be the city's

largest.¹³ The most sought after book was the New Testament, which first appeared in German in 1522, in Luther's translation, selling 5000 within two months. The Old Testament followed, in 1534, freeing the people from the interpretations of priests. Copies were rare, and cherished: a single Bible might serve a whole community, passed from hand to hand like a precious stone tablet.

Hoffman read from his favourite Biblical tracts – the Books of Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation – as though they were his own creations. His audiences lit up at the Old Testament stories he related – of Abraham and Moses, Jacob and Isaac, Job and Daniel – and wondered at the beauty of the Psalms and the wisdom of Proverbs. They listened in numb horror to the Revelation of John the Divine, the monk who, according to legend, had received the Word of God in a cave on the island of Patmos, and transcribed the story of the Apocalypse. But it was the New Testament that held the crowds in raptures: the words of Jesus Christ, His parables, and the Epistles of St Paul, which spread His Word like a stream of pure light through the darkness of the Holy Roman Empire.

Hoffman delighted in kindling the people's fury, inflaming their minds against Rome. His sermons incited them to defy the old order. Prince-bishops, priests, monks and friars he damned as 'crows of the night, owls and bats'. Nuns and beguines were 'brides of the devil and whores of heaven'. The images of the saints were 'painted dummies'. And the requiem mass was a cacophony of 'clashings, swishing and hootings'.¹⁴

He marshalled the ideas of preachers and theologians who were equally seditious: the *Twenty-four Theses* of Andreas Knöpken, a Lutheran in Riga, who had denounced the veneration of icons as 'insanity', and the Catholic Church as a parasite that drank the blood of the common people; and the *Wittenberg Ordinance* of Andreas Karlstadt, the great theologian of Franconia, who had debated with Luther and lost, sealing his fate as a leader of radical Protestants.

Indeed, Karlstadt was among the first to sanction the destruction of church images, icons and statues – in defiance of Luther, who condemned what he saw as the nihilism of fanatics. But Karlstadt and Hoffman and others would not be silenced. The worship of graven images offended God, they declared, because nothing in the New Testament overruled the Second Commandment of Moses: 'You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether

in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water underneath the earth.’¹⁵

Karlstadt and Luther fell out on questions of degree, yet their ideas chimed like a carillon: the church’s wealth and property should go to the poor and needy, and not be wasted on statues, icons, gold or silver. Helping the poor and sick, not worshipping carved saints, was the proper expression of God’s love. Karlstadt went so far as to write: ‘The presence of beggars in a town is a sure sign that it has no Christian inhabitants.’

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Having drunk deeply of such ideas, Hoffman carried his message to Riga, Dorpat and Tallinn. His sermons unleashed some of the most violent iconoclasm of the Reformation. He read from the Bible with crystalline clarity, and the common people, whose adoration protected him from arrest, were astonished by what they heard.¹⁶ They looked around their towns and villages: inside the churches and cathedrals were the bejewelled statues of the Virgin and the saints, exquisite monstrances and silver chalices, tapestries and images. Outside, the people were cowed and sick, hungry and poor. If it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to go to heaven, as Christ said, then what chance had the bishops, princes and rulers of the Holy Roman Empire?

Hoffman greatly admired the Book of James, which Luther mocked as the ‘straw epistle’, thinking it so subversive that it should be removed from the New Testament.¹⁷ Yet the author of James’s epistle was probably Christ’s own brother, not one of the two disciples who also bore the name. James opened his letter with a thundering denunciation:

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted ... You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.¹⁸

Hoffman endowed James's words with blazing relevance, firing up the workers and farmers against the unctuous cupidity of their local priests. And so in Riga, on 16 March 1524 – according to the records of the Latvian Guild of Beer Carriers – a mob of the 'lower sort' of 'non-Germans' who had heard Hoffman speak burst into two parish churches and smashed every icon, statue, Madonna, cross and sainted head in sight, heaping the rubble in the street. The most valuable treasures, the monstrances and chalices, were salvaged and sold for the benefit of the poor.¹⁹

The riot that followed another sermon, on 10 January 1525, spread from the parish church of the Virgin to the Dominican and Franciscan monasteries, and then to the convent of the Poor Clare Sisters, who threw off their habits and ran into the streets, denouncing the faith that had bound them to miserable lives of celibacy and isolation.²⁰

Hoffman inspired even greater disruption in the town of Dorpat (now Tartu). He arrived in March 1525, still without a licence to preach. The town was bankrupt, the people destitute. A warrant went out for his arrest, but he hid in the homes of reformed burghers, who rallied his supporters. His sermons provoked running street clashes. Whipped into a frenzy, the crowds stormed the cathedral, smashed and burned every altarpiece and icon, and even shattered the tomb-stones of bishops and treasures of the Russian Orthodox Church, provoking a threat of invasion by Grand Prince Vasili III Ivanovich of Moscow.

The Franciscans and Dominicans were expelled from their monasteries – they were permitted to keep only their prayer books – but the Cistercian nuns, daughters of the nobility, were left unscathed.²¹ Hoffman's final outrage in the town was to humiliate a burgher's daughter by ordering the congregation to prostrate themselves in mock-worship of her gold necklace, which had been melted down from confiscated communion vessels.²²

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The Livonian authorities were at a loss as to what to do. Hoffman seemed, in spirit at least, to be one of them: a Lutheran who loathed the corruption of the old church and its system of indulgences. Hadn't the finest theologians of the early Reformation – Philip Melanchthon, Huldrych

Zwingli, Martin Bucer and of course Luther – inspired much of what Hoffman was saying?

Yet that did not mean they endorsed violence, or the destruction of church property. Luther had promulgated a gentler, ‘Magisterial Reformation’, one that adhered to civic order and gradual reform, and was directed by magistrates and councillors. Luther’s reforms would be acceptable to burghers, the property-owning classes and the progressive nobility. Melanchthon, Zwingli and Bucer, who variously sparred with Luther, more or less shared this temperate vision. They had read the Bible in Latin, Greek and/or Hebrew, and so their scholarship cushioned their minds from the shock of translation.

That was not the case with unlicensed, untutored preachers such as Hoffman, who were as amazed as their parishioners by what they were reading. How would Christ, when He returned, reconcile the spirit of his teaching – ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven ... Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth’²³ – with the misery, greed and corruption they saw everywhere on earth? He would seek vengeance, they cried!

It was no wonder these self-taught preachers seized on the most terrifying visions of vengeance, in the books of Daniel and Revelation. And as the self-appointed torch-bearers of the Word, they boldly transmitted these themes in language the common people would understand. The people, in turn, were astonished and delighted to hear of divine retribution *against* the incumbent church, of the fall of the rich and mighty, of the destruction of the whole apparatus of oppression. Hadn’t Luther, too, let the common people down when he had refused to support the German Peasants’ War of 1524–25, a war Rome blamed directly on his teachings?

Justice was at hand, the people felt, and Hoffman was their man. He filled them with a glorious vision of hope: the hope of relief from the shackles of poverty and oppression. Such was his popularity that the Livonian authorities had to buy themselves some time. They issued him with an ultimatum: ‘Get yourself a licence to preach or face banishment.’

And only Martin Luther himself could grant Hoffman that licence.

2

ELIJAH

‘What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?’

The Book of James, 2:14

And so Hoffman set off on the long journey to Wittenberg, in the hope of securing an audience with Martin Luther, the rumbustious leader of the Reformation, whose withering attacks on papal indulgences had rocked the foundations of the Holy Roman Empire. Only God, Luther fumed, had the power to pardon sinners. Yet here were thousands of monks and friars acting as tax collectors for the Pope, selling salvation on the promise that ‘[a]s soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from Purgatory springs’.¹

None could deny the monstrous greed of the Pope and the Emperor. If the Pope wasn’t fleecing the people to save them from Purgatory, the Emperor was taxing them to pay for his war against the Turks. The Turks’ Tax cost as much as 10 per cent of ordinary people’s total income, and that was on top of the usual taxes. ‘The misery is appalling and indescribable,’ an archdeacon of Dortmund had written of its impact on the poor.²

For Luther, the last straw had been Pope Leo X’s massive sale of pardons to pay for the completion of St Peter’s, in 1517. On 31 October that same year Luther posted his ninety-five theses to Albert of Brandenburg, the Archbishop of Mainz. (He may also have nailed or glued them to the door of a church in Wittenberg and the chapel at his university, as Melanchthon claimed and popular mythology would have us believe.) His theses attacked the Catholic church where it hurt the most – in the wallet – and launched the Protestant Reformation.

Hoffman arrived in Wittenberg in June 1525, towards the end of the Peasants' War. Luther had refused to accept any responsibility for inspiring this hideous child of the Reformation, as his Catholic enemies had denounced it. Nor would he intercede on the side of the peasants. He had little affinity with the 'little people', and would not let a mere peasants' uprising infect the purity of his movement.

At their meeting Hoffman made an effort to charm and flatter the great man. Luther's first impression was of a humble and dignified young man whose views appeared sound. Yes, Hoffman accepted that one could attain salvation (or justification) by faith alone; yes, absolution was a gift of divine grace; yes, he renounced violence, as only the Lord could avenge evil. All this chimed with Luther's core tenets. And this rough-hewn amateur preacher spoke well.

Yet Hoffman also displayed a morbid interest in the parts of the Bible Luther least admired, such as the books of Daniel and Revelation. The furrier's unhealthy relish in stories of God's vengeance, wrought by terrifying creatures and fiery punishments, repelled Luther: the boiling lake, the seven-headed beast, the ten-horned dragon, the four horsemen. To Luther, these were irksome distractions from the calm contemplation of the Lord. It would have pleased him more had Hoffman showed better feeling for the perfect grace and love of Christ, so beautifully rendered in St Paul's Epistle to the Romans, which Luther revered as 'the daily bread of the soul ... in this one Epistle [is] the whole Christian and evangelical doctrine'.³

On the other hand, Luther reasoned, if the End Times were indeed at hand, perhaps this itinerant preacher might prove a useful foot soldier. He was crude and unschooled, no doubt, but might be effective on the frontline of the struggle with the papists. Were not the books of Daniel and Revelation powerful weapons in the arsenal of the righteous – against the Pope and Rome, against the Turks on the threshold of Christendom, against the Jews who refused to convert, against all who threatened Luther's beloved church?⁴ The whole world seemed to be veering toward the abyss. Hadn't Luther himself seen intimations of the Apocalypse in the Peasants' War and the incursions of Islam?

So Luther granted Hoffman a 'certificate of orthodoxy', empowering him to preach. If doubts lingered in the great monk's mind, they seemed of little consequence at the time. What Luther would later damn as Hoffman's

fanatical heresy he failed to apprehend that day. Within three years, the leader of the Reformation would bitterly regret his decision.

Hoffman returned to Dorpat, freshly licensed, and threw himself into preaching. He immersed himself in the books of Daniel, Revelation, Joel and the Old Testament prophets.

If the local authorities were hoping that Luther had softened his edges, Hoffman soon disabused them. In 1526 he wrote his 'Commentary on Daniel', which was damned as exceedingly blasphemous. Worse, Hoffman lambasted Rome as a power-grubbing empire, not a faith, which had destroyed the true church with ungodly errors such as the Mass, infant baptism and the intercession of the saints.⁵

He raged against the disdain of established theologians, who dismissed him as a mere fur dealer. He stood up for the poor and oppressed, as the Book of James told him to. He placed divine wisdom at the heart of his faith, and rejected 'human reason' as 'Satan's doctrine' – a theme lifted from Luther himself, who had condemned 'reason' as 'that whore' obscuring the true path to God.⁶

Hoffman travelled to Stockholm early in 1526, and there continued his fiery iconoclasm and his prophecies of the Last Days. King Gustavus I banished him when he refused to cease his 'fantastical' preaching. It became a pattern: Hoffman would arrive in a new town, deliver his blazing sermons, incite mob violence and face exile. On hearing him preach in Lübeck in the winter of 1527, the local Protestant officials 'cried out for his neck, his blood, his body, his life'.⁷ They opposed Rome well enough, but they were not going to sit by and watch as church property was trampled on. Those monstrosities and reliquaries were valuable, after all.

For his part, as Hoffman wandered around northern Europe, leaving a little trail of wreckage, a thought played on his mind: was he heading for a place of darkness – even prison? In his commentary on the Book of Daniel, he had written: 'God is leading my affairs into a difficult place.'⁸

Dark prophecies came easily to those who chose a dark path through the world. But Schleswig-Holstein offered Hoffman shimmering respite. The Danish kingdom presented a strange new realm of religious tolerance, of mesmerising liberty, ethereal, unearthly, like a kingdom floating in a cloud.

This unheard-of freedom followed an edict issued by King Frederick I on 7 August 1524, proclaiming that ‘no-one’s life, body or possessions be attacked on account of his religion whether papal or Lutheran, and that everyone follow his religion as he thinks he can justify his conduct before God the Almighty and his own conscience’.⁹

Preachers, sages, holy men, seers, spiritualists and all manner of zealots were drawn to the sweet freedom of the Danish realm, a spiritual zoo of the fantastic and the grotesque. The nobility fussed over these exotic creatures, these wailing crazy men, thrown up by the amazing convulsions of the new thinking. Many were taken into Frederick’s personal protection and encouraged to proclaim the ‘pure word of God’. Hoffman impressed the Danish king so much that he gave him a licence to preach.

Yet too much freedom, and less respect, unleashed the forces of chaos. One vagabond preacher, known as ‘Mad Friedrich’, urged his screaming acolytes to urinate in the stoups of holy water, to ‘wipe their backsides’ with episcopal letters of remonstrance and to throw stones at priests and monks, whom he damned as ‘flesh eaters’, ‘traitors of God’ and ‘cuthroat bugs’.¹⁰

Perhaps it was too much even for Hoffman. A revolutionary needs something to revolt against. And Hoffman needed validation, for his fresh ideas about the Gospels. In May 1527, therefore, he decided on another trip to Wittenberg, where he hoped to present his latest thoughts to Luther.

Along the way he detoured to Magdeburg, hoping to pay his respects to Nicholas Amsdorf, the most prominent Lutheran. The feeling wasn’t mutual. Amsdorf shunned Hoffman, warning his parishioners to avoid this ‘false prophet, liar and devil’.¹¹ Hoffman’s ideas, Amsdorf wrote, were derived from the ‘great intelligence of Satan’, and the man himself was a ‘useless babbler’ who should be banned from preaching. To which Hoffman replied with a blizzard of verbal dung: Amsdorf was a greasy grub, a coarse ass, an evil gossip, a shameless belcher, a ‘robber of God’s honour’, a ‘riotous and murdering scoundrel’, and a ‘blasphemer against God’s truth’.¹²

At Wittenberg, Luther listened politely as Hoffman regaled him with his strange, allegorical reading of the Gospels. But soon he and his colleagues had had enough: Hoffman was speaking rubbish. In Hoffman’s telling: ‘They made me out to be a great sinner and thought I was a lunatic.’¹³ Hoffman severed his links with Luther forever. He found himself at home in

the wild outer reaches of Christianity, a place populated by spiritualists, Sacramentarians, Anabaptists, Adamites, Hussites and every shade of extremist, who seemed to course around Europe in perennial flight from their persecutors. In such a world, every preacher stood condemned of heresy, and his every utterance risked death.

Hoffman returned to the Danish kingdom, where Frederick assigned him to the church in Kiel. Here he leapt back into his role as evangelical provocateur, after the style of an Old Testament prophet. He made his usual incendiary start, accusing the city council and local nobility – including Luther's man on the spot, Marquard Schuldorp – of stealing church funds. The entire ruling class should be strung up, he declared, and the peasants should rise in revolt.

He rejected the sacrament of infant baptism, and denied the 'real presence' of Christ's body in the bread. For Hoffman, the Eucharist was a kind of marriage contract between Christ and the soul, in which the bread and wine were pledges of fidelity, like wedding rings. This idea brought much ridicule on him from his Lutheran enemies, but Hoffman retaliated by denouncing them as 'false prophets, robbers of God, magicians or belly servers'. They were sacramental conjurers who, like the Catholics, cannibalised the Lord, and who claimed to be able to pluck Christ from Heaven and embed his body in a loaf of bread.¹⁴

This was too much, even for the liberal Danes: something had to be done about this wayward preacher. In Flensburg on 8 April 1529, several prominent Lutherans held a public disputation in which they sought to crush Hoffman. The rowdy debate, held in a former Franciscan cloister, drew a capacity crowd of 400, only a quarter of whom backed Hoffman. Many more waited outside to hear the result.

Outnumbered, out-argued and openly mocked, Hoffman was pronounced a dangerous agitator and a false teacher. He was stripped of his belongings, including his beloved books and printing press, and banished from Denmark along with his wife and child. King Frederick washed his hands of this troublesome preacher.

Hoffman fled to East Frisia, where he encountered a strange sect whose extreme ideas and methods seemed to echo some of his own. These local

hotheads used beer instead of wine in the Eucharist, in open mockery of the 'real presence' of Jesus. They baptised each other at thirty years, the age Christ was said to have been baptised, and they threatened to beat up anyone who claimed that Christ's body was in the bread. 'Kill the cannibal, strike him dead,' they screamed as they stormed the pulpit of one Lutheran preacher, who narrowly escaped with his life. Hoffman was entranced.

Two months later Hoffman visited Strasbourg for the first time, drawn by its religious tolerance. 'He who would be hanged anywhere else,' it was said, 'is simply driven from Strasbourg by flogging.'¹⁵

Here Hoffman went past the point of no return, renouncing his previous beliefs and joining a sect known as the Strasbourg Brethren. They were dismissed as 'rebaptisers' – or 'Anabaptists' – by the scornful authorities, who saw them as a mob of dangerous fanatics. Their members tended to be artisans, workers and farmers, bound by a simple, unadorned faith in Christ's message. They shared Hoffman's love of the primitive, Apostolic church. They believed in peace and charity and compassion. They followed the letter of Christ's Sermon on the Mount. They shunned both Catholics and Lutherans as godless and corrupt. And they greeted Hoffman as 'brother'.

The Strasbourg Brethren reinforced Hoffman's thoughts about the need for good works, the symbolism of the Eucharist, the divine nature of Christ's body, the freedom of the will and, most importantly, the role of adult baptism as a precondition for salvation. All were anathema to the mainstream faiths. To demonstrate his goodwill, Hoffman made a dramatic gesture on the Brethren's behalf: he appealed to the city authorities for a church to be set aside for them.¹⁶

In April 1530, he was baptised. In that act, Hoffman threw off any last vestiges of Lutheranism. He jettisoned lingering notions of 'predestination' or 'justification by faith alone' like a man unshackling himself from iron chains. Why had God given his creatures the power of free will if they were not to use it? Of what value was faith if it lacked charity or 'works of love'? And what was the point of striving to do good if you were already predestined for Heaven or Hell? Either God was wrong or the Lutheran notion of predestination was wrong. And that made up his mind.¹⁷

James had asked the same questions and reached the same conclusions, as Hoffman delightedly recalled:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.¹⁸

Hoffman's spiritual odyssey had ended: he had found his true home. It was time to spread the word, expand the faith, baptise and embrace novitiates – and to these goals he now turned his astonishing energy.

He had chosen an exceedingly dangerous path. Under a 1527 edict, these 'rebaptisers' or 'Anabaptists' (from the Greek *ana*, again; hence 'he who baptises again') were banned throughout Christendom, but the harshness of its application varied. Many cities applied the edict to the letter and burned or beheaded members; others tolerated or ignored the sect. Strasbourg chose a middle path, but by now Hoffman had exhausted the city's patience. The last straw was a sermon in which he dared publicly to liken the Emperor to the red dragon in the Book of Revelation. He was banished.

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Undaunted, irrepressible, Hoffman set off on a mission to baptise as many people as possible: anyone who was 'old, mature and rational enough to choose, assimilate and understand the teaching of the Lord'.¹⁹

He settled in Emden, in East Frisia, drawn by the lenient regime of the House of Oldenburg, which sought a third way between Catholics and Lutherans, making it one of the most radical corners of Christendom. Here, Hoffman flourished. His eloquence transfixed the crowds. A community of fellow believers formed around him. In 1530 he publicly baptised 300 people in the sacristy of the *Grosse Kirche* in Emden,²⁰ including John Volkertsz Trijpmaker, a preacher who moved to Amsterdam that year to spread the faith. Soon Hoffman joined him, and together they baptised at

least fifty Hollanders, one of whom was a great, black-bearded baker who went by the name of John Matthias.

Many more would follow, and soon Melchior Hoffman became the acknowledged leader of the Dutch-speaking Anabaptists, the new Elijah, come to lead them to salvation. 'Melchiorism' seized the imagination of the poor and those burghers who had fallen on hard times. It spoke to their spiritual as well as their economic needs – and thus posed a growing political threat.

Most Melchiorites wanted peace and social justice, as well as the freedom to practise their faith. Yet already there were signs of another strain, a violent few who would choose armed resistance and vengeance against the princes, landlords and bishops who had oppressed and persecuted them.²¹

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By the spring of 1533 we find Hoffman back in Strasbourg, the city that had banished him. Why? He was heeding the prophecy of an old man, possibly Trijpmaker, who told him that he would suffer six months in prison in the city before Christ returned and set him free. Then Hoffman would join the 144,000 messengers of God who would fan out over the earth with such power and spirit that no man could withstand them.²²

The prophecy cohered with Hoffman's image of himself as the new Elijah, and bore out his own premonitions. He acted on it, to will its fulfilment. And so in Strasbourg he gave himself up and went to jail cheerfully. He seemed unconcerned by the darkness that was enveloping him. Christ would protect him.

3

APOCALYPSE

‘The stinking puddle from which usury, thievery and robbery arises is our lords and princes. They make all creatures their property – the fish in the water, the bird in the air, the plant in the earth must all be theirs. Then they proclaim God’s commandment among the poor and say, “You shall not steal” ...’

Thomas Müntzer, prophet of the Apocalypse

If God had chosen Melchior Hoffman to announce the end of the world, Melchior Hoffman had chosen an inopportune place to do so: a city that had banished him. For one thing, the brilliant Martin Bucer, Strasbourg’s leading theologian and, for a time, Luther’s man on the ground, had condemned Hoffman and his followers as unspeakable heretics who were seeking the overthrow of the city. Bucer and the local authorities wished to rid their town of these fanatical rebaptisers once and for all. Some 2000 lived there at the time – out of an adult population of 20,000 – and almost all of them were refugees from elsewhere: ex-priests, teachers, textile workers, metalworkers, cobblers, publicans, bakers, gardeners and butchers.¹

Hoffman was the biggest bird in this nest of heresy, swollen by a personal cult that kept his printing presses busy night and day, and spread the spores of his doctrine far and wide. His sermons had reached his old stomping ground in the Dutch-speaking lands to the north, the burgeoning heartland of Melchiorism, where he’d baptised scores of people, including the obnoxious figure of John Matthias. Hoffman had conceded as much to his interrogators, in May 1533, during which he admitted that he was not a

prophet, and merely one of God's witnesses. That in itself was downright blasphemous. Now he was arraigned to appear before the local Synod of church and council leaders on 10 June, to face the serious charges of heresy and sedition.

As he sat in his cell, awaiting the tribunal, and preaching from his window whenever the urge took him, Hoffman consoled himself with thoughts of the special role God had allotted him, kindled by the realisation of his prophecy. It was all coming true, he thought: his imprisonment, his summons before a great council, and soon, no doubt, the return of Christ Himself to liberate him at the beginning of the end of the world. That 'great council' was not the celestial gathering of angels Hoffman had imagined. Yet somehow the pot-bellied burghers of Strasbourg suited his vision. For was it not fitting that a grand tribunal in this free Imperial city, the throbbing heart of the Reformation, the scourge of popes, bishops and emperors, should witness his last act?

Strasbourg was one of the most progressive cities in Christendom, a beacon to religious radicals. It was rich and secure, and home to one of the first Gutenberg presses, which was now pumping out the Gospels in the German tongue. The grand Alsatian city was a lenient haven at the centre of a patchwork of religious communities, Catholic and Lutheran, which were fiercely opposed to one another. It quietly welcomed certain 'heretics', so long as they were law-abiding and did not agitate or subvert the civil order.

Some of the bravest Anabaptist leaders had sojourned in the town, among them Hans Denck, Michael Sattler, Martin Borrhaus, Ludwig Haetzer, Hans Hut, Caspar Schwenckfeld and Sebastian Franck. Most had been evicted after 1527, when an imperial edict banned Anabaptism; they left behind them smouldering memories of their sermons and a taste of rousing nonconformity. So although the leaders of Strasbourg confined him, Hoffman felt safe, at least for now. Had he fallen into Catholic hands, their authorities would have tortured and burned him alive, decapitation being too hasty and painless a death for an Anabaptist.

Hoffman had trodden in the footsteps of a dazzling parade of radical preachers: Anabaptists, Spiritualists, Quietists, Sacramentarians and others. Exiled from here, denounced there, they were the outlaws of a spiritual

insurrection. Hoffman borrowed many of their ideas and made them his signature themes, chiefly adult baptism, the sharing of all private property, free will and the universality of divine grace.

These ideas appalled the mainstream faiths. Free will implied one could choose to be saved, through good works and charitable deeds, a concept abhorrent to Luther. Salvation could not be purchased, he fumed; giving a penny to the poor brought you no closer to Heaven than a papal pardon. For Luther, faith in God alone won salvation; 'good works' flowed from that faith, and were not a precondition. On this point, the Anabaptists cleaved toward the traditional 'Catholic' position, that a good deed eased the likelihood of perdition. The idea of universal grace suggested that God loved all people, and that none was born damned, and a child could not know sin. Again, this offended the leaders of the dominant faiths, who believed everyone came into the world in a fallen state, according to the notion of Original Sin, on which the entire Augustinian and Catholic tradition was based.

All this meant that Strasbourg's councillors were far less tolerant than they'd been on Hoffman's last visit, four years earlier. Back then they'd welcomed him as a fellow Lutheran. Now he'd gone too far: they could not tolerate another wretched rebaptiser, especially one so popular, and who presumed to be the 'New Elijah'. A firm example must be made.

In chains, Hoffman was led into the Church of the Penitent Magdalens and brought before the Synod. There stood Martin Bucer, the great Protestant reformer, glaring down at him like a keen-eyed predator.

Born of a barrelmaker, excommunicated by the Catholic Church, this brilliant student of Greek and Hebrew had mediated between Luther and Zwingli over the question of the Eucharist, and had recently completed his Sixteen Articles on the new church doctrine. He was a giant of the Reformation. He would later serve as Calvin's muse and, in 1549, having accepted Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's invitation to visit England (where he was in any case exiled), would help revise the Book of Common Prayer. Now, under Bucer's withering brow, the Swabian furrier prepared to face charges of heresy and sedition.

Bucer grilled Hoffman about his peculiar views on the divine nature of Christ, the Eucharist, adult baptism, free will and more. Hoffman spoke eloquently, but could produce none of the siren-like power of his public sermons. Prison had weakened him. On each point Bucer soundly refuted him: infant baptism was the holiest of Christian sacraments; man did not have free will; God, not good works, determined who would be saved; Christ shared our mortal flesh and had not simply ‘passed through Mary’s body’ ... On and on Bucer went, beating down the man’s heresies like a threshing machine. When Bucer had finished, Hoffman was diminished, but not defeated.

Then to the charge of sedition. As a witness the Synod called Claus Frey, a former Melchiorite and a liar and fantasist. He accused Hoffman of inciting the local Anabaptists to seize control of the Strasbourg council.

Hoffman rejected the charges: ‘I’ve always prevailed upon my brothers and sisters to obey the authorities,’ he told the Synod. He reminded them that he had suspended the practice of adult baptism, following news of the execution of some of his followers in Amsterdam.

Frey produced no evidence, and the charges were withdrawn. Yet Bucer persuaded the authorities to keep Hoffman in custody. Anabaptism, after all, was illegal, even if the authorities in Strasbourg had turned a lenient eye to it. Now they decided that Hoffman was more mad than evil, a public nuisance rather than a criminal or dangerous heretic. And his popularity likely stayed the executioner’s hand. Having no desire to make a martyr of him, they moved Hoffman to a different tower. They fed him well and heated his cell; they even treated him for dysentery.

Here, too, he poured out his sermons to the crowds below. ‘The noble and high born had no hope of Christ’s comfort,’ he would cry, ‘while the bright sun of their Saviour would warm the poor, the unlearned and the powerless.’² He just wouldn’t shut up. Melchior made their task easier by welcoming harsher treatment, reasoning that this would invoke God’s wrath and hasten the divine intervention in which he so fervidly believed. He actually asked to be shut away in a dungeon, silencing his raptures and casting his prophesies in darkness, ‘where he could see neither the sun nor the moon’ till God had mercy on him and intervened.³

The months passed, and Melchior faded from view. The city kept him alive. He continued to be fed well. He was able to shave and wash. They heated his dungeon. And there he would stay, indefinitely, without ever

being formally sentenced, one of the bravest but least-known martyrs of the Reformation, fed through the ceiling of his cell where nobody could hear him preach.

As the darkness closed in and silenced him, Hoffman resorted to scrawling his thoughts on paper, and having them smuggled out by his friend Cornelius Poldermann. ‘Oh, saints of God,’ he wrote in despair, ‘raise your heads, your hearts, your eyes, your ears. Your salvation is before the door. All the plagues have been fulfilled save that of the Seventh Angel of vengeance!’⁴

Hoffman’s words spoke to a real and pervasive fear of the end of the world. Regardless of whether you were a Catholic, a Lutheran or a radical, you lived on the brink of doom, in a world in which Judgement Day was imminent, and you had better prepare your soul for the return of the Lord or face eternal perdition. The expectation of the violent end of times pervaded conservative and radical thought; it was not the preserve of a few fanatical cells. The promise of God’s rescue of the righteous animated every rung of society.⁵

As early as 1520, Luther himself had written: ‘I verily believe that the judgment day is at the door ...’⁶ He would return to the theme of the Apocalypse throughout his life. In a sermon in 1522, he described signs on the sun and moon, comets, monsters and the wickedness of the age as harbingers of the Second Coming.⁷

Many feared it, some longed for it, but all believed the End Times were coming. Some fixed the day and hour. Multitudes were preparing to face the wrath of the Lord, praying for forgiveness. Self-anointed prophets brought forth terrifying visions, kindling horror in the hearts of sinners at the prospect of the end of the world.

From the east came rumours of the actual birth of the Antichrist; from the west the story that the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, would go forth and conquer the Holy Land, and put to the sword any man who refused to worship Christ.⁸ People wanted to believe such tales; often a prophecy felt more real than the leaden facts.

Strasbourg, ever a magnet for fanatics, swirled with visionaries bursting with prophecies and religious superstitions. It was here, in 1518, that a

mania for dancing had gripped the people. Inspired by their faith, some 400 locals, mostly women, took to the streets, some dancing for up to a month. Dancing was thought to be a cure for infection and recommended by doctors, but there were also powerful religious incentives, which would inspire a later dance craze in the German-speaking city of Münster.⁹ Many collapsed and died of heart failure or stroke.

The most famous of the Strasbourg prophets were the married couple Lienhard and Ursula Jost, and Barbara Rebstock, ‘the great prophetic of the Kalbsgasse’, who held the city in their thrall in the 1520s and early 1530s. Hoffman himself had come under their spell, and persuaded his followers that the Josts’ supernatural experiences were true. He even wrote the preface and epilogue to Ursula Jost’s book of visions.

The Josts were so beset by visions and daydreams that they seemed to lapse in and out of a trancelike state. They claimed to have seen, while quite conscious, the coming of the Lord and the dreadful punishments that awaited the godless. They shook and sweated as they beheld these fantastic images. The ordinary people wanted to believe them; it mattered little that their prophecies were suspiciously timed around actual events, or exploited the prevailing mood.

Ursula was especially vulnerable to hallucinatory storms, of which she recorded no less than seventy-seven: bright lights in the dead of night, demons dragging her into the abyss, God firing burning arrows, floating corpses, dead fish on a parched landscape, headless men and beasts colliding with each other, the destruction of a great city by wind and fire and huge, vicious dogs, and a rain of water, fire, pitch and brimstone. She claimed to have seen gruesome scenes of torture and enslavement, of bishops dragging people up and down hills with ropes, of a headless prelate being pushed into a dark lake, of the Pope himself with a rope around his neck, being dragged into the darkness. Oddly, none of her visions featured awful things being done to Protestants.

On and on she shrieked, of torments and metamorphoses, the surreal mingled with the Biblical, of children climbing a sunbeam, a woman turning into a bird, a ship crowded with men holding books, a man turning into a giant frog, a lion devouring the giant frog, a swordsman cutting a rainbow in half, a serpent coiled around a tree trunk – and of the ordinary people, her people, wearing crowns and ascending into Heaven.¹⁰

Yet the people had no need of flights of imagination to tell them that the end was nigh. They faced actual threats that were indeed Biblical in scale: famine, sickness, revolution, the rupture of the church, the invasion of Islam.

The German- and Dutch-speaking peoples had just come through the terrible famine of 1528–34. None had forgotten the worst of the great hunger in 1530, when the prices of rye and barley soared, and people starved in the streets.

And everyone lived in fear of terrifying new diseases, the most dreadful of which was an infection contracted through sexual intercourse that crawled into your body, slowly drove you mad, grotesquely deformed you and then killed you. Syphilis, thought to have been brought to Europe by Columbus's sailors in the 1490s, was said to be God's punishment for lust. The first recorded European outbreak, in 1495, infected French troops who were then attacking Naples, and spread to infect and kill 5 million people. In fact, the syphilis bacterium had long incubated in the Old World. The advanced stages produced repulsive symptoms: lesions on the genitals, pustules covering the body, the rotting of nose and mouth. Many mistook the disease for leprosy, and fled the victims. There was no treatment; penicillin was hundreds of years away. And the disease spread quickly, making it one of the biggest killers in Renaissance Europe. Luther himself saw the ubiquity of syphilis, and its sexual provenance, as 'a sign of the End'.¹¹

As if these were not enough to excite the terror of Revelation, the very foundations of the Christian faith were crumbling, sending terrific reverberations through society. The brilliant 'New Evangelicals' of the Reformation – chiefly Luther, Zwingli and Melancthon – were striving to destroy the power and credibility of the old church that had guided the soul of Christendom for 1500 years.

For many, the Reformation itself was a harbinger of the end of the world. It brought forth great champions of the people, ready to avenge them against the rich and powerful, the most famous of whom was the preacher Thomas Müntzer, who delivered excoriating blasts against tyranny:

The stinking puddle from which usury, thievery and robbery arises is our lords and princes. They make all creatures their property – the fish in the water, the bird in the air, the plant in the earth must all be

theirs. Then they proclaim God's commandment among the poor and say, 'You shall not steal' ... ¹²

His message was straight from the lips of Christ's to the money changers: a man cannot serve both God and Mammon.¹³ And those who served riches were damned, Müntzer declared:

They have passed their lives with beastly gorging and tippling; they were brought up most tenderly from their childhood, never once had a bad day; and they are determined never to submit to one for the sake of truth, nor to let a penny of their rents get away from them; and yet they want to be judges and defenders of the faith.¹⁴

In such a world the ordinary people, beset by 'usury, taxes and rents', could not possibly know the Word of God. 'Landlords, priests and rulers' had obstructed the salvation of the masses, by compelling them to live under a 'sinful order'.

So Müntzer pledged to take up the sword on behalf of the peasants and workers, and smash a path into God's kingdom. In 1525 he inspired the Peasants' War, an 'apocalyptic crusade'¹⁵ against the rich and powerful, which he justified by reference to St Paul's Letter to the Romans: the sword was the servant of God, to 'execute wrath on the wrongdoer'.¹⁶ Or, in Müntzer's inverted reading, to avenge the poor and punish the powerful. Inspired by his leadership, the peasants and smallholders rose against the nobility. They were mercilessly crushed: around 100,000 were slaughtered. Luther refused to intervene, condemning the insurrection. Yet many had acted in his name against the power of the Holy Roman Empire.

And the Reformation was opening great fissures between the Pope, the people and the crowned heads of Europe. The German- and Dutch-speaking realms were taking their first steps toward spiritual independence, while the English crown was on the verge of a complete split with the ancient church.

Meanwhile, the sprawling Holy Roman Empire under Charles V was subject to multiple existential threats. The Emperor's inheritance of the Crown of Aragon and the Habsburg empire had given him vast claims over Spain, Italy and Germany, and wars both real and threatened crowded in

from every side. The French and Spanish monarchies, in particular, were in grave conflict with the empire.

In the German lands Charles held together a clutch of principalities rather as a landlord, not a direct ruler. While he presided over the Imperial Diet, the assembly of princes whose territory he controlled, he could not enforce laws in the city-states in his realm without the cooperation of the local authorities. This enhanced the power of city councils, and created the unique circumstances that would allow an entire city – such as Münster – to declare itself independent of any external power.

The Last Days were thus real, not allegorical. They were felt. They were *here*. And the signs were everywhere: in the clash of arms, in the warring sermons, in the blood-red skies, in the prophets' visions, and in the pale eyes of the hungry and sick.

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The Apocalypse loomed in a place far beyond imagination, in the Muslim world. All Europe trembled at the armies of Suleiman the Magnificent, the Turkish Sultan. The Muslim hordes were pounding at the gates of Christendom, just as the Huns, Magyars, Mongols and Saracens had done in centuries past. Muslim armies had conquered Constantinople in 1453, seized Hungary in 1526 and reached the walls of Vienna in 1529, their furthest incursion into Christian Europe.

In 1529 Ursula Jost slyly timed her vision of the invader, stunning Strasbourg with descriptions of hundreds of thousands of black figures at the gates of the city, each one emitting a blazing light. They were the tools of the Almighty, come to smite the godless, as the Bible had foretold. The concordance of her vision with the Muslim threat reinforced the Melchiorites' conviction that the End Times were upon them all.

Even expert theological and legal minds agreed on this interpretation of the Islamic threat. The coming of 'the Turk' was an ominous indication of God's intentions, reckoned Justus Jonas, a professor of law at the University of Wittenberg, and Luther's finest legal colleague. Jonas identified the Turks as the 'little horn' of the Book of Daniel, a people given over to every form of sin, blasphemy, murder, adultery, prostitution, robbery, arson and homosexuality.¹⁷ The Turks, he wrote in 1530, had earned the 'special condemnation' of God because their origins were 'in Satan'.

Luther, too, could not resist hurling down a few prophetic thunderbolts against the Muslims. He agreed that the Turk was the 'little horn' of the Book of Daniel, whose armies had already defeated three of the ten kingdoms of Daniel: Egypt, Asia and Greece. That meant the Last Day had arrived, since no Biblical history remained.¹⁸

The Anabaptist mind was in rare concordance with the major faiths on the Muslim threat, which confirmed their reading of Revelation. For the Melchiorites, the Turks were destined to conquer the world, precipitating the reign of the Antichrist. They had long associated the Muslim foe with Gog and Magog, Biblical symbols of the evil regimes at the four corners of the Earth, whom Mohammed would lead to conquest.¹⁹

And then the armies of the Elect – those marked for salvation by baptism – would rise up and smite the Godless,²⁰ led by the 'new men' – men in the mould of Melchior Hoffman, Thomas Müntzer, Hans Hut and Michael Sattler. They were the true messengers of Christ, the Melchiorites believed. And when their work was done, Jesus himself would return and usher in the New Millennium.

4

SCHWÄRMER

‘The heretics are almost destroying us. We are now paying for our great laxity. The Council now realises that Hoffman’s fanaticism affected so many people that there might be a revolt ...’

Martin Bucer, champion of Protestant reform in Strasbourg

The ‘*Schwärmer*’ (or ‘zealots’ or ‘enthusiasts’), as Luther had dismissed the Anabaptists, were far from the monsters of Lutheran and Catholic demonology. Few in number, widely dispersed, of various strains and eccentrically led, they posed no real threat to the established faiths. Yet their ferocious persecution shows that they were considered a clear and present danger to Christendom. This was sheer overkill, out of all proportion to their influence, and inflicted to set an example to other heretical movements.

The *Schwärmer* were, in the main, artisans and workers, bound together by their economic duress and spiritual ardour. Just 7304 Anabaptists were ‘discovered’ in the Swiss, Austrian and southern and central German lands between 1525 and 1549.¹ At least as many were spreading through northern Europe in the 1520s and ’30s. In fact, the total was probably far higher, because many worshipped in secret and their names went unrecorded.

Despite their numerical weakness, their pure and simple message captured the imaginations of the poor, the vulnerable and the destitute. Their summoning of hope, their certainty of God’s grace and their emphasis on friendship and charity consoled those who felt lost, left behind or lonely amid the turbulence of the Reformation.

The Brethren's pledge to restore the Apostolic Church, their belief in the universality of divine grace, their compassion for the meek and the poor, and their promise of salvation: these were life-saving ideas to the downtrodden. And all it took to join these 'Elect' was a splash of holy water on your forehead.

If they seemed innocuous enough at first, the *Schwärmer's* naive rejection of the established faiths soon turned them into the most despised sect in all Europe. Their refusal to baptise children unified their enemies, but there were other, subtler causes of their coming persecution. For one thing, they rejected or reinterpreted all seven sacraments, not only infant baptism. Most obnoxiously, the Anabaptists branded the ceremony of the Eucharist, the holiest of Catholic rites, a fraud. The bread and wine of the Last Supper were not Christ's actual flesh and blood, they insisted. The bread and wine were allegorical representations of His body.² This challenged centuries of Catholic teaching, and enraged the Lutherans – especially Luther – who were hoping to reform, not destroy, the ancient faith.

The eating of the bread was an act of reverence, Melchior Hoffman had taught. When Christ said 'take and eat' his own flesh and blood, it was the *Word* of Christ, not the substance of what was being eaten, that should be revered and remembered. The bread and wine were symbols of our remembrance and love of Christ, and of our gratitude for His forgiveness of our sins.³ By saying 'This is my body', Christ was simply asking us to remember Him when we ate and drank.

The Melchiorites made their case with a literal logic that sounded childlike to the sophisticated theologians who adjudicated on such matters. How could the Apostles have eaten His flesh and drunk His blood while He sat beside them, the Brethren wondered? Had the Lord sliced off pieces of Himself in their presence? And how could we, they asked, 1500 years later, devour Christ's corpse while He sits in Heaven at the right hand of God?

In any case, what sort of father would allow his son to be bitten, chewed and digested, his body to be 'shitted out' and his blood drunk and pissed? Such acts were a desecration of the Son of Man, and a shocking heresy, they argued. The great humanist Zwingli, who otherwise spurned the rebaptisers, shared their revulsion at the 'cannibalising' of the Lord: it reminded him of 'pagan sacrificial meals' and 'ancient ideas of eating the gods':⁴ 'We believe that Christ is truly present in the Lord's Supper,'

Zwingli wrote. ‘But that his body is literally eaten is far from the truth and the nature of faith. It is contrary to the truth, because He himself says: “I am no more in the world”.’⁵

Further infuriating their opponents, the Melchiorites branded the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (the metamorphosis of the bread and wine into Christ’s flesh and blood) and the Lutheran rite of consubstantiation (the coexistence of the bread and wine with His flesh and blood) as mere inventions, blasphemy and idolatry drummed up for filthy lucre. The bread was ‘a dumb idol of wheat, a dead god, dog’s food, a devil pure and simple’, and the goblet of wine ‘the chalice of abomination, the chalice of the Babylonian whore’.⁶

In reply, the Lutherans and Catholics scorned the poor, simple-minded *Schwärmer* – their latest blasphemies would merely hasten their destruction – and repeated what Christ had said to his disciples at the Last Supper: ‘This is my body.’

Had the Son of Man meant the bread and wine *was* his actual flesh and blood? Such questions sowed profound doubt in the minds of those who were reading the Word for the first time – and would soon fuel the most cataclysmic series of wars in human history. As Luke recounted, Christ had broken a loaf of bread, handed a piece to each of his disciples, and said: ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’⁷ And Matthew told how Jesus had poured a cup of wine and given it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’⁸

Luther himself issued the most persuasive demolition of the Anabaptists’ case. In his bitter polemic ‘Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments’ (1525), he tore into the Melchiorites, mercilessly ridiculing their allegorical reading of the Bible and arguing that if the bread and wine were merely symbolic, why not then reduce the whole of God’s Word to a playful allegory, a vast metaphor, a fantasy? Were Christ’s miracles mere symbols? Had the Lord not cured the sick, restored sight to the blind, made the lame walk? Were these real events or mere signs? Was the Bible itself a sort of children’s book, full of wondrous stories and fearful monsters? The banality of allegory and ‘reason’ had no place in Luther’s theology. Christ’s flesh was deified, blessed and consubstantial with the sanctified bread, just as fire and heat were

consubstantial in a red-hot iron.⁹ To argue otherwise was ‘pure jugglery’, Luther raged, and ‘so stupid as to make one feel like vomiting’.¹⁰

This was not mere theological sparring. Where you stood on these issues decided whether you lived or died. And – if you were to die – whether you died by fire, water or the sword.

By strange and terrible increments, then, the Anabaptists drew the wrath of Christendom upon themselves. And the world bore down on these ‘brothers and sisters’ of ‘the company of Christ’ with terrific force. Here was not a ‘faith’ but an abomination, a mob of devil-led ‘rebaptisers’, a ‘foul disease’, ‘vermin’ and ‘senseless unchristian animals’, who defiled Christ’s words and mocked the holiest sacraments.¹¹

The power of the Holy Roman Empire thus fell on a little sect of a few thousand souls. Wherever these fanatics showed themselves – throughout Germany and the Netherlands, from Switzerland to England – they had to be exterminated like vermin.¹² Henry VIII would soon oblige his continental counterparts: in 1535 he would order the burning of a dozen Anabaptists, the first of many.¹³

A siege mentality gripped the nascent faith. Hatred and terror stalked the perimeter of their lives. A meeting of some sixty representatives of the various Brethren, held in Augsburg from 20 to 24 August 1527, would be dubbed the Martyrs’ Synod because almost all of them would be executed for their beliefs.¹⁴

Whatever differences separated the Dutch Melchiorites from the Swiss, German, Austrian and Moravian strains, their members had committed the unforgiveable heresy of being rebaptised as adults, despite having already been baptised as children. This effectively reversed the authority of the Lutheran and Catholic churches.¹⁵ For that alone, it was believed, they should suffer the extreme penalty.

During the 1520s and early 1530s, the intensity of the Anabaptists’ oppression varied across the empire’s principalities. Yet it was organising. On 26 August 1527, Archduke Ferdinand of Austria issued an imperial mandate that threatened the rebaptisers with death; 2000 copies were distributed through the imperial cities. An edict on 4 January 1528 reinforced the crackdown, ordering the arrest and execution of all

Anabaptists, whom it accused of ‘rebellion’.¹⁶ And in 1529 Emperor Charles V, at the Second Diet of Speyer, fearing the spread of the noxious sect, ordered the extermination of ‘every anabaptist and rebaptized man and woman of the age of reason’ without trial.¹⁷

Of the thousand or more rebaptisers who were executed in the sixteenth century, a third perished in the worst year, 1528, and 80 per cent in the period between 1525 and 1534. By this measure, they were hardly a threat to the established church: ‘witches’ were thought a far greater menace, 40,000 to 60,000 of whom would be executed during the great witch trials between 1560 and 1630, most of them intelligent and wilful women who challenged or frightened the church.

The Anabaptist executions were an exceptionally brutal public spectacle, dragged out to maximise the victims’ pain. The members of the sect were seen as the devil incarnate, and thus no treatment was considered too harsh.

Consider poor Hans Hut, a leader of the southern German Brethren, and a missionary for the faith in the villages and towns. Hut was susceptible, like Hoffman, to millenarian visions, and predicted that the world would end on Pentecost in the year 1528. He would not live to witness his error in timing. Captured in Augsburg, interrogated eight times and horribly tortured, he died of asphyxiation in his cell in a prison fire on 6 December 1527. A day later the Augsburg officials condemned him anyway, and burned his lifeless body at the stake. Hut was among the victims of a decree by the Augsburg Council that aimed to wipe out all the Anabaptists in the city. Many of those who weren’t executed fled to Strasbourg.

Anyone who witnessed the end of Michael Sattler would shudder at the memory. Sattler, a brave but reckless former Benedictine monk from Staufen, chose to be rebaptised in 1526, and became a leading member of the Swiss Brethren. In 1527 he convened the meeting that produced the Schleitheim Confession, the most important statement of Anabaptist doctrine. Sattler was arrested with several followers in Rottenburg am Neckar in May that year, and condemned to an especially gruesome death. According to his sentence, the executioner was required to cut out Sattler’s tongue, bind him ‘fast to a wagon’, and ‘with glowing iron tongs twice tear pieces from his body’. On the way to the place of execution, Sattler’s body

would be torn ‘five times more as above’, and then ‘burnt to powder as an arch-heretic’.¹⁸ Sattler’s male colleagues were beheaded; the women, including his wife, Margaretha, were drowned.

An ominous Dutch precedent – hitherto the Low Countries had been a haven of tolerance – was the beheading of the tailor Sikke Freerks Snijder at Leeuwarden on 20 March 1531. Baptised in Emden, under Hoffman’s approving eye, Sikke became the first Anabaptist martyr of the Dutch-speaking lands.¹⁹ News of Snijder’s death caught the ear of a wandering Catholic priest called Menno Simons, who was astonished by the harshness of the penalty. Menno’s shock deepened when he heard that ten more Dutch Anabaptists, including Trijpmaker, were beheaded in The Hague on 5 December 1531.

Hoffman, similarly shocked, felt responsible, because he had baptised many of the victims. This was why he ordered the suspension of all adult baptism until the end of 1533, when the Apocalypse was to have begun. The ban may have helped to save his life, even if he now spent it in a dark cell in Strasbourg.

The Anabaptists well knew the kind of punishment they could expect if caught: the Catholics would burn them alive, while the Protestants would behead or drown them. There were exceptions: Duke Wilhelm of Bavaria tended to behead those who recanted and burn those who refused. Yet few were tortured in the Lutheran cities, because most city councils needed permission, and this was not always forthcoming. In any case, terror of the rack or the flames usually persuaded a prisoner to cooperate. Only defiant leaders and extreme cases were scalded, mutilated or racked in advance of their execution.

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Despite their persecution, Anabaptist influence rose. The sect drew all sorts. Sinners rejoiced in the chance to cleanse their souls, as nineteen men and women in Hesse explained in 1533, when asked why they had converted. Others were terrified of the Apocalypse, and joined on the promise that baptism would save them. The Anabaptist preachers would cry out: ‘Whosoever did not believe and have himself baptized would be eternally lost.’²⁰

Some converted because they were disillusioned with Luther, repelled by his rejection of the peasants and his struggle with the Catholics. Others fell under the spell of what they saw as a peace-loving faith, one that sought to recreate the Apostolic church of Christ's own disciples. Farmers, clerks, straw-cutters, well-diggers, shepherds, bakers, brewers, and soon the higher echelons of artisans, guildsmen, preachers and even magistrates were enchanted by this singular message of the faith, the astonishing promise of salvation.

Notoriety and secrecy attracted others, drawn to the idea of a radical club. They met in clandestine assemblies, acknowledging each other with special signs, words or items of clothing. They met in attics, hidden rooms, forest clearings, below trapdoors, even on boats, like a cursed people, a banished horde, a plague-ridden race. Rumours associated the sect with blood sacrifices, of bacchanalian rituals, of sexual depravity posing as the re-enactment of the Fall of Man and his expulsion from Eden.

In truth, their meetings were often respectful and orderly, drawing on the Lutheran model. Everyone had the right to speak, one after the other, in careful order, rather like an early meeting of Quakers. Members knelt while praying, their hatless heads bent towards Heaven. They prayed with great emotion, and loudly, and often fell forward on their faces, clasping their hands, crying out, 'The Lord be praised!' What began calmly sometimes turned hysterical. The brethren would sigh and sometimes weep, beat their breasts, and, according to one hostile witness, utter words that nobody could understand while 'groaning and grunting like a tired old nag pulling a cart'.²¹

Their leaders were brave, zealous young men, cut from the same cloth as Karlstadt, Müntzer and Hoffman – men such as Balthasar Hubmaier, an Anabaptist leader in southern Germany who was executed in Vienna in 1528; Melchior Rink, a Hessian Anabaptist imprisoned in 1531 for his part in the Peasants' War; Hans Denck, a Nuremberg Spiritualist banished from several cities for his belief; and the fiery Hans Hut, a travelling bookseller from Thuringia who, like Hoffman, would later openly renounce violence.

In the Dutch-speaking lands arose the distinct strain of Anabaptists known as the Melchiorites, after their imprisoned leader Hoffman. Their self-righteousness, defiance and sense of being 'chosen' singled them out as peculiarly aberrant. The Melchiorites claimed a special relationship with God that was denied to anyone who opposed them. They read the Bible as

though it were speaking to them directly, to the exclusion of all who refused to join them. They would sit in circles, the literate reading the sacred text to the illiterate, who would listen in raptures.

The story of Jesus of Nazareth struck them with personal force. They wept at his crucifixion and rejoiced at his resurrection, as though they had been there watching. They wept too at the suffering of the Apostles, as if they had suffered the same. The Word of God held a strange immediacy for them, as if He were speaking of events that had happened just now, not 1500 years earlier. They were artisans, peasants and journeymen, in the main, with little or no education and the scarcest knowledge, save isolated fragments of history, so there was no interruption for them between the time of the Bible and their own age. They felt an intense personal intimacy with Christ, and a fraternal love of the Apostles, as though they were kin. They shared a literal horror of the monsters of the Apocalypse. They read the Old Testament prophets as though their visions were happening in real time.

Gradually, the Biblical truth the Melchiorites absorbed became more real to them than reality itself. They wove the parables and prophecies into the fabric of their daily lives. The world of the Gospels and their own world were as one. It was a small step for them to believe that God had somehow singled them out for a special kind of grace. The last would be the first, as Christ had said – and were not the Melchiorites the most persecuted faith in Christendom? In this way they came to think of themselves as God's Elect. The Lord had *chosen* them.

Because of this thrilling sense of being singled out for God's grace, they drew strength from the courage of the martyrs and the Apostles, the first Christians. They read of Bartholomew, flayed alive and beheaded; of Thomas, thrown into an oven; of Matthew, bound and decapitated; of Luke, hung from an olive tree; and of Andrew, who, when about to be crucified, cried out joyfully, 'The nearer I come to the cross, the nearer I come to God ...'²²

They heard how King Herod had killed the Apostle James. And how Peter, at his own request, had been crucified upside down, deeming himself 'unworthy to be crucified with his head upward like his Saviour'.²³ They read of St Stephen, stoned to death in AD 34 by Jews outside the gates of Jerusalem, for 'speaking blasphemous words against Moses'.²⁴ And of the thousands killed by the Romans, flayed, skinned, stoned, crucified, dragged

behind chariots, scalded with red-hot irons, doused in boiling oil, fed to wild animals or flung into dungeons and left to rot.²⁵

Fifteen hundred years later, the Melchiorites prayed that they, too, would have the courage to die in a manner worthy of Christ. Many girded themselves to suffer as the Apostles had done. They swooned and sang martyrs' hymns, songs that told of the triumph of the faithful over their persecutors.

Indeed, they felt a kind of pity for their persecutors: 'Do penance, do penance, you stubborn people,' ten Anabaptists shouted at the crowds in Mühlhausen, in Thuringia, as they passed in a wagon on the way to execution. 'Desist from the dog's bath, the pig's bath ... of infant baptism.'²⁶ Many went happily to their deaths, singing with joy, dancing around the scaffold as though it were a maypole. For them, this was the beginning, not the end. Death was a divine reunion with the Lord, a beautiful wedding. In the Swabian town of Kaufbeuren, in 1528, one Anabaptist actually embraced and kissed his executioner.²⁷

Near the end of 1533, in Strasbourg and Amsterdam, apocalyptic feeling reached fever pitch. The Dutch Melchiorites grew bolder in the face of official passivity, spurred by rage at their leader's imprisonment. Their notoriety having proliferated, they dispatched missionaries into the surrounding regions, and made contact with the German and Swiss Brethren.

In the eyes of Bucer and the councillors of Strasbourg, firm action had to be taken. What was happening in the city was becoming 'a great scandal throughout all of Germany', and 'a blasphemy against the Gospel'.²⁸ Bucer put the citizens on alert: 'The heretics are almost destroying us. We are now paying for our great laxity. The Council now realises that Hoffman's fanaticism affected so many people that there might be a revolt ...'²⁹

The day after Christmas 1533, the city councillors issued a mandate against the sect, outlawing the Melchiorites who had taken up Hoffman's torch. They warned the people to shun the 'violent, saturnine, melancholic and fanatic men who are going about'.³⁰ Fearing that the fanatics might actually try to seize power, early in 1534 the authorities decreed that any Anabaptist who refused to make peace and obey the city's law would be

banished. All parents were compelled to baptise their children within six weeks of birth, or leave town.

And so, even in Strasbourg, the Melchiorites were not safe. With their faith under fire, they cast around for a refuge, a safe haven, a new New Jerusalem – and a new leader.

ENOCH

‘Baptism shall be given to all those who have learned repentance ... and who believe truly that their sins are taken away by Christ.’

The Schleithem Confession, the core statement of Anabaptist principles

After the jailing of Melchior Hoffman, the Melchiorites became a huddled, fearful tribe, marooned in a world that despised them. They had lost their prophet, the soul of their faith.

They appealed to the Strasbourg authorities to release him on bail, to no avail. ‘God will punish you for what you have done,’ Cornelius Poldermann, a devout Melchiorite preacher, told the city council on 26 November 1533. ‘You have condemned Melchior Hoffman as a fool and heretic,’ he wrote. ‘Well, dear sirs, you should know that God will beset you and your children with the same, as happened in Jerusalem, for all tyranny must receive its heavy wages ...’

Hoffman’s ideas, he warned, were spreading like fire through the Dutch and Westphalian regions:

You should know that the disputation held here has been disseminated in print throughout the whole Netherlands so that the whole world may consider right and wrong ... You should know that what is being condemned here as heresy is being publicly testified in some parts of the Netherlands as truth. Also in the city of Münster in Westphalia, that which is being condemned here is being preached by scholars as truth.¹

That ‘truth’ lay in Hoffman’s latest prophecy, which Poldermann had smuggled out of his cell. It foresaw the creation of a Christian kingdom on earth that would destroy the ungodly and prepare the world for the Second Coming. The forces of the Pope, the heathen peoples and the armies of Islam would all be wiped out in this holy war, the last battle of mankind. Yet the kingdom would stand and witness the coming of Christ.

In this last war the Melchiorites must not raise their swords against the enemy, Hoffman pleaded. The standing armies of the free Imperial cities, not ‘my brothers and sisters in Christ’, will conquer the legions of the Antichrist. And after their victory they would join hands and together build a kingdom fit for the Lord. In his own mind, of course, Hoffman had always been a man of peace: the Word of God, not his sermons, had inflamed his disciples to rage. He simply saw himself as the Lord’s messenger.

His newfound pacifism drew on core Christian lessons, adopted by his brothers. Hadn’t the gentle Conrad Grebel, founder of the Swiss Brethren, taught in 1524 that ‘[t]rue Christian believers are sheep among wolves, sheep for the slaughter ... Neither do they use worldly sword or war, since all killing has ceased with them.’² And hadn’t the Schleithem Confession (1527) declared: ‘The godless are armed with steel and iron, but the Christians are armed with the armour of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the Word of God.’³

And so, in the coming holy war, Hoffman’s disciples should act as Christ had said: turn the other cheek, harm no one and bear witness.

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Some influential Melchiorites disagreed. Only a weapon borne in Christ’s name could defeat the godless, they believed. The loudest of these was John Matthias, a master baker from Haarlem whom Hoffman had baptised in Emden, though the preacher would live to regret it.

Matthias was a great bear of a man in his fifties, swarthy, black-haired, and with a thick black beard. He was a man of blood and iron, given to long, menacing silences interspersed with explosions of wrath. At first the Melchiorites refused to accept him as their new leader, preferring the peaceful Cornelius Poldermann. But Matthias terrified them into submission.

When he preached he barked with ‘all the power of the Holy Ghost’, pouring out fire and brimstone on his terrified listeners.⁴ And just as suddenly he might burst into laughter and smother you with words of love. He was a healer and punisher bound up in one huge, hairy body. One moment he would frighten you with ghastly visions of hell and damnation; the next he would ease your pounding heart with the promise of salvation. Nobody knew what to expect from him, and his unpredictability, by turns terrifying and uplifting, gave him the mystique of a prophet.

Like Hoffman, Matthias thought of himself as a holy man, a tool of the Almighty, endowed with prophetic powers. God had chosen him for some great task. Yet unlike Hoffman, Matthias believed in holy war, and desired a violent uprising. The incitement to destroy his oppressors he saw as a religious duty. In this, he shared Müntzer’s revolutionary fervour. The Brethren must prove their zeal by rising up and destroying the godless.⁵

Matthias first revealed his divine mission to a Haarlem brewer’s daughter, who reputedly ‘knew the gospel well’.⁶ Her name was Divara, and she was fourteen years old when they first met, about thirty years his junior. Her beauty seems to have attracted him more than her knowledge of the Bible, and he persuaded her to accompany him to Amsterdam.

‘Matthias lured her away from her parents with holy and beautiful words,’ recalled a disgusted Obbe Philips, a preacher who loathed Matthias, and would later abandon the Melchiorites. ‘He told Divara that God had shown him great things and she should be his housewife. And thus he took her secretly to Amsterdam with him and brought her to a secret place.’⁷

And in that secret place Matthias confided in Divara that God had revealed his destiny. He was possessed by the Holy Spirit, he said. He was the reincarnation of the Prophet Enoch, the Second Witness of the Apocalypse after Elijah, and the great-grandfather of Noah. God had instructed him to leave his wife and marry her, and she would be his ‘spiritual sister and bride’. Divara was spellbound, and imagined herself in love with this prophet incarnate, this wild spirit who had lived before the Flood. Neither cared that he had not yet divorced his wife. That ‘old woman’ who had rejected his faith no longer existed for him, Matthias said. It was as if he had never met her.

When Hoffman heard of the marriage, he damned Matthias’s relationship with the girl as ‘whoredom’. But few were listening to the

broken spirit in his dungeon. Most had ears only for Matthias now. His booming voice and bold prophecies rejuvenated and terrified them.

As Enoch reincarnated, Matthias had little time. The Biblical Enoch had been a vulnerable prophet, prone to the devil's entreaties. God had saved him from himself, as told in Genesis: 'Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him.'⁸ God 'took' the first Enoch at the Biblically tender age of 365. His son Methuselah lived to 782, and his grandson Lamech to 777. And Noah, Enoch's great grandson, had started a family at the relatively youthful age of 500. No wonder some feared Matthias would die young.

So Matthias got to work in earnest, trying to persuade the Melchiorites in Amsterdam that he was their new leader. With Hoffman languishing in prison, they needed a bold spirit to guide them to salvation, by force of arms if necessary – a prophet who would turn their ploughshares into swords.⁹

Yet many were opposed to Matthias, and refused to believe he was the Second Witness of the Apocalypse. Hoffman had already singled out his friend Cornelius Poldermann for that honour, and Poldermann was the people's favourite. When he heard this, Matthias raged that the people were misguided, fooled. He cast around for a grand gesture that would prove to them that he was the true Enoch, Elijah's successor, and their leader as God had ordained.

He found the answer in the unbearable persistence of Hoffman's ban on adult baptism, introduced in 1531 to prevent further persecution of the group. Hoffman had argued that since baptism was 'no more than an external sign of a man's inner commitment', it could be dispensed with temporarily.¹⁰ Matthias and most of the Melchiorites disagreed. The rite of adult baptism lay at the heart of their faith, and would assure their salvation. It could be suspended no longer. 'Baptism,' stated the Schleithem Confession, 'shall be given to all those who have learned repentance ... and who believe truly that their sins are taken away by Christ.'¹¹

Other Brethren leaders echoed this. Hans Hut had described adult baptism as 'a bath of souls that washes and rinses them clean from all lusts and desires of the heart', just as God had washed away the sins of the world

in the Flood and the Red Sea.¹² Balhazar Hubmaier had written powerfully of adult baptism as the offering of one's life to Christ, the sanctification of the human soul in a reciprocal act of love.¹³ And the gentle Poldermann taught that baptism cleansed man of the 'first death', Original Sin – analogous to Christ's death – and gave him free will to choose his destiny.¹⁴

In all this Matthias sensed a political opportunity. By resolving to lift the hated ban, he would deliver the promise of salvation to his terrified followers. He would also risk renewing their persecution.

That was a risk they were willing to take. Baptism, for them, was much more than a ceremony or an act of reverence. It pressed on the Melchiorite mind with apocalyptic power. If you weren't baptised, you faced damnation. If you hadn't received the holy seal, God would not recognise you at the End Times, and all the monsters of Revelation would ravish you.

That cherished seal was the Tau Cross, holy water daubed on your forehead in the shape of the Greek letter tau. This was the mark of the chosen people, as Revelation told:

I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea, saying, 'Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads.'¹⁵

Those who possessed the seal had entered a secret covenant with the Lord. He would know them by the tau, as Ezekiel had prophesied: 'The Lord ... said to him, "Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark upon the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over the abominations that are committed in it".'¹⁶ Those bearing the tau would come together as the 144,000 Apostolic messengers listed in Revelation, and claim the earth for the Lord.

Yet their mission, according to Ezekiel, had a terrifying sequel: to kill anyone who lacked the seal. God had said to the Prophet: 'Pass through the city ... and kill; your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. Cut

down old men, young men and young women, little children and women, but touch no one who has the mark.’¹⁷

In the Old Testament, this had great significance. The last letter in the Hebrew alphabet, tav, was used to anoint the heads of the Israelite poor to save them from extermination. It prophesied the Last Day, as did the Greek letter omega, of which Christ had spoken in Revelation: ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.’¹⁸ The first Christians adopted the Hebrew letter as an eternal reminder of the cross on which Christ had died for the salvation of the world.¹⁹

Now Matthias reminded his followers of the seal’s terrifying power: those who chose the seal were bound for Paradise; those who refused it were doomed.

A terrible pallor fell on the faces of his followers who had not yet received the Tau Cross: Who will save us? Will we be condemned to the fires, and lost to God? Pray, who will help us?

Matthias answered their prayers. In Amsterdam on All Saints’ Day, 1 November 1533, without seeking Hoffman’s consent, he lifted the ban on adult baptism – six weeks before it was due to expire.

Hundreds came forth to be baptised. All were of the ‘age of reason’, as young as sixteen and as old as sixty. They were saved – received, they believed, into the one true faith. They had chosen Christ. They rejoiced and sang hymns. Their childhood baptism meant nothing to them anymore. For how could a baby understand the Word of God? An infant could not choose. Only a sentient adult was capable of deciding his or her spiritual home, in full consciousness of the love of Christ. As one Melchiorite wrote, ‘One must first of all learn the Divine message, the love of an active faith, and only after having done so, should he receive Christian baptism.’²⁰

Melchiorite parents refused to baptise their children, in defiance of the law. Chaotic scenes resulted, with church officials trying to seize the babies, and parents refusing to yield them.

The Lutherans and Catholics were aghast at this abomination of the sacrament. What of Original Sin? Wasn’t every child born a sinner, poisoned by the guilt of Adam and Eve? If the child died unbaptised, wouldn’t he or she be damned to Hell?

In reply, the Anabaptists said they rejected Original Sin. A child was born innocent, like all God’s creatures, they argued. No child hated at birth. A barely conscious child could not *decide* to reject God.²¹ God desired the

salvation of every human being and loved everyone at birth, the Melchiorites believed. Babies could not distinguish between good and evil: 'not having committed any sins, they did not need penance, confession, or baptism'.²² Only man corrupted man. And only an adult could cleanse himself or herself of corruption, by choosing absolution through baptism.

The Bible reinforced this message, they further claimed. For where in the New or Old Testaments did God say anything about the necessity of infant baptism? It was 'a piece of villainy', Hans Hut had argued, of which 'not a single verse in all Scripture can be brought forth to defend'.²³ The godless, he wrote – meaning Lutherans and Catholics – 'all remain silent' over that omission, while insisting on 'the contrived baptism of children'. That, Hut warned, was 'not only useless, it is also the greatest hindrance to truth'.²⁴

And yet, the Anabaptists gleefully pointed out, the Bible was full of references to adult baptism, and they seized on these passages to taunt their persecutors. Had not Christ told Matthew to 'go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'?²⁵ And was it not the Apostle Mark who proclaimed that 'the one who believes and is baptized will be saved'?²⁶ And had not Peter told the first converts to the Apostolic church, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven ...'?²⁷

And who could doubt the example of Christ Himself? Jesus had been baptised at the age of thirty by the wandering holy man John the Baptist, who had submerged the Lord's body in the River Jordan. Three Apostles, Matthew, Mark and Luke, described the moment 'when Jesus came up from the water, and the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved ..."'²⁸

The Lutherans and Catholics scoured the Bible for a reference to infant baptism with which to justify the sacrament. They found no direct statement, despite Zwingli's strenuous efforts to winkle one out of the Old Testament.²⁹ On the other hand, they pointed out, Christ had blessed children: 'Truly I tell you,' He said, 'whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'³⁰ And Christ entrusted children with the capacity to believe in Him: 'If any of you put a stumbling block

before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.’³¹

The Anabaptists were not persuaded; in fact, they were emboldened, and condemned infant baptism as ‘the highest and chief abomination of the Pope’,³² a water bath, a pig’s bath, a filthy ablution and the greatest blasphemy that had ever existed.³³ The bogus rite, they claimed, was the invention of the popes to ‘save’ sick children at risk of death, and was thereafter applied to every child as a devious means of claiming the young for Rome. For more than a thousand years then, argued the Melchiorites, Rome had harvested the souls of humanity by baptising children without their knowledge, thus chaining billions of people to a life of guilt, confession and the wages of sin. Moreover, the practice had enriched the church: parents had to pay to have their children baptised.³⁴ In fact, greedy Dutch clergymen, who worked tax-free, were said to have inspired the saying that ‘the goodness of God and the avarice of priests are both without end’.³⁵

These were shocking blasphemies to Catholics and Lutherans. The damned Anabaptists had poured impertinence on heresy! The giants of the Reformation – Luther, Melanchthon, Calvin, Bucer and Zwingli (who decried rebaptism as ‘contrary to God and Christian peace’³⁶) – all believed in retaining the ancient Catholic ritual of daubing holy water three times on a baby’s head, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. All believed the sacrament welcomed the infant into the church of Christ. And baptism was, of course, a great social occasion, dear to parents who rejoiced in Christ’s acceptance of their child into the faith.

Yet here were hordes of barely literate zealots, crazed heretics, daring to proclaim that ‘the whole of Christendom had erred for more than a thousand years’.³⁷ How dare these damnable Anabaptists, common tailors and blacksmiths, peasants and clerks, ridicule the holiest of the seven sacraments? Were they out of their minds?

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By lifting the ban, Matthias won the loyalty of most of the Melchiorites, and breathed new life into the fledgling faith. He thus reactivated the

practice that had begun in Zurich in January 1525, when the Swiss Brethren first baptised an adult.

Now, as then, the promise of salvation drove the newly baptised wild with excitement. In Zurich they had dressed in simple smocks tied with rope, and run screaming through the streets, crying, 'Woe! Woe!' and, 'Repent! Repent!' to the people of the city they likened to Ninevah. The same hysteria now gripped many of Matthias's followers, and the secret ceremony spread. Matthias and other Anabaptist leaders were determined to build a holy tribe, sealed with the mark of the elect. Soon, thousands were coming forward to be baptised, in defiance of Dutch and German officials.

The Anabaptists stripped the ritual of Catholic ceremony. The preacher simply asked the person about to be baptised, 'Is this the true baptism? Are you willing to revoke the first baptism, which you received in ignorance?'³⁸ Then the recipient received three splashes of water – in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost – or a wet hand, or sometimes complete immersion. Some were drenched with jugs of water. In St Gallen, one former monk waded naked into the waters of the Rhine and there received the sacrament.³⁹

The Tau Cross was then daubed on the forehead, and the newly baptised crowds would sink to their knees, lift their eyes to Heaven and offer God their love and gratitude. Later, they would appeal to their friends and families to join them, to *choose* to be baptised, and partake of the divine.

6

EXODUS

‘It was the duty of all the Brethren to shew their zeal by at once seizing the sword of sharpness and mowing down the godless.’

John Matthias, the new leader of the Melchiorites

The promise of salvation held the people in a kind of spell, and drew many to the Melchiorites. Another reason for its allure was the hope that this strange new faith would deliver them from poverty and oppression. In the late 1520s the Dutch-speaking region had fallen on extremely hard times. The people were angry and rebellious, and Matthias’s call for arms and the sharing of property held tremendous appeal.

In 1527 the English ceased trading wool with the Netherlands, to protect their domestic market. And in 1531 the Danes unleashed a piracy war on Dutch cargo vessels and closed their waters to Dutch ships, in retaliation for Emperor Charles V’s plans to invade Denmark and restore his brother-in-law to its throne. This squeeze on trade raised the prices of herring, corn and grains. A severe depression ensued, bringing famine and diseases such as the ‘English sweat’ or ‘hot sickness’ (probably cholera and tuberculosis). The worst afflicted were the Dutch lower and middle classes, many of whom were or would become Anabaptists.¹

‘Now that it is hard to come by food in the town,’ wrote the Burghermaster of Leiden in 1530, ‘there is great poverty and terrible hunger. The wretched people are suffering all the time and everyday someone says, “Oh dear God, do not pass over us with our hot sickness but give us quick release, for we would rather die than go on living.”’²

Many left home in search of work and food. Deprivation drove them to seek spiritual solace and God's mercy. Hearing stories of another New Jerusalem in Westphalia and the promise of salvation, they eagerly responded to Matthias's call to join the Melchiorites.

Matthias raged against their oppressors. He himself had experienced their plight. Yet his people were not desperate serfs or starving peasants, reliant on harvests. They were prosperous artisans and guildsmen who had fallen on rough times through no fault of their own: tailors and blacksmiths, bakers and bookkeepers, glassmakers and sailors. Many had suffered fierce discrimination on account of their faith. Dutch courts forbade companies from hiring Anabaptists unless they recanted, for instance. Those who refused found themselves shut out of trade, and unwelcome in taverns and guilds where business was transacted.

How could they reverse their baptismal vows and renounce their faith, given that Judgement Day was nigh? Salvation was a gift worthy of the torments of the secular world, even the loss of their income. Hadn't their leader, their *baptiser*, promised them this?

Matthias felt that responsibility, as had Hoffman. Yet a fury simmered inside Matthias, against the princes and bishops who had hounded his followers and banned his faith. Why submit to those who sought to torture and kill his brothers and sisters? Had he won the loyalty of his followers only to see them hounded from society, and hunted down like animals, racked, burnt and drowned?

He longed for vengeance, too, to settle a personal score against his persecutors. In 1528, in Amsterdam, Matthias had dared openly to deny the 'real presence' of the body of Christ in the Eucharist. For 'blaspheming against the holy body', he had received the customary Dutch punishment: the torturer drilled a hole through his tongue. In this, he was lucky; the Catholics would have cut it out.³

So Matthias searched for an escape to a sanctuary, somewhere his brothers and sisters could live in peace. Yes, he would lead his people out of this misery, this world of injustice and tyranny! It would be a Great Exodus, he dreamed, to a Promised Land. Like Hoffman, Matthias saw the world in the fiery images of the Old Testament, and in the crimson hues of the Book of Revelation.

The Great Exodus needed a patriarch at the helm, a new Moses: Matthias would be that figure! Only he could lead them to salvation, the

Melchiorites realised, and even if Strasbourg pardoned Hoffman, their erstwhile leader was not up to the task. His late insistence on obedience and his eschewal of the sword rendered the Melchiorites powerless against their enemies. Now, firm in their faith, their shoulders set against a world that rejected them, they would discover a new home, a true New Jerusalem. In this sense, the Schleithem Confession spoke for them all:

[E]verything which is not united with our God and Christ cannot be other than an abomination which we should shun and flee from. By this is meant all Catholic and Protestant works and church services, meetings and church attendance, drinking houses, civic affairs, the oaths sworn in unbelief and other things of that kind, which are highly regarded by the world and yet are carried on in flat contradiction to the command of God ...

You must unsheathe your swords when the time comes, Matthias said. In the tradition of Müntzer and the peasant leaders, he exhorted the Melchiorites to slay their enemies with the weapons God had given them. Turning the other cheek would only prolong their suffering. It was the duty of all the Brethren, he insisted, to 'shew their zeal by at once seizing the sword of sharpness and mowing down the godless'.⁴

The Last Days would be violent and terrible, yet everyone must be willing to die for the faith. The Melchiorites, he insisted, should not stand aside and let others fight the Antichrist. They must lead the charge, defeat their oppressors and build the last kingdom on earth from the ground up.

Some, like Poldermann, rejected violence and venerated the memory of poor Melchior Hoffman, whose last, lingering sermon rang in their minds: the godless should be rooted out *before* the Last Judgement, and the kingdom of prophets and kings should rule the world before the Second Coming. But they should not use violent methods; they should stand silently by and witness the destruction of their enemies.

Matthias ignored Hoffman's warning. For him, only the sword of vengeance would realise God's kingdom on earth. For was he not in direct contact with the Almighty, who had chosen him, the new Enoch, as the second witness of the Apocalypse? Who else would protect his people in the Last Days, from the darkening of the sun and the moon and the stars, the rolling together of the heavens, and the terrible wrath of the Lord?

Follow me, Matthias cried, and you shall behold the light of the Messiah. You will see the moon shining as the sun, the sun's light intensifying sevenfold, the deserts and wastelands blooming, and food and wine in abundance. Follow me and you will be rid of sorrow, sickness and pain, until the Kingdom of God receives your souls.⁵ And all who reject me, the forces of the Antichrist – the Lutherans, Catholics, Jews and heathens – will be flung into the sulphurous lake.

To the Melchiorites, all this was vividly real. The monsters and signs of Revelation – the four horsemen, the red dragon, the seven-headed beast, the seven trumpets and the seven seals – were not a spiritual allegory. All were imminent and real.

In taking Revelation literally, they overturned a thousand years of Catholic teaching. St Augustine himself had written, in his fifth-century epic *The City of God*, that the monsters of Revelation, Gog and Magog, and the Ten Kings of the Book of Daniel, were signs, or symbols, of what was to come. They were allegorical, not literal, truths.⁶ The Antichrist was human pride, not an individual, and any attempt to set a date for the Last Day was speculative folly.⁷

None of this stuck in the minds of the Melchiorites, for whom the Apocalypse was the culmination of a divine plan for humanity. And Matthias was the interpreter of that plan. He filled them with fresh, messianic zeal. They were crusaders, 'Apostolic Messengers', who would go forth and baptise everyone and save the world. In their eyes, Matthias was the Heaven-sent prophet: Enoch in a baker's smock.

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And so, as if to demonstrate his God-given power, Matthias set a new date for the beginning of the end: Easter 1534. Poor old Hoffman was wrong, he told his astonished followers. Christ would return at a different time and in a different place.

But where, they wondered.

In late 1533 Matthias sent a series of envoys into the regions, to spread the message that Enoch had returned and to enlist through baptism new recruits to the army of the Lord. All should prepare for holy war.

On 5 January 1534 a pair of Matthias's missionaries arrived in the Westphalian town of Münster, where they encountered a radical spiritual

upheaval. The sermons of the city's leading preacher, a man of great eloquence called Bernard Rothmann, were in marked sympathy with Melchiorite teaching.

Later that month, Matthias asked his most trusted lieutenant to take a message to Münster. The envoy's name was John Bockelson, a tailor from Leiden whom Matthias had met on the day he lifted the ban on baptism, and had baptised thereafter. 'John of Leiden', as the young man styled himself, was like a son to Matthias. The old baker confided in the young tailor, and seemed to be grooming him for a great task. The Brethren, too, were seduced by the youth's handsome face, sparkling eyes and eloquent voice. His strange, angelic presence consoled them and eased their fears of the great black-bearded brute who led them.

Leiden and a fellow emissary, Gerrit Boeckbinder, arrived in Münster on 13 January and found that about 1400 of the city's population had already been baptised.⁸

The pair went at once to Rothmann's home, where several city councillors had gathered to discuss what was to be done. How would they prepare New Jerusalem for the millennium? When was the day of vengeance? When would come the promised destruction of their enemies?

'All your concerns will be answered by the Prophet Matthias,' Leiden assured them. He conveyed Matthias's new message: that no preacher should preach from church pulpits anymore. They should abandon the churches altogether.

They had all heard of John Matthias. Even Rothmann quailed before the reputation of Enoch, the Second Witness of the Apocalypse after the legendary Hoffman himself.

Leiden sent glowing reports back to Amsterdam: Münster was indeed a holy place, a city of God, protected by thick walls and a deep moat. It would welcome them all. The local Brethren were even on the point of taking control of the city's council. Matthias and their brothers and sisters should come at once.

Matthias had faith in Leiden's judgement and acted at once on his favourite's advice. The Melchiorites had been grievously misled, he cried. Strasbourg was not the New Jerusalem. Nor was Amsterdam. The Promised Land was the holy city of Münster, whither they should go. And Matthias himself would lead them, like Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt.

The exhortation went out: pack and prepare to abandon your homes and venture into the unknown.

Many of the Dutch Melchiorites had never left their towns or villages, so the prospect of a journey into German-speaking lands terrified them. Some longed to return to the simple, peaceful faith espoused by Melchior Hoffman. Yet most were loyal to Matthias now – and all were frightened of him. What else could they do? Amsterdam and Strasbourg had shunned them. Across Europe they risked torture and death. Only Münster promised refuge.

Hope of salvation in this distant city fortified them, even as fears rattled around their heads. Was Münster truly the New Jerusalem? Would it welcome or spurn them?

MÜNSTER

‘Most merciful prince,
 If only you could see the tears and lamentations of the pious people everywhere who do not merely mourn on my behalf but on theirs and the defamation of Christ; But through the mendacious accusations of the impious your Lordship had decided that I may be deposed from office and they be deprived from hearing the Gospel ... For if they tear my doctrine apart and accuse it of falseness, they insult Christ himself.’

Bernard Rothmann, appealing to Bishop Friedrich against banishment from his church in Münster

image

Approaching Münster from the east in 1533, the weary traveller beholds the tops of towers and steeples, black against the setting sun. As you near the city, you pass windmills, small fields and garden plots, a church and an archers’ training ground. Surrounding the town rises a defensive barrier, a high outer wall, made of solid stone. A moat runs along the foot of the wall, so deep and broad that a heavily armoured knight could not hope to swim it. From the outer edge of the moat, mounds of earth slope away to the gentle pastures and fields of Westphalia.

You cross a wooden bridge and pass through a heavy iron gate, one of twelve set in solid stone foundations at equal intervals around the city, each guarded by twenty-metre-high lookout towers made of stone and brick (one of which, now called the Buddenturm, was used as a prison in 1533, then a gunpowder store, and was reputed to be haunted by a phantom spirit). The gate opens onto a second bridge over a narrower, shallower moat, bound by an inner wall. The walls and towers are pocked with loopholes, affording a superb view for marksmen, archers and spear-throwers. The whole system

conceals a labyrinth of passageways and tunnels that open onto firing platforms – or offer an escape route out of the city.

This great defensive barrier encircles Münster in a rough zig-zag pattern for a circumference of 4.5 kilometres, rendering the city impregnable to all but the most determined army, one equipped with grappling hooks, scaling ladders, catapults and cannon, and willing to besiege the city for months.

The gates are magnificent structures. Many, like their nearby churches, are named after saints: St Ludger, St Martini, St Servatius, St Giles and St Mary. The Cross, Horst and St Ludger gates are the most heavily fortified, their foundations made of harder stone. The Jews' Field Gate looks out over the Jewish field, to the north-west, where the Jews had lived until 1349–50 when they were banished in the wake of the Black Death, for which they were largely blamed.

Within the town, you find yourself in a Pieter Bruegel painting, replete with all the smells, dirt, folly, noise, squalor and grandeur of the late-medieval world. You head down the cobblestoned lanes, torch-lit by night, past the flickering shadows cast by little wooden homes, almshouses, infirmaries and garden plots. You encounter the guild workers' shops, blacksmiths and pewtersmiths, tanners and cobblers. You pause at rowdy taverns full of beery locals, and then enter the sprawling markets that sell fish, meat, grain and all manner of merchandise.

You hasten past a bleeding criminal bound to the 'stake of disgrace', admire the grand brick houses near St Lambert's and the high stone façade of the Council Hall, and cross one of the little arched bridges over the River Aa, which brings you to a pristine square fronting a church of golden stone. All the routes tend to converge on Münster Cathedral, or St Paulus Dom, set on a slight hill in the centre of town, overshadowing a wide common, the cathedral square, reserved for official receptions. You've arrived in the heart of Münster.

The city rose out of the darkness with a clash of blood and iron, faith and heresy. Its story tells of Saxon tribes returning from the conquest of northern Italy in AD 548 to build a new town between the Weser and Rhine rivers. These 'Westphalians' ('west of the river Weser') named it

Mediolanum (Milan), to commemorate their destruction of the Italian city. A few years later they changed it to Mimingardford (or Mimigardeford), roughly 'the river crossing at the Milanese fortress'.

In AD 772 the conqueror Charlemagne occupied the Saxon lands and forced the pagan Westphalians to convert to Christianity. A decade later he imposed a law, the *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, which condemned those who refused to be baptised. 'If any one of the race of the Saxons shall have scorned to come to baptism and shall have wished to remain a pagan,' the statute read, 'let him be punished by death.'¹

Charlemagne built a Benedictine monastery in Mimingardford, and put it in the care of a Frisian nobleman called Ludger, later canonised, who introduced a rigorous strain of Christianity that, he hoped, would convert the barbarians and save them from Hell. Ludger built the city's first churches and Westphalia's first nunnery, conceived as a home for his pious sister. He earned a happy reputation among his parishioners, if not his superiors, for spending more on alms than on church decorations. During his tenure, the city wiped its association with Saxon conquest and adopted the solid Christian name Münster, from the Greek monasterion, or 'monastery'.

The worship of Christ failed to curb the wrath of men. On 7 May 1097 a dispute between the eighteenth bishop, Count Derek von Winzenberg, and the nobility flared into violence. The noblemen plundered the city, destroying the walls and all the churches. Borchard of Holte, the nineteenth bishop, rebuilt the city, making the ramparts higher and stronger to defend Münster against the ever-present threat of attack. The patricians rebuilt their palatial homes and gardens on a grander scale.

During the following centuries the bishops oversaw the construction of the cathedral, three monasteries and several magnificent churches. The finest accoutrements of the Catholic faith adorned their interiors: paintings and tapestries, marble statues and sculptures, depicting the annunciation, the nativity, Biblical scenes, the three Magi, the crucifixion and the resurrection. Crucibles and monstrances of gold and silver, ornate clocks,

angels bearing wax candles in brilliant candelabra – all resounded to the power and wealth of Rome.

The cathedral reached a state of Gothic wonder in the 1340s, under the thirty-fifth bishop, Louis of Hesse, spreading its stone arms 109 metres along the main square. The spire offered a view in every direction, and inside a great bell tolled the hours like powerful hammer blows on cast iron. A tower built in smooth stone and capped with a lead-covered steeple deepened the awe in which the people held their holiest place.

Within the cathedral, the worshipper beheld a high-vaulted ceiling supported by stone columns. Shards of coloured light streamed through four rows of stained-glass windows. Several chapels, dedicated to saints and financed by wealthy patrons, were adorned in icons and images depicting stories from the Bible. The tombs of three bishops were set in the floor; a heavy sarcophagus of black imported marble contained the remains of one. A magnificent organ replaced two earlier models at the far wall. There were carved wooden benches for the choir, and to the side a stone baptismal font, where the first-born sons of the diocese were christened, as tradition decreed. On the walls around the choir were pictures of the prophecies of the Sibyls, lit by countless lamps and candles.²

Mammon lived next door to God. Across the square stood Münster's treasury, which minted the diocese's coins. To the north was a refectory that contained a feasting hall and a cellar stocked with beer, wine and spirits. Here, the city's lords and patricians would enjoy regular banquets.

To the east of the city, beside St Lambert's cemetery, was the court-house, where criminal and civil cases were heard and confessions extracted, often under torture. Those sentenced to die were hung or beheaded at the Tuckesburg Field, outside St Mary's Gate, a grassy plot surrounded by weeping willows.

South of the cemetery was the main marketplace, packed on market days with vendors selling the fat of the land. Three other markets traded in grains, fish and meat. Here, too, were the 'steps of disgrace', where lesser criminals were paraded in irons or bound to a stake before the mocking

crowd, then flogged, branded or mutilated. Cutting an ear off was a common punishment.

Close by the market were the grand houses of the burghers, and the Council Hall, which contained the council chamber and offices, a wine cellar and dungeons. It was here that leading citizens met to administer the city.

The guild leaders, most of them low-born burghers, met at the Guild Hall, near the fish market to the north-east. This was the scene of heated debate among the artisanal classes, whose power rose with the Lutheran ascendancy. A hostile Catholic witness described the Guild Hall as an illegal gathering of heretics that gave rise 'to every civil disturbance, first introducing various novelties in religion, and finally begetting the monstrosity of Anabaptism'.³

Running through it all was the River Aa. Today little more than a shallow stream, back then, entering from the south through an iron grille, its current was strong enough to drive the mills owned by the Wieck and other wealthy families. Fishing rights were owned by a local lord, a legacy of the feudal system. Near the city centre, the river divided and reformed, creating a little island, then exited north, carrying the people's waste beyond the walls.

Münster was the capital of the diocese of the same name, one of several in the province of Westphalia. Its bishops lived outside the walls, in nearby towns, from where they ran the diocese in the manner of imperial magnates.

Like other late-medieval cities, Münster had a rigid class hierarchy. At the top of the secular pile were lords and knights, who owned houses in town and spent their time hunting, drinking or socialising. Next were wealthy patricians and burghers, businessmen and administrators, who lived in town and ran the council. Lower down were the poorer burghers and guild members, who had the right to vote in municipal elections and ran the sixteen guilds (for, among others, bakers, wool workers, furriers, tailors, blacksmiths, tanners, stonemasons, coopers, pewtersmiths, saddlers and glaziers; each guild was distinguished by their multicoloured uniforms).

Lastly came the workers and serfs. Many were freemen, others serfs since feudal times, but none had any role – yet – in running the city.

In the spiritual hierarchy, the bishop was at the top, followed by the canons, deacons, vicars, priests, abbots, monks and chaplains. The bishops and canons dressed in elaborate garments of woven wool or silk, layered head to foot with furs – sable, mink and ermine – and wore solid gold chains and gem-encrusted rings decorated with their family's coat of arms. Simple habits or smocks identified the lower clergymen, who did most of the hard liturgical work in the city's six parishes (St Lambert's, St Ludger's, St Martin's, St Giles, St Servatius and the Parish Across-the-Water), four monasteries and seven nunneries. The sisters of the Roseum, or Rosenthal, convent were devoted exclusively to St Augustine.

In the early 1530s, nobody suspected that the convulsions of the Reformation would settle here, with so many faiths scrabbling to possess the soul of the people. It was as though God had chosen Münster as a microcosm of Christ's kingdom on earth, compressing every gradation of worship into this humble little town.

image

In 1529 a preacher returned, like the prodigal son, to Münster, the city where he had gone to school. His name was Bernard Rothmann, and he was then about thirty-five years old. His ideas were crystallising into a set of beliefs, an amalgam of extremes hitherto unseen in Christendom. Already he was testing the outer limits of what Luther deemed tolerable, and sowing the seeds of an unusually intolerant theology that married aggressive evangelism with root-and-branch reform.

Born in around 1495 in Stadtlohn, near the Dutch-speaking border, Rothmann was raised in poverty, the son of a blacksmith. His uncle was a vicar at St Maurice's church, just outside Münster. He recognised the boy's ability and arranged for him to attend the cathedral school in the city, which trained future priests. There the lad studied grammar, literature, the ecclesiastical calendar and liturgical music, and sang in the choir. His temperament seems to have been more studious than a clown given to

practical jokes, as his enemies saw him. He went on to teach at a local boys' school in nearby Warendorf.

In the mid-1520s Rothmann completed a masters degree in theology at the University of Deventer under the guidance of Erasmian monks who taught that every individual was a conscientious member of his community, with a rich personal life. God had given you the freedom of will to choose, to make decisions on the right or wrong course, to change your mind – in short, to think. This was a dangerous message in a world in which the Catholic Church presumed to decide how everyone should think.

In 1529 Rothmann secured a chaplaincy at St Maurice's, thanks to his uncle's influence. Of the 'hidden years' before this, we know little. Yet clearly a fierce antagonism welled inside him, a result of the acute sensitivity of an intelligent young man, of humble birth, to the powers that had crushed poor families such as his. With a burgeoning social conscience, he felt the same stab of injustice that had motivated Müntzer and the Peasants' War and would inflame the coming Anabaptist leaders of the city.

And as he took his first steps as a chaplain, Rothmann saw what Luther had seen: the vast corruption of the papacy. Luther's condemnation of the Pope as the Antichrist took hold of Rothmann's thoughts with a coruscating intensity. Everywhere he beheld Rome's parasitism and exploitation of those people least able to help themselves. Everywhere he saw what Luther had so brilliantly expressed: that the Popes had cooked up the idea of Purgatory to promote the sale of pardons to the poor.

True faith, piety and salvation, Rothmann believed, had nothing to do with the cold apparatus of the Catholic Church, with its grand rites and ceremony, sacerdotal fastidiousness and draconian canon law. It had everything to do with the simple message of love – of the Gospels, of Christ – and the expression of that love in a direct relationship with God here on earth, unimpeded by the grand intercessors of the Catholic Church.

Rothmann thus became an avowed Lutheran, and sought to seize the new ideas at the flood. This was all too much for his uncle and those at St Maurice's, who, though tolerant of minor reforms, found the young man's ideas beyond the pale. In early 1530 Rothmann lost his chaplaincy and was

sent off, at the church's expense, to a Catholic institution in Cologne, where he was to be redirected back onto the orthodox path.

He had no intention of taking it. Instead, Rothmann set off on the well-worn pilgrimage to Wittenberg, as reform-minded novitiates tended to. There, Luther and Melanchthon deigned to meet this impassioned young man, as they had met Hoffman and so many other zealous young preachers. They noted his intelligence and eloquence, yet something about Rothmann troubled them. His passions were unguarded, and untutored. His self-righteousness lacked the grace of humility. They concluded that he was probably mentally unfit for the job. As Melanchthon observed, Rothmann might turn out to be exceptionally good or exceptionally bad.

Undaunted, Rothmann wandered southern Germany, writing to a friend from Speyer in May 1531 that he meant to visit Strasbourg, 'the crown among all Christian cities', and 'inquire into everything'. That included the Melchiorite phenomenon, news of which had reached him. He begged his friends to send him twenty gold florins as he was running short of funds.

Intrigued by the Melchiorite ideas, Rothmann appealed to the Münster councillors to be allowed to return to the city. His wish was granted – on condition that he refrained from stoking civil unrest. He arrived in July and bided his time with sober sermons.

But his restraint didn't last, and soon he rounded on the mainstream faiths with fresh vehemence. He rejected several of the sacraments as fabrications. He condemned the Mass, Purgatory, the cult of Mary and the veneration of the saints. He even led a parish mob on a rampage of idol-smashing, toppling the altar in one church, crushing the silver communion chalice and tearing down paintings of the Virgin.

Great crowds were drawn to his raucous performances, many out of curiosity, many in awe of his bravura. His growing band of followers succumbed to his mordant charm, and hung on his every word. He appealed to the poor and debt-ridden. He called for radical reform. He briefly turned St Maurice's into the pounding heart of evangelism in Münster.

The local Catholics took fright. They appealed to Prince-Bishop Friedrich zu Wied, whose bishopric included the city, to issue a mandate banning Rothmann from preaching and expelling him from St Maurice's. This the prince promptly did. But Rothmann refused to leave, and responded with astonishing audacity. He wrote to Friedrich directly, daring to claim on 1 November that, by silencing him, the bishop had insulted Christ Himself:

Most merciful prince,

If only you could see the tears and lamentations of the pious people everywhere who do not merely mourn on my behalf but on theirs and the defamation of Christ; But through the mendacious accusations of the impious your Lordship had decided that I may be deposed from office and they be deprived from hearing the Gospel ... For if they tear my doctrine apart and accuse it of falseness, they insult Christ himself.⁴

Rothmann's plea to the bishop revealed a mind under siege: a crowd of dogs and a parade of evildoers preyed on him, he feared. Yet God would destroy the wicked who had defamed him, he pledged, signing himself 'Your Lordship's most abject little client'. Locked out of St Maurice's, Rothmann took to preaching to his delighted flock in the churchyard. The prince responded by revoking Rothmann's safe conduct, exciting further letters of supplication, in which Rothmann offered to prostrate himself at the prince's knees and begged to be allowed to plead his case in person.

But these entreaties had little effect, and soon the turbulent preacher was forced to seek refuge inside the city, in the homes of friends.

THE BISHOP

*‘Most reverend prince,
‘We implore you, we beseech you, to help us ... May the frightfulness of the
present time, our pale worries and anxieties, the risk of death with which
we are threatened every day, or rather every hour, impel you to succour us
with your advice and help.’*

Münster’s Catholic priests, in a letter to Bishop Franz von Waldeck

At this time, in early 1532, Münster was nominally Catholic, but the Lutherans were in the ascendancy. Priests trod a delicate balance between curbing zealotry and testing reform. If they went too far, they risked the charge of heresy; if they dragged their feet, they invoked the wrath of the people. In this menacing atmosphere, higher clergy relinquished their duty to lead and hid behind administrative tinkering.

That opened the door to reckless, outspoken young men like Rothmann, who seized the pulpits and satiated the parched souls of their parishioners with floods of defiance. Sometimes Rothmann jumped up and preached from the same pulpit as the incumbent Catholic, seeking to drown him out, as happened in St Lambert’s Church, where he provoked laughter by out-preaching Rector Timen Kemner, an orthodox Catholic whom the people had accused of simony.

This had spectacular consequences. On 18 February 1532 Rothmann gave a seemingly impromptu sermon in the churchyard outside St Lambert’s. In fact it was a rallying cry to the faithful. At his signal, the crowd burst into St Lambert’s, threw out Kemner and installed their favourite. Within days Rothmann was named the new rector of St

Lambert's, and received rooms commensurate with his status, in one of the grand guild houses opposite the church.

Events spilled over into uncharted territory. Word of Rothmann's deposition of a Catholic priest raced across town and fiercely divided opinion, encouraging other parishes to question the authority of their pastors. Were you with Rothmann or against him? Did your priest support his calls for social reform, for sharing your wealth with the poor? If not, the zealots cried, get rid of him!

The Catholic and regional officials, chiefly the Bishop, were outraged but reluctant to act. Rothmann was now very popular and had won over many of the town's guildsmen, who so hated the Catholic clergy that the latter scarcely left their homes for fear of abuse.¹ One witness hostile to Rothmann, Henry Gresbeck, recalled the mood. 'In Münster,' he wrote, 'there used to be a respectable council ... and there was good order in the city. But once this parson Stutenbernd [White Bread Bernie] began to preach in the city, one burgher stood up against the other, and some priests opposed each other, so that there was no longer any unity in the city of Münster.'²

Rothmann's self-confidence grew and he now openly attacked idolatry. At his nod, crowds rushed around the city, smashing church icons and images, profaning everything the church held as sacred. His core constituency had been made up of guildsmen, artisans, farmers and journeymen. Now he began to seduce city councillors, businessmen and patricians. He even boasted that he'd won over Bishop Friedrich himself, who trod a careful line between backing Luther's reforms and paying lip service to Rome. On 24 March, after nine years in the job, Friedrich thought it wiser to avoid the heat. He resigned his position and retired to Cologne.

Friedrich's successor was Erich of Brunswick-Grubenhagen, a nobleman of the House of Guelph and a devoted Catholic who deplored Rothmann and wanted him defrocked.

The Münster council refused to renounce their local preacher, an extraordinary act of defiance. There were 'just reasons', they warned Grubenhagen, 'why we judge that Rothmann's dogma is pure and untainted by any filth [i.e. Catholic teaching] and that it conforms with the Gospel.'³

Grubenhagen was furious. He tore off the velvet glove and threatened violence unless the city banished Rothmann, whose pulpit had created a breeding ground for sedition, leading the people into sin. If the situation should endure, the bishop wrote, ‘the surest destruction will result not solely for you but for the entire diocese’. He demanded the city remove Rothmann ‘and the rest of the preachers, and that you restore the ancient ecclesiastical rites and ceremonies within the churches and revoke all innovation’.⁴

Again the city councillors ignored him. In his rage, Grubenhagen fell dead on 14 May 1532, after drinking a large cup of wine. On 1 June the diocese elected a new prince-bishop, another nobleman of ancient lineage, called Count Franz von Waldeck. A Catholic with Lutheran sympathies, Waldeck was made of sterner stuff. And his motives were more in tune with those of the ruling class: wealth and worldly power interested him more than a local crisis in his church.

A painting of Waldeck depicts a puff-faced, pitiless old man with a scrappy beard and wispy brown hair beneath a silver mitre. His baggy eyes look out on the world with patrician disdain, and there is scorn in his full lips. His posture is rigid, as if propped up. A steel breast-plate contains his plump frame, and he is draped in a red and white sacerdotal gown. A blood-red cross hangs around his neck. He holds a sword and a sceptre, the one seemingly intended to coerce the other. The portrait, in sum, depicts the antithesis of Christian humility: here sits a ruthless nobleman, poised in stern judgement on an unruly world, whose guiding animus is the assertion of power.

So much for his appearance. In his mind and his methods, Waldeck was hardly a model of Christian rectitude. While the Catholics applauded his appointment – here was a man who would avenge their faith – the Lutherans saw a decadent old baron who lived for women, booze and the hunt. The fact that he’d had a son with his mistress, though unshocking at the time, was unlikely to enhance his ecclesiastical authority. Rothmann and his followers saw something much worse in the man: a lusty old tyrant and greedy opportunist who had no claim to the bishopric and no right to speak for Christianity.

Waldeck’s allegiances were divided. His wealth was bound up with his family connections to Philip I, the Lutheran Landgrave of Hesse. Yet his direct superior was the Catholic Archbishop of Cologne. For now, he knew

where his loyalties lay: with the Catholic rulers of the Holy Roman Empire, who had the power to suppress Münster.

Aware that the city's priests were being humiliated and removed, that bizarre new ceremonies were replacing the Catholic Mass, and, more alarmingly, that the city's churches were being stripped of their treasures, on 28 June Waldeck reissued Grubenhagen's ultimatum: the city must abide by the Imperial Diet of Augsburg, restore the Catholic rites, cast out the fanatical preachers – which meant Rothmann – and call the people back to subservience and obedience.⁵

The Münster councillors merely acknowledged receipt of the letter. They wished Waldeck good health and promised to respond more fully in time.

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In the city, meanwhile, a great commotion arose. Bernard Knipperdolling, a prominent local cloth merchant and Rothmann sympathiser, summoned the guild masters and the commons – the people's representatives – to debate the dispute with the new bishop. Scores of people gathered in the *Schohaus*, the ornate guild hall in the centre of town. There was uproar. Many rose to defend Rothmann, vowing to fight for his evangelical mission to their last breath. Hadn't he shown them the true path to salvation, and exposed the papal filth and repellent lies along the way?

After much heated debate, the aldermen, guild masters and the commons signed a pact to defend Rothmann and other evangelical preachers against the bishop's incursions. On 25 July the council pledged themselves to Rothmann's teaching of the 'truth' and expressed their full confidence in him.⁶

Moved to respond, Rothmann now openly compared himself with Christ and a martyr to the faith. In a letter to Waldeck he portrayed himself as the Lord's messenger, bearing out Melanchthon's conclusion that he was probably mentally unfit:

That now my person, which is of little significance – for Christ himself endured the same thing – is being torn by false quarrelling, by outrageous, infinite, vociferous lies, does not harm me. But these afflictions without doubt are directed by Satan, the originator of

every lie and calumny, to oppress the noble and salvific word of God, which He explains and distributes among the people through me as His servant.⁷

This was extremely provocative. The people understood ‘Satan’ to mean the Pope and the papists. Waldeck felt deeply affronted: would the man’s blasphemies never cease?

Fearing the bishop’s rage, the Münster councillors appealed to Prince Philip of Hesse, Luther’s champion, who duly warned Waldeck that unless he acted in a wise and pious manner, he risked offending the electoral duke of Saxony and other Lutheran-leaning Christian princes and landowners of the Empire.

The Münster burghers were right to be worried. On 5 August they received a furious letter from Waldeck, threatening violence – unless they abandoned the religion they had taken up, banished the preachers and restored the traditional rites of the Catholic church.

News of the dispute reached the German and Dutch nobility, the owners of the richest estates in north-western Europe. Some saw it as a test case for the survival of the Protestant faith in the region. But they underestimated the intensity of Rothmann’s ideas, which were hurtling well beyond Luther’s reforms. While the Lutherans would retain, in a moderated form, the holiest sacraments of the Catholic faith, Rothmann and his disciples were determined to discard the lot.

The Imperial Court in Regensburg was apprised of the scandal in Münster, and Emperor Charles V was spurred to act. They irritated him, these pesky fanatics. What with confronting the Turks, trying to tame Luther and appeasing Rome, the last thing he needed was a local religious squabble. ‘Thus we command you,’ the Emperor wrote to Bishop Waldeck in August 1532, ‘that you remove the seditious demagogues and their companions not only from office but that you also banish them from the city.’⁸

A delighted Waldeck dispatched the Emperor’s decree to Münster at once.

Now the people were frightened. Were they prepared to defy an edict from the Emperor himself? The councillors and commoners fell into a fierce dispute over how far they should go. The commoners refused to compromise. Any suggestion of banishing their star preacher and accommodating the papists was not only anathema to them, it was against God's will. They lashed out at their detractors. Even moderate Lutheran aldermen who bore the Catholics no ill will feared for their lives and property.

At the same time, Rothmann won the support of some of Münster's eminent citizens – businessmen, property owners and local politicians such as Bernard Knipperdolling, Herman Tilbeck, Caspar Schrodercken, John Langerman, Peter Friese, Peter Mensing and others. They were an unusual minority: most wealthy citizens were appalled by this preacher who was demanding that everyone share their possessions with the poor. They were ready to pack up and leave if things got worse; indeed, many already had.

The patronage of some of the city's leaders emboldened Rothmann to harsher action. That summer he led a crowd into several Catholic churches, disrupted the Mass, smashed altars and images, and replaced the priests, according to a hostile witness, with 'effeminate, ignorant members of their faction'.⁹ By the end of August, evangelical preachers of Rothmann's stamp had seized control of most of the churches in Münster. Only the cathedral and a few outposts remained in Catholic hands.¹⁰

The parishless priests desperately appealed to Waldeck for protection: 'we take refuge in no one (after God) other than you', they cried, from 'seditious men' whose 'disorderly, violent and forbidden acts' had 'smashed' all good and pious ceremony and the true worship of God.

Consequently, most reverend prince, we implore you, we beseech you, to help us ... May the frightfulness of the present time, our pale worries and anxieties, the risk of death with which we are threatened every day, or rather every hour ... impel you to succour us with your advice and help.¹¹

Waldeck replied that he was unable to help them at that time. But if he cared little for the complaints of the ordinary clergy, Waldeck cared mightily for his own honour and power, and Rothmann's insubordination and

insufferable arrogance began to obsess him: this wretched preacher had humiliated and perverted his office and faith.

On 30 August Waldeck took up his quill and reiterated the Emperor's warning: if the people of Münster persevered with their insubordination they would draw down the Emperor's fury and subject their lives to a perilous risk.

Münster's zealots hunkered down and held to their position.

In the following weeks Waldeck growled about taking unilateral action: he would overthrow Münster, sack Rothmann and the seditious clergy, and restore the ancient ceremonies of the Catholic faith. Yet he procrastinated, for good reason. He lacked the military strength. And he was nothing if not a politician: before acting, he needed to know the outcome of an extraordinary gathering of the local nobility and knighthood in Bilderbeck, a town in the diocese, on 17 September. Here, representatives from Münster listened in dread to a litany of charges against their preachers, chiefly Rothmann, who had abandoned all the ecclesiastical rites of worship that bound people to a life of duty and piety.

The Münster delegation requested fourteen days to respond. The burghers needed time to think. They well knew they couldn't remove Rothmann or his 'innovations' without violent resistance. Waldeck gave them eight days.

Eight days passed. On 25 September, Rothmann sent his own reply – a measure of his now boundless self-confidence and pre-eminent role in the city. He utterly rejected the accusations: no, he would not return to the false Catholic doctrine.

A stalemate resulted. To prevent bloodshed, the Münster delegation again appealed to Philip of Hesse to protect them from the bishop. To this Hesse conditionally acceded, buying a little time. In his humiliation Waldeck resorted to sabre-rattling threats, and churlishly confiscated a few cattle being driven from Münster to Cologne. The action provoked the fury of the farmers, who accused him of being a tyrant, an oppressor and a worthless count.

Soon, soldiers were dragooned on either side. Fearing an attack, towards the end of 1532 the people of Münster urged the city council to

appoint an armed guard that might defend them from the Bishop's men – chiefly the 'shaven crowd', or the tonsured monks. Bernard Knipperdolling led the recruitment drive, raising a force of some 300 amateurs, who were swiftly trained as infantrymen. Around the same time he drew up a code of Sixteen Articles that outlawed Roman Catholicism in the city, banning the Mass, the use of Latin, the worship of Mary, prayers to the saints and various forms of idolatry.

The councillors appealed for help from neighbouring towns. They even asked the Archbishop of Cologne to appoint 'fair judges' to examine whether Rothmann had erred. These moves bore no fruit. While some in the nearby towns and villages sympathised, they were helpless to intervene. And Cologne ignored the request, holding the Emperor's line: Münster's councillors had gravely dissented, and their actions could only lead to sedition and arouse unquenchable hatred.

Waldeck heightened the stakes with a harsh temporary measure: he cut off access to the city and placed the roads under the guard of cuirassed cavalymen, forbidding the delivery of food and fuel. To maintain their supplies, the townsfolk were forced to raid farms in the surrounding countryside. On 13 December a raiding party of 600 returned with fifteen wagonloads of firewood and cartloads of flour. The raids terrified the local peasants, who were said to quiver at the appearance of so much as a mouse escaping from Münster.

The bishop raised the blockade after several weeks but his point was made. The threat of a prolonged siege was now very real and imminent.

9

WHITE BREAD BERNIE

‘A number of vagabonds and unknown journeymen have invaded Münster and attempted to implant the cursed and insufferable doctrine of rebaptism into your congregation and establish a terrible unchristian entity.’

Bishop Franz von Waldeck, in a letter to the Münster council, 28 October 1533

image

As his mind darkened against his enemies, Rothmann used all his oratorical skills to rally the people. They responded in great numbers. By December 1532 his parishioners were packing St Lambert’s Church to hear him speak.

He often began by citing St Paul’s sonorous appeal to the Romans:

[I]t is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy.¹

He bewailed the Holy Roman Empire, calling it a realm of darkness, the ‘blackest night of errors’. And he offered hope: the light was shedding its ‘tyrannical chains’. ‘Now, the night has passed and the day is approaching. The very sweet light of the Gospel has dawned! We know what God demands of us ...!’²

On Christmas Day the Bishop reissued his demand to the people of Münster to return to the ancient faith. Rothmann responded with severity. Inspired by his words, at dawn the next day 900 mounted zealots rode to Telgte, a mile from Münster, smashed through the gates, occupied the

streets and burst into the homes of the authorities, seizing cash and jewels and taking eighteen high church officials and army officers back to Münster as hostages.³

No blood was shed, and the prisoners were unharmed and later returned in an exchange. Yet Waldeck, who had left on a holiday before the attack, returned to find Münster bristling with defiance, and Telgte despondent and humiliated. Another raid a few days later sealed the city's fearsome reputation, and Waldeck's plan for violent retaliation gathered momentum and adherents.

The people of Münster paused to reconsider their loyalties. By now many had left or were leaving the city. Even those who sympathised with Rothmann had no stomach to defy the power of the Empire. Some abandoned the cause, locked their homes and fled with their families into voluntarily exile.

But Rothmann would not modify his violent language. The conservative Lutherans, led by Johann van der Wieck, a prominent lawyer, grew alarmed at the behaviour of their chief preacher, and pleaded with Rothmann not to disturb the unity of mainstream Lutheran reform.

Rothmann refused. He would not be muzzled. The most radical doctrines, Anabaptist in all but name, were now intruding on his thoughts. With every sermon he struck further into the unknown, increasingly untethered from the relative safety of Lutheran orthodoxy. He preached the universality of divine grace and salvation through good works and faith, as opposed to the Lutheran doctrine of salvation through faith alone. He inveighed against private property and urged the communal sharing of goods. Many of his ideas strayed perilously close to core Melchiorite teaching.

His treatises and sermons, heretical to the Catholic mind, poured off Knipperdolling's printing presses and circulated around Westphalia and the Dutch-speaking lands. And as Rothmann's fame spread to the wider world, his teaching aroused the enthusiasm of the Dutch Anabaptists, chief among whom were the two Johns, Matthias and Leiden, who felt the powerful allure of ideas so clearly in accord with their own.

And so Rothmann's followers in Münster – a knot of zealous, self-righteous folk, flush with a little learning, in thrall to an insurrectionist preacher and his seditious reading of the Bible – were led to hope that absolute power over the city would one day be theirs.

image

Bishop Franz von Waldeck seemed occupied more by schemes for enriching himself and satisfying the nobility than by the errant souls of those in his diocese. As a sign of his priorities, he would not find the time to be consecrated as an ordinary priest until 1543, eleven years after his election as bishop.⁴ In ecclesiastical matters, he answered to the Archbishop of Cologne. In all else he sought economic and political dominion over this little corner of the German-speaking world.

The nobility, who treated Waldeck as the executor of their wishes, cared more about civil order, their property and the payment of taxes than they did about spiritual reform. They tended to tack towards the religious authority, whether Catholic or Lutheran, which better supported their interests. The trouble was that the ideas of the Anabaptists collided with those economic interests: the Schwärmer sought the redistribution of wealth.

‘Such were the conflicting powers in Westphalia,’ writes the great German historian Leopold von Ranke: ‘on the one side, spiritual princes, cathedral chapters, knightly orders and city authorities, closely bound together; on the other, bodies of citizens vehemently excited, and inflamed by zealous preachers; the one class not less wilful and violent than the other.’ The former employed their powers with the most extreme authority to suppress the new ideas; the latter were ‘ripe for revolt’.⁵

By early 1533 Münster had become a pariah in Catholic and Lutheran Europe, and a brave example to extreme Protestant sects in neighbouring towns. Rumours flared that Waldeck, enraged by the city's insubordination, was planning to take firm military action to satisfy Cologne and the Emperor. A siege mentality began to grip the people of Münster. Would the attack start at St Maurice's Church, just outside the walls, the possession of

which would give Waldeck a perfect vantage point from which to assault the city?

To avoid that possibility, on 5 January, at the sound of a horn, a mob gathered in the marketplace. Armed with stakes, grappling hooks, hammers, crowbars, guns, battleaxes and pikes, they set off to destroy St Maurice's. They plundered the church's wealth, smashed the organ, tore down the altar screen and set about dismantling the steeple. If not for the appearance of the bishop's cavalry, they would have burnt the building down.

image

The next month the city took a bold step into the unknown. On 14 February the Münster council voted to join the Schmalkaldic League, a defensive alliance of Lutheran cities. Philip I of Hesse and John Frederick I of Saxony had established the league in 1531 to cement and defend the Lutheran reforms.

Münster was henceforth officially Lutheran. This did not mean Catholics were forced out – though many of them took the hint and departed – but it ended their aspirations and rendered them a barely tolerated minority within the city walls. Equally frustrated were the zealots: the decision did not go nearly far enough to meet the demands of radical preachers such as Rothmann.

The people felt endangered and alone, like other newly minted Lutheran communities. Fear of a Catholic counterattack bred hysterical gossip. They readily believed horror stories of official vengeance. They had all heard stories of the burgher Arnold Belholt, who had been arrested by the Bishop on charges of sedition. According to the rumour, Belholt had been bound in chains and thrown into a cell full of poisonous toads and snakes.

In fairness to Waldeck, although he was nominally Catholic he sympathised with the Lutherans. He sent many constructive letters to the Münster councillors, proposing a peaceful, conservative compromise. But these dismissed the demands of the popular preachers, whom he utterly disdained, which heightened rather than eased the tension.

A message to the Archbishop of Cologne set the tone. While ‘wishing to obey the Emperor’s commands’, Waldeck wrote, he would not suffer ‘certain lowly, insignificant and seditious preachers’ to set the pace. He would not be dictated to by zealots who had seized the parish churches, cast out the pastors and curates, and ‘impudently taught unheard-of erroneous doctrines in violation of the Christian religion’.⁶

Nonetheless, there were sincere efforts made on both sides to defuse the conflict. On 14 February, after much correspondence and official toing and froing, Waldeck and the Münster council signed a truce. In essence, the Bishop agreed not to overthrow the six evangelical parishes (including Rothmann’s), on condition that those Catholics and Lutherans loyal to him be free to worship and perform the sacraments, unmolested, as their faith set forth. Furthermore, the city must continue to pay taxes due to the diocese ‘since ancient days’. Exiled burghers must be free to return to the city. The prisoners taken by either side should be liberated. And everyone should refrain from ‘slander, insult and revilement’.⁷

Yet the terms of the truce gave the council the right to appoint clergy and decide the nature of worship in the six parishes. This effectively stripped the Bishop of his traditional power over Münster. The local councillors could now remove any preacher or priest they deemed impious or heretical, and appoint a successor of their own choosing.

The little world of Münster was turning upside down: now the evangelicals enjoyed executive power. The Bishop, the Pope and their tonsured monks had been routed. Catholics were still able to practise their faith, but they were now a frightened and beleaguered minority. Mainstream Lutherans, too, felt shut out by a deal that gave the radical councillors, now in the majority, extraordinary powers over religious expression.

Rothmann was the champion of the hour. The will of the ‘people’s preacher’ had prevailed. He now effectively controlled the six parishes, and was free to preach as he pleased. Where his faith travelled the city would follow. His crowning act was to marry the rich widow of a high official, a kindly notary called Wiggers, who’d reportedly drowned after she’d neglected him while he was recovering from an illness in the baths at

Emden. Another rumour held that she'd poisoned him. A passionate evangelical, she had caught Rothmann's eye at one of her garden parties, and a passion of 'the most violent nature' had formed between them.⁸

On 3 March 1533 the people elected a new council. They voted to replace the wealthy patricians and conservative burghers with fierce supporters of Rothmann: a locksmith, a hat seller, a tawer, an ironsmith, a dress cutter, a tailor, a painter and a tanner, as well as a few prominent citizens such as Bernard Knipperdolling, all of whom now had the power to choose the local community leaders.

Knipperdolling had great influence. A rich cloth-merchant and able speaker, he threw aside his class ties and allied himself with the evangelical faith of the ordinary people, who could now push the limits of their freedom in Münster. The evangelised councillors, seeking the holy high ground, voted to impose a puritan moral code that was more censorious than the one it replaced. There were new punishments for fornication, incest, drunkenness, gambling and 'high living', usury, defamation, profanity, and even oaths and curses.

At the same time, there germinated in Münster in 1533 a small, peaceful expression of the strange new faith of the rebaptisers, spiritually marooned in the only city that would tolerate them. These local Anabaptists were not cut from the same cloth as John Matthias and his Melchiorite followers, whose arrival was still some months away. They were peaceful, in the main, but their views were extreme, and hardening. Some of their ideas appealed to Rothmann, but initially he refused to join them as he still had doubts about adult baptism.

In April Rothmann accepted the Anabaptist interpretation of the Eucharist, and taught it to friends such as Herman Regeward, a Lutheran preacher (and future Anabaptist) in nearby Warendorf. Echoing Rothmann, Regeward ridiculed a Catholic opponent who'd argued that Christ's body would remain present in the consecrated bread even if it were locked in a stone vault for a hundred years. Summoned to defend himself, Regeward declared: 'It is intolerable that [the bread] should be worshipped when

enclosed in stone or gold, since only God is to be worshipped.’⁹ The case reached Münster, where the new council firmly backed Regeward.

In this way Münster announced to all of Christendom that it rejected the idea of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, openly defying Lutheran and Catholic doctrine. In so doing, it raised a welcoming flag to Anabaptists and radical sects throughout Europe, whose members began to stream into the city, drawn by the siren song of the vicar of St Lambert’s and his fellow preachers.

The zealots in Münster were emboldened, and now unleashed some of the worst abuses of the Catholic minority. ‘Hey, starving priest, haven’t you eaten enough of your God yet?’ shouted Knipperdolling at a priest officiating in the cathedral in April.¹⁰ A fresh burst of altar smashing and icon destruction ensued, in Münster and surrounding towns. The people of Ahlen were reported to be in the grip of religious hysteria, and the burghers of Dülmen were ablaze with heresy.

image

Several visitors were now to exert a decisive influence on Rothmann’s mind. One was John Bockelson – John of Leiden – who had slipped into Münster in July, and began to secrete Anabaptist ideas into the ears of the burghers and guildsmen. Leiden didn’t stay long, but his ideas affected Rothmann greatly. Leiden absorbed the mood of the city, thought it a perfect refuge for the Melchiorites and departed, fully resolved to return.

A little later, four evangelical preachers from Wassenberg sought refuge in Münster. Rothmann welcomed them as brothers in Christ, but rejected, at least at first, their belief in adult baptism. Henry Roll, the most outspoken of the ‘Wassenberg Preachers’, tried to persuade him to reconsider. To choose to be baptised as an adult was the only path to salvation, Roll argued (even though he himself had not yet been baptised). Roll’s more militant pupil, Herman Staprade, who had followed him to Münster, dared to preach that infant baptism was ‘an abomination in the face of God’.¹¹ Infant baptism, the Wassenberg men claimed, was a mere adiaphoron –

something to be treated with indifference. (Roll would later be captured in Maastricht and burnt at the stake.)

These new ideas amazed the crowds in Münster, seduced the local preachers and outraged the stalwart conservatives. Anabaptists began to crowd into the city. One councilman tried to drag an ex-convict turned Anabaptist from the pulpit, shouting:

What are you doing, rascal, talking to the people here? You are unworthy to climb the pulpit. You were held by the neck at the stake because of your disgrace, and were branded with glowing iron on one cheek by the hangman ... Go away! You and your doctrine and your burnt-in scar!¹²

In reply, a newly converted crowd of Anabaptist women rushed to the preacher's side and shouted down the councilman.

All this was too much for the members of the newly evangelised council, who felt they were losing control. The people's councillors may have been zealous reformers, but they weren't prepared to abandon the holiest sacraments. They embarked on a heated debate over the city's direction. What if Rothmann converted to Anabaptism? As far as they knew, he had not yet been rebaptised, but his friendship with Roll and the 'Wassenbergers' suggested it was a possibility. If he did, would the people follow? Would the city be overrun with rebaptisers? Were they facing an Anabaptist supremacy? In which case, what would become of the city's newborns? Would they be condemned to live in sin? And how would the powers beyond the city walls react?

The backlash intensified. A furious debate erupted in the council chambers on 7 and 8 August, in which several senior aldermen bitterly attacked Rothmann and the Wassenbergers. When the furore ended, the Lutherans, under the leadership of Johann von den Wieck, persuaded the council to retain the sacrament of infant baptism, ruling that every parent should be free to baptise their newborn children in the church fonts unmolested.

The resolution infuriated the Anabaptists, whose numbers in the city were mounting. And when Rothmann appointed Herman Staprade as his assistant preacher at St Lambert's, the crisis boiled over. Roll's protégé

swiftly stamped his ideas on the parish, publicly refusing on 7 September to christen babies in the church font. Several highly ranked parents were turned away. Livid at this provocation, the council forbade the 'Rothmannites' from preaching, and temporarily banished them from the city. They refused to leave.

Appealing the decision, Rothmann displayed all the self-righteous zeal of the new convert. 'What case,' he thundered in a letter sent to the council on 17 September, 'do you have against us, who have publicly declared that the teaching of infant baptism is wrong? Pass judgement on yourselves! ... We will profess the Truth before God, even at the cost of our lives and all our property.' With those words, Rothmann roused the popular will against infant baptism and rallied the Brethren, the brothers and sisters of the new faith, to his cause.

The four Wassenbergers – Henry Roll, John Klopris, Godfrey Stralen and Dionysius Vinne – were also signatories to Rothmann's letter.¹³ They continued to refuse to obey the council's directive. Helpless against Rothmann's popularity, the council acquiesced: the Anabaptists were allowed to stay, but were forbidden from preaching.

image

Rothmann's soul had made an extraordinary journey. Not yet forty, he had travelled the full spectrum of the Christian faith, from strict Catholic to Lutheran to Evangelical to Anabaptist. This metamorphosis had revealed a character of great stamina, mental agility and public appeal, yet one beset by the self-doubts of the 'low-born', and dangerously vulnerable to the persuasive power of more ruthless leaders.

As 1533 drew to a close, he reconciled himself with Anabaptist teaching. Under the sway of Roll and the Wassenbergers, Leiden and others, his mind fastened itself to the Melchiorites like a barnacle to a ship. Now his sermons began to echo the principles of Melchior Hoffman, whose writings continued to emanate from Strasbourg. The difference was that Rothmann, unlike the placid Melchior, believed the faithful should take up the sword.

Rothmann's appearance changed too. Gone were the stiff ruff and black cassock. He now got about in a simple brown smock, reflecting the stark absolutism of his mind. He projected the meekness of a holy man. The crowds adored him; the women kissed him. Pared down, stripped of ostentation, he strove to emulate the humble demeanour of Christ.

He portrayed himself as a holy man, Christ's emissary on earth. According to a hostile witness, Rothmann imagined himself as not a mere man 'but some divinity in human form, being grave and thoughtful in walk, stern in visage, stoical, unlaughing, sober ... and tinged with a remarkable pallor'.¹⁴

Rothmann insinuated himself into the people's hearts. He earned the nickname 'Stutenbernd', or 'White Bread Bernie' – white rolls were called 'stuten' in the local dialect – for his insistence on using leavened white bread rather than traditional wafers in the Eucharist, which he transformed into a cheerful feast of remembrance of the Last Supper.¹⁵ According to Henry Dorpius, a witness, 'He broke some rolls in a large dish, poured wine over them, and, after speaking the Lord's words of communion, told those who wanted the Holy Communion to dig in.'¹⁶ Rothmann would also summon the people to communion at strange times, sometimes in their homes and by the bedsides of the sick, arriving rather like a travelling doctor, with lumps of white bread tucked up his sleeves. The abundance of bread devalued the rite, and people came to treat the Eucharist as just another meal, one washed down with wine.

His services were rousing evangelical performances, soaring celebrations of the love of Christ, peppered with bitter attacks on his 'godless' persecutors. He encouraged singing and dancing, and seemed to care little if his parishioners turned up drunk. He delivered his sermons in bold, portentous tones, as though the spirit of Matthias and Leiden ran through him.

'You must share your property,' he told his followers, 'care for the poor, pursue good works and lovingly embrace each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. None of you should exalt yourself above another. All of you are equal before God. But beware the papists! They have contaminated the

earth with their foul doctrines and evil ceremonies! A terrible calamity will afflict them. All will die a cruel death except us, the Elect, who will live for the love of Christ blessed for a thousand years!’

image

In the last months of 1533 the battle of words raged on. Letters, ultimatums, threats and appeals to higher offices went back and forth between the city and the authorities. Like an ancient vendetta, the hostility became mutually reinforcing, until the origins of the dispute blurred and hatred reigned.

News of Rothmann’s Anabaptist preaching aroused the fury of the Lutheran grandees. In a series of blistering dispatches, the great Philip Melanchthon stooped to rein in this wayward preacher:

Nothing has ever befallen me, in such an unexpected way, as to learn that you condemn and prohibit children’s baptism ... Thus I ask you again and again, for Christ’s sake, that you consider the tranquility of the Church and do not abolish the baptism of children.¹⁷

Luther himself weighed in. He warned Münster of ‘the crafty lying spirit creeping into your undertakings’, and reminded them of the terrible fate that had befallen other Anabaptist leaders. No matter how ‘splendid’ a preacher this ‘Master Bernhard’ was, Luther wrote, the man risked falling prey to the ‘devil’s trickery’, which ‘ensnared the pious and learned’.¹⁸

Waldeck’s appeals for dialogue dried up, and he resorted to aggressive ultimatums. ‘A number of vagabonds and unknown journeymen’ had invaded Münster, he wrote to the city council on 28 October, and ‘attempted to implant the cursed and insufferable doctrine of rebaptism into your congregation and establish a terrible unchristian entity’. If these ‘Schwärmer’ refused to stop trying to ‘mislead the simple-minded mob’, he would be forced to take harsh action. Invoking the imperial mandate against Anabaptism issued at Speyer on 22 April 1529, Waldeck told the council not to grant the fanatics residency or shelter, ‘but without delay to

purge yourselves of them and to expel them from our city to avoid the disfavour of the emperor, his majesty and the holy empire ...'¹⁹

Such ultimatums rang hollow, though, because the Bishop lacked the weapons, money and men to back them up. Nor had he fully appreciated the surge of popularity for the rebaptisers, who were now on the verge of seizing control of the city.

Waldeck was forced to bide his time. He appealed to Cologne for help to crush the rebellion. This was about something far more important than salvaging the plebeian soul of a heretical city: at stake was the wealth and power of the ruling class.

The Bishop found a willing audience in the conservative Lutherans led by Van der Wieck, who alerted the Chancellor of Hesse, Johann Feigk, to the city's disastrous direction. 'As soon as I came to Münster with my books,' Wieck wrote on 15 November, 'Bernhard Rothmann and his fellow journeymen were preparing to make Münster a stronghold of the Anabaptists. So it struck me that these things must be resisted ...' Banishing Rothmann was the only answer, he argued. Exiling him would moderate the city: 'the Papists will turn to a large degree evangelical and the Anabaptists, being robbed of the head of their party, would have to repent'.²⁰

But Wieck, too, had underestimated the power of the new ideas. Three days later he appealed to Philip of Hesse to act against the 'poor, corrupt bunch' of rebaptisers: 'If we do not get rid of Bernhard Rothmann, it is certain that this city will be corrupted and destroyed by internal discord.' Many were mere down-and-outs, he suggested, drawn to Anabaptism to escape poverty. 'I know nobody among them who, for the sake of his debts, could raise two hundred guilders,' he claimed. As for Rothmann's theology, it had been 'invented in such strange and changeable ways ... taught white today, black at other times, that reasonable people can no longer believe his teaching and sermons. Therefore, none of his writings to your princely Grace should be given any credence.'

Wieck ended by urging Philip to banish Rothmann to a place where he could 'do no evil': 'Thus this city would be saved from discord, infidelity, corruption and death, and this would lead to the acceptance and proliferation of the Word of God.'²¹

The Landgrave of Hesse failed to act. And Rothmann and Münster would not be cowed. The people ignored Waldeck's threats and Wieck's appeals. In despair, the Bishop summoned another assembly, at Dülmen, in the hope of thrashing out common ground with the Münster councillors. This merely threw oil onto the fire, and gave the townsfolk a chance to protest the theft of their cattle.

image

Towards the end of the year, Rothmann took up his pen with fresh vehemence. The old world had been shaken to its core, but where, he wondered, were the torchbearers of the new? Where were the new crusaders, bringing Christ and his teachings to the ordinary people?

Such questions motivated him on 8 November 1533 to publish his 'Bekentnisse van beyden Sacramenten' (Confessions of Both Sacraments), an evangelical manifesto co-written with other preachers and addressed to the 'deans, pastors and presbyters' of the city. It set out to oppose all those who had outrageously reviled 'Christ's doctrine as hare-brained, crazy, erroneous and heretical'.²² 'God's Word,' Rothmann thundered, 'has been inverted into mendacious fables, the baptism into a game, the Lord's Supper into a sacrificial Mass.' He spoke of 'violations' against the 'commands of Christ' through the erection of 'horrible idolatry' and 'the devil's deceit'.

The preacher promised to bring the Word to the illiterate crowd. He enlightened them to the Scriptures, the nature of God, the Fall of Man, the Incarnation, the coming of Christ. He railed against Catholic 'ceremonies' and the Mass as 'superstitious', 'useless' and 'impious'. Purgatory, too, was an 'impious fabrication', and the Pope's pardons of sinners 'pointless lies'. Only Christ had the power to forgive the sinner and remit the sin. Prayers to

‘dead saints’ were worthless: saints should be honoured through imitation, not worship.

Violence was permissible in the service of the state. The politician was the authority to whom God has entrusted the sword to punish evil and praise the good – as St Paul had said to the Romans: ‘But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.’²³ But if a government denied Christ, the people should ‘obey God rather than men’. As if this wasn’t subversive enough, Rothmann condemned the practice of exorcism, a beloved Catholic rite performed on ‘animals, statues, water, candles, plants, church bells and other such things’. None would be ‘improved with exorcism’.²⁴

Rothmann’s treatise caught the attention of Münster’s rebellious guildsmen and councillors, many of whom eagerly embraced it. The town’s Catholics and moderate Lutherans remained silent. To speak out risked provoking the preacher’s passionate defenders.

At the same time, he issued a nineteen-point manifesto which surpassed even Matthias’s in the severity of its language: infant baptism was an abomination before God; the sacraments, the Mass, vespers, the holy water and the candles were the work of the papist devil; the Eucharist was a ‘great Balaam’; the only true Christians were those ‘who first believed in Christ and then were baptised in his name’; the government of the pagans should be disobeyed; Christian marriages between couples who had not been baptised as adults were invalid; usury was prohibited; and all property should be held in common, following the example of the Apostles.²⁵

Rothmann’s open rejection of infant baptism allied him with the Anabaptists. He wrote of the power of the Tau Cross, and the horror that awaited those who refused to receive it in adulthood. Like Matthias, he drew on the warning from Ezekiel that any left unmarked by the Tau deserved to die.²⁶ To be worthy of the seal, the people must renounce sin, the devil, their own flesh and the entire world. They must resist gluttony, whoring, gaming, rash oaths and blaspheming.

Rothmann first preached this doctrine at the Church of St Servatius on 21 December, to a large Anabaptist crowd. In so doing, the most powerful preacher in Münster realised the council's fears. White Bread Bernie had become a fully fledged Melchiorite in all ways except one: he was yet to be baptised.

Elsewhere in Münster, the Lutherans quietly observed the Last Supper, and a little gathering of Catholics grieved in the cathedral in silence.

image

Soon, everyone from the lowly peasant to the high-born patrician was forced to choose: were you with Münster or against it? More precisely, were you with Rothmann and his radical preachers, or were you with the moderate Lutherans or the orthodox Catholics? Your answer could determine whether you were worshipped, ridiculed, beaten up or even killed. Preachers of all stripes risked violent attack.

And those questions now travelled well beyond Münster's walls. By the end of 1533 Rothmann's pamphlets and sermons were proliferating through Westphalia, Frisia and Holland. His work reached Matthias, Leiden and the Dutch Melchiorites, most of whom were then in Amsterdam and preparing to leave for Münster. They marvelled at a mind of such persuasive power, whose ideas chimed so harmoniously with theirs. Here was a kindred spirit, a man who openly condemned private property as the source of human misery.

With such ideas, Rothmann spoke to Matthias's heart. For was it not against God's will, the baker asked, to think in terms of 'this is mine and this is yours'?²⁷ Had not God made all things for all living creatures to share – fire, air, water, food, riches, sunshine – and not for the exclusive enjoyment of a grasping tyranny?

When the poor and destitute read these words, thousands took up their fardels and joined the pilgrimage. The walled city rose in their imaginations like some fabled paradise, hovering above the rank and wicked world. And so Münster inched towards its terrifying fate, weeks before Matthias and Leiden arrived at the head of crowds of their disciples, fleeing persecution.

NEW JERUSALEM

‘You used to be evangelicals and advocates of the cause, but now you have changed your mind and turned back into papists. You gobble the Hessian God ... Soon you are going to pay a penalty worthy of your deeds. Be hanged, never to return alive! Ha, ha, ha, ha, you papists! Ha, ha, ha, ha, you gobblers of God!’

A gang of Anabaptist women, including six converted nuns, upon bursting into the all-male Münster council

They walked in the shadow of towns and steeples, across darkened fields and snowy meadows. They walked under the brows of great Gothic cathedrals, soaring reminders of the Pope’s earthly power, ‘stone temples’ built not to venerate Christ but to subdue the weak. They came from the Dutch- and German-speaking regions, from the towns of Amsterdam, Leiden, Deventer and Wesel.

The authorities in those towns were relieved to be rid of this irksome sect, whose strange dress, baptismal rite and bursts of hysteria had so disturbed their cities. Dozens of Anabaptists had earlier run naked through the streets of Amsterdam, crying, ‘Repent! Repent!’ Some officials were moved to compassion as they watched them go. ‘Many Anabaptists are starving and all are poor,’ reported Reynier Brunt, the general procurator in Amsterdam. They were ‘all poor folk, all of them badly off’.¹

They had little time. The end of the world was upon them. Yet they felt safe, thinking they were the Lord’s Elect, the Children of God. To Lutherans and Catholics, of course, they were merely the violent Melchiorite strain of Anabaptism, loathsome heretics who deserved nothing

less than an agonising death. And now they were leaving their spiritual ghetto and venturing out into the world, as naked to the storm as they had been in the wild forest clearings where many were baptised and first heard the Book of Revelation. And as they travelled, they wondered what New Jerusalem would be like. Would it be the shimmering city of Revelation, with ‘a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal’? Münster had ‘a high wall with twelve gates’, just as Revelation said. Would there be angels guarding the gates? And would the walls be made of solid jasper, and the city of ‘pure gold, clear as glass’ and adorned with every jewel?²

The Anabaptist leaders knew they were not heading to this New Jerusalem: the bejewelled city described by John of Patmos awaited them in the more distant future. Nor were they heading to the City of God described by St Augustine, where the just and unjust lived together until Judgement Day. No, only the just would live in their Jerusalem, as mentioned in the Psalms and Old Testament prophecies, a citadel of the pure and righteous, gathered together to celebrate Christ’s near return.³

Thousands were desperate to get there in time. The Dutch Brethren travelled through the earldoms, bishoprics and principalities of the Low Countries, the ‘nether lands’ (which would not become the national entity of ‘Holland’ until 1648, after Dutch liberation from Spain at the end of the eighty-year war), and into the German-speaking region of Westphalia, where the little town of Münster beckoned them like a warm and friendly torchlight.

For many, this was their first journey from home. They were entering a world that detested them, the prospect of which loomed in their minds like an Old Testament landscape: the baleful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, the savage land of Noah’s before the flood, the terrifying path of Exodus from Egypt. And everywhere they saw cruelty, famine, conflict, moral decay and sexual abandon. Storms, eclipses, shooting stars, natural phenomena they construed as terrifying signs of the coming Eschaton. This was real. This was happening. Evil leered in from all sides. Grinning heretics mocked them, rogues screamed obscenities at them, drunks and fornicators abused them, government agents hounded them. Everyone, they felt, wished them harm.

But a great thought sustained them: soon they would be spared all this. Soon Christ would return – at Easter 1534, as Matthias had prophesied – and He would deliver them from suffering and fling their enemies into the

flames. And so they pressed on, towards the scene of their salvation. Thousands risked their lives to reach Münster before Easter. A group of thirty-seven were arrested on 4 March, and confessed before a Dusseldorf court that when the Son of Man returned, ‘not one-tenth of the population will survive’. Only in New Jerusalem would there be peace and security.⁴

In Münster, the year 1534 opened with a series of hysterical scenes and apocalyptic visions: of the humiliation of priests and nuns, of the destruction of church property, of the constant flow of people in and out of the gates. Signs in the sky, falling stars, third suns and terrifying storms bore out the prophecies of the preachers, or so their followers believed. Many ordinary folks were yet to decide in whose hands their salvation lay, yet many others were certain: as the number of foreign Anabaptists rose, the local Lutherans and Catholics were leaving. Some 2000 fled or were expelled in the first two months of the year, while around 2500 outsiders, most of them rebaptisers, arrived, bringing a net gain of 500. The total population rose and fell during the Anabaptist reign, but most estimates average it at around 8000, some 4000 to 5000 of whom were women, as well as 2000 men and 1000 young children.⁵

In early January the Melchiorite missionaries Bartholomew Boekbinder and William Kuiper arrived in Münster, sent by the Prophet Matthias, as two of his twelve apostles.⁶ They stood before the people and declared Münster the New Jerusalem, scene of the return of the Messiah and humanity’s final reckoning with God. Those who hoped to be saved must be baptised and join the chosen people. The mass baptism of the city should start at once.

For this job, the envoys would need the help of local preachers. So they hastened to the gabled mansion near St Lambert’s, home of Bernard Rothmann, who had so impressed Leiden on his previous visit. He welcomed them and wanted to help, but there was an immediate obstacle: Rothmann himself had not yet been baptised. Was anybody qualified to do so? Boekbinder and de Kuiper resolved to rectify the situation, and the next day Rothmann, the Wassenbergers and other preachers were baptised outside St Lambert’s church.

There was no going back now. Rothmann had converted to the Children of God, the Melchiorite strain of Anabaptism that Luther and the Pope had damned as heresy. From this point on, Rothmann pledged himself to Matthias and Leiden and the defence of their chosen faith. From this point, he was a marked man, who risked capture and a ghastly death if he dared set foot outside the walls. Now, as the city's most popular preacher, Rothmann was instructed to begin baptising the adult population right away.

The sign of the Tau spread like a spore on the wind. Desperate to be saved, the people queued to be baptised – in private at first, in their homes and gardens, and then in the city squares and council chambers. They came from all classes, professions and trades, locals and foreigners alike. The ceremony soon became a spectacle of public defiance.

Wealthy women were particularly susceptible to Rothmann's fame and charisma. And he employed a shrewd fundraising tactic: he linked their salvation to their abandonment of worldly goods. No one who adorned her body in jewels and lived in riches, he warned, could hope to be saved. Over several weeks hundreds of women were baptised after surrendering their jewels, gold pins, studded belts and other valuables to Rothmann's faith. Many wives did so without telling their husbands, who were furious when they found out. On 11 January one councilman, Christian Wordeman, beat his wife senseless when a servant informed him that she'd been baptised and given away her jewels. 'She could barely crawl, much less walk,' a witness reported.⁷

Nuns longing to be saved threw off their habits, abandoned their celibacy vows and rushed into the city. Rothmann baptised several from the Convent of St Giles and the Convent Across-the-Water. The sisters' flight was so serious that Ida of Merfeld, Abbess of the Convent Across-the-Water, appealed to the Bishop's 'princely mind' for help: some of her 'fellow maidens', she wrote, had gone into the city to hear the sermons and 'do not want to come back'.⁸

Such was the power of the Tau. If the Last Days were truly upon them – and who dared doubt the Prophets Elijah and Enoch? – none wanted to be left behind to perish in the flames. The young witness Henry Gresbeck observed that 'the rebaptisers had grown so numerous in the city that soon they were able to publicly baptise whoever wished to be baptised'.⁹

The baptised used special signs, greetings and items of clothing to identify each other. When Anabaptist men met on the street, they held the

other's hand, kissed each other on the mouth and said, 'Dear brother, God's peace be with you.' The other would answer, 'Amen.' Anabaptist women replaced their hats or headscarves with wimples, a long sash with a covering for the head.¹⁰

Swiftly their numbers rose, until the Anabaptists were strong enough to denounce those who opposed them – and encourage others to join them. Those who refused to be rebaptised were forced to leave town. Families were rent asunder. Staunch Lutheran men whose wives had been baptised packed up and abandoned their families and homes. By now, too, most Catholics were long gone – all of which served to encourage John of Leiden, who made his crucial visit to Münster at this point, mid-January 1534, and reported to Matthias of the warm welcome they could expect in the city.

Some Münster visitors clung to the hope of accommodation with the Melchiorites. A few brave souls tried to win the rebaptisers back to the Lutheran cause. One was Derek Fabricius, a Lutheran clergy-man from Hesse, who had arrived in autumn 1533 on the orders of Landgrave Philip. Fabricius pleaded with the people but his words did not sway a defiant crowd.

In January a crowd of Anabaptist women moved against him. Fabricius, they claimed, was an imposter who 'hissed in a foreign tongue' and was 'rash, foolish and driven by some evil spirit'.¹¹ Some hurled clods of cow dung at him, demanding his expulsion. When a few Lutheran burghermasters intervened to defend Fabricius, the women shouted, 'You are not councillors, for what is good for the public you ignore. You are not fathers of the fatherland, for you neglect the fatherland. In fact, you are worse than murderers, since you deny not only the body but also the soul of their nourishment.'¹²

Fabricius informed Philip, his chief backer, that there was 'nothing but violence, rioting and joining forces against us'. If only Bishop Waldeck would 'scare the Anabaptists a little more', he pleaded, 'so that obedience and fear among them would return'.¹³

But they did not scare easily, especially the baptised women. In early January a gang of them, fortified by six converted nuns, burst into the

council chambers and harangued the all-male leaders with a stream of insults:

You used to be diligent evangelicals like us and promoters of the cause, but now you have changed your mind again and turned back into papists. You devour the Hessian God. Soon you will pay a penalty worthy of your deeds. Go to the gallows and never return alive! Ha, ha, ha, ha you papists! Ha, ha, ha, ha you devourers of God!¹⁴

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By mid-January Bishop Waldeck had abandoned hope of preserving Münster through negotiation. A vigilante regime had usurped his power, so he decided to deploy a more forceful approach. On 20 January he wrote to Philip of Hesse for ‘advice and counsel’ about how to put an end to ‘the cruel heresy, cursed sect and doctrine of rebaptism by the seductive preaching of Bernhard Rothmann’, which was growing daily.

The rebaptists’ insistence on communal property deeply aggravated the Bishop. He accused them of defrauding the poor by promising ‘a new Christian life’, in which there would be no poverty so long as all money and possessions were ‘held in common ... just like at the time of the Apostles’.¹⁵

Three days later the bishop sent an edict to the diocese banning the Anabaptists and denouncing its leaders as heretics and common criminals:

... we have reliably been informed that the damned, forbidden and rebellious party and doctrine of the Anabaptist preachers [he meant Bernard Rothmann, Henry Roll, Johann Klopris, Hermann Staprade, Dionysius Vinne, Godfrey Stralen] and their cronies has taken root in our city of Münster. If we were to let this evil run rampant without punishment, we draw upon us not only the disapproval of the Imperial Majesty and the whole empire, but also bring upon our diocese and our subjects perpetual discord and irreparable harm, into ruin indeed.

To protect the diocese, he ordered the Münster council to ‘banish this seditious doctrine ... from the city and ... not [to] tolerate it in any way within its walls’. To halt the spread of the ‘cursed schism’, the Anabaptist preachers and any citizen who defended or sheltered them must be arrested at once and severely punished for ‘their godlessness and wickedness’.¹⁶

The council did the opposite, showing just how little Waldeck understood the changing power relations in the city. On 9 February, in response to fears that the Bishop was about to attack, the Melchiorite leaders and 500 armed supporters, amid much shouting and singing, seized the marketplace.

Their fears were well founded. Their Lutheran opponents, who were in contact with Waldeck, answered by occupying the Parish Across-the-Water. A standoff ensued. Meanwhile, 3000 of the Bishop’s mercenaries were massing outside the city, ready to breach the walls and seize the troublemakers. Waldeck even sent a letter demanding entry, promising to respect the new liberties. But an influential burgher named Herman Tilbeck, who secretly had radical sympathies, seized and suppressed the letter.

Panic broke out when some of Waldeck’s men managed to penetrate the walls, enter the city and seize several prominent citizens, including Bernard Knipperdolling, and briefly imprisoned them. Knipperdolling made much of his captivity, shouting to the people from his cell: ‘O Father, Father ... Punish the godless!’

Fearing a local civil war, the Lutherans and Anabaptists agreed a truce. Domestic bloodshed should be avoided at all costs. Neither wanted to lose the city’s cherished independence to an imperial occupation. The Bishop’s forces withdrew and the prisoners were released. For now, a strained peace reigned.

Yet the settlement enraged Waldeck, who had been left out of the negotiations and humiliated. Once again he took up his quill and fired off letters to the Archbishop of Cologne and the Duke of Cleves, pleading for help in suppressing ‘this dangerous sect’, whose outrageous actions, if not controlled, would lead to ‘irreparable ruin, destruction and devastation, the revolt of the common man and great bloodshed in Münster and the region’.¹⁷

The Anabaptists were victorious. The truce gave them time to bed down their new status as the biggest faith in town. People cavorted in the streets. Some imagined they could fly. Others frolicked in mud. To cap it all off,

they viciously parodied the pre-Lenten festival: actors dressed as monks dragged along a wagon, on which sat an impersonator of Bishop Waldeck. Dressed in a robe and carrying a silver mitre stolen from a local church, he waved mock benedictions to uproarious laughter.

Rothmann wrote glowing letters about the Melchiorite triumph. He recorded a series of visions reported by the people that, they supposed, divined victory: a man with a crown of gold, with a sword in his right hand and a rod in his left; a man with both hands dripping with blood; a white horse flying through the air; fiery clouds and three suns shining at once on the marketplace. (Meteorologists have since discovered that polar lights and a parhelion were in fact visible from Münster at the time.)¹⁸

Importantly, the struggle had unmasked the Anabaptists' enemies: locals loyal to the Bishop hung wreaths of straw over their doors during the fracas to identify themselves. They had hoped Waldeck would spare them if he prevailed in a pitched fight. Now their true allegiances were clear to all, and at the worst possible time: the Melchiorites were about to receive new weapons, reinforcements and the leadership of an Old Testament prophet.

THE CHOSEN PEOPLE

‘We were so faithful to each other and firm, and thus saved each other from the heretics’ hand and power. The Anabaptists made every effort that we should surrender to their faith. But God preserved us ...’

A sister in a Münster nunnery, in a letter to a friend

The great black-bearded figure of John Matthias, incarnation of Enoch and the sword of the Melchiorites, entered New Jerusalem in February with his adolescent wife, Divara, by his side. Matthias, then in his fifties, was tall and forbidding, with a great jutting brow. He wore a long, black-hooded robe and carried himself with the aura of a high priest – or, as some felt, the Grim Reaper. The beautiful, dark-haired Divara was dressed entirely in white, and seemed to flutter alongside him like a visiting angel. They arrived at the head of a small crowd of delighted Melchiorites, Matthias’s adoring followers.

Happily reunited with his Dutch-speaking brothers and sisters, Matthias and his entourage walked through the parting crowds to the square fronting St Lambert’s Church, where he rose to speak. A hush fell upon the people. Matthias gazed about fiercely, as if anticipating at any moment an encounter with evil. All had heard of Enoch but few had seen the Prophet; his towering presence and fearsome facial hair amply fulfilled their expectations.

Matthias began by declaring that God had revealed to him that the city of Münster was the millennial kingdom spoken of in the Bible as New Jerusalem. Laying two stone tablets in the churchyard, Enoch gazed at the sky and, with the gravity of a holy man, revealed that the Almighty, whose

spirit breathed through him, had chosen him to reveal the mind of God to the poor, ravaged descendants of Adam.

It was God's will, he said, that he and John of Leiden should instruct them, the chosen people, in the pure and holy service of God. He ended with a rousing declaration of their spiritual power: 'Almighty be our doctrine and our power, and praised be the will of our Father, who has sent us to found the New Jerusalem, the city of Regeneration, the thousand years Kingdom, according unto His Holy pleasure!'¹

Their dazzling leadership had by now all but expunged the memory of poor Melchior Hoffman, the sect's peaceful founder and namesake, who still languished in his Strasbourg dungeon 'quite despised and forgotten'.² Together, Matthias and Leiden forged a fearsome duo: Matthias, the wild, violent and impulsive prophet; Leiden, the shrewd pragmatist with the survival instincts of a politician. In their hands, Münster would become a refuge for the persecuted, a spiritual oasis and, soon, a Christian kingdom they deemed fit for the coming of the Lord.

To that end, they needed help – men and women of faith and courage – and so they appealed to their brothers and sisters in Frisia, Holland and Westphalia to come and join them. In a sign of his subordination as a 'mere instrument' of Matthias,³ Rothmann was instructed to write these invitations – to the people of Osnabrück, Soest, Hamm, Wesel, Coesfeld, Warendorf, Ahlen, Dülmen and Schöppingen, and to the Dutch cities where many were under imminent threat of arrest.⁴

Matthias ordered the people in those places, in the name of the Lord, 'to flee out of Babylon' and come at once to Münster, where 'certain prophets' had been sent by the Heavenly Father to 'proclaim the pure word of God' and spoke with the 'most marvellous gift of tongue'. All those who sought 'everlasting salvation' should 'forsake their worldly goods' and 'come unto us here to the New Jerusalem, to Zion, to the Temple of Solomon!'⁵

And thousands came, or tried to: night and day new arrivals streamed into the city, overjoyed to be united with their brothers and sisters. The roads leading to Münster were thronged with pilgrims, some walking alone with staffs in their hands, others in family parties, driving wagons loaded with clothing and furniture and household goods. They were low-born and high-born, and spoke all manner of dialects, mostly of German, Frisian and Dutch origin. Of the 8000 to 9000 residents of Münster in early 1534, some 4000 were foreign, mostly Dutch-speaking Melchiorites.⁶

Among them were Henry Krechting, the Gaugraf of Schöppingen, who was captured on the way and rescued after his son raised the alarm; Lord Bernard Krechting (Henry's brother), the priest of Gildehaus; Herman Regeward, the pastor of Warendorf; Peter Swering, a wealthy patrician, and his wife from Coesfeld; and John Dusentschuer, a crippled goldsmith.

Many came filled with enthusiasm, singing 'Hosannah' and dancing and cavorting as they went.⁷ They carried swords, guns, pikes, halberds and other weapons, in anticipation of the war with the Antichrist. As they entered the city, eager to show off their zeal, some rushed through the streets shouting to the people to repent, repent and love the Lord their God.

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Very quickly the Melchiorite faith infiltrated the upper levels of the administration and became dominant in the city. Matthias pressed for official representation; his aim was complete control of the city.⁸ On 24 February (or 23rd, in some accounts), he achieved it: the men eligible to vote elected an all-Anabaptist council. Matthias had won power through the ballot box.

The new councillors were mostly guildsmen and artisans, cobblers, furriers, tailors, blacksmiths and other craftsmen, but there were several rich businessmen and patricians. Henry Redecker, a master guildsman, became an influential alderman, while Knipperdolling and a fellow master tailor, Gerard Kibbenbrock, were named joint mayor. All were ultimately answerable to Matthias. And all were compelled to be baptised, if they hadn't been already.

And so these Children of God were on their own, cast adrift from traditional Christianity, in thrall to a blacksmith from Amsterdam who had persuaded them that he was the spirit of the great-grandfather of Noah. The Anabaptists had taken possession of an independent, heavily fortified city. They gave thanks for the impenetrable wall that separated 'the evil outside from the virtue within'.⁹

The few 'unbaptised' Lutherans and Catholics who remained became prisoners in their own homes. To leave meant risking being branded a spy or an Anabaptist, which fetched a death sentence; to stay meant living at the mercy of Matthias. And so they hid themselves away, and waited in mortal fear of what would befall them.

Revelling in their strange new power, the Melchiorites abandoned all restraint. Their spirits ran free. They were God's chosen, the spiritual heirs of the first Apostolic Church of Christ – of that, none was in any doubt. At last, too, they were rid of their tormentors: government officials, papal intercessors, priests, monks, pardon sellers, tithe collectors, torturers, executioners. Gone were the Lutheran humanists and intellectuals, whom they distrusted. Most Melchiorites had no university training and rejected scholarship; 'I study with hoe and flail,' was a common remark.¹⁰

They were acutely sensitive to the natural environment, prone to interpret lightning, strange lights and patterns in the sky as divine affirmation of their place in the firmament. When the sun shone on a weathercock, making it glister like gold, they prayed to the miracle of the weathercock. When the Bishop's camp lit a huge bonfire – marking the start of the siege – they swore they had seen a great fire blazing on the plain, flanked by two enormous swords, and they interpreted this as a warning from God.

Astonishing visions possessed the city. A crowd in the marketplace claimed to have seen a giant blue flame descending from the heavens, through which the light of the sun gilded their faces. Above the blue flame they saw a knight on a white horse galloping towards Münster, his sword drawn to cut down the impious. Others reported a vision of three great cities hanging in the night sky, thought to be Münster, Strasbourg and Deventer, scenes of the most fervent Anabaptist activity. Senior burghers reckoned they'd had divine hallucinations. 'A face in the moon', Knipperdolling saw, with 'Moorish' people standing either side of the man in the moon – a symbol of the long anticipated Turkish invasion.

Throughout February and March chiliastic visions dazzled their minds, while their hearts burned with intimations of the Messiah. Matthias and Leiden stirred up the frenzy. 'Get out, you godless people!' they cried. 'God's just about to wake up and punish you!'

The people responded, rushing to outdo each other in zeal: 'I can see the Heavenly Father with many thousands of angels making dire threats against you,' shouted a tailor. 'Woe, woe, to you impious people!'¹¹ Crowds rushed around the city, crying, 'Repent! Repent!' Semi-naked women, their hair streaming, their bodies shaking, shrieked at the unrepentant. Some were seen writhing in the streets in a kind of sexual ecstasy. One wore a goat's bell around her neck.

Sober citizens and senior burghers were caught up in the zealotry, swooning and dancing and throwing themselves on the ground in the shape of the cross. Leiden himself went on a rampage of self-righteous zeal, shouting to the people to come out and repent. A strange spirit seemed to possess Knipperdolling, who was found standing before a wall in his home, addressing the Heavenly Father in odd, faltering tongues. Some saw this as an omen, others as a sign of madness.

And now their hatred of the Catholic faith erupted in a fresh iconoclastic frenzy: baptismal fonts, statues and images of Christ, reliquaries, altars, dedications to saints, clocks, organs, carvings, stained-glass windows – any item or image that attempted to glorify Christ and his disciples – was smashed or burnt. All were deemed graven images, an affront to piety and godliness.

The destruction of St Maurice's resumed. The church outside the walls – seen as a dangerous firing platform – was burnt to the ground. When the sisters in the Niesing monastery witnessed the 'fire from our balcony', wrote one, 'we were extremely dismayed and saddened by it, because we were aware of what was yet to come. They cut down the trees around the city, and burnt the fences and houses which stood in every garden, because they feared that the city would be besieged.'¹²

An orgy of vandalism descended on St Paul's cathedral on the night of 24 February. Fortified by Matthias's power, a Melchiorite mob stormed the last Catholic redoubt, grabbed the keys from the sextons and locked themselves inside for two days.¹³ With nobody to stop them, they unleashed a destructive whirlwind. Taking up their axes, knives and crowbars they mutilated the painted images of the sibyls and slashed the images of the saints and the Apostles. They tore out the organ's pipes. They drilled holes through a diptych of the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist, converting it into a latrine. They plundered the tombs of the bishops and canons. They ripped up the hymnals and medieval manuscripts and burnt them in great pyres in the cathedral square, where they also hung an effigy of Bishop Waldeck. It was said they even used the sacred texts as toilet paper, smearing excrement on the pages before setting them alight.¹⁴

Next they emptied the monastery. On 27 February an armed throng burst into Neising. 'They brought with them preachers, who were to instruct us in rebaptism,' a sister wrote. 'With them also came some young virgins from Überwasser [Across-the-Water].'

The Anabaptists formed a ring around the sickly Mother Superior, led her into the dining hall and demanded that she submit to baptism. She and the other nuns bravely refused to allow it. ‘We were so faithful to each other and firm,’ the sister wrote, ‘and thus saved each other from the heretics’ hand and power. The Anabaptists made every effort that we should surrender to their faith. But God preserved us ...’ The intruders screamed that the nuns’ hearts were harder than stone and ‘began to trample their feet very hard’. But the nuns stood firm.¹⁵

The monks and nuns were ordered to leave the city. They received safe passage but were denied adequate food. ‘So we departed peacefully,’ the sister wrote. ‘After many requests they gave us bread and two herrings for the carter, even though we left behind four tons of herrings and many other foods. We had also baked and brewed at the time, and had a great supply of all things’ – including 220 malters of grain (equivalent to about 4400 kilograms). ‘Of all this we were not allowed to take anything with us.’¹⁶

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Drunk with power, Matthias gave a sermon near the fishmarket. Any citizen who had not yet been baptised must leave the city or face the death penalty, he declared. That meant not only the Catholics and Lutherans but also any other ‘sect’ whose members refused to submit. ‘There is no place in New Jerusalem for your filth,’ he cried, ‘no place for the contagion of the godless, the foulness of the impious. New Jerusalem could not stand riven by sects and schisms: the enemies of the city must be routed and eliminated!’

Those enemies were ubiquitous. ‘Everywhere we are surrounded by dogs and sorcerers and whores and killers and the godless.’ All must leave or perish, he barked, because the Lord ‘demands the purification and cleansing of His New Jerusalem’.¹⁷

Wiser heads moved to deter Matthias from this bloody course. Leiden and Knipperdolling quietly advised him against the mass slaughter of innocent people. It would surely bring the wrath of the Empire upon them. ‘They would have killed us all if Knipperdolling had not changed this proposal, which spelled our doom,’ wrote Hermann von Kerssenbrock, a boy witness, many years later.

That consideration, of course, had not restrained the Catholic and Lutheran authorities from trying to exterminate *them*, an injustice not lost on Matthias. Even as he spoke, the brethren knew that, outside the city walls, their brothers and sisters were being tortured, burned and drowned. Henry Roll had been burned at the stake in Utrecht. Waldeck himself had ordered the execution of twelve Anabaptists in nearby towns, drowning the women and burning the men alive.

By night, Christ's Elect kept watch from the ramparts. Leiden himself wandered the walls, assessing the risk of an attack. Fires crackled in the darkness out there, marking the limits of the Bishop's camp and the trailing torches of the exiled.

Had the siege begun? In late February earthworks sprang up around the town. In reply to the threat, Leiden encouraged local men to enlist in a little Melchiorite 'army'; a few hundred kept a constant watch in the marketplace, keeping a brazier fire burning. That day a winter gale blew in, bringing rain, snow and blasts of cold air. Here was God's wrath, the Melchiorite leaders cried, raging against those who had refused to purify themselves.

Matthias and Leiden seized on the storm as a sign: a warning to those yet to be baptised. They entered the marketplace armed with swords and shields. Matthias tore around the square, shouting at the street vendors: 'Come to your senses, come to your senses, you wicked people! Don't you realise that the natural order is raging against your crimes? ... Oh you stupid, insane group of impious people, come to your senses, come to your senses, so that you may be marked with the sign of our Covenant, lest you be excluded from the people of God!' ¹⁸

The Prophet then threw himself on the paving stones and fell into a trance. Rothmann, Leiden and Knipperdolling were by his side, and they announced that the Lord was about to reveal himself through Enoch. On cue, Matthias opened his eyes and spoke as if the Lord was talking through him: 'Hear now the word of your God! Cleanse this holy city of its impurities!' ¹⁹

There followed three days of mass baptism. Roaming bands of Melchiorites drove the unbaptised from their hiding places, in cellars and attics. Many were elderly, very young or sick, and so went willingly, their eyes glistening with the promise of salvation. They knelt in rows before the preachers in the squares and council chambers, as three handfuls of holy

water were drawn from a pail and poured on their heads – in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

On the first day, 300 people were baptised. Rothmann was prolific. Among the scores he baptised in late February was Herman Tilbeck and his family, the last of the burghers to convert. By the end of the month, all the councillors, guildsmen, workers and their wives, as well as the priests and nuns who had stayed in the city, had received the sign of the Tau and been reborn into the Lord's grace.

A terrible enthusiasm then possessed them and they goaded one another to more extreme expressions of love for what they believed and hatred for what they rejected. They heaped fresh scorn on the Catholics and Lutherans. They devised juvenile pranks that ridiculed the Mass and the Eucharist. The city's ne'er-do-wells dressed up as monks or Teutonic Knights. Clowns imitated the Pope on makeshift altars. Mock priests cavorted around town on wagons, delivering phony sermons and screaming, 'Death to the heathen and to the godless!'

A few hundred unbaptised folks held out. Neither zealous nor orthodox, they had hoped to tread a middle path. They accepted the Melchiorites because some of their friends and family had joined the sect – but why should they disown the sacrament they had received at birth? Or hand over their worldly goods to a band of strangers? They failed to see that if you weren't with Matthias, you were against him. And now they faced a stark choice: submit to the Melchiorites or pack up and leave town. Some were ill, elderly or unable to walk. Others had families: what were they to do with their children? And the men whose wives had been secretly baptised – were they to abandon them?

Matthias was unmoved. He ordered the stragglers to the Council Chambers, where Rothmann and three preachers were waiting to baptise them. Those who refused were banished, forced to gather up their few belongings and pass out of the gates. Many were sick, mothers and fathers, young children – ordinary, well-meaning people hounded from the ancestral homes in which their families had lived for generations. Husbands or wives whose spouses had been baptised were torn from their families and flung outside the walls.

Henry Gresbeck witnessed the expulsion. The Melchiorites, he wrote, ‘chased out of the city everyone who was unwilling to have himself baptized. The people had to abandon everything they had, house and home, wife and child.’²⁰ Kerssenbrock saw the weak and infirm herded out of the city like animals. He wrote of freezing children whimpering barefoot in the snow, and pregnant women giving birth in the fields beyond the city walls.

Gresbeck and Kerssenbrock were observant young lads hostile to the new regime, and they exaggerated what they saw. Yet many citizens were indeed stripped of their belongings and thrown out of the city. The Lutheran preacher Fabricius had to disguise himself to escape an angry mob, who would have beaten him to death had they discovered his identity. Some Melchiorites even assaulted and stole from the people as they left. Matthias himself was said to have robbed a butcher at the point of a spear; Rothmann compelled a woman who was too fat to travel to submit to baptism or die. The brave woman succumbed. ‘If therefore you want to rebaptize me, rebaptize me in the name of one hundred devils, for in the name of God I have already been baptized.’²¹

The banished deserved their punishment, Rothmann later wrote. They were ‘godless’ people who had decked their houses in straw wreaths, a sign of their loyalty to Bishop Waldeck and their betrayal of the rest. ‘Whatever is not so marked should be taken away and plundered,’ he concluded. He confirmed that the Melchiorites had driven them out without their belongings. ‘It’s true,’ he said, ‘but it was enough that we let them go, as they were God’s and our obvious enemies.’²²

Even those who had resisted Matthias were not safe outside the walls. John van der Wieck, leader of the orthodox Lutheran party and Syndicus of Münster, was arrested en route to Bremen where he hoped to seek asylum, and beheaded without trial on the Bishop’s orders.

At the same time, tens of thousands were trying to get into Münster, spurred on by a new appeal, attributed to Rothmann and Matthias, to ‘come to the New Jerusalem, the city of the saints’, and escape the Lord’s wrath on Judgement Day.²³

And they responded in great haste, like Noah’s family heeding God’s call to board the Ark. Propelling them were fresh waves of persecution throughout the Dutch-speaking and German-speaking lands. Flying columns of soldiers were hunting them down, by the hundreds. In captivity they were tortured – racked, flogged and broken on the wheel – until they

recanted and denied their baptism. And if they refused, they were executed. The Anabaptist Obbe Philips went in disguise to witness the burning of the preacher who had baptised him, but the victims' faces and bodies were so horribly deformed by the effects of the rack, the wheel, the smoke and flames that none was recognisable.²⁴

Such horrors made their dreams of salvation more urgent. In March the apocalyptic fervour peaked in the Dutch-speaking lands. As many as 16,000 gathered a few clothes, savings and arms, and prepared to sail from Monnickendam to Swarte Water, thence to travel overland to Münster. Many had sold all their valuables to buy this passage to salvation.

All had seen the letter signed 'Emanuel'. It was from Matthias himself, urging them to sail at once for New Jerusalem: Come, he urged them, come, 'for there is riot upon the whole world'. He likened them to Lot's family fleeing Sodom, and he warned them not to look back 'for anything on earth', lest they be deceived like Lot's wife, who looked back on the burning of Sodom and was turned into a pillar of salt. They were to take only money, clothes and food, he said, and their weapons: 'Whoever has a knife, or a spear, or a rifle, he shall take them with him, and whoever has not shall buy them; For the Lord will redeem us through His mighty hand.' They were to meet near Hasselt at the Bergkloster, a mountain monastery, around noon on 24 March. 'Be careful in all things,' Matthias advised. And be there on time: 'If anyone remains behind, I will be innocent of his blood.'²⁵

And so this marine Exodus out of a Dutch-speaking Egypt set sail for the promised land. Between 22 March and 24 March, a fleet of twenty-seven ships embarked from Monnickendam, containing around 3000 passengers. The voyage was a fiasco. Some ships sank. The surviving passengers meekly surrendered to the few soldiers and police who awaited them at Genemuiden. Bishop Waldeck's spies informed him immediately of their capture.²⁶ The Melchiorites' leaders – two of whom, the baptisers Kruyper and Boeckbinder, ran through the streets crying, 'Woe! Woe!' – were promptly seized and executed. Very few even reached Hasselt; none would get to New Jerusalem.²⁷

Purified at last, alone with their faith, the Melchiorites felt a swelling of self-righteousness. Surely they had validated themselves in the eyes of God? Surely He was smiling on them? With their possession of Münster complete, they were free to worship as their doctrine allowed. Feelings of joy and kinship bloomed. Fresh converts arrived and were duly baptised. The Children of God were tearful with happiness and bristling with pious zealotry. They grew arrogant, and contemptuous of their enemies.

It would be Easter in a few weeks, and the End Days would begin, as Matthias had prophesied. The Son of Man would return and they would all be saved. In the meantime, with the sword of God in their hands and the love of Him in their hearts, they prepared to defend New Jerusalem to the death and annihilate the godless hordes who were assembling around the city.

For all their spirituality, the Melchiorites could be ruthlessly pragmatic. However lovely the appearance of their spiritual freedom, however tenderly they gazed on their fellow Elect, it had not escaped the harder-headed brethren that they were locked inside a walled city with no apparent means of escape. Yes, God would intervene and save his Chosen Ones. But until then? Would they suffer an excruciating death in advance of His descent?

Leiden and Rothmann were quietly aware of the situation. In the pamphlets he dispatched to the Dutch- and German-speaking lands, Rothmann always pressed his brothers and sisters to come armed. The Lord required evidence, he wrote in one, ‘that we are willing to fight for ourselves and for His Kingdom’.²⁸

Matthias, however, was unperturbed. He trusted God to deliver them from evil. The Lord would crush their enemies when the time came. Matthias’s was a mind coldly divorced from the brute facts, and given over completely to his faith. He shunned ‘that whore reason’ as the whisperings of the devil.

Yet a series of brute facts lay outside the city. There, in a deepening semi-circular band, around the eastern circumference of the city, lay the entrenched lines of Bishop Waldeck’s burgeoning army of mercenaries. Their night fires crackled in the distance, their cavalry’s horses stamped and snorted, their cannons were being hauled into place, and great contraptions designed to smash the city’s defences were being assembled.

Matthias hastened to reassure the people that whatever befell them, God would be by their side. Most of the Melchiorites trusted him. Thus far, he

had proven a true prophet. And they were prepared to fight to defend their faith. Many newcomers, heeding Rothmann's words, had arrived with muskets, swords and pikes, or whatever weapon or tool they could find. And on entering the city, secretly by night, the preachers rallied the people's spirits with soaring sermons.

Young John of Leiden had a firmer grip on their earthbound reality than his mentor. He inspected the city's manpower and defences. He found that Münster had only 1600 combat-capable men, and another 500 or so adolescents and elderly. None were trained soldiers; virtually all were civilians. Of a population of about 9000, more than 5000 were women, and there were 2000 young children. Every able hand, he realised, from young girls to the elderly, would have to help defend the city.

Yet Münster was blessed with great advantages. In the city's giant ramparts the people beheld an earthly symbol of God's protection, the embodiment in stone of His spirit. Their walled city invoked Luther's famous hymn:

A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing.

And the people trusted in their walled defences as if they were fortified by God Himself. The fortifications were indeed formidable: only a huge army equipped with heavy cannon and giant cannon balls and pontoons and scaling ladders would be capable of storming the system of earthworks, walls and moats, the defence of which required only a small army of sharpshooters.

Still, there was much to do, and Matthias and Leiden ordered the citizens to prepare. The people jumped to the task with astonishing energy. Since God had willed them here, to defend their faith, they would do everything in their power to equip themselves for the task. They reinforced the walls and stockpiled their weapons, readying themselves for the attack they knew would come. Paving stones were ripped up, linden trees felled, and marble slabs torn from Catholic tombs – all material to be packed against the inner wall. By night, reconnaissance parties crept outside the

city to deepen the earthen ramparts, check the bridges and gates, and spy on the enemy.

Münster possessed a formidable arsenal. Set in stone battlements around the walls were eighty-six heavy cannons, twice as many as the Bishop possessed. As well, they had 450 muskets or arquebuses, and many swords, pikes, bows and other firearms. The men devoted hours to learning how to use them.

The city's food supplies were another source of comfort. Münster had bulging granaries, smokehouses and breweries, as well as winter barns packed with cows, sheep and pigs. Fruit and vegetables grew in the garden plots, watered by the River Aa, which supplied drinking water and a ready flow of carp, bass and eel. There was enough to feed everyone for at least a year.

Comforted by this visible evidence of their strength, they sang and prayed. They adapted several of Luther's hymns to their own teachings. They sang without alteration 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God'. They shouted the lines of their favourite psalms, 6, 46 and 124:

Psalm 6:

Depart from me, all you workers of evil,
for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping ...
All my enemies shall be ashamed and struck with terror;
they shall turn back, and in a moment be put to shame.²⁹

Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
He utters his voice, the earth melts ... ³⁰

Psalm 124:

Blessed be the LORD,
who has not given us
as prey to their teeth.

We have escaped like a bird
from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken,
and we have escaped.

Our help is in the name of the LORD,
who made heaven and earth. [31](#)

12

A FALSE PROPHET

‘They were so angry with him that they did not kill him like other people, but beat and cut him into small pieces.’
Obbe Philips, on the fate of ‘Enoch’

With Easter and the coming of the Messiah imminent, Matthias now worried for the people: were they ready for salvation? Were they pure enough? Look to your souls, he cried; you are greedy, lustful, frivolous, ungodly. How will you appear in the eyes of the Lord? Knipperdolling and others joined in. ‘Improve yourselves! Be better! For the Lord will come,’ they implored the Melchiorites.¹

New Jerusalem should live according to God’s, not man’s, law, Matthias insisted. The people’s first duty, he declared, should be to pool their worldly goods in emulation of the Apostles, as recounted in Acts 4:32–37:

... no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common ... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.²

And Matthew 6:24: ‘You cannot serve God and wealth.’ All of which flowed from the words of Christ Himself, in the Sermon on the Mount: ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.’³

Private property was a curse, and greed a moral abomination, Matthias taught. He thus turned the Melchiorites into much more than another heretical sect. They were a deeply subversive political and economic movement. Their walled Westphalian enclave was a living rejection of the entire established order of the Holy Roman Empire.

Matthias now instructed Rothmann to persuade the people to obey the new decree. The chief preacher would become a sort of town crier, and voice of the faith. Rothmann's job was to bend the people to Matthias's will.

'Dear brothers and sisters,' Rothmann told a crowd in the main square, 'now that we're a single folk, brothers and sisters, it's absolutely God's will that we shall bring together our money, silver and gold. The one person is to have as much as the next. So everyone should bring his money up to the registry next to the council hall. It's not appropriate for a Christian to have any money. Be it silver or gold, it's unclean for a Christian. Everything that the Christian brothers and sisters have belongs to one person as much as to the next ... It's mine as much as yours, and yours as much as mine.'⁴

Wealth, usury and profit were incompatible with the love of God, he told them. 'Everything which has served the purposes of self-seeking and private property, such as buying and selling, working for money, taking interest and practising usury, or eating and drinking the sweat of the poor – that is, making one's own people and fellow creatures work so that one can grow fat – and indeed everything which offends against love – all such things are abolished amongst us by the power of love and community. And knowing that God now desires to abolish such abominations, we would die rather than return to them.'⁵

All commercial transactions were banned, and the currency itself abolished. (The city would later mint its own coins.) Food and clothing would be freely distributed, rendering money redundant. In Münster, observed Knipperdolling, who had divested himself of some of his wealth, every citizen would have 'one God, one pot, one egg and one kitchen'.⁶

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Among those listening that day was the young cabinetmaker Henry Gresbeck, who had moved to Münster from the neighbouring town of Osnabrück to look after his mother's property. He now found himself

locked in the city, obliged to serve as a soldier under the new Anabaptist administration.

Something of a yokel, Gresbeck detested the Anabaptist outsiders who had streamed into town. He felt special contempt for the Dutch-speaking Melchiorites, whom he correctly identified as the fanatical rump of the movement in Münster. He was incensed by the sight of Rothmann and Knipperdolling colluding with the Dutch strangers to seize control of Münster and strip it of its wealth. He despised the destruction of church property: it should have been sold, he believed, and the proceeds distributed to the poor.

His feelings were in conflict. He admired the ideal of a common-wealth and he felt sympathy for the poor. And as a Lutheran, he abhorred the wealth and power of the papists. Yet he deplored the way the Melchiorities were collecting and redistributing the city's wealth – unfairly, in his view. Many citizens were surrendering their money and valuables under duress and in fear of punishment, not in the name of charity or the common good.

As he watched the lines of people disburdening themselves of their possessions – driving wagons of food and household goods into the cathedral square, and lugging boxes of jewels and coins to the council – Gresbeck felt his fury rising. The blood-curdling threats and bursts of violence of Matthias and his followers horrified him. 'They preached so fearsomely and imposed such a dire penalty ... that no one dared to retain anything,' he recorded.

Especially ominous, in Gresbeck's view, was the growing influence of Leiden, who said of the council's treasury of riches: 'This money, silver, and gold is for our best benefit in case we need it.'⁷

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It was true that anyone who refused to hand over their worldly goods faced severe punishment, exile and possibly death. Only silent dissenters and those of a more practical bent buried their most expensive valuables. Yet most willingly performed what they saw as a selfless act of charity for the good of the community. It put into practice the Melchiorite principle that 'good works' were in harmony with God's will and a prerequisite for salvation; 'faith alone' would not get anyone to heaven, they believed, despite what Luther had taught. And during those few months, from

February to April 1534, at the height of apocalyptic fervour in Münster,⁸ the city enjoyed an efflorescence of ‘good works’, as sincere as they were tyrannical.

The people looked to the selfless example of their persecuted brothers and sisters, who had raised funds for the poor well above the ‘tithe’ recommended by Rome. They had given to the sick and the bankrupt. They had condemned usury; love, not interest, should motivate a creditor, they believed. Hadn’t the visionary Hans Hut inveighed against ‘the profit-seeking, pleasure-loving, ambitious, hypocritical scribes who preach for money’? Hut had set up communal funds for the poor,⁹ and urged his disciples to ‘look upon the poor, who are despised by the world ... as were Christ and the Apostles’.¹⁰ They delighted in the story of the Anabaptist peasant who lived with his only child near Ansbach, and who sold his field and several oxen, cows and horses to help fellow peasants who had several children to support.¹¹

And so, for a brief moment, the Münster poor enjoyed the pleasure of eating the same food and wearing the same clothes as the rich. Servants took over the estates of their masters, who had fled or been expelled. Ordinary folk were persuaded to think of these privileges as a gift from God – literally manna from Heaven.

One woman wrote to her sister, inviting her daughter to Münster:

I’m not concerned whether she has clothes or not. Send her to me; she’ll have enough here. For you should know that the Almighty has bestowed such grace upon us that I am able to go about in gold, velvet and silk clothes ... and the poorest have become as rich through God’s grace as the burgomasters or magistrates of the town.¹²

The pooling of the people’s possessions continued well into April. Matthias appointed seven ‘deacons’, whose task it was to go from house to house, checking off lists of goods the inhabitants were obliged to surrender. Their coins and jewels, gold and silver items, necklaces, rings, ornaments and other valuables were deposited at the council, in strong boxes to which only the councillors held the keys. The food – mostly meat, grain and fish – was stockpiled in general stores, and kegs of beer were kept in the breweries. The people henceforth ate meals together in ‘community houses’ set up

near the city gates, with food distribution regulated by officers of the new Anabaptist army.

In February and March Matthias dispatched some thirty emissaries to Westphalia and the Dutch-speaking lands to spread the good news. They bore copies of Rothmann's sermons, whose words fell like a miracle into the lives of the poor. 'The poorest among us,' he wrote, 'who used to be beggars, now go about dressed as finely as the highest and most distinguished ... God has made known to us that all should get ready to go to the new Jerusalem, the City of Saints, because He is going to punish the world.'¹³

Matthias compelled the people to realise his dream of a proto-communist society, reminiscent in some ways of the island idyll portrayed by Thomas More in his book *Utopia*, which was first translated into German in 1524. And yet, the inhabitants of More's utopia lived peacefully, equally, in a polytheistic society of sun, moon and ancestor worshippers. Münster was of course monotheistic, where communal sharing was an expression of God's will, as taught by His Son. Everyone was free to earn money, work and farm, but the fruits of their labour should be 'ours' by the grace of God, not 'mine'.¹⁴

And some were more equal than others, as Gresbeck slyly noticed. The richer converts – men like Knipperdolling, Kibbenbock and Tilbeck – may have surrendered part of their fortunes but were loath to relinquish their power. They still owned the grandest homes in the city and occupied the most important administrative jobs. Chief among them was Knipperdolling, the fifty-year-old businessman of stern demeanour, who got about in heavy grey robes and a long, square-cut beard. One of his two pretty daughters by his late first wife had already caught Leiden's eye.

In mid-March Matthias's regime took a sinister turn, in the eyes of the schoolmasters and many parents. The Prophet decreed that every book, with the exception of the Bible, must be destroyed.

The brethren had already burnt most texts sacred to the Catholics, including a collection of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts and printed books, as well as works by Augustine, Aquinas, Erasmus, Luther, and the great poets and philosophers of antiquity. They'd scythed through the

records of the past, uprooting and discarding any works associated with the rites of the old church.

Now they seized on contemporary literature, school manuals, treatises, pamphlets, educational tools, poetry – all were consigned to the flames. Matthias sent his agents into every home, school and place of worship. They confiscated the offending material and cast it onto a great pyre in the Lord's Field. They tore up account books and records of lawsuits, official documents and charters dealing with ancient feudal relations, and scattered them in the streets. 'All letters and seals, privileges, registers, and accounting books had been destroyed,' Knipperdolling would later confess, 'so that from then on all things would be common, and no one was to hawk or bargain.'¹⁵

Matthias had set in train the deletion of the history of Münster.¹⁶ The Bible alone would guide and educate the people, the Prophet announced. The minds of Melchiorite children were to be the purest receptacles for the Gospels, untainted by godless treatises, pagan literature or false teaching. The city would know no other history, no other Past or Future, other than the story of the Son of Man recounted in the Bible. Their conception of time would be the divine arc of God's Word, stretching from the prelapsarian dawn in the Garden of Eden to the twilight of the Earth in the fires of Revelation.

The people of New Jerusalem would henceforth inhabit a realm cut off from the earthly world in time and place.

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Not everyone, however, accepted Matthias or his regime. Many called him the 'dark prophet' and were quietly terrified of this huge, hooded figure who strode around the city, sniffing out sinners. None forgot an early incident in which Matthias violently tried to assert his authority: he locked a group of dissidents inside a church, and threatened them with death unless they recanted. For hours they sat inside, terrified, uncertain of their fate, dreading they'd be mutilated or burnt to death. When Matthias finally entered the cathedral, hours later, they crawled towards him, begging for God's pardon.¹⁷

The preacher Obbe Philips later recalled Matthias with special loathing. Matthias, he wrote, had destroyed all that Philips had once loved about the

Melchiorites and their peaceful founder, Melchior Hoffman. Matthias was a tyrant posing as a prophet. ‘He was so fierce and bloodthirsty,’ Philips wrote, ‘that he took many people’s lives and killed them – so fierce that even his enemies were frightened by him.’

Philips later mourned that he had been so ‘shamefully and miserably deceived’:

[T]here was with us no small joy and hope, because we expected that everything would come true and be fulfilled. Because we were all untempted, simple, innocent, without malice or bad faith and knew of no false visions, prophecies and revelations, and believed in simplicity, that if we protected ourselves from Papists, Lutherans and Zwinglians, then everything would be fine and we did not need to have any concerns.¹⁸

Alas, he warned, those ‘false visions’ now emanated from the demonic designs of Matthias and his young comrade, Leiden. But who would protect the Melchiorites from themselves, from their inner demons? Who would protect those peaceful souls in Münster who were aghast at Matthias’s enthusiasm for violence, but stayed silent for fear of punishment?

To ensure their loyalty, the Prophet played on the people’s terror of the Apocalypse: anyone who refused to obey his orders, who rejected baptism, would be damned to the fires of Hell.¹⁹ If you were not with Matthias, you were against him, the Prophet made clear. This was a perversion of Christ’s words. Jesus had meant ‘those who believed in God’ were with him, and ‘those who rejected God’ were against him. Matthias twisted this to reinforce his own power.²⁰

And he meant what he said. In March, Matthias ordered the arrest of several knights for drunken or lewd behaviour and had six of them executed, according to Gresbeck.²¹

Anyone who spoke ill of the Prophet was instantly punished. One grisly case was that of a popular local blacksmith, Hubert Ruescher, a huge and muscular man who despised the foreign takeover of his city. While on sentry duty, he was overheard decrying Matthias as ‘a stupid crazy liar’ who ‘does not blush at calling himself a prophet’, and ‘a shit of a prophet who was not worth a baker’s fart’. Ruescher blamed himself and his fellow Münstermen for losing the city. ‘It is we who are the stupidest,’ he

lamented, ‘since we take him to be a prophet who is so often proven wrong in his predictions.’ Of the rest of the Dutch intruders, he warned, ‘they will prophesy until they do us in – they must have a devil in their body’.²²

Informed on, Ruescher was hauled before Matthias and a tribunal in the Lord’s Field, where a great crowd had gathered. ‘Perhaps this man has gone mad?’ the Prophet shouted. ‘Or perhaps an evil spirit has misled him? He dares to despise the Prophet sent to you by the Father for your salvation.’ The blacksmith confessed and Matthias sentenced him to death. An example must be made, Matthias declared: ‘this man must be quashed, he must be pulled up by the roots from the midst of the pious and removed from Israel.’²³

Herman Tilbeck and Henry Redeker, two influential burghers, insisted Ruescher be given a fair trial. Furious, Matthias rejected their pleas for clemency. He had both men locked up, and then moved to execute the blacksmith himself. Raising his sword, Matthias shouted that Ruescher was a ‘godless’ blot on their city who, if allowed to live, would infect them all. He then hesitated. Something restrained him – a sudden surge of pity? No, it seems he wanted young Leiden to finish the job, to prove his mettle.

Eager to do so, Leiden stepped up, snatched a halberd and cut Ruescher down. The victim survived the mutilation. A day later, in agony from his wounds, Ruescher was put up against a wall. He threw himself to the ground and begged for his life, at which Matthias seized a gun and shot him in the back. Ruescher took eight days to die.²⁴

The blacksmith’s ordeal terrified many people, yet the promise of salvation eased their fears. Most accepted the need for severe discipline and forgave their dark prophet.

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An earthly threat none could deny rose beyond the walls. By late March New Jerusalem was thoroughly surrounded. Bishop Waldeck’s campfires blazed through the night, throwing a ring of fire around the city. Rows of small white tents billowed through the morning mist. Earthworks were underway, great circular barriers to protect the Bishop’s men from Münster’s cannons.

Many inside New Jerusalem took fright. How long could they hold out? Did they possess enough weapons and supplies to resist? Would the Lord

deliver them at the allotted time?

One thing was clear: by late February 1534, the siege of Münster had begun.

In reply to the anxieties of the townsfolk, the city's leaders summoned them to a meeting in the cathedral square. It was fitting that Knipperdolling should address them. The prominent local burgher was still a respectable man of means, despite recent signs of erratic behaviour.

Knipperdolling raised his burly form, smoothed his beard and began. He spoke calmly at first, soothing the people's concerns that had arisen from the 'sudden siege at the hands of impious enemies'. Don't worry, he reassured them: the city had 'a plan to pursue', using 'the power and weapons which the Father has given us against our enemies'.²⁵ Any fears should be put aside, he continued:

For we rid ourselves of fear together with the shameful lot of criminals who constantly sharpen their swords against us. We put down those among us that were secretly planning to murder us ... The internal enemy has left, and we are now of one religion, of one faith ... Therefore we do not fear any enemy within the city walls. What then do we have to fear? A mercenary enemy, an impious soldier, a robber who takes up arms against the Father and His Chosen, who are marked by the sign of the Covenant? The enemy who riots outside, worships idols, who dwells in debauchery, constantly visits whores, and who is polluted with every kind of fault? However, that fear is outside; between it and us are our fortifications.²⁶

And within those walls they had enough gunpowder to last for several years. They were 'awash' in food supplies, they had 'measureless quantities' of gold and silver, and an abundance of lead in the roofs of the churches with which to cast cannon balls and shot. 'Steadfast courage is all that is required of us. God will supply the rest!'

His voice rising, he appealed to their faith in Christ and their belief in the holy city of New Jerusalem, the purest society on God's earth. He gestured wildly at the world outside, a debauched Sodom seething beyond the city walls:

Here there is decency, there impudence; here there is true faith, there vain opinion and fraud! Here there is piety, there crime! Here there is steadfastness, there depravity! Here there is equity, piety and the other virtues, there inequity, impiety and overflowing with vice! Here there is a sane spirit, there madness and confused minds ...! Whom now shall we fear? May all papists and pseudo-evangelicals fight for the bishop, so long as God alone fights for us! ... So long as the blood runs hot in our veins, so long as our shoulders can carry weapons, so long as our arms are able to throw spears and use pikes and swords, we will always be willing to endure the utmost danger ... with God as our leader.²⁷

The people were on their feet now, cheering. They went away intoxicated with hope and love. They flung themselves at the job of fortifying the city and training their little army. The blacksmiths hammered out blades for use as spears and knives. Guildsmen pounded gunpowder in a hand mill near the derelict cathedral. Children received archery lessons and were trained to deliver messages and ammunition to focal points around the city. Women were entrusted with heating lime and pitch on the ramparts, and shown how to hurl burning flax dipped in barrels of boiling pitch on the heads of soldiers who tried to scale the walls. Roving patrols were given the job of rushing to plug any breach in the defences. Ideas were sought, and great praise heaped on anyone who suggested ways of defeating the enemy.

To prove they were not 'effeminate' or 'terror-stricken', the Melchiorites set off on frequent raids outside the walls. In March they burned down two mills, and attacked the Bishop's men. During one skirmish they lost thirty-five of their own to a few of Waldeck's; in another, some 500 of Matthias's combatants were almost cut off and slaughtered, but somehow managed to escape.²⁸

While all this went on, the city's exiled burghers, who had been stripped of their possessions and banished from their ancestral homes, gathered to launch an appeal to the Bishop. At a meeting in the village of Telgte on 9 March, they urged Waldeck to 'wreak vengeance' on the Anabaptist rebellion, stamp out the heresy, and restore their homes and wealth. They pledged to give their lives to the struggle to reclaim their city.

In the days before Easter, the brothers and sisters of New Jerusalem were in ecstasies of anticipation. New visions paraded across the sky. A new arrival, Jakob Hufschmidt of Osnabrück, later confessed to having seen ‘miraculous things’ in Münster: ‘a horrible fire from the sky, as if the whole city had been full of fire, of a blue and black colour ... and through this fire the sun had shone so brightly that all men, who stood in the market, had the appearance in their faces as if they were gilded.’

He also witnessed the separation of families, so that mother, father and children ‘all ran with their own minds’. Hufschmidt believed the world was about to be ‘cruelly punished’, and a tenth of the population destroyed: ‘For alone in Münster there would be peace and security, which is the city of the Lord,’ he concluded.²⁹

The people of Münster hatched new schemes to insult the Bishop, such as attaching a soiled agreement between Waldeck and Landgrave Philip to a mule’s tail and sending it into the enemy camp. And they rang church bells on Good Friday, a disgraceful sound to Catholic ears, as bells were not permitted on the day of the crucifixion.

Good Friday fell on 3 April, and the End Times were about to start, as Matthias had prophesied. To mark the occasion, the Prophet convened a great banquet in the hall near the marketplace. All the important citizens and many ordinary folks were in attendance. Matthias sat at the head of the high table. By his side was Divara, whose beauty had drawn the roving eye of Leiden. Alongside them were Rothmann, Knipperdolling, Krechting, Tilbeck and other notables. The leading citizens dressed simply, like the ordinary people. They ate and drank from the same kitchen, the same bread and wine, chicken, fish and ham. The powerful deigned to share their table and food with the powerless.

An air of soft-spoken humility filled the hall. This was their last mortal repast before the Apocalypse. Awestruck, they said little. Many were terrified and yet relieved that the time had come at last. They took their cue from Matthias, their dear prophet, who had led them to New Jerusalem and sworn vengeance on their enemies.

Midway through the feast, Matthias paused, threw up his hands and turned very grave. He hung his head. The people were familiar with his sudden mood changes, his raucous laughter and his gusts of rage, but this was different. This time the Prophet sat in silence, downcast. His silence loomed over the hall like a dark shadow. All of a sudden he raised his head

and let out a howl, as though he had witnessed the fate of the earth and bore the terrible weight of that knowledge. His body shook. He nodded and sighed heavily, as if he were about to die. And then he smiled. The weight had lifted.

He rose to his full height, his great black beard tumbling forth, and spoke – not to his fellow citizens but to the rafters. He spoke to God. ‘Oh, dear Father, not as I will, but as thou wisheth!’

Then he moved around the room, shaking each guest by the hand, kissing them on the lips, and saying, ‘God’s peace be with you all.’³⁰

Now Matthias left, as abruptly as he’d come. ‘As thou wisheth!’

The words lingered. What had the Lord willed him to do? The people rejoiced in anticipation of some great event. Others had disquieting thoughts. What had the Prophet meant? Was he abandoning them?

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That night Matthias prayed with Divara. He rose early, put on his armour, mounted his horse and, together with twenty chosen comrades, rode toward St Ludger’s Gate. Around noon, he ordered the guards to lower the drawbridge and raise the iron grille. A great crowd, whom Leiden had summoned, lined the walls, watching in astonishment at the scene unfolding beneath them.

Only Leiden and the few in whom the Prophet had confided were aware of Matthias’s last action. God had spoken to him the previous night, he told them. He was to ride out of the city, disperse the Bishop’s forces and slay their commanders – as the Israelite Gideon had done to the Midianites. He would then return in glory to liberate the city.³¹

On foot, Matthias led his horse onto the field, his black robe billowing in the breeze, like a lone general seeking dialogue with his enemy. His twenty soldiers followed behind him. He then mounted his horse, raised his double-bladed axe and spurred his horse into a canter. Soon he was bearing down on the Bishop’s lines at a gallop, his men streaming behind him in the shape of an arrow.

At the sight of this lone, hooded cavalryman thundering towards them, the Bishop’s frontlines emerged from their barricades, raised their pikes and drew their swords. The soldier who ran Matthias through was unaware that he had felled the Melchiorite leader and the Prophet Enoch. The huge,

cowled figure who writhed on the ground, shouting helplessly for God, seemed a kind of madman, a visitation from hell.

When they realised the identity of the attacker, the Bishop's men rushed forward and stabbed furiously at his floundering body, dis-membering him. They would terrorise the city with the body parts: they impaled Matthias's head on a pole and displayed it for all of Münster to see. They nailed his genitals to St Giles' Gate.

Obbe Philips later wrote about this event:

[T]hey were so angry with him that they did not kill him like other people, but beat and cut him into small pieces, so that his brothers, when the uproar was over, had to carry him away in a basket. Nevertheless, some brothers said that on the fourth day, according to the prophecy of Enoch and Elijah, he would rise again and ascend to heaven in the presence of all men, or be taken away by a cloud. With such terrible blindness some were struck.³²

Word of Matthias's lone attack sent a disquieting message through the Bishop's ranks. What sort of fanatic charged an army of thousands? A baker with no military experience? Who was this 'New Samson'?³³ What sort of enemy were they up against?

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The sun set. Birds sang. Cows lowed. Everything seemed normal in New Jerusalem – except the people. They were in a panic.

They scanned the heavens for a sign of the End Times, for a distant herald of the Eschaton. They clung to rumours that Matthias would rise in three days, Christ-like, and ascend to Heaven, as told in the Book of Revelation.³⁴ As the hours passed and night came, their hopes sank. Darkness and despair closed in. Bitter suspicions prowled the minds of the Elect. Had Matthias been wrong? Had Enoch failed them, like Elijah? Had God really spoken through him? Or was the whole thing a fraud? If so, in whom should they trust? Should they surrender?

A new terror pulsed through the city, like the dull beat of a distant drum. Had God forsaken them? Were they alone on this earth?

13

JOHN OF LEIDEN

‘Dear brothers and sisters, you must not despair because our prophet, John Matthias, has died. For God will send us another prophet, who will be even greater and higher than John Matthias.’

John of Leiden, to the people of New Jerusalem

When John of Leiden witnessed the death of Matthias, he seemed as shocked as the people who were watching from the city walls. None suspected that God had forewarned Matthias’s protégé of the tumultuous end to the Prophet’s life.

In the numbed aftermath, Leiden quickly met with Knipperdolling, his landlord, in the privacy of the businessman’s home. What should he do? He had lost his mentor and patron. He was vulnerable. For he, more than anyone, had urged the people to trust Matthias – to follow the second Enoch to New Jerusalem. That hope now lay in pieces on the battlefield, and the Prophet’s head bobbed on the end of a pike.

Much more was at stake than the death of Enoch, Leiden realised. Matthias had promised the people, ‘Follow me and you will find salvation.’ Who, now, would lead the people to Paradise? Talk of surrender was in the air. But surrender to whom? The Bishop promised no mercy. What were they to do?

Knipperdolling listened to the young man with sympathy. The old cloth merchant saw in Leiden a natural leader and loyal preacher who had worked tirelessly for the late prophet, spreading the word of his special relationship with God. Now that Enoch had destroyed himself,

Knipperdolling saw at once that the people needed consolation in their despair – despair that might turn to anger and defiance if they failed to act.

Leiden had no fears for his life. He feared for the survival of the faith that bound New Jerusalem together. Its continuation, its strength, was the lifeblood of the city, the glory of God, and it must be sustained at all costs until help arrived. But how?

Knipperdolling advised the young man to follow his instincts and lead the people – to take up Enoch’s mantle. Hadn’t Matthias anointed him as his heir apparent? Hadn’t he entrusted him with every task? Knipperdolling promised to vouch for Leiden, and to support his leadership.

Together they set in motion a plan to take command of the city. Their chosen course was a perilous one: to persuade the people to believe in a fresh vision of the will of the Lord, promulgated by a new visionary: John of Leiden.

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Leiden was cut of smoother cloth than his predecessor. He possessed the svelte tongue and manipulative mind of a politician. And as he prepared to address the crowd in the cathedral square, he filleted his late mentor’s legacy, retaining what he thought had worked (the prophecy of the End Times) and discarding what had failed (Matthias’s bursts of rage and his impulsive cruelty).

As Leiden rose to speak, many asked themselves: why should we trust this youth, the most intimate of Matthias’s lieutenants? Why follow another Dutchman, a princeling of little experience who had attached himself to the crazed Enoch? The very name now evoked scorn and sadness.

If some saw in Leiden signs of a dissolute, even monstrous, character, most were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt – for now. In truth, they had little choice. In any case, his handsome face and gleaming eyes, his broad smile and winning charisma, created a reassuring spectacle that suppressed their worries about the darker shades of his reputation.

Leiden wore a simple smock and an air of shy modesty, which suited the moment. He trimly shaved his reddish-blond beard, which sat on a face that seemed sculpted out of marble. His aquiline nose, intelligent brow and high cheekbones gave him the appearance of a Greek god, and an authority well beyond his twenty-six years. He wore his blond hair to his shoulders.

His eyes were like sapphires, sparkling, blue and penetrating. But what lay beyond the gleam in his gaze? Were these the eyes of a poet, a prophet or a tyrant?

And what of his character? Few could fault the sincerity of his faith, or the intensity of his devotion. Yet none had forgotten his botched execution of the blacksmith; Gresbeck was one who bore the memory in disgusted silence. On the other hand, most placed the blame for this on Matthias, not his young acolyte: hadn't Leiden been forced to do his leader's will?

They began to look at Leiden through fresh eyes, and they liked what they saw. He was one of them, a stranger in a strange land. Like them, he was poor. He had fled persecution, as they had. He had chosen to be baptised, at risk of an agonising death. He had endured the same pain as they. And now he shared their refuge from a world that despised them.

There was something else – something ineffably exotic, romantic – about this good-looking, well-read young journeyman, and it attracted many of the illiterate folk who had spent most of their lives shut away in villages. Leiden was secretive, a man apparently without a past. He kept the truth of his origins hidden, lest they deadened the startling hues of his local fame. But, some wondered, who was he truly?

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John Bockelson was born the illegitimate son of John Bockel, the deputy mayor of the village of Soevenhaven, near Grevenhagen (The Hague). His mother was a serf girl called Alit (or Adelaide), of Horstmar, in the Bishopric of Münster, who had fled the drudgery of her Lord's estate to find a new life in the Dutch-speaking lands.

Seven years later, after his wife died, Bockel married Alit, making her acceptable to the local priest at last, and for the first time the couple attended church together. The boy was sent to a good school in Leiden, where, notwithstanding the fact that his father and mother were now married, he was cruelly mocked as a 'whoreson' and 'the child without a name'.¹

John Bockelson learnt to fight and defend himself, displaying a steely courage in the playground. He shone at school, in a time when few in his village could read or write. He was an avid learner and showed great promise at rhetoric. He joined a debating club, and wrote and acted in plays,

in which he usually took the leading role, revelling in his local fame. His need for an audience never left him.

John Bockel lacked the money to send his son to university, so the boy was apprenticed to a local tailor. There he sat confined all day in a dark workshop, embroidering and stitching the garments of the local nobility. There, he wondered at the injustice of a world in which a talented man, because he was poor, must waste his life sewing the clothes of the rich. Unwisely, he aired his grievances to his local priest, who slapped him down, declaring it a dangerous heresy to challenge the authorities.

It is likely that around this time, in the mid-1520s, Bockelson first heard John Matthias speak. In a dimly lit tavern in Leiden, he encountered the tall, gaunt, black-bearded figure addressing a small group in a hushed, sharp voice that was occasionally interspersed with thunderous rage. It is uncertain what Matthias actually said, but he appears to have been denouncing Luther for refusing to support the German peasants' revolt. The words of the baker from Haarlem left a deep impression on the young man, as if branded onto his brain.²

In the late 1520s Bockelson travelled to England and then to Flanders, to practise his trade and try his hand at business. In London, where he fashioned himself John of Leiden, he attended and likely acted in medieval mystery plays and elaborate pageants. This was also probably where he learned fencing and horsemanship, as well as other courtly pleasures normally denied a commoner.

When his business ventures failed, Bockelson returned to Leiden and married the widow of a sailor, who bore him two children. Through her late husband's connections with sea-going merchants, he travelled to Lisbon and later Lübeck, where again he tried to establish himself in business. Again he failed. He returned to Leiden and opened a tavern with his wife, which they called At the Sign of the Two Herrings. By day he served beer and wine; by night he read the Bible, wrote poems and speeches, and taught local children the rudiments of language. He honed his speaking style into a tool of persuasive power, able to sway an audience in any direction he pleased.

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Bockelson took a close interest in the spiritual upheaval in the established church and the Lutheran revolt that was rippling across Europe. And he

examined his own soul: where did he stand on these mighty issues? Whose interpretation of God spoke most loudly to his fierce sense of social injustice?

Bored and poor, despising his wife and their impoverished lot, he cast around for a new beginning. He longed to be close to those who felt as he did, and close to an interpretation of the Gospels that reconciled him with Christ in a world that was, in his view, devoid of true Christianity. A man of his cut was not destined to run a public house!

Hearing of a religious uprising in Münster, the city the members of a religious sect were calling New Jerusalem, Bockelson got it into his head that he must travel there and see it for himself. His long-suffering wife objected: 'Do you want to waste more money? You have already lost enough through your merchants!'³ He departed for Münster against her will, lured by stories of the radical preachers who had flocked to the city. He stayed for several weeks, until the end of July 1533, and while he was there he attended open-air sermons, listened to Rothmann and drank deep of the mood of iconoclasm, free will and hatred of the Pope. Then he took a slow road home via some neighbouring towns.

His world changed when, around All Saints' Day (1 November), John Matthias, the fiery preacher whom he'd heard speak in the tavern several years earlier, passed through Leiden. Bockelson managed to secure a meeting with him. It was a blazing encounter, an efflorescence of ideas. Matthias stayed in Bockelson's home, and they talked late into the nights of faith, defiance and salvation. Matthias taught him his interpretation of the scriptures; near the end of his stay, he baptised him.

Thus John Bockelson joined the Melchiorities, and soon after he went on the road as an (unlicensed) preacher and baptiser, defying the ban which Melchior Hoffman had imposed on adult baptism. He travelled widely, at Matthias's request, in the Dutch lands. In Brill and Rotterdam he baptised about ten people in each community he visited. On his return home he continued baptising the local people: a maker of leather rope, a fuller (or cloth cleanser), the schoolmaster, and his own wife and two servants.

Bockelson next travelled to Amsterdam, Horn, Enkhuizen and Alkmar, and baptised as many people as came forward, and those he persuaded to. It was said that when he baptised a sick girl in Schöppingen he healed her. In response, the Catholic authorities put a price on the preacher's head. The Lutherans wanted his arrest.

Under Matthias's tutelage, Bockelson came to believe that the love of God was not enough to protect their faith. The sword was as vital as a devout heart. Their brothers and sisters were in mortal and spiritual peril. He felt they had no choice but to defend themselves from those who sought to destroy them. With these messages in mind, Matthias ordered him to proceed to Münster.⁴

He arrived on 13 January 1534, as we've seen, during the week after Epiphany, and went to visit Knipperdolling, Henry Roll and Rothmann to relay Matthias's chief message: that none should preach from the preacher's chair. Rather, they should abandon the churches completely. From then on, Leiden (as he now became known) taught and baptised in Münster, and encouraged the crowds to repent and 'reform themselves'. If they refused, as he later confessed, they were to be 'chased out of the city without a sword'.⁵

Quietly a picture formed in Leiden's mind of himself as the leader of this little community. The other preachers lashed out at fleeting targets, unable to train their zeal on a solid purpose. They were merely improvising, while he had become aware of his part in a great performance. It was to be a magnificent part, he promised himself, for his stage was the great world.⁶

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What drove this young man, many wondered. Who guided Leiden's heart and mind? A voracious reader, he'd read many of the important religious thinkers of his time, including forbidden and dangerous works by Melchior Hoffman, Andreas Karlstadt and Thomas Müntzer.

Years later, his interrogators would accuse Leiden of agreeing a secret pact with Hoffman to seize Münster. To this, Leiden replied: 'I never met Melchior Hoffman, never received letters from him or wrote to him.' He admitted reading the jailed prophet's work on baptism, free will and the incarnation of Christ. Yet these were general works; they had not been written for the people of Münster. Nor had Hoffman ever visited Münster: he was still in prison in Strasbourg when Leiden and Matthias had departed for the city. Not since the dispute between Hoffman and Matthias over the reintroduction of baptism had the Melchiorites heard from their founding preacher.⁷

A brighter torch into the darker corners of Leiden's mind was the writing of Müntzer, whose ideals of equality and the sharing of possessions, and whose belief that violence was justified, Leiden found utterly persuasive. Müntzer, the great warrior-preacher from the little town of Stolberg, taught that armed resistance was necessary to overthrow a godless tyranny whose 'serpents, the clergy, and those eels, the secular rulers and lords, pollute one another in a squirming heap'.⁸

Leiden was most struck by the rebel preacher's pamphlet titled 'The Explicit Unmasking of the False Belief of the Faithless World'. In this, Müntzer argued that the secular noblemen – princes, dukes, lords and so on – who ruled from their godless castles must be 'put down', because 'they hinder the holy, genuine, Christian faith' and 'do everything in their power to keep the common people from perceiving the truth'.⁹ The nobility were unworthy of salvation. They perverted God's law to justify crushing the poor. And, Müntzer wrote, 'they have spent their lives in bestial eating and drinking ... they have been brought up most delicately, in all their lives they have never had a bad day'.¹⁰ All must die, Müntzer concluded. He urged his followers to rise up and crush their oppressors: 'Don't put up any shallow pretence that God's might will do it without your laying on with the sword ... Don't let them live any longer, the evil-doers who turn us away from God ... The Sword is necessary to exterminate them.'¹¹

While Luther challenged the brain of Rome, Müntzer attacked its body.¹² In April 1525, in a Quixotic blast against crushing new taxes, he helped raise a force of Thuringian 'peasants' – most of them disgruntled smallholders, miners and weavers – against the local aristocracy. Inspired by the books of Daniel and Revelation, Müntzer sent furious dispatches to his disciples: 'Go to it, go to it, go to it! Show no pity ... Pay no attention to the cries of the godless ... Alert the villages and towns ... We cannot slumber any longer ... Go to it, go to it, while the fire is hot! Don't let your sword go cold, don't let it hang down limply!'¹³

But Müntzer had more zeal than martial skill. On 15 May, Philip of Hesse's army, positioned on a Thuringian hilltop and equipped with cannons and cavalry, launched a ferocious reply. Müntzer's 'peasants' had few guns and no cavalry. Philip's artillery broke the peasant ranks: some 5000 were slaughtered that day in what became known as the Massacre at Frankenhausen. Müntzer himself was dragged from a cellar, tortured and

beheaded. The broader Peasants' War of 1524–25 would claim the lives of more than 100,000, at little cost to the princes.

Though he was not an Anabaptist, Müntzer and his doomed offensive exerted a mystical hold over Leiden and many other Melchiorites, who bided their time.

On arriving in New Jerusalem, Leiden moved in with the Knipperdolling family and promptly seduced the burgher's daughter (whom he would soon marry), as well as a serving girl, despite the fact that he had a wife back in Holland. He lusted after many women, but had hitherto indulged his sybaritic tastes in private, in deference to Matthias's menacing insistence on purity. But now, with Matthias dead, there was nobody to restrain him. And of late Leiden had discovered a new aphrodisiac – absolute power – whose delicious taste turned him briefly from the temptations of the flesh to thoughts of seizing it.

Even before Matthias's death, New Jerusalem was reeling for want of direction. Hoffman had proved a false prophet, doomed to spend the rest of his days in prison. Rothmann had sunk to a submissive role, effectively the court secretary. Knipperdolling was fearful, elderly and unpredictable. Matthias himself had been erratic and violent, more feared than loved or respected. Thousands of the city's prominent menfolk had fled, fearing execution, or been forced into exile. And most of those who remained were zealous followers or silent dissidents.

No wonder the people looked to Leiden, just as Knipperdolling had said – especially women, who were in the majority by at least three to one, and found the young man irresistible. And while women had no effective power in the city – they could neither vote nor sit on the council – they made their voices felt in every home and tavern, in the working parties and the communal kitchens. They were a confident and visible majority, and many of them felt liberated by the rebellion.

Leiden, this angelic youth whose devotion and courage none doubted, kindled their hopes that he would regenerate faith in a city deprived of men. He spoke to their aspirations. He promised to lead them to salvation. And so, on that bright spring day, the city turned out in their thousands to listen to what he had to say.

Flanked by Knipperdolling and Divara, Leiden rose to speak. He had prepared well, with the help of Rothmann's eloquent hand. And as he spoke, he gradually deployed his theatrical and rhetorical skills, and found a new energy breathing through him: the persuasive power of a true orator and leader.

'Dear brothers and sisters,' he said, 'you must not despair because our prophet, John Matthias, has died. For God will send us another prophet, who will be even greater and higher than John Matthias. For it was God's will that he should die. His time had come. God did not allow him to die in this way without reason, but so that you should not place all your faith in him and hold him higher than God. God is more powerful than John Matthias was. What Matthias did and prophesied, he did through God – he did not do it by himself. So God will send us another prophet, through whom God will reveal his will.'¹⁴

Who would be this new prophet? Leiden left the answer hanging, and seized the chance to diminish his predecessor. God had not abandoned Matthias, he cried; Matthias had abandoned God! Matthias had presumed to ascribe to himself – and not to the Lord – the power to vanquish the bishop's forces! God had 'taken' Matthias for the sin of pride, just as God had 'taken' the Biblical Enoch before his time. Had Matthias acted to the glory of God alone, he would surely have vanquished their enemy. The crowd began to see Matthias through fresh eyes, as a great deluded fool who had galloped stupidly into a line of pikemen.

Leiden then revealed a secret to the people. Eight days before the late prophet's charge, the Holy Ghost had sent Leiden a 'vision' in a dream – of Matthias's death. In the vision, Leiden had seen the body of Enoch impaled on a lance, his guts spilled on the soil, just as it had happened. God's spirit had said that he, John of Leiden, should acquire the powers of Matthias – as well as his conjugal bed. For the Lord had said to him: 'Do not fear, man of God, or be in any way afraid! Instead, press on with your calling and plan! For this special judgement of God concerns not your life but the life of Matthias, whose wife you should marry.'¹⁵

Leiden seemed as stunned by these revelations as everyone else. The beautiful Divara was similarly wide-eyed, as though she had rehearsed the moment. Pretending that he had no desire to take Matthias's wife – Leiden readily admitted that he had a lawful wife back in Holland – how, he implored them, could he deny what God now granted him?

At this point Knipperdolling, on cue, leapt up to vouch for what Leiden had said. 'He confided everything to me a week ago!' Knipperdolling declared.¹⁶ Everything Leiden said was true, the businessman affirmed, apparently untroubled by the fact that Leiden had seduced his daughter.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

‘Everything that is unrighteous and is still in sin must be stamped out ...

You have entered into the Apostolic Church and you’re holy folk.’

John of Leiden, announcing his new regime to the people of New Jerusalem

The people dearly wanted to believe this impassioned young man, and take him into their hearts. The power of his message, smoothed by Rothmann and affirmed by Knipperdolling, began to silence the worm of doubt. After all, had he not reinvigorated their hopes of salvation? And the more they despaired, the more they clung to that fading dream. The bleaker their hopes of salvation, the more they gathered it to their hearts. The alternative was too horrible to contemplate.

Sombrelly at first, they began to embrace their new leader. But should they accept him as a prophet, as he claimed? Many had had enough of preachers claiming to be prophets, especially Dutch-tongued ones. And yet ... perhaps he truly was what Elijah and Enoch had claimed to be? Perhaps this time they had found a leader genuinely touched by the divine?

Leiden sensed a longing among the people to think of him as someone beyond the merely mortal. They needed a spiritual guide, a light through these terrifying times. And he responded to their hunger. He drew on all his theatrical gifts, his sense of spectacle and surprise, to persuade them of his provenance, as a prophet chosen by the Lord.

The next day he appeared half-naked in the marketplace and yelled at the crowd: ‘You men of Israel, who dwell in the sacred walls of Jerusalem,¹ fear the heavenly father and do repentance for your former life! Come to your senses! Come to your senses! The glorious King of Zion is girding

himself with many thousands of angels and prepares a campaign against earth at the terrible sound of the trumpet. Therefore come to your senses! Come to your senses!’²

In a burst of zealotry he ran through the streets, shouting a now familiar refrain: ‘Repent! Repent!’ And then, just as dramatically, he froze and played mute. ‘By the order of the Father,’ he wrote, ‘I have been struck dumb for three days so that I might properly receive God’s vision.’³ God had bound his tongue, and to speak was a sin until the allotted time had passed.

Three days passed. The city waited like a family at the bedside of a comatose relative. A few dissenters wondered: was the holy mute play-acting? Was all this the work of an amateur player and charlatan?

Regardless of these suspicions, Leiden’s stunt worked. Most people didn’t care whether his mute seizure was real or fake: it grabbed their attention, and they longed to know what their prophet would say when the Lord freed him to speak.

Leiden played on these anticipations and raised their expectations, until the whole city was poised to hear him when released from his silence. Thousands were summoned to the marketplace, where, under the fearsome gaze of Rothmann and Knipperdolling, the mute mounted the stage and opened his mouth.

The regime of Matthias, Leiden declared, was the creation of godless humanity. A new government would rule New Jerusalem according to a true understanding of God’s laws. The people of Münster must all obey the Bible to the letter, and never flinch from their adherence to the Word of God.

Leiden’s sense of drama was masterful, his performance superb. He spoke with astonishing authority, as though he were the incarnation of a higher prophet, a greater visionary than they had ever seen. He summoned within himself a character of more persuasive power than either Hoffman or Matthias had possessed. He lubricated the people’s parched souls with the sweetest reaffirmation of their faith. He restored their belief in salvation and New Jerusalem. And the future opened before him like a blossoming tree.

Now he made his first prophecy, resetting the date of the beginning of the end. Yes, he reassured them, your salvation lies here, in New Jerusalem. But Matthias had mistimed it. The end of the world would begin at Easter 1535, a full year away. Everyone must prepare. ‘Everything that is

unrighteous and is still in sin must be stamped out ... You have entered into the Apostolic Church and you're holy folk,' he exclaimed.⁴ And all must spread their example to the entire world.

Matthias's disciples abandoned their erstwhile prophet and turned to this extraordinary spirit, a genuine holy man in whom God had placed his trust. Word spread through the city that Leiden was a true 'Man of God'. Their adulation consumed him, according to a hostile witness: 'He was thus convinced that he was more excellent and illustrious than Matthias. Everybody hung onto his every word and they admired, worshipped and venerated him alone after the Father.'⁵

Leiden felt swept along by events even as he tried to seize them at the flood. Why had God chosen him to lead a city of strangers to salvation? He tried to direct their course as he went along, to fashion a story that accorded with the exigencies of the hour. For now it was good enough to reassure the people that they were saved, and the coming of the Lord was nigh.

The people's spirits soared. This time, surely, they had found a true prophet, chosen by the Lord? Zealous celebrations rippled over the city. The people danced and ran half-naked through the streets, the men drew their swords against the godless, threatening them, the women and virgins frolicked in the cathedral square, their hair free and flying in the wind, their heads raised in a swoon toward Heaven.

They cried for love and light as though it were a gift from God, a redeeming substance: 'O Father, O Father, give love, give love!' 'Father, father, give us light!'⁶ They danced and danced until their faces turned pale and their excitement sagged, and some wore the wan visage of a corpse.

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Behind Leiden's well-crafted histrionics was a purposeful mind with a gift for self-preservation. He now set himself the task of reforming the city. That meant purifying it according to Biblical law, which appealed to the devout side of his character, the part not given to debauchery.

He wisely chose not to alienate the older leaders who had served Matthias – chiefly Rothmann, Knipperdolling, the Krechting brothers and Tilbeck. He needed their help, and so decided to keep them close, and would soon appoint them as earthly advisers and administrators. Seeking their counsel flattered them usefully.

Leiden saw himself as fulfilling a higher calling than these lay leaders, one closer to God, although its outline was as yet unclear. He would bide his time, deploying his oratory and organisational skills to prepare New Jerusalem for Judgement Day. In any case, the fate of Elijah and Enoch counselled against the hasty presumption of divine power.⁷ He presented himself as God's humble emissary. In everything he did, it was not John of Leiden who acted thus, but the Lord who was acting through him. God chose the new laws and customs; God insisted that everyone wore the same simple garb and shared their worldly goods; God ordered the abandonment of the old churches – and it was all expressed through his envoy on earth.

Leiden's first acts, apparently on God's orders, were to complete the destruction of Catholic church property, to strengthen the city's defences, and, as 'the true servant of the Almighty', to abolish the old secular council and replace it with a cabinet of 'Twelve Elders', who were to serve as a kind of supreme court and cabinet.⁸

The Twelve Elders were responsible for applying Leiden's new constitution, which was based on the precepts of the Bible. Were the councillors modelled on the Twelve Tribes of Israel? Or the Twelve Apostles of Christ? Or the twelve gates around the city walls? Whatever their provenance, the chosen men were devout Melchiorites and utterly loyal to Leiden. Each received great powers, special rights and a sword. Their luminaries included the rehabilitated patrician Herman Tilbeck; John Ossenbeck; Henry Roede, the goldsmith; Lambert Bilderbeck, the burgher of Coesfeld; Peter Simonson of Frisia; John Eschman of Warendorf; and the nobleman Gerlach of Wullen.

Bernard Knipperdolling and Henry Krechting would receive more important jobs: Knipperdolling was promoted to *Schwertführer*, the chief executioner or enforcer, with unlimited powers to inflict vigilante justice, while Krechting was made chancellor, responsible for signing laws and official papers. Henry's brother Bernard remained a senior councillor and later became Leiden's chief of staff.

Just as God had enacted his commandments through Moses, and Christ had spread the Word through His Apostles, so now the Holy Father had chosen Leiden, two burghers and Twelve Elders to hand down the law to New Jerusalem, the holiest place in the world.

The new constitution established a pure Christian theocracy. Leiden envisaged a society bound by the sternest reading of Biblical law. Drawing on Romans 13 – ‘Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God’⁹ – he proclaimed: ‘Therefore, whoever resists the power, resists the ordinance of God. And those who resist shall receive their own judgement. For rulers cause no terror to those doing good, only to those who do evil.’¹⁰

Nobody dared ask why, then, they had disobeyed the Prince-Bishop who ruled Westphalia, the Emperor who ruled the Holy Roman Empire, and the Pope himself. Nobody asked what Thomas Müntzer or other Anabaptist rebels would have thought of such subservience to authority. Had they done so, the answer would have been that Leiden, their new prophet-prince, had appropriated the law to cement his power.

The constitution drew on the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, as well as the books of Daniel, Jeremiah and Revelation, redolent of brimstone and boiling lakes and portents of doom. The gracious words of the New Testament, the compassionate spirit of the Sermon on the Mount, and the loving, forgiving word of Christ were nowhere to be seen.

The new laws expressed the harsh concept of justice that permeated the Old Testament, notably the books of Exodus and Leviticus, chiefly the parts that delineate the power of the Israelite kings. Posted on the city’s walls in the name of the Prophet and the Twelve Elders, the constitution imposed the death penalty on anyone who:¹¹

- Committed acts of greed, theft, deceit, lies, obscenities, foul speech, slander, sedition, anger;
- Blasphemed, as written in Leviticus 24: ‘The Lord said to Moses, saying: Take the blasphemer outside the camp ... and let the whole congregation stone him’;¹²
- Cursed or criticised their leaders (meaning Leiden and the Elders), as written in Exodus 22: ‘You shall not revile God, or curse a leader of your people’;¹³
- Dishonoured their father or mother, as written in Deuteronomy 21: a ‘stubborn and rebellious’ son who refused to admit his errors should be stoned to death;¹⁴ or

- Committed adultery, incest or lay with animals or members of the same sex, as written in Leviticus 20: ‘If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbour, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. The man who lies with his father’s wife has uncovered his father’s nakedness; both of them shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall be put to death; they have committed perversion, their blood is upon them. If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. If a man takes a wife and her mother also, it is depravity; they shall be burned to death, both he and they, that there may be no depravity among you. If a man has sexual relations with an animal, he shall be put to death; and you shall kill the animal. If a woman approaches any animal and has sexual relations with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.’¹⁵

Wives who refused to fear and obey their husbands would be severely punished, according to Ephesians 5: ‘Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church ...’¹⁶

Leiden made clear that anyone who contaminated themselves with these sins would, unless they truly repented, ‘be banished from among the people with excommunication and the sword’.¹⁷

Leiden softened the harshness of the new law by adapting a passage from Revelation. The people of New Jerusalem ‘who uphold His commandments’ were ‘blessed’ and would enjoy the power of the tree of life and the keys to their holy city. They would be safe from the ‘dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practises falsehood’ who lived beyond the walls.¹⁸

A series of thirty-one articles was appended to the constitution. These outlined the daily running of New Jerusalem, according to which everyone must, on pain of severe punishment:

- Uphold the supremacy of Biblical law, which ‘each Israelite will obey through fear of punishment’ (Article 1);

- Affirm the absolute power of Leiden and the Twelve Elders to interpret and apply the law: ‘Whatever the Elders will decide by their common judgement to be beneficial in this new community of Israel, John of Leiden the Prophet will, as a faithful minister and ruler of the highest and most sacred God, announce and explain this to the community of Christ ...’ (Article 7); and
- Recognise Bernard Knipperdolling’s authority as chief executioner [he would soon be dubbed ‘the Sword’] to execute on the spot anyone caught committing a crime, and to interrogate any foreigner ‘who does not belong to our religion’ (Articles 8 and 29).

Further articles designated who was responsible for vital jobs. Bernard Boentruppe and Gerard Pruessen, for example, would control the slaughter, curing and selling of meat, to avoid a shortage (Article 12). John of Coesfeld and his servants would forge iron nails (Article 15). Bernard tor Moer, Bernard Glandorp, Henry Edelbot and John Northof would superintend the mending of clothes and ensure that no fashionable varieties were made (Article 16). Stephen Kopperschleger would draw up an inventory of wine and liquor supplies to be preserved for the sick and those in mental distress (Article 20). Others were placed in charge of the treasury, the construction and maintenance of the city’s defences, the care of horses, the holders of fishing rights, the distribution of beer and bread, and so on.¹⁹

The Twelve Elders were quick to impose a theocratic rule, aided by seven deacons and sub-deacons who served as their administrative staff. Every day the Twelve met in the council chambers and gathered around a table with an open Bible before them. Chancellor Krechting and ‘the Sword’, Knipperdolling, would be in attendance, their quills poised. Leiden stood at the head of the table, counselling them on the city’s evils, whereupon the Twelve would rustle up the relevant passages that banned the heinous practice. Once a new law was approved, it received the Chancellor’s signature and the seal of the city. Leiden then announced it to the people.

The Supreme Court met twice daily, in the market square, at seven am and two pm, the Twelve Elders sitting in judgement on the accused. Adulterers, blasphemers, thieves, fornicators, dissenters, homosexuals, angry people and the occasional goat-molester were brought before them. Knipperdolling stood by, grasping the huge sword with which he performed

any summary executions. These were rare, as most of the accused fearfully recanted and pledged to improve themselves, and so received light punishments.

Most obeyed the law and were willingly submissive, as a single body of worshippers. They dressed in the same drab linen smocks, greeted each other the same way – as ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ – ate together in the communal dining halls, and left their doors unlocked and shared their homes. There was one glaring oversight in Leiden’s theocracy: what to do with the thousands of single women living in sin in the city.

STORMING THE CITY

‘God is our confidence, hope, protection and shield, and it is our desire to obey Him, whether we are to live or die. Accordingly, we are not afraid of what the Antichrist, the priests, the monks and the devils are cleverly plotting against us.’

An extract from a pamphlet catapulted out of Münster into Bishop Waldeck’s lines

Word of the bizarre goings-on in Münster raced around Christendom, borne by messengers, pamphlets and word of mouth. The nobility were at once intrigued and entertained. A fanatical sect of ‘rebaptisers’ had seized control of a Westphalian town! The crazy zealots had locked themselves inside, under the delusion they were God’s Elect, their salvation assured. The madmen reckoned God had chosen Münster as ‘New Jerusalem’!

The sensational news was the talk of the salons first in Cologne and Amsterdam, and soon in London, Geneva and Rome. There were exaggerated stories of naked dancing and sexual debauchery, of people executed for refusing to be baptised, of gangs of defrocked nuns mauling their priests, of all sorts of frenzied violence against the old church. And now this: a demonic young preacher – one Bockelson, a mere tailor – had taken over the city and bedded the wife of their late leader, the ridiculous ‘prophet Enoch’. The gall of these damnable heretics!

The *Schwärmer* were sure to be condemned to a horrible death, of course, but in the meantime the appalling episode transfixed and amused the ruling classes. Some privately revelled in the trials of the woebegone

bishop whose diocese had the misfortune of containing the wayward city, and who had failed to compel the fanatics to surrender.

Poor old Waldeck! The wretched rebaptisers had scorned his letters and envoys, and subjected him to withering public mockery, some of it hilariously blasphemous. They had bared their bums at the Bishop's army from the city walls, until a cannon ball or two had put an end to the obscenity. They'd snuck out at night and poured human excrement into the bishop's trenches. They'd spiked his guns. They'd fashioned a puppet of Waldeck himself, a mitre on its head, and then tied it to the back of a horse laden with papal indulgences, which they sent galloping toward the Bishop's soldiers. They, on finding they'd killed a straw prelate, chopped up the puppet as well as the poor horse.¹

The time had come, the aristocrats decided, to crush the miscreants. And on this the Lutherans and Catholics were in rare accord. Uppermost in the minds of the landowning classes was the threat Münster posed to their financial power. It was beyond forbearance that a few bogus preachers should be allowed to seize a free city. What if the madness spread, threatening their interests in the surrounding region? A 'holy alliance' of Lutherans, Catholics and wealthy landlords pressed Bishop Waldeck to act.

On 10–11 May, Prince Elector Friedrich of Saxony received a letter about the strange events in Münster from Duke Ernst Braunschweig-Lüneburg. The Duke warned the Prince that a shortage of gunpowder and weapons might hinder the Bishop's chances of a quick victory. Waldeck would need help. Braunschweig-Lüneburg added that 'many pious people' still in Münster believed neither in being 'rebaptised' nor in the Zwinglian 'symbolic' interpretation of the Eucharist, a concept that had been embraced by the zealots. To avoid shedding the blood of these 'innocents' in the coming siege, the Duke hoped they might be rescued and returned 'to the right worship by God's grace'.²

Yet the siege should certainly go ahead, the Duke added, despite the risk to innocent civilians. If they failed to reclaim the city, religious sedition would spread. The 'surrounding lands were almost all speckled with the error of rebaptism and the sacrament, so that then a great crowd might gather in Münster'.³

Any delay would excite the displeasure of Emperor Charles V, who fretted that the monasteries of Münster and others in the diocese might fall into the hands of the Burgundian knights, who were casting acquisitive eyes

over the Westphalian jewels, and were even willing to negotiate with the Münster Anabaptists.⁴ That prospect frightened Philip of Hesse, as well as the houses of Cleves, Trier and Cologne, and spurred them to help the Bishop.⁵

The English court, too, cast a long shadow; it was then in crisis over King Henry VIII's desire to divorce Anne Boleyn. Münster, of course, though shocking, was treated as irrelevant to the ravenous monarch's plans to create a 'Church of England'. Yet Rome tended to blame all Protestants for the excesses of the fanatics, and bundled up the lot as sheer devilry. To avoid being tainted by association, mainstream Protestants now set themselves against the Anabaptists, with a measure of cruelty and intolerance that said more about their own insecurities than the threat to Christendom of a few thousand rebaptisers.

A firm example must be made of Münster, the noblemen concluded. It was time to rid the world of this excrescence on the body of the true faiths. The Bishop should attack at once.

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Bishop Waldeck's camp now encircled half of Münster, in a broad four-mile horseshoe, set several hundred metres from the walls, just beyond the range of the city's cannons. At great and rising expense, the prelate had assembled his own army, and bought, borrowed or begged for cannons, horses, carts and siege instruments. Philip of Hesse, now a solid supporter of the Bishop, had donated two giant siege cannons, nicknamed the Devil and the Devil's Mother.⁶

At the same time, Waldeck wrote to the neighbouring dioceses, calling in their verbal offers of assistance. They should send money, weapons and supplies at once. The bishoprics of Paderborn and Capenburg each lent around 2000 gold guilders, while Osnabrück lent 1000; rich merchants and noblemen offered the Bishop loans totalling 25,000 gold guilders.⁷ By May the bishop had raised an infantry of about 8000 *Landsknechts* (knights), at a cost of 34,000 guilders per month.

These men were not the dashing, chivalrous knight of folk tale and Cervantes. They were rough-hewn, raucous, hard-drinking mercenaries and bounty hunters, nomadic guns for hire who wandered Europe looking for the next war or adventure, often dragging their families with them. They

were fairly evenly split between pikemen, who were armed with a long poles fitted with iron blades, and arquebusiers, who carried the primitive firearm called the arquebus – either the handheld, hook-like model, or the heavier musket, which was supported by a small tripod.

Waldeck's militiamen mostly came from the diocese, but the notoriety of Münster had drawn many from the Saxon, Dutch and Danish lands. Princes tended to hire such men at their own expense to fight local battles, usually over property or long-standing vendettas, and paid them in cash and a share of the spoils. As such, their men enlisted not out of loyalty to church or state. They were jostling to be at the kill, so they could share in the booty. They had families to support, after all, and rumours swirled of a treasure trove inside the city. Hadn't these Anabaptists pooled their possessions, seized the church property and minted their own gold coins?

Disciplining his mercenaries would be one of Waldeck's greatest headaches. The appearance of gibbets and wheels and instruments of torture on the field had little effect: these men didn't scare easily. They cared little for civilian threats. How often had they heard a prince warn them that desertion or other crimes were punishable by death? Or told them not to plunder the treasure their paymaster claimed? The knights treated Waldeck's harsh rules with contempt. This was another job. And if this campaign failed, there was always another prince or bishop with a score to settle.

By May 1534 Waldeck's forty-two heavy guns had been hauled into place, at the Horst, St Mauritz and Jews' Field gates, behind a series of huge wicker barricades. The heavy culverins shot iron balls of between twelve and twenty pounds (5.4–9.1 kilograms), while the smaller falconets fired projectiles weighing between three and five pounds (1.4–2.3 kilograms). Some 300 barrels of powder and salt-petre were on hand to blast them into Münster.

Thousands of peasants from the surrounding estates were press-ganged into the Bishop's service as sappers and supply soldiers. They deepened the trenches, sharpened the pikes and swords, and brought forward grappling hooks, ladders, shovels, carts and all the paraphernalia of an army about to storm a fortress. Wagon after wagon filled with weapons, lances, spears, halberds, arquebuses, swords and knives came clattering into the Bishop's seven encampments. By now, these were little white-tented villages set a half-mile apart, packed with knights and their wives and children, as well as

cookhouses, smiths and taverns. Regular trumpet blasts announced visits by commanders, while travelling salesmen shouted about their wares. All this played out beneath the flags of Bishop Waldeck's coat of arms: a shield and mitre crossed by a sceptre and sword.

Inside New Jerusalem, the Children of God were preparing for war. Leiden insisted on the strictest discipline in his little army of 1600 combat-worthy men, some 4000 women and about 1200 boys, girls and elderly, organised into ten companies, each dedicated to the defence of a gate.⁸

Unlike the Bishop's unruly militia, the Melchiorites were intensely loyal and utterly dedicated to their cause. In their minds they were the chosen people, a family of God's Elect. They seemed to float above the rotten world like anointed souls, while beneath them, spread out beyond the walls, caroused the debauched and drunken revellers of Sodom.

Leiden's brothers and sisters were learning from their mistakes. They trained in the city's squares and commons well into the night. Boys were taught archery and shooting, girls to cook and keep supplies flowing. Sentry duty on the walls was rigorously enforced. Alcohol in the ranks was banned. Siege tactics were studied and implemented. Any cannonballs that flew in were collected and recast.

At the same time, the citizens completed the destruction of the cathedral and the old churches, hated symbols of Rome. They reduced the city's great architecture to rubble with chilling zeal. They pulled down the vaulted ceilings and beautiful green steeples, raising a cloud of dust over the city. They converted the exposed towers into gun platforms, and used the rubble to fortify the walls. They melted down any salvaged metal to make swords and spearheads.

Leiden set his mind to the arts of military propaganda. Pamphlets tied to stones were catapulted into the Bishop's lines, designed to persuade the soldiers that the people of New Jerusalem were God-fearing and innocent. 'Attack us and you attack the Lord Himself,' ran the theme. The bishop had started hostilities and it would all end badly for him! To paraphrase one pamphlet, sent in April 1534:

To all the people, whatever be their age, who are besieging Münster, the Christian city of God most High ... God is our comfort, hope, shelter and our shield; to obey Him is our sole desire, whether we are going to live or die. Hence we do not fear what the Antichrist, the priests, monks and devils are conniving against us ... So be reasonable and recognise your errors while you can, lest you dig a ditch for your own destruction! ... Take this as a benign warning ...

[9](#)

The Bishop dismissed such warnings as laughable. In mid-May he sent a final ultimatum to Münster: surrender or face immediate attack.

Leiden and the Twelve Elders responded at once:

You write to us that we have caused your gracious Lord ... to besiege us with military power. So we reply to you that we ... know no guilt of any godless, rebellious action. Nor do we know that we have said any godless, inappropriate word against your gracious Lord. We will also seek to forget your Grace's striving for our blood, including that of our wives and our children ...

They made an offer to meet the bishop, with a sting in the tail:

We would acquiesce in you coming to us without danger and would deal with you in a friendly manner ... But we would rather lose our lives and limbs before we adhere to whatever is contrary to Him and His Divine Word. Thus we have sufficiently warned you ... [10](#)

Leiden's offer made not the slightest dent in Waldeck's resolve. The city's entreaties were silken lies around an iron fist. The Bishop had no reason to trust the hand of friendship when it was offered by a sect of heretics who had befouled his diocese and humiliated him. Waldeck wanted Münster rid of the pestilence, once and for all.

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Leiden was a step ahead of his enemy. On 16 May he launched a surprise attack on the Bishop's lines, killing thirty and destroying sixteen cannons.

Leiden lost almost as many, killed and wounded – a serious blow he could little afford.¹¹ Yet he'd avenged Matthias's death, decapitating a captured drummer and impaling his head on a turret for all the Bishop's men to see. The skirmish forced Waldeck to delay his attack by several days.

A last exchange of letters failed to extract any concessions, so on Friday, 22 May, the Bishop sent the order to his artillery to bombard the city. Thirty-five cannons fired away, sending a storm of heavy cannonballs smashing into the outer walls and hurtling into the city.¹² The gunners kept this up for four days, at a rate of twenty balls per gun per day – some 700 projectiles in total.

The Bishop's infantry, waiting behind a protective barrier of earthworks, were to storm the walls at dawn on Tuesday, 26 May. In the meantime, they brought forth straw to be laid across the muddy patches where they'd drained the moat.

On the evening before the attack, the plan ran afoul. A mob of *Landsknechts* from Gelders, drunk on beer and the promise of plunder, dozily mistook the setting sun for the rising dawn. They snatched up their weapons, hooks and siege ladders, and charged the city walls. The premature assault caught the rest of the Bishop's men off-guard. Many were half-dressed, playing at cards or napping, when they heard their comrades' cries of 'Charge!'. Many thought *they* had mistimed the charge and scrambled to join in.

By this point the Bishop's men had lost any element of surprise. The walls of Münster rang with the sentries' alarms: Waldeck's forces were assailing the city! Leiden's army rushed to defend the wall. The Melchiorites had known an attack was imminent and so were well-prepared. The towers and ramparts bristled with men, women and children, rushing to hold off the attack.

And now it was upon them! Hundreds of the Bishop's men poured across no-man's-land and rushed at the moat and walls. Straw bales were tossed into the drained moat, grappling hooks hurled over the walls, siege ladders rammed into place. Leiden's arquebusiers and gunners flew into action, flashes of powder illuminating the loopholes and platforms from which they fired. Pikemen speared the enemy who tried to cross the drained moat – easy pickings, as many floundered in the mud. Others armed with spears, swords, axes and shovels stabbed and hacked at any intruders trying to scale the walls, while the women hurled flaxen wreaths dipped in burning

pitch onto their heads. Children ran forward with gunpowder, food and water.

All around the walls Leiden's ten company commanders were dispatching constant messages to each other, keeping the city attuned to the scale of the threat. All that night the rampart's torches were ablaze, shedding light onto the mayhem below.

The Gelders knights were soon rebuffed, and retreated with heavy losses. More *Landsknechts* joined the siege, attempting to assault the city at different points. Some tried to tunnel under the walls, others to fill the moat with soil. But the people of Münster fought with demonic energy, repeatedly rebuffing the invaders, plugging breaches in the walls, shutting off their tunnels and removing the build-up of dirt in the moat. By daybreak, piles of corpses could be seen lying at the foot of the walls, burnt, stabbed or shot. With no breach in sight, Waldeck called off the attack. His commanders sounded the retreat.

As the siege eased, Rothmann was on hand to raise the townsfolk's morale, having transformed himself from preacher-propagandist into a kind of bellowing regimental sergeant major. He rallied the city in her hour of need: all able-bodied men must prepare for another attack, and even to march on the Bishop's camp! Henry Gresbeck, who was listening, wrote of there being 'no equal' to the preacher's 'yammering'.

'Dear brothers,' Rothmann cried, 'it's God's will that we should march forth. Whoever is willing to march forth for the sake of God and risk his life for the sake of God, stick up a finger.' Every man present raised a finger. 'Dear brothers,' he continued, 'I realise the flesh has fears. Your spirit urges you on and is willing!'¹³

The brothers launched a series of brazen night attacks. Armed with knives, swords and axes, they crept out of the city and picked off dozens of the Bishop's demoralised men. They drove several onto a sandy common on which they'd scattered gunpowder, then ignited it. Elsewhere, they crawled up to the Bishop's frontline billets, rushed in and cut down the exhausted *Landsknechts*, who moments earlier had been playing cards and drinking.

DARING THE EMPIRE

‘If one were to stand back and accept and not oppose the unchristian plan of Münster ... not only the monastery of Münster, but also the princes of Cologne and Cleves and the surrounding estates, and even deferential and pious people in the whole German nation, the Holy Roman Empire and Christendom will face irrecoverable harm.’

A report of a meeting of prelates and noblemen at Neuss, in the aftermath of Bishop Waldeck’s defeat, 16 June 1534

In a rage, Waldeck made a grim reckoning of his losses: almost 200 soldiers dead, and almost three times as many wounded. A rabble of civilian heretics had repulsed his mercenaries and depleted his financial reserves. Not to mention the blow to his personal honour. Münster, he soon discovered, had lost just ten dead and perhaps two dozen wounded – a clear sign, according to whispers, of the tenacity of the Melchiorite faith and the strength of the city’s fortifications.

Facing a storm of recrimination, severe disciplinary problems and a shortage of men and weapons, Waldeck felt obliged to write a self-exculpatory letter to Philip of Hesse, whose great cannons had failed to penetrate the walls of Münster. ‘Several drunken servants’ had attacked ‘without command and knowledge of the leading field chiefs’, he told the Landgrave, and had been ‘repulsed by the inhabitants of the city ... Be that as it may, we will by the help of God continue to pursue the cause with sincerity, being confident to bring the city of Münster to due obedience.’¹

To this end, Waldeck cast around for reinforcements. He ordered up the rest of the peasantry, able-bodied or not. Between 7 June and 14 June, some

9500 peasants and smallholders in the Münster bishopric were pressed into service, along with thousands more from the bishoprics of Minden and Osnabrück.

At the same time, the Bishop begged help from the neighbouring princedoms of Cologne and Jülich, sending envoys to an assembly at Neuss on 16 June to plead his case. He promised that once he had crushed 'the impiety and rebellion of the people of Münster', the city would be restored to the glory of the Catholic religion, and its neighbours 'saved from disaster and ruin'. Until then, all their dioceses were at risk, so they should share the burden of defending the region from this godless scourge.

Cologne and Jülich replied that they would never withhold their counsel, help and resources from the Bishop in his distress, and offered loans to help bear the cost of gunpowder pending further negotiation.

None of this would pay for morale, though, which was at rock bottom. Amazement at the Anabaptists' victory rippled through the Bishop's ranks. Leiden had shown the power of a people ready to fight and die for their faith. And this gave the *Landsknechts* pause. Confronted by so dedicated a foe, many began to question their readiness to join the siege. Some deserted. Others, beset by doubts, wondered whether to defect. Perhaps these crazy Anabaptists were right? What if God really was on their side? And perhaps Münster was the New Jerusalem? If so, what will become of us?

Such fears drove almost 200 of the Bishop's men to defect to Münster in early June, according to a mercenary who, captured by the city during the siege, later escaped and was brought before the Duke of Cleves. The man's testimony was the Bishop's only good news that month: apparently, most of the militia who had defected to the enemy quickly regretted it. Inside the city, disillusionment set in: most 'would gladly have left if they could'. The city was short of adequate food, drink and clothing. And many found 'repulsive' the legal demand that they give away their possessions 'to the congregation' and submit to baptism.² The *Landsknechts* felt they were second-class citizens in a city whose rulers didn't trust them.

This portrait was drawn by a few disgruntled militiamen, however, and so did not accurately reflect the mood inside Münster. In truth, after such a great victory, the city was a beehive of energy, exuberance and festive spirits. The Children of God had heroically defended their city for six days against an army of trained soldiers who outnumbered them three to one.

Leiden, who had shown himself to be an agile commander and stern disciplinarian, insisted that before they gave thanks to God and celebrated, they had much to do. The most important was to secure the city and help the wounded. At once the people cleaned and barricaded their cannons, none of which had been seriously damaged. They extended the hospital to accommodate more patients and four extra surgeons. They checked the inventories of their arsenal. They plugged the weak points in the walls. They dredged and deepened the moat. Brave detachments used tunnels to reach and reinforce the outer earthen ramparts. Piles of dirt were raised around the twelve gates and along the moats, and fortified with sharpened stakes. The first slingshots and catapults were erected. Fears of a follow-up attack kept the townsfolk hard at work for weeks. Sentry duty, by day and by night, took on fresh urgency.

In military matters, at least, the people of Münster were becoming hard-headed pragmatists of Spartan self-discipline – utterly unlike their reputation beyond the walls, where they were thought to be a rabble of unruly fanatics. They operated like a machine of many parts. Everyone knew his or her job, and was driven by the conviction that God was smiling on His chosen warriors.

And now it was time to thank God for His hand in their great victory. They gathered in the half-ruined churches, council chambers and beerhalls. Hymns were sung, and prayers of thanks offered. The frontline soldiers were feted; the women, the elderly and the children who had lent support were hailed. The halls and churches resounded with the praise of God, without whose divine intercession they could not have held the city from the forces of the Antichrist. Of that nobody was in any doubt.

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The Bishop's failure to conquer Münster focused attention on the very real threat posed by this stubborn little city, whose stunning victory was inspiring radical sects in neighbouring towns. The prince-bishops and local nobility were alarmed. What had started as an irritating nuisance had turned into a menace, both to their self-interest and to the peaceful progress of religious reform in Westphalia. If they were to let this irruption persist, the heresy would spread and engulf the region. It was one thing to share

Luther's contempt for the Anabaptists as a godless aberration; it was quite another to see it threatening their political and financial power.

Clearly, Waldeck needed a much bigger war machine. On 20 June Hermann of Wied, Archbishop-Elector of Cologne, and John III, Duke of Cleves, met to discuss the Bishop's struggle. At the time of the Münster rebellion, both Wied and the Duke were reform-minded Catholics who sought an Erasmian middle ground. And they spoke for two of the grander houses – Cologne and Cleves – in the German-speaking lands of the Empire.

Wied would later break with Rome and join the Schmalkaldic League (and would be excommunicated in 1546). Duke John III of Cleves controlled the combined duchies of Jülich-Cleves-Berg, which rivalled the three Westphalian bishoprics of Münster, Minden and Osnabrück. Waldeck hoped one day to unify and rule these as a single prelature, posing a threat to Cleves. So the Duke had good reason to bargain ruthlessly with Waldeck.

After a long and tense negotiation at Neuss, amid 'valiant consideration' of 'the greatness of these issues', the prelates and noblemen from Cologne, Cleves, Jülich, Berg and elsewhere set aside their vested interests to pursue the common good. They pledged their wholehearted support for Waldeck.

Too much was at stake: the Münster uprising was considered a festering boil on the Empire, which, if left unlanced, might infect all of Christendom. So warned a rather swivel-eyed report of the proceedings:

If one were to stand back and accept and not oppose ... the unchristian plan of Münster ... and if it were to become rampant (which the Almighty may graciously prevent), not only the monastery of Münster, but also the princes of Cologne and Cleves [and] the surrounding estates, and even deferential and pious people in the whole German nation, the Holy Roman Empire and Christendom will face irrecoverable harm ... ³

To prevent such a calamity, the 'gracious gentlemen' from Cologne, Cleves, Jülich, Berg, Münster and elsewhere agreed to procure a further thousand labourers to join Waldeck's siege, and to contribute 10,000 Emden guilders each to pay for gunpowder – a total of 70,000 Emden guilders, or 60,000 gold guilders. This was an astonishing sum at the time. Their lordships

anticipated further calls on their purse, should the siege fail to crush Münster ‘within the next month’.⁴

Amid these grave deliberations, the noblemen at Neuss found time to fret over the moral transgressions of Waldeck’s army. That they deigned to consider the souls of ordinary soldiers at all redounded to their thankless virtue, they believed, and it had not escaped their notice that the enemy appeared to be outdoing them in piety. The *Landsknechts* represented the armed face of Christian Europe; they could not be seen to be behaving like a mob of drunken, whoring layabouts.

So in a spirit of pious intervention, the nobles decided to prevail upon the Bishop’s commanders and war councils to prevent in the ranks ‘blasphemies, swearing, cursing, strife, quarrelling, nagging and beating as well as drunkenness and whatever is unChristian and opposed to good order’.⁵ The Bishop’s men must uphold these standards at all times if they were to carry the good fight against Anabaptism, and silence the Münster heresy once and for all.

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Far from the salons of power, there emerged a threat to the Bishop from two unusual individuals, both of them deeply devout citizens of New Jerusalem.

One was a chimneysweep called Wilhelm Bast, who, during the attack on the city, found himself seized by a vision in which God told him to burn the Bishop’s camp to the ground. After setting a few huts ablaze, Bast was arrested and condemned to die. The method exceeded the Bishop’s usual standards of cruelty: Bast was bound by one wrist to a short chain, two or three feet long; the chain was attached to a post, around which piles of logs were laid and set alight, leaving him enough slack to run about as he was slowly roasted alive.

The second was an exceptionally devout fifteen-year-old Dutch girl called Hille Feicken, who had got it into her head that God wanted her to assassinate the Bishop. Feicken conceived the plan after hearing a public sermon on the apocryphal Book of Judith, a beautiful Hebrew widow who liberated the Israelite city of Bethulia from the besieging Assyrian army of Holofernes. In the story, Judith dressed alluringly, crept into Holofernes’ tent, plied him with drink and the promise of sex, and then cut off his head.

When his men discovered that a woman had slain their commander, they fled.

The story inflamed Feicken's imagination, binding the fate of this poor girl from the village of Sneek, in West Frisia – where her father worked as a day labourer for 'devout people'⁶ – to a wealthy Jewess who may have existed 2000 years earlier. It was God's will, Feicken believed, that she should imitate Judith and save her brothers and sisters. It was God's will that she should seduce and poison the lecherous old Bishop Waldeck, exactly as her heroine had murdered Holofernes.

The plan was entirely her own, according to her later confession: nobody in Münster had put her up to it, and none had restrained her.⁷ To be sure, several had strongly encouraged her: when Matthias first heard of the girl's dream, he heartily approved and may have been inspired by her. Knipperdolling encouraged her with two gold rings, food and twelve guilders in travel money.⁸ While Leiden thought her a fantasist, he went along with the general enthusiasm for her plan.

In broad daylight, then, on 16 June, with the blessing of the city, Hille Feicken walked through one of the gates, over the moat and into no-man's-land. To Feicken, God willed that she should march straight into the Bishop's camp, to the astonished admiration of her brothers and sisters. She wore a beautiful dress that showed off her comely figure, and a dazzling array of jewels the city had given her, including Knipperdolling's rings. It was said that she carried a gift for Waldeck: an undervest she had stitched out of the finest linen and soaked in poison. More likely she made this up – poison-drenched gloves, wigs and shirts were common murder weapons in medieval folklore – and simply hoped that God would reveal the murder weapon to her when the time came.⁹

Captured at once, she was brought before Waldeck's provost, Theodor von Meerfeld, in whom the girl confided tearfully that she and her husband (a fictional character she named 'Psalmus') had eloped from Holland and were now trapped in Münster, where the Anabaptists threatened their lives. She sought asylum in exchange for information about a secret entrance to the city – information she would share only with the Bishop, for whom she bore a 'little gift', which, though unworthy of a prince, she said 'would demonstrate the honesty of my intentions and the skill of my hands'.¹⁰

Unfortunately for Feicken, a citizen who knew of her plan deserted the city two days later and surrendered to the Bishop. Hermann Ramert was an

original burgher of Münster who loathed the Anabaptists. To show his good faith, he denounced Feicken as an assassin and assured Waldeck that her story was a monstrous fabrication. To extract the truth, the Bishop had the girl tortured. She quickly confessed on the rack that she had ‘gone forth as Judith, to give the Bishop of Münster a sign of Holofernes’.¹¹ As a reward for Ramert’s loyalty, Waldeck freed him and promised to protect his family once the city was liberated. He then moved Feicken to Bervergern, where her interrogation resumed.

Refusing to believe she’d acted on her own account, the Bishop demanded to know who had planned the assassination attempt. In an agonised whisper, Feicken said nobody had helped her, and none had sought to dissuade her. ‘It could have been the devil or God,’ she said. All she knew was that she would have angered God had she not tried to kill the Bishop.

Had she been rebaptised?

Yes, she said: in Sneek, by a Dutchman.

Did she still reject infant baptism?

‘If it could be proven to her by the word of God’, she would believe in it, she answered. But in her opinion faith came before baptism, and true faith meant charity. Before she left home, she said, she had given her few possessions – a little money, some jewellery – to the poor in her village, and travelled to Münster, ‘not fearing for limb, life, nor coveting money, alms or goods’. Her one wish had been to live among the Elect in New Jerusalem, and she would suffer any torment to be able to do so. Nothing, neither torture nor death, would separate her from the Word of God and her soul’s salvation. If she were mistaken, she would willingly accept God’s correction.¹² Feicken confessed, however, to being disillusioned of late with Münster, where she found little sign of love of one’s neighbour. She distrusted the ‘brothers’ who led the city.¹³

What had she done there?

She had worked on the walls with the other women, and dipped straw wreaths in boiling tar during the recent attack.

Feicken’s broken body was taken from the rack to a place of execution, where, on seeing the block, she dared to proclaim that the axeman had no power over her because God would intervene.

He took off her head with a single sharp blow, as if he were felling an aged oak, not cutting through the soft tissue of a girl’s neck.¹⁴ Her trunk

was tied to a wheel and raised in the air, like the body of a common criminal.

MAIDENS AND WIVES

‘The more wives they had, the better Christians they were ... So they slept first with one wife and then with the other. They did all this with a holy pretence.’

Henry Gresbeck’s eyewitness account of the implementation of the law of polygamy

In late July 1534, a great rumour reached the ears of Bishop Waldeck and his war council, and spread through Westphalia and soon all of Christendom. The truth behind the story would astonish the crowned heads of Europe and seal the fate of New Jerusalem.

The rumour told of a young mother who was jailed for trying to flee the city because she refused ‘to believe that a man should have more than one wife, or that he may abandon one and take yet another’.¹ When the young mother refused, the chief executioner Knipperdolling arrested her, sparking a violent reaction, according to a merchant who had escaped the city. ‘They arrested Knipperdolling and the Prophet Leiden!’ he claimed.²

How the crisis had played out the merchant couldn’t say. He had been on sentry duty at the time, before he escaped.³

The rumour was part of a more disturbing truth, as the world beyond the walls would soon discover. After his military victory, John of Leiden – now the undisputed prophet of New Jerusalem – was casting around for ways to exert his power, purify his realm and satisfy his sexual desires. Since his arrival he had paid close attention to the city’s great preponderance of young, unmarried women. Surely, he thought, they ran the risk of

fornicating or living in sin and displeasing God? Unless they married at once, they could well be plunged into the fires of Hell.

The trouble was that there weren't enough men to marry them. Many husbands had opposed the Anabaptists and fled the city, or been forcibly exiled, leaving their wives behind to convert, willingly or not. And hundreds of single women had flocked to New Jerusalem, enticed by the city's religious freedom, its dashing young prophet and his promises of salvation. These women risked falling into a state of whoredom, Leiden concluded. Many were loud, demonstrative, hysterical and immoral, and needed the protection and spiritual blessing of a husband. In short, they should get married at once.

To this goal, Leiden and the Twelve Elders devised a law of polygamy – or, more precisely, polygyny, meaning one husband having several wives. According to the edict, which was promulgated on 23 July, a man could take as many wives as he wanted, so long as he 'lived with the wives in a godly way'.⁴

After suppressing his initial doubts, Rothmann became a fierce defender of the law. There were strong Biblical precedents. Hadn't David, Abraham, Jacob, Lamech and other Old Testament kings and patriarchs taken more than one wife? David had had eight, Abraham two, and Lamech, Noah's father, two. Why shouldn't New Jerusalem follow their example?

Leiden and Rothmann leant heavily on the Book of Genesis to justify the law. They reminded their brothers and sisters of the Lord's exhortation to 'be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it'.⁵ Did that not mean a man should inseminate as many women as possible, so long as they were living in a state of holy matrimony? And if his wives were too old to bear children, shouldn't the husband find another wife, someone of child-bearing age, and fertilise her too?

Rothmann would soon take nine wives for himself, and later defended the law in a widely distributed treatise. 'If, therefore, a man is so richly blessed that he is able to fructify more than one woman,' he wrote, 'he is free, and even advised to have more than one woman in matrimony.'⁶ To do so out of wedlock was a mortal sin. A man thus had a moral *duty* to marry and impregnate multiple wives. And while the law forbade a woman from having sex during pregnancy, that should not prevent her husband from doing so, as long as he married his chosen lover. And if his second wife should fall pregnant, nothing should stop him from taking a third, and then

a fourth – ‘as many women as he wants to have, so that they will increase the world’, as Henry Gresbeck scornfully observed.⁷

Leiden, the Twelve Elders and the preachers were confident that nobody would object, such was their arrogance after the military triumph. And, at first, many seemed joyfully to acquiesce to the law. ‘Long live the Prophet!’ they cried, after Rothmann announced it. White Bread Bernie beseeched his brothers and sisters to give three days’ notice before they married, and to pray to God to bless the union with children.

Only a silent minority disapproved. They ‘bottled up their lamentations’, afraid openly to defy the Prophet and Biblical precept.⁸

And so, in the coming weeks, hundreds of single women were ordered to come forward and marry: virgins, maidens and widows, noble or low-born women, and any ‘sexually mature’ women (i.e. menstruating), should find a husband at once. The younger and prettier ones hoped to marry a single man whom they liked, or at least found tolerable. In practice, powerful old men snapped them up.

The law dissolved all existing marriages in cases where the husband had been exiled or escaped the city. They were deemed godless men who had abandoned the faith. Their children were condemned as bastards, reflecting the emphasis the Anabaptists placed on spiritual over marital unions.⁹ So their wives were now deemed single, and were required to remarry and bear children. Fruitless or unconsummated marriages could be annulled without fault or prejudice, and the women assigned to a new husband.¹⁰

Nor should the newlyweds waste a droplet of semen. The Lord frowned on men who ejaculated outside the woman’s vagina. They were like Onan, slain by God for spilling his seed on the ground rather than inseminating his late brother’s wife.

Leiden and the Twelve Elders were delighted by the marital law, which they determined to enforce with rigid efficiency. It prevented their womenfolk from lapsing into godless depravity, and freed men to seduce and marry as many women as their age and energy could handle, and as the Lord saw fit to provide. The Melchiorites were on track to repopulate New Jerusalem, if not the world.

A spirit of riotous sexual abandon now gripped parts of the city. Hundreds of married men, drunk and engorged by lust, seized the chance to take a second wife. And a third. And a fourth.

They rushed around town with a kind of bestial urgency, free to indulge their sexual fantasies in God's name. They tore open the doors of the houses 'in which they knew a woman or a virgin or young maiden' lived. Half a dozen were often seen chasing a single pretty girl up the street, in a race to accumulate the most wives. To have several became a kind of status symbol; the most sought-after prize was a pretty young virgin.

'The more wives they had, the better Christians they would be,' noted Gresbeck, with his usual contemptuous sarcasm. 'But eventually they took wives wherever they could get them, they became fruitful or not ... Hence they slept with one wife first, then with another. This they all did with a holy pretence ...'¹¹

Some women leapt at the chance to marry and sleep with a man they secretly desired. And the law freed those in loveless or abusive marriages to abandon their spouses and find others – all with the imprimatur of the Almighty.

Yet the consequences of the law disgusted many married couples. Furtively, and then fiercely, they began to oppose it. Were our marital vows, our years of struggle together, worthless, they wondered. What right had these strange women to share my husband's bed, wives demanded to know.

This was a time, of course, when the state and the people lived – publicly, at least – according to an austere code of sexual propriety. The puritan spirit of the German and English Reformations ushered in the most abstemious regimes. Social norms between the sexes were exceedingly precise: women were not to be seen in public with men who were not their husbands or fathers; a chaperone should always accompany a woman in society. In Bern, women were banned from riding in sleighs without their husbands or fathers. In Bavaria, 'fornication fines' of up to a year's salary were imposed on transgressors.¹²

A sort of vigilante justice animated many communities. Adulterers and unwed mothers were often beaten up or ostracised. Deviants were pilloried, tied to rocks and forced to wear white smocks in public. And the trade guilds, so pervasive in Münster and other German-speaking cities, exerted great social power, banishing adulterers and sexual miscreants.¹³

As the great chronicler of human sexuality Eric Berkowitz writes:

If it wasn't a church tribunal, secular judge, or justice of the peace nosing into one's life, it was neighbours peeking through the window: busybodies who might well fetch the local constable, to whom full power was given to break into any home and drag the alleged moral offenders away.¹⁴

A decadent elite ignored this puritanical regime, of course. Erotic verse such as *Carmina Priapae*, attributed to Virgil, had been sold in twenty-two editions by 1517. Not that pornographers to the aristocracy weren't eager for mass appeal. The notorious Italian pornographer Pietro Aretino had a prostitute say, in his *Dialogues*, 'Speak plainly and say "fuck", "prick", "cunt" and "ass" if you want anyone except the scholars of the University of Rome to understand you.' Aretino also delighted in debasing romantic love, with a ringing celebration of anal intercourse: 'And God forgive anyone who does not fuck in the ass.'¹⁵ He ignored the fact that the Holy Roman Empire had made buggery a capital crime, punishable by burning at the stake. Bestiality, too, violated Biblical law; sex with goats was especially heinous, thought to be linked to witchcraft.

Despite this, the Vatican was a hive of sexual depravity, so long as it stayed 'in house'. Pope Clement VII tolerated the circulation of sixteen hardcore erotic images by the artist Giulio Romano among his ranking churchmen, and only acted to protect public sensitivities when an engraver tried to mass-reproduce them. For this, the engraver was flung into prison and the copies destroyed.

Most of the citizens of Münster were at the nether end of this social scale, and it appalled them to find so many sexual taboos being broken. Their society was swimming in the opposite direction of public respectability, into the torrents of unbridled sexual excess.

Young women were shocked to find themselves compelled to marry fat old men, and obliged to fulfil his grotesque sexual demands. Parents despaired of a law that forced their daughters to wed men old enough to be their grandfathers. And elderly spinsters were aghast at being told they were 'too old to take husbands' – because they could not bear children – and so should attach themselves to male 'guardians'.

That the Heavenly Father apparently approved was little consolation, because many people could not reconcile His Word with this behaviour. Few had the courage openly to resist the law, but their simmering outrage

burst forth in public debate, in the squares and marketplaces. Leiden, Knipperdolling and Rothmann had not confronted such public defiance before. They wrestled with the question of how to make polygyny acceptable to women without infringing the God-given right of men to go forth and multiply.

Leiden, a seasoned lothario, reckoned he had just the answer. He conceded that some men had behaved coarsely in the getting of a wife, or wives. They had ruffled the smooth adoption of the nuptial law. Such men needed a remedial lesson in the art of chivalrous and respectful seduction. Had they no decency, these men – no sense of etiquette, no understanding of the rudiments of courtship? Appointing himself a sexual counsellor, Leiden advised his brothers not to force themselves on reluctant women. Nor should they insist on marrying women who did not wish to marry them. Patience and charm would win them the women they desired.

‘Dear brothers,’ Leiden declared in a public statement, ‘you should call on the sister or go to her house alone, and ask for her hand in marriage.’ If she declines, he went on, or if she is already betrothed, ‘you should leave her alone’ and ‘find another’. And if the man finds a sister who accepts his hand in marriage, ‘you should pray to God for three days, that it be God’s will that you take her and may live with her’. Whatever method of seduction the men chose, their pious mission should be to ‘populate the world’, Leiden urged, ‘with all the women that you can get’.¹⁶

Leiden led by example. Upon his arrival in New Jerusalem, he had moved in with Knipperdolling and promptly seduced and was now married to his daughter, Klara, even though he was still married to his first wife, whom he had left in Leiden with their two children. When he grew bored of Klara, he drove her out of her home and began sleeping with the maid. And now it was God’s pleasure that he should marry Matthias’s widow, the lovely Divara, even as he cast a concupiscent eye over the beautiful girls in the city.

Rothmann was loosed on the city to defend Leiden and the men’s growing collections of wives. The preacher drew heavily on the Book of Genesis, making it clear that no matter how many wives a man acquired, he remained the head of his family, with all his patriarchal and property rights intact. He would later write:

The husband should assume his lordship over the wife ... Too often the wives are the lords, leading their husbands like bears ... The husband is the head of the wife, and as the husband is obedient to Christ, so also should the wife be obedient to her husband, without murmuring or contradiction.¹⁷

Melchiorite weddings were simple, unadorned affairs – and quick. After three days of courtship, the man simply had to say to the woman, before two or three witnesses, ‘Do you wish you have me? I desire you.’ If she willingly said yes, they were pronounced husband and wife.¹⁸ Most women were too afraid to say no.

Leiden himself performed wedding ceremonies in the marketplace, and dissolved those marriages where the relationship had irrevocably broken down.¹⁹ Many men delighted in the prospect of enjoying a harem of wives; others despaired at what they had lost or were about to lose: a stable, loving marriage. Some couples held marital parties and celebrated their freedom; others felt revolted, spurned, enraged. And women in unhappy or abusive marriages seized the chance to find a lover, even if it meant having to marry him.

Fierce domestic brawls broke out. Wives who had been married to their husbands for years found they had to share their nuptial bed with one or more strange women. Violent jealousy led to at least one woman committing suicide. People lost track of who they were supposed to be married to, and to whom they were betrothed. Women would wander the streets, asking each other, with derisive laughter, ‘Have you seen my Lord?’ ‘Can you find my husband?’

Every day husbands and wives brought fresh domestic crises before the Twelve Elders. Wives of heroic fidelity were outraged by a law that ran roughshod over their nuptial rights. Leiden and his regime quickly lost patience with these vexatious women. How could a man multiply, as God intended, with only one wife? These silly women did not seem to appreciate the urgency of His Word. Nor were Leiden’s lessons in courtship working: the Twelve Elders were disturbed to find that many women and a few men dared openly to resist the law.

Serner measures were required. It was decided that anyone who refused to obey would be sent to prison. Since most of the offenders were female, Rosendale Convent was converted into a woman's gaol. The cells soon filled with angry wives who preferred confinement in a nunnery to sharing their home with their husband's harem; some single women opted for jail rather than marry an unwanted suitor.

Rothmann advised the government to go further. 'I say to you truly,' he preached to a meeting of the sisters, 'Rosendale won't work any longer. We realise that you can't be forced by it. Hence, now you must be punished by the sword.'²⁰

Women who refused to marry, and wives who denied sex to their husbands, henceforth faced execution. This gave women pause for thought. Most grudgingly accepted the new arrangements: living with a husband's 'concubines' was probably preferable to decapitation. A brave few chose death. It is unknown how many women were executed for refusing a man's hand in marriage, or denying him sex. And the death penalty did nothing to stop the domestic brawls that were making a daily hell of New Jerusalem, and creating a little crystal of resistance.

WOMEN REVOLT

‘Do you have enough women now?’

Female rebels confront a preacher, whom they discover in bed with two wives

Within a few weeks in the summer of 1534, Münster lurched from the euphoria of martial victory to the debauchery of legalised polygyny.

Observant townsfolk suspected that Leiden was using the Bible to validate his gluttonous sexual appetite. It hadn't escaped their notice that the Prophet had married or proposed to the prettiest of the city's young women. So too had the Elders and the preachers. Their disgust deepened when the reprisals began. What right did the city have to put to death a woman who refused to marry or have sex with a man she loathed?

At first they turned their ire on Knipperdolling, the chief executioner, who was now given to swaggering around town with his enormous sword. They demanded that he release the young mother who had been jailed for trying to flee the city rather than marry an already married man. Then they turned on Leiden. Was it God's Will, they cried, that a woman should be condemned for refusing to share her husband? Or that drunken oafs should chase their daughters through the streets?

Aghast at this insubordination, Leiden, the Twelve Elders, Knipperdolling and Rothmann went into a huddle to decide how to respond. They could hardly behead or imprison every woman who opposed the law.

An inveterate escape artist, Leiden came up with a new ruse. They would admit they made a mistake, he said, and blame it all on a group of clerics who had left town (and who had already been captured and

executed, as he well knew). And they would let any wives who had been forced to marry 'separate permanently' from their husbands. The Prophet dared not use the word 'divorce'. The Bible and Münster's new constitution prohibited divorce on pain of death. No, a permanent separation seemed the only way to appease reluctant newlyweds without offending God.

His trusty mouthpiece Rothmann delivered the admission of error in a public sermon. 'The preachers have erred,' he declared. Any woman who felt she had been forced to marry 'should come up to the council-house and have yourselves listed. Then you shall be separated. No-one must be forced. Matrimony must be voluntary.'¹

By now, however, many women so distrusted the regime that they refused to cooperate. Was this a trick to incriminate them? Listing their names surely amounted to a confession of guilt? Many feared that if they identified themselves, they would be sent to the market square with a fur pelt around their necks, a signal to the executioner to behead them.

Some women decided to trust the edict, and gave their names, and they were indeed allowed to separate from their unwanted husbands. Yet the regime's apparent leniency came with a sting in its tail. For resisting the law, Rothmann and his preachers damned the 'listed women' as 'divorcees' and 'whores' given to devilry.

There were deeper reasons, though, that women opposed Leiden's marital edict, reasons that went beyond jealousy, tradition and domestic strife. The new law had reduced women to sexual vassals, destroying their self-respect and spiritual 'oneness'. It reminded them of what they had lost, or were losing: their sense of a direct relationship with God as valued and sacred beings in their own right, untrammelled by the laws of men.

Sexual slaves could hardly be the spiritual equals of their masters. Yet their faith supposedly respected the freedom of conscience of both men and women. Baptism, the sign of the cross on the forehead, had promised 'rebirth', a new life, and the liberation of the soul. Baptism rendered men and women spiritual equals before God. Many women had flocked to New Jerusalem for precisely this reason.

The women of Münster drank deep of the idea that they were as favoured in God's eyes as men. For Biblical succour, they cited Joel 2:28–29, for whom God:

will pour out my spirit on all flesh,

your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

...

Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.²

Many women who read these words felt that God was speaking directly to them. What need had they of priests and preachers to interpret the Gospels when even female slaves were graced with the spirit of the Lord? Had not God said to them, 'You too are my children – you too will be saved'?³

There were dazzling precedents of women who believed they were blessed with a direct relationship with God: the astonishing visions of the Strasbourg Spiritualists, Ursula Jost and Barbara Rebstock; the defiance of the Swiss sisters, notably Agnes Linck from Biel, who told a court in 1530 that 'no man' had led her to grace – she was guided by her own intimate connection with the Lord.⁴

Such women inspired others to believe that God, and not man, had called them 'directly' to faith.⁵ It was a powerful idea, and one some of the brothers accepted, even fostered. Melchior Hoffman, for example, had described women as 'vessels of the divine spirit', and feminine spirituality as a 'new stage in history', when God made his thoughts known through His chosen female prophetesses.⁶

Nowhere in Christendom did women feel so valued as in Anabaptist communities, where they enjoyed full participatory rites of worship. Throughout Germany and Switzerland, they enjoyed 'an unprecedented degree of independence and equality'. They were 'companions in the faith' and 'mates in missionary enterprise and readiness for martyrdom'.⁷ Without the devotion of women, whether they were ex-nuns relishing their liberation or prophetesses gripped by heavenly visions, the Anabaptist faith could not have survived.⁸

And while Anabaptist women could not become preachers, baptisers or scriptural interpreters – they would never 'equal' men in a functional sense, and were expected diligently to obey their husbands – they showed great 'informal leadership', as teachers, carers, Bible readers and even composers of hymns.⁹ God had spoken to the female conscience, urging them to do 'good works', help the sick and poor, venerate charity and generosity, and defend and protect their faith.

In this spirit, women in the Anabaptist strongholds of Strasbourg, Amsterdam, Deventer and Münster formed the bedrock of the community. They ‘secretly carried messages, penned consolatory messages, proffered their homes for meetings, nourished their brothers and sisters in hiding, [and] proselytised whenever they had a chance’.¹⁰ They housed, fed and clothed outlawed male preachers. Some were even allowed to preach.¹¹

And for the first time in her life a woman enjoyed a spiritual identity, a direct relationship with Christ, who cared specifically for *her*.¹² Baptism and freedom of conscience had made women ‘the spiritual equals of men’. Even if much of this was illusory – she still did the same dreary chores, bowed and scraped to her male masters – somehow she felt elevated, a special soul, unique in the eyes of God. Had her sisters not suffered as much as men for their faith – imprisonment, torture, burning and drowning? Was she not as willing to die for her beliefs as any man? A third of Anabaptist martyrs were women! Had they not sung, laughed and thanked God on their way to grisly deaths, just as men had done? Was she not as devout as they – as *good* as they? Would she not one day shed the burden of Eve?

And now, in her beloved New Jerusalem, was all this to be discarded in a theocracy that was becoming every bit as oppressive as the world she had fled? Had she misread the Prophet’s intentions? Or had her brothers never intended her to be their equal in the eyes of the Lord after all?

One thing was certain: the delicious freedoms women had tasted at the dawn of New Jerusalem were no more, and the social relations of the old world were returning in a brutal new form. Men would decide not only how a woman should worship and what she should believe, but also when, where and with whom she should marry and procreate.¹³

So the feminine spirit of the rebellion began to recede, and the wisp of hope that had illuminated women’s souls shrank from that happy vision, clouded by the return of a terrifying patriarchal future. And this, in a city in which they outnumbered men by three to one. In its place rose an angry and defiant cry, aided and abetted by those men who shared their womenfolk’s outrage at the domestic laws being imposed by the Prophet and his cronies.

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The revolt against Leiden started timidly. The people were reluctant to defy the new law. And yet in the streets and homes and taverns, there flourished

little pockets of angry resistance.

In late July a small crowd resolved openly to resist the regime, led by a principled locksmith called Henry Mollenhecke. A devoted husband and father of a twelve-year-old girl, he was disgusted by the law that insisted his daughter must marry. Mollenhecke had been a devout member of New Jerusalem, but now he even dared to argue publicly with Knipperdolling against the marital law. For Mollenhecke, the Anabaptist madness had gone far enough.

On 30 July Mollenhecke led a crowd of some 200 artisans and soldiers, and many wives and young women, against the city's leaders. At nine pm, at the sound of the horn in St Lambert's spire, the rebels surrounded the council chambers, where Leiden, Rothmann and several preachers had convened on the second floor. The rebels rushed up the stairs, arrested them all and imprisoned them in the council cellar.

They made further arrests around the city. They dragged one preacher, Herman Schlachtschap, from his bed, where they found him wedged between two wives, with two more women sleeping in a cot underneath. They slapped Schlachtschap in the stocks in the main square, where the people flung manure and stones at him, crying out, 'Do you have enough women now?'¹⁴

Mollenhecke and his men then debated long into the night the thorny problem of how to surrender the city to the Bishop without risking their own lives. Should they enter into negotiations with Waldeck? Should they disband Leiden's regime and reconstitute the council? Meanwhile, unbeknown to the rebels, Leiden and his fellow inmates were shouting to their supporters in the street through the iron grilles of their cells. And Herman Tilbeck, the influential former mayor, was busy amassing a force of some 600 of Leiden's devoted followers.

At daybreak Mollenhecke summoned by drumbeat all who 'loved the word of God' to the marketplace. Few knew why they were being asked to assemble in the cool morning air, but there were alarming signs: unusually, neither Leiden nor Rothmann was there to meet them. And here was the city locksmith regaling them with the idea of surrender. Word of what had happened spread, thanks largely to the rage of Henry Redeker, who was fiercely loyal to Leiden and took charge in the Prophet's absence. The menfolk were not going to lose their new conjugal rights without a fight.

Fear fragmented the people's loyalties. When they realised what was at stake, many deserted Mollenhecke and rallied behind Leiden and Redeker and the 'polygamist' faction. Their wives joined them, afraid to back a failing rebellion whose leaders were as good as dead. With his revolt in disarray, Mollenhecke and his terrified rebels fled to the council chambers, bolted themselves inside on the top floor and barricaded the lower stairs with furniture.

The polygamist faction raced to the basement and released Leiden, Rothmann and the preachers. The Prophet and his entourage emerged smiling, waving at the crowd and shouting, 'No mercy to the enemies of the Lord!'

At the same time, Tilbeck's army surrounded the council building with soldiers and cannons. 'Death to the traitors!' a crowd shrieked from the street below.

Soon a felt hat appeared at a window on the top floor, and then another and another. Surrendering, Mollenhecke and some 120 rebels trudged downstairs and begged for mercy.

They received none. The polygamist mob fell upon them with fists and stones, beat and insulted them, and herded them into cells. Leiden's female disciples were especially vicious, pummelling the revolutionaries with rocks and stripping them of their clothes.

One rebel, Nicholas Detmar, was found to have stolen 4000 florins from the council treasury. Under torture, he confessed that the rebels had intended to hand the city over to the Bishop. Leiden had all the ammunition he needed for a thorough purge.

With the Prophet back in charge, the Twelve Elders met to discuss how to punish the forty-nine rebels found guilty of leading the insurrection. There was no trial, of course, simply an announcement: all must die. An example had to be made.

The first batch of twenty-five, including Mollenhecke, were put up against the linden trees in the field set aside for execution and shot. The rest were beheaded or mutilated – to save ammunition and avoid alerting the Bishop to the dissent within the city. One man begged to be allowed to see his wife and children before he died. His plea was denied and he was cleaved in half.

Knipperdolling and his men carried out most of the executions, with Leiden taking part when the desire possessed him. For several mornings

they dragged up new batches of ten or so terrified victims, hacked them to pieces and buried the body parts in two great pits near the cathedral square. About 120 other prisoners, many of them women, were found to have been led astray and pardoned.

From now on, the punishment for any dissent was summary execution, at a nod from the Prophet. Resistance meant many people would eventually have to die, as Gresbeck observed.¹⁵ That fate befell three men who dared to denounce the cruel punishments in the following days. The broad mass fell silent and submitted. They had no choice.

Thus ended the only rebellion against the theocracy of John of Leiden. Its failure extinguished the last flicker of conventional morality against the polygamist faction of the city. Leiden now controlled the most intimate aspects of the people's lives. And the fear of tyranny spilled down the alleys and courtyards and into the squares and churches, frightening into silence any hints of sedition.

The polygamist victors celebrated with a burst of sexual depravity that was extreme even by their standards, according to Kerssenbrock's lurid eyewitness account: 'Raging with untamed lust, everyone was now possessed by obscene lechery,' he observed. Their 'promiscuous lustfulness' knew no restraint.¹⁶

Of course, many men and women revelled in their sexual liberty, thrilled at last to be free to sleep around in the name of God. New Jerusalem was a nightly celebration of procreation: multiple sexual couplings, as long as the couples were married, was good, it was moral, it was the will of the Lord.

For Leiden, it was another triumph. The marital law stuck and polygyny was established as the norm. As yet unmarried men and women, fearful of the axe for being found single, rushed to the altar and had sex as often as possible – anything to avoid whispers that they were refusing to multiply.

Leiden himself set a ferocious pace, acquiring three new wives in as many days, bringing his tally to five, among whom Divara was his favourite. Soon he would amass more than ten; by the end of 1534 it would be fifteen or sixteen.

Try as they might, the Twelve Elders and the preachers were unable to keep pace. According to witnesses, Rothmann was the proud runner-up, with nine wives, while John Klopriss, placed third, had six. Knipperdolling had two, Henry Krechting three, Herman Tilbeck two, and Gerard Kibbenbrock two.¹⁷ Most of the Elders married at least twice.

The few remaining nuns, too, relished the idea of sexual freedom. Those still holding out at the Convent Across-the-Water and the Convent of St Giles threw off their habits, abandoned their vows of chastity and rushed off in pursuit of a man. Down from their cloisters they came, their freed hair streaming in the wind, as Kerssenbrock witnessed, ‘this one finding a soldier, that one, a cobbler; this one, a foreigner, that one, a local; this one a priest, that one, a bailiff; this one a lawyer, that one a peasant; this one, a nobleman, that one a burgher or whomsoever her spirit took her’.¹⁸

It was no wonder that stories circulated of depraved acts, pagan orgies, bestial couplings, monstrous incontinence and every imaginable sexual convulsion. Kerssenbrock reported that ‘men assaulted the female sex’ with greater ‘lustfulness than any beast’. He felt so disgusted that he chose to pass over the subject ‘in silence’, so as not to offend the reader’s ‘modest ears’. No doubt he exaggerated some of this, given his general hostility to the Melchiorites, but acts of depravity were inevitable in a closed society that sanctioned sex on demand, where to refuse a husband was a capital crime. As the supply of single women dried up, some men were reduced to prowling the streets in search of a victim, groaning like famished vampires when they found one: ‘My spirit yearns for your flesh!’¹⁹

Thus the city entered a lower circle of depravity. Having exhausted the supply of grown women, certain men cast their eyes over the city’s few hundred little girls, some as young as ten. Indeed, Gresbeck can’t bring himself to mention the girls’ ages. According to the law, if they were old enough to bear children – which is to say, if they had started menstruating – they were old enough to marry.

And so the rape and sexual abuse of girls proceeded under the smiling gaze of the Lord. Men old enough to be their grandfathers would barge into homes where they knew there were little girls, force them to line up for inspection and seize the ones they wanted.²⁰ ‘They kept the girls for so long with their evil will that they wrecked all the girls, breaking their bodies down,’ observed Gresbeck.²¹ He blamed the Hollanders, the Frisians and

the preachers – he had a tendency to blame foreigners and clerics for the city’s crimes – yet local Münster men were also involved.

If not for the intervention of an extraordinary female surgeon, herself a rarity in Westphalian society, many of the little girls would have died of the diseases and injuries inflicted on them by their ‘husbands’. According to witnesses, this surgeon – the wife of a man called Knupper – healed the bodies and restored the health, if not the virginity, of dozens of girls.

Outside the walls, stories spread of a society given over to monstrous debauchery. The crazed Melchiorities were thought to be worse than the Adamites, a second-century sect who believed they were conjoined with Adam and Eve and attended religious services naked. They were deemed worse than those ecstatic sects of Dreamers, the Blood Friends and Spiritualists, who had tolerated forms of polygamy, ‘holy’ promiscuity and ‘free love’ as an expression of God’s will to procreate. They were more depraved than the thirteenth-century Dutch Brethren of the Free Spirit, the fifteenth-century Bohemian Taborites and German Beghards, accused of the wildest sexual excesses (of which, in truth, they were largely innocent; refusing to accept that the Fall of Man had taken place, they simply hoped to recreate Paradise on earth).

The Münster Anabaptists were accused of every kind of sexual crime: of holding baptismal orgies, of forcing girls to have sex with old men, of beheading those who refused. And as the rumours spread, even their brothers and sisters elsewhere in Europe disowned them: Münster was an abomination, a perversion of everything true Christians held dear.

Menno Simons, the gentle nomadic preacher who would later weave the vestiges of Melchiorite Anabaptism into a peaceful faith, castigated the city for its excesses and ridiculed Leiden’s recourse to the authority of the Old Testament to justify polygamy. Yes, Abraham and Jacob had had more than one wife, but that was before Moses forbade polygamy in Israel, Menno taught. And the New Testament clearly condemned the practice: 1 Timothy 3:12 states that deacons should marry ‘only once’, while St Paul in Titus 1:6 advises the elders of Crete to be ‘married only once’.²²

Menno and other peaceful Anabaptists, such as Melchior Hoffman, who heard the stories in his prison cell, came to share the horror felt by the

Catholics and the Lutherans: a wicked spirit purporting to represent the will of God had loosed itself on the city of Münster.

THE BLOCKADE

‘We have baked and brewed, three and four nights long, and the brew is finished. Will you not come?’

Female combatants taunting the Bishop’s mercenaries from the walls of Münster; their ‘brew’ was the boiling pitch they would pour on their enemy’s heads

News of Münster’s degeneration shocked and titillated all of Christendom. The stories of polygamous unions, lawless debauchery, the sexual assault of minors and the desecration of the sacrament of marriage reached Martin Luther, who kept a passing eye on the activities of the ‘faith’ he likened to a Satanic cult. If he thought about them at all, Luther regarded the Anabaptists as a devil-led scourge, a pestilence on the body of Christianity. That they claimed to be acting in God’s name merely worsened the heresy. Yet he could not ignore these latest, diabolical rumours. Not only had those damnable Melchiorites rejected the holiest sacraments of infant baptism and the Eucharist, they were now besmirching the sanctity of marriage.

Luther’s theological position was in many respects closer to that of the Catholic Church than to that of the extreme Protestants who owed their existence to his reforms. Yet the father of the Reformation had unleashed the demon, and Rome would never let him forget it. Partly for this reason, Luther became determined to stamp out the radical fringe, to preserve the integrity of the faith that now bore his name. The Anabaptists must be crushed, he advised, just as the Peasants’ Revolt had been crushed. They were allied to Satan. And while the devil at large in Münster was comically inept, a ‘kindergartner devil’, an evil delinquent ‘just learning his ABCs’,¹

this rebaptising wickedness had gone far enough. The evil *Schwärmer* had befouled the holiest rites of Christendom.

Luther honed his sharpest cut for Rothmann, a trained priest who should have known better than to urge men to marry ‘as lust and appetite demanded’. Worse, Luther heard that Rothmann believed that only Anabaptist marriages were sacred, and damned other marital unions as mere whoredom. If that were true, Luther argued, marshalling all his withering logic, were not the leaders of the Münster rebellion, whose parents were Catholic, merely ‘the children of whores’?²

Luther’s later defence of the bigamous marriage of Philip of Hesse would draw charges of hypocrisy, yet that was the price he had to pay for the Landgrave’s help and friendship. There were mitigating circumstances, too: poor old Philip was reportedly born with three testicles, which explained his rampant libido and need of two wives – or so it was thought.

Luther’s great collaborator, Philip Melanchthon, was similarly caught between apologising for the sexual excesses of the powerful and condemning those of the weak. In 1531 he had assured King Henry VIII, no less, that polygamy was not prohibited by divine law. Now Melanchthon changed his tune. Damning the ‘satanic sect’ that had seized Münster, he insisted that marriage was the union of one man and one woman, as written in the Gospel of Matthew: ‘a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’. In the same treatise, published in 1535, Melanchthon dismissed the precedent of polygamy in the Old Testament as a Jewish error: ‘even though the Jews might have had many wives, it still violated natural law’.³

This was an age, remember, when thousands of priests and monks and nuns were disavowing celibacy, abandoning the Catholic Church and marrying. God had entered the bedroom and despaired of what He saw: cold, celibate beds, childless monks and nuns, living drab, sexless lives, and all apparently in His name. Why were they not multiplying, as He had intended? Why these shameful, childless homes?

The Bible legitimised sexual love – within holy matrimony. Yet for centuries celibate old priests had abjured sex, or loaded the sexual act with guilt. Now, the freedom to joyfully multiply was transforming human relationships throughout Christendom. Indeed, Luther and Bucer were leading by example: both had abandoned their monastic lives and married former nuns. Karlstadt and Melanchthon had praised marriages between

priests and nuns, thousands of whom were spilling from their monasteries and nunneries flushed with the hope of securing a nuptial union.

By the early 1530s, dozens of monasteries and nunneries in the German-speaking lands were closing their doors, and many of their inhabitants were embracing matrimony. In England, Henry VIII and his chief minister Thomas Cromwell had devised the legal machinery for the dissolution of the monasteries (which would proceed between 1536 and 1541). The closure or destruction of some 900 religious houses – monasteries, nunneries and friaries – and the sale of their assets for the enrichment of the crown forced the monastic orders into the world, where many would abandon their vows and marry.

The Catholic-inspired backlash came soon enough. Pure lust was driving the clergy to marry, Rome declared. It was a disgusting betrayal of their vows of celibacy. Priests were married to the church, not woman. Nuns were the brides of Christ, not man. Sexual love had no place in their lives.

Under Rome's omnipotent gaze, many parishioners felt inclined to agree. Somehow, a married priest seemed diminished. What right had he to sermonise, to tell us how to behave, the people wondered. Were they mere sex-crazed fornicators, no better than the ordinary people? And these married nuns – what were they, other than common whores who had befouled their habits with fornication? And with this sudden burst of sexual freedom, rumours did the rounds of unmentionable depravity, of mass orgies in the convents and monasteries, some of them true.

Unable to face their congregations in a married state, many clerics fled their dioceses and sought refuge in Wittenberg. To his consternation, Luther found newlywed monks and nuns at his door, seeking help. He could hardly send them away: his own writing had emboldened them to marry.⁴ In truth, this evidence of the power of his words pleased the great theologian. His robust ego was not beneath claiming credit for ending the unnatural state of celibacy. Luther had witnessed and himself endured its attendant agonies and perversities. If his papist enemies would deign to notice the torments of conscience suffered every day by the monks and nuns who sought his help, he argued, 'they would help me storm the cloisters tomorrow'.⁵

The Münster regime had abused this new freedom, though, far exceeding what anyone had imagined. And its harshest critics were typically newly married Lutherans, who saw in Leiden's polygamous sect a

repulsive affront to the sacrament of marriage. Former celibates who had broken their sacred vows were aghast. In their eyes, Leiden was a disgusting heretic, a whoring pimp, a priapic satyr, a bogus prophet – how dare he invoke the will of God to justify his perversity! How dare he make a mockery of the sacred bond between husband and wife!

The sanctity of marriage, the miracle of procreation, the holy witness to their nuptial vows – the Westphalian outrage dragged everything the church stood for through the slime. Something had to be done. The powers who financed Bishop Waldeck crowded for action.

Waldeck had heard the stories too, and believed them. Münster was ‘ablaze with unbridled lust’, and its inhabitants reeked of sexual incontinence. The entire city was now a whorehouse in which ‘it was not possible to find a virgin over the age of eleven’, according to Kerssenbrock.⁶

There was another reason, though, why the Bishop felt compelled to launch a second assault on the city and exterminate the pestilence: the Münster rebellion was firing discontent in other dioceses, and horrifying the crowned heads, dukes and lords. The presumptuousness of these common fanatics, to imagine that God spoke directly to them! Was there no end to this coarse zealotry, this heresy posing as Christianity? Who would rid the realm of these low-born fanatics?

Ridding his realm of Anabaptism was precisely what Waldeck was determined to do. Since the failure of his previous assault, the Bishop had been quietly amassing men and materiel, paid for out of his own pocket and by his wealthy donors. The electors of Cologne, Cleves, Mainz and Trier were among the biggest backers of the siege. Their investment placed Waldeck under unrelenting pressure to drain the ‘cesspool of depravity’ inside Münster.

In late August 1534 he made his move. On the twenty-fourth the Bishop held a military meeting in his camp. Some of the most powerful princes in the German-speaking lands attended – the Archbishop of Cologne, the Count Palatine, the Duke of Grubenhagen, and the counts of Schauenburg, Isenburg, Nassau, Waldeck, Neuenahr, Oberstein, Bentheim and Wied – as

well as many battle-hardened, senior knights. Some had come to participate in the assault, some to monitor the use of their money and men; others were quietly titillated by the stories and had come to witness the doom of this Satanic city, this second Sodom.

The meeting decided that a show of mercy might spare them the blood and cost of a full-scale battle. So they decided to send one last delegation to Münster, bearing an olive branch.

On 25 August the two sides agreed a three-hour truce, during which the Bishop's delegation was offered safe passage in and out of the city. Waldeck's delegates entered Münster and found the streets deserted of people: Leiden had cleared the city and forbidden anyone from trying to contact the envoys, who were brought before the Prophet and the Twelve Elders in the cathedral square. Here, the Bishop's men abruptly declared that the people of Münster would be spared, their crimes forgiven and forgotten, if they would repent of their rebellion and surrender the city. If they refused, the Bishop would cut a path of 'blood and iron'. There would be no mercy.⁷

To this, the Prophet spat scorn and defiance. Leiden was in no mood for ultimatums from 'the godless'. Who were these agents of the Antichrist who presumed to offer *him* clemency? Who was the Bishop to claim the power of life and death over the people of New Jerusalem? Only the Heavenly Father had the power of life and death, of mercy and forgiveness, not these heralds from hell.

Leiden dismissed the offer outright. He saw no impiety or rebelliousness in the holy city, as the Bishop's envoys claimed. The people of New Jerusalem lived according to the Word of God, he declared. Rather, it was the Bishop and the princes and lords who were living in godless depravity, who were impious and rebellious. They had dared to persecute a godly people who simply wished to live according to the Bible's laws. It was the Bishop and his allies who should be begging for peace; it was they who should be seeking forgiveness from *him*. No, New Jerusalem would not lay down its arms and surrender the city. The people would defend New Jerusalem to the last breath, and spill their blood for the glory of God.

On receiving news of this rebuff, Waldeck realised that his appeal hadn't reached the ears of the ordinary citizens. His envoys confirmed that Leiden had only permitted them to speak with him. So the bishop extended the deadline and ordered his archers to fire blunted arrows carrying his offer

in writing into the streets of the city. The letter promised a full pardon to anyone who repented of their error and abandoned the city by five pm on 28 August. After then, he would be compelled to take the harshest measures. As God was his witness, his conscience was clear.

To this, Leiden issued an immediate edict prohibiting anyone from picking up and reading the letter. Those who did so would be executed, and their souls excommunicated from the company of Christ.

The deadline passed. Soon after five pm on 28 August, Waldeck launched his second assault on the city, with a heavy cannonade. This time, Europe's crowned heads were paying close attention, as were Luther and the Pope: the abomination of Anabaptism must be exterminated once and for all.

The Bishop had not been idle: since June his men had been trying to drain the moat around the city by damming the River Aa. To complete this project, thousands of indentured peasants had been working through the nights. They had achieved little, though, because Leiden's men kept peppering them with cannon fire and gunshot. They were unable to drain the moat.

Waldeck's opening bombardment of Münster could be heard seventy miles away, it was said, terrifying the surrounding villages and shattering windows. It continued for three days and nights, an infernal pounding, punctuated by the great boom of 'the Devil', Hesse's huge cannon.⁸ This time, the gunners concentrated their firepower on the gates, severely damaging several, which fell loose from their frames.⁹

In the pre-dawn hours of 31 August, as the bombardment ceased, the Bishop made a fatal error. He held a tactical meeting that failed to agree on when and where to attack. His commanders argued at length. Valuable time was lost.

A seam of sunlight glowed on the eastern horizon, revealing the previous night's cannonball damage. The barrage had destroyed six outer gates and collapsed a few towers, but had failed to penetrate the inner wall.

At last the Bishop's commanders agreed: the infantry would charge the damaged sections of the walls after five am. This time, Waldeck felt sure his mercenary army would prevail.

Again, he gravely underestimated the Melchiorites. The bombardment had stung the city into action. For three days the people had been preparing, and now they were on high alert.

In the lull at the end of the barrage, they had rushed to batten down the city. They manned the lookouts day and night. They attached ropes to the damaged gates and hauled them upright, preventing them from plunging into the moat. They reinforced the towers, several of which had partially collapsed. They plugged weak spots in the walls, where the barrage had dislodged great blocks of masonry.

Every citizen in New Jerusalem knew his or her duty. As before, the men were quick to their firing platforms to prime their weapons. They laid bramble bushes on the earthen ramparts to inhibit the attack. Women boiled pitch and immersed their flaxen wreaths into the pots, ready to be lit. Children ran about with messages, food, shot and supplies. The rest aligned the walls, or waited on alert in the marketplace, heavily armed and ready to rush to defend any section of the ramparts that came under threat. Only the very sick and old remained in their homes, some of which had lost their roofs under the Bishop's cannonade, their tiles flung about like cards. And all the while the Prophet rode about the city on his white stallion, his entourage straining to keep up, spurring on his brothers and sisters to fight to the death.

The people were so confident of victory that they actually longed for the assault, Gresbeck later remembered. They crowded along the walls in their crude armour, shaking their fists and shields at the foe, daring them to charge.

The women were particularly defiant. 'When will you come?' several shouted down. 'We have baked and brewed, three and four nights long, and the brew is finished. Will you not come?'¹⁰ Their 'brew' was the boiling pitch in which they dipped their straw and flaxen wreaths, the burning rings they would throw on the enemy's heads.

It began to rain and the field turned muddy. The trumpets sounded. The first waves of Waldeck's battle-hardened mercenaries, several thousand strong, rose from behind their barricades and pressed forward in a broad semi-circle. They rushed the points where the walls and gates had suffered the most damage. Before long they held a position at the base of the outer wall.

The Bishop's engineers hurled grappling hooks over and raised their ladders, supported by their pikemen and arquebusiers. Hungry for plunder, they threw themselves over. Wave after wave penetrated the Servatius, Jews' Field and Cross gates. Some tried to cross the moat on straw rafts. Some reached the inner wall, over which they threw more grappling hooks, and slammed into place their siege ladders.

There they met ferocious resistance. The brothers and sisters of New Jerusalem rained bullets and spears and rocks onto the mercenaries. The women poured boiling pitch and lime and tossed their burning tar wreaths. The men rolled heavy wooden boards off the ramparts, crushing the attackers. The axemen were ready to chop off the hands of anyone who scaled the wall. The arquebusiers and gunners were in full roar. And on the enemy's distant formations the Melchiorites trained their own great cannons.

'The most appalling form of death was dealt out by the women,' recalled Kerssenbrock. The boiling lime penetrated the soldiers' armour, and they ran madly about in agony before toppling face-down into the dirt. Some tried to remove the burning wreaths with gloves they had made for the job from animal skins, but the lime stuck and burned through. Others dived into the moat to extinguish the flames, but the weight of their armour dragged them under and they drowned.

The brethren defended the city with a furious, disciplined energy. The heaviest defence was around the Jews' Field and Cross gates, where they repulsed every assault. Soon the Bishop's men began to turn and flee their demonic foe.

'Come back!' Leiden's brothers and sisters cried out with scorn and jubilation. 'Will you retreat already?'¹¹

It was all over by dusk. The *Landsknechts* lost the stomach for the fight. Scaling the walls had proved impossible under such relent-less counterattack. Once again, their comrades' bodies lay in heaps against the ramparts. The horrible scenes of men flailing around in flames, their bodies shot and speared, their skulls crushed, deterred even the bravest of the Bishop's men.

The outer moat ran red with blood. The wounded crawled back under cover of darkness. Families grieved the loss of their *Landsknechts*. And the Bishop sank into despair. It was a catastrophic defeat, and he was utterly humiliated. His second failure to crush a civilian rebellion made him the

laughing stock of Europe. Hundreds of his men were dead and wounded. Worst of all was the cost: he'd so far spent 600,000 florins on the unsuccessful siege.

And now his resources were again running dry, forcing him to plead for further help. He dispatched envoys throughout Cologne, Mainz, Rhine Palatinate and elsewhere in the German-speaking lands to raise money and reinforcements. And he sent an order to press-gang into service any idle serf labour in the Münster diocese.

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For New Jerusalem, this victory was even sweeter than the last. The brothers and sisters streamed onto the streets, praying and dancing, embracing and thanking the Lord. They fell to their knees and sang the Lutheran hymn 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God'.

The victory exhilarated Leiden and his regime. New Jerusalem had lost only fifteen men killed and a few dozen wounded. The Prophet, Rothmann, Knipperdolling and the Twelve Elders made a grand tour of the city, congratulating and consoling the people. 'Dear brethren, have we not a strong God?' they asked. 'He it is who helped us. With our own strength alone we could not have done it. Let us now be joyful, and give thanks to the Father!' ¹²

The people's fears were laid to rest. There could be no doubt now: the Lord had willed their victory. Here was the sweetest evidence that God was on their side. Victory sent the most powerful message that the Melchiorites of New Jerusalem truly *were* the Elect, chosen by the Almighty to witness the end of the world. They cried with delight: 'If God had not been with us we would have failed ... Christ will soon descend. And our saviour will live among us for 1000 years. He will usher in a new world. And He will deliver our souls to our Father in Heaven. The holiest among us might ascend directly to Paradise.'

Their trust in God was boundless in the joyful aftermath of victory. They repaired the gates and walls and refilled the earthen ramparts. They ate and drank and rested. There would be no follow-up attack on Waldeck's weakened ranks, and none countenanced the idea of breaking out of the city and escaping the siege. The Melchiorites sincerely believed they were safe inside New Jerusalem, protected by the shield of Christ. Never had they felt

so close to God. It made no sense to flee a place their Saviour was so evidently protecting. So they hunkered down and prepared for the next blow.

In fact, even if they had wanted to flee, it was not feasible. Although Waldeck had lost many men, his forces still greatly outnumbered the Melchiorites. And Leiden's amateurs had little hope of defeating trained mercenaries in open battle. They had no choice but to wait out the siege and hope for relief.

The more rationally minded citizens still nursed nagging doubts, and feared the immediate repercussions. The Lutherans and Catholics were united against them. Münster had provoked the wrath of the Holy Roman Empire. Their food and supplies could not last forever. The siege had been going for six months now; could they survive another attack? And if the Eschaton didn't arrive by Easter 1535, who would protect them? Some believed that an army of rebaptised Dutch brothers and sisters was coming to relieve them: Frisians and Hollanders, and perhaps even the Swiss and German Brethren. Even so, the thought of the horror that might befall them in the next week or month began to impinge upon their minds.

For his part, Bishop Waldeck was busy devising a new strategy. He would eschew further wasteful attacks, and instead strengthen the siege and block all routes into and out of Münster. Not so much as a letter would penetrate the walls. And anyone who left the city would be instantly slain.

To this purpose, a great trench was dug around Münster, edged with a thick hawthorn hedge – 'nature's barbed wire'.¹³ This connected the seven solid-stone blockhouses that had been built the previous February. The immense blockade sent a clear message to Leiden and his brothers and sisters: slowly, the Bishop was going to starve them into submission.

KING DAVID

‘Power over all the nations of this earth and the power of the sword has been given to me to terrify the wicked and protect the good.’

John of Leiden, on being named King

‘Now God has chosen me as king over the whole world. But I say to you, dear brothers and sisters, I would much rather be a swineherd, hold the plough or dig ditches than be such a king. What I do, I must do, for God has chosen me for this. Dear brothers and sisters, let us thank God for this.’¹

The people fell to their knees and sang a hymn, ‘To God on High Alone Be Glory’, to the melody of the Gregorian chant ‘Gloria in Excelsis Deo’.²

A worshipper in the market square that day would have seen, sitting on a carved wooden throne, the man they now called King extravagantly attired in a pure velvet coat and silk doublet and hose, a short bejewelled dagger by his side, his fingers dripping with gem-encrusted gold rings, and a gold cap and velvet bonnet on his head. (His crown was even then being struck in pure gold and mounted with jewels.) Around his neck hung strands of silk bearing gold coins, and several gold chains, from one of which dangled a blue-speckled yellow orb with two swords stuck through it, the symbol of the coat of arms of the King of New Jerusalem, formerly John of Leiden, the man born John Bockelson, tailor.

Two youths stood at attention on either side of His Majesty: the one on the right held an Old Testament, the one on the left a drawn sword. One lad was Christopher of Waldeck, the Bishop’s son, whom the Melchiorites had captured when he strayed too close to the walls. His loss, a bitter blow to

his father, possibly contributed to the Bishop's decision to stop the bombardment of the city.

In a smaller throne beside the King sat a young woman of exceptional beauty, dressed in a gorgeous silk robe and a bejewelled tiara. This was Leiden's favourite wife of the fifteen he had now accumulated: Queen Divara, Matthias's widow, voluptuous, ruddy-cheeked, her eyes glittering, her belly heavily pregnant with her late husband's child.

Alongside them sat a row of councillors in velvet doublets and hose, and several preachers, led by Rothmann, in fine black cassocks and broad-rimmed hats, having dispensed with the coarse cloth smocks of their humbler days.

In the wings of the royal entourage stood a line of freshly knighted Royal Guards, resplendent in silk-lined doublets, the lining shimmering through the slits on their ballooning sleeves, their swords flashing in the afternoon sun. And beyond them a throng of servants, liveried in bright-red coats and red-and-grey hose, each wearing a gold ring worth between five and twenty guilders, signifying his value to the King. To one side of the crowd, the King's handpicked cavalry jostled menacingly in their saddles, astride horses that had been seized from their rightful owners.

The crowd went quiet. The King nodded to his royal spokesman to proceed. Rothmann rose, stood on a bench and read out the names of the King's court. 'Bernard Knipperdolling, Viceroy; Herman Tilbeck, Master of the Court; Henry Krechting, chancellor.' And then the four royal councillors, including Henry's brother Bernard; Henry Redeker, the burgher; and Gerard Reining, a merchant.

The body that was the Twelve Elders was dissolved, and the authority of the cabinet terminated. A kingdom was instituted in New Jerusalem, in which the monarch's power was second only to that of the Almighty. Knipperdolling would serve as regent when the King was busy or absent, and retained his post as Chief Executioner. And Christian Kerckering, a patrician, took charge of the councillors, reserving the power to cast the deciding vote in disputes, in the King's name.

To defend the city, the King appointed a new commander-in-chief, Conrad Kruse, as well as a new commander of cavalry, drillmaster, engineer and lesser ranks. Bernard of Busch was made mint master, responsible for issuing new coins; John Kerckering became the chief engineer; and Hans Borstel the city goldsmith.

The King's most trusted disciples were appointed to vital domestic roles: secretary, taster, cook, butler, barber, gatekeeper, chamberlains, couriers, bodyguards, stewards and doormen. There were another twenty-eight royal attendants, and several superintendents of supplies (in charge of the distribution of wine, spices, bread, sugar, beef, lamb and other foods). There were also bakers, saddlers, tailors, fishermen and scribes, all appointed by royal decree.³

After these announcements, the King himself took the podium, anxious to quell suspicions that mere ambition had propelled him to power. He had no personal need of all these servants or the earthly accoutrements of power, he insisted. They were required merely to run his royal estate while he devoted his time to the workings of the Lord. It was apparently Leiden's destiny to rule the world in readiness for the return of the Son of God.

As if to demonstrate his omnipotence, the King gestured to the two youths to swap sides: the lad bearing the Old Testament moved from right to left, a symbol of the King's authority to interpret the Word of God, while the boy bearing the sword moved from left to right, a symbol of his military power.

Leiden's work in New Jerusalem was almost done. He was ready to lead his people into Paradise when the time came. He had cleansed the holy city, repulsed his godless enemies and conformed with Biblical law. New Jerusalem was a shining light on the hill, he reflected, a Christian theocracy fit to receive the Son of God. Alone on earth, his people inhabited holy ground, the rejuvenated Apostolic Church, just as it had existed when the Apostles went forth to spread the Word after the Resurrection.

And the people bowed before their King, and prayed, and many beheld visions in the sky – of angels, heavenly images, an armed horseman, even the Lord Himself. Here were God's Chosen People, keen witnesses to the coming Apocalypse.

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How Leiden turned New Jerusalem into his personal kingdom owed more to his shrewd timing and political cunning than to any divine intervention.

In early September, basking in his second military triumph and at the height of his popularity, he seized his chance. Drawing deep on his gifts as a showman, he crafted a series of outbursts designed to mesmerise the

people. He was 'struck mute' again. He lay down for hours in the shape of a cross. He fell into a trance. He spoke in strange tongues. He wrote unintelligible messages in chalk that were, he said, the Word of the Lord.

To hostile witnesses like Gresbeck, these pranks brought to mind Leiden's tricks after the death of Matthias, to distract the people: the three days of silence, the bizarre dialogue with God and so on. But their voices had little sway in a society given over to the veneration of their Prophet and victorious commander. So when Leiden announced his readiness to end his silence and speak, for the first time in days, most of the city turned out to hear him, eager to know the mind of God, as transmitted to them by His prophet.

Leiden rewarded their patience with a revelation. He had had a cosmic vision, he said, in which a new prophet would appear before them, who would prophesy the coming of a great king and ruler of the world – someone who at that very moment lived within the walls of New Jerusalem. The name of the new prophet had come to him in a dream, Leiden said: it was John Dusentschuer, the crippled goldsmith from Warendorf. On cue, Dusentschuer hobbled to the podium. His speech had been prepared for him, probably by Leiden, Rothmann and Knipperdolling.

'Most Christian brothers,' he announced, 'the Father has revealed to me from heaven to make known to you that Johann Bockelson of Leiden, a man of God and holy prophet, be king over the whole world. He shall reign over the emperors, kings, princes and all the powerful in the world. He himself will rule above all the magistrates, but no one will rule above him. He will hold the sceptre and throne of David, his father, until God the Father will reclaim the kingship back from him.'⁴

Then, with great ceremony, Dusentschuer placed the Sword of Justice in Leiden's hands. The sword would make 'all the people of the earth subordinate to yourself', the cripple said, on condition that Leiden gave Christ 'an accounting when He returns to pass judgement' and did not abuse his powers.

Dusentschuer put golden rings on Leiden's fingers and anointed his bowed head with oil, then stood back and cried out, 'At the Lord's command I anoint you king of the new temple and of God's people ... I declare you King of New Zion!'⁵

Their newly anointed King, heir to the throne of David, fell to his knees, raised his hands to Heaven and thanked Almighty God for choosing him to

rule New Jerusalem and the world. He declared that he was unworthy for so great a burden. He was too young to be King. ‘Send me Thy wisdom from the seat of Thy power,’ he implored God, ‘that I may discern what is pleasing unto Thee. Then may I be found worthy of the office Thou hast entrusted unto me, to govern Thy people in equity and justice.’⁶

The people were silenced. Some were aghast at this man who presumed to be their king. Sensing their displeasure, or confusion, Leiden rustled up another piece of adhocery: he protested that he had played no part in the Lord’s decision. All he knew was that God had chosen him. He was at a loss to know why – for who can know the mind of God?

‘Dearest brothers,’ he shouted, ‘through the inspiration of the Father, I knew many days ago that these events would take place, but to avoid the appearance of having my own ambition aimed at the kingship among you, and in order that you should have greater faith that all this is happening through God’s will, these events had to be revealed by someone else. This is how, at God’s command, David was turned by the Prophet from a lowly shepherd into the anointed king. This is how the Heavenly Father often performs His works, and if someone opposes His will, he calls down upon himself God’s outrage.’

Next he laid down the law that would govern their Kingdom, his words edged with menace. ‘Let no one in this saintly city, then, poison himself with crimes, and struggle against the will of the Lord. Otherwise, he will be struck down by the sword ...’⁷

Those who doubted Leiden’s divinely ordained right to rule – the few who feared they were in the grip of a madman – dared not voice their concerns. A few dissenting locals quietly grumbled about this Dutchman who had cast out their government and ascribed tyrannical powers to himself. But nobody, now, openly opposed their King. Three days of prayer and sermons followed, which silenced the sceptics or scared them into submission.

The King moved quickly to entrench his power, in New Jerusalem and far beyond the city walls. He declared that he would be Lord and King not only of the city, but also of Westphalia, Christendom, the Western Hemisphere and the entire world. His kingdom would last until Christ Himself returned to earth. ‘Power over all the nations of this earth and the power of the sword has been given to me to terrify the wicked and protect the good,’ the King announced.

Rothmann and the city's preachers rammed the message home. John of Leiden, they thundered, was no earthly king. He was a spiritual monarch appointed by God, the second King David, whose return the Old Testament had prophesied. They cited the relevant passage in Jeremiah: 'The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.'⁸ And in Ezekiel: 'My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob ... and my servant David shall be their prince forever.'⁹

The people must pledge to obey their King, lest they bring the wrath of God on themselves, as St Paul's Epistle to the Romans warned: 'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God ... But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.'¹⁰

In the weeks following Leiden's coronation, the people celebrated, feasted, sang and prayed, seemingly heedless of another passage in Jeremiah that may have given them pause to reflect: 'Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you; they are deluding you. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord.'¹¹

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Now came the weighty task of administering a theocracy under chronic siege. Three times a week the King entered the marketplace to parade his power before the people. An alarum of trumpets announced such grand occasions. His generals appeared first, in armour and plumes; then his four councillors, in purple gowns and gold chains; then Tilbeck, the master of ceremonies, bearing a white wand; and then, flanked by lines of servants, the King, wearing gilded spurs and astride his magnificent white stallion. He was followed by Queen Divara, dressed in a white or golden gown, riding side-saddle on a horse draped in purple and led by a minion.¹² Bringing up the rear were the King's three chief ministers, Knipperdolling, Rothmann and Krechting, followed by a troop of splendidly dressed cavalrymen.

The King dismounted and ascended the throne, set on a platform draped in purple rugs. The people parted and bowed and curtsied as he came, imagining they were in the presence of a monarch appointed by God. The few dissenters, such as Gresbeck, went through the pretence of worshipping their ruler, while silently willing him to Hell.

The people prayed. They heard extracts from the Bible. And then the judgements began. During these public appearances, Leiden presided over legal and domestic disputes, and judged according to his interpretation of Biblical law and his self-interest. Most offences related to the calamity of polygynous households: rows over sexual abuse, denial of conjugal rights, impotence, perversion, rivalry and so on. Husbands tended to initiate many complaints, against a wife or wives who had refused his sexual demands. Crimes of theft and blasphemy were also on the rise, due to concerns over the food supply and general disillusionment with New Jerusalem.

Punishment was summary, on the King's nod, and executions were carried out there and then. There were no juries. The death penalty for small offences was common, according to hostile witnesses – a group of *Landsknechts* were executed for drunkenly abusing an innkeeper, for example – though it seems many sentences were commuted.

The King offered no mercy to women who offended his marital laws. In late September 1534, Elizabeth Holschern was dragged before him in chains and forced to kneel. Sitting on his throne, surrounded by his courtiers and preachers, Leiden heard that the woman had 'three or four times' denied her husband's conjugal rights to have sex with her as and when he pleased.

Holschern pleaded in her defence that she had never consented to the marriage, and referred the King to Rothmann's list granting women the right to separate from unwanted husbands. 'Heavenly Father,' she cried, 'if you are almighty, see to it that I never more in my life have to climb into this marriage bed.'¹³

The King decided that the woman was setting a dangerous example. She had defied God's will and should be summarily executed. At that, Knipperdolling stepped forward and chopped off her head. She thus became the first woman officially to die by the sword for breaking the law of polygyny (among many unrecorded cases).

There followed several similar cases. Barbara Butendick was sentenced to death for having grumbled that her husband had been acting 'carnally

and not spiritually' with his other wives, and that 'he was often joining his body with theirs'. Butendick happened to be pregnant, so they suspended her execution until the birth of the child. When the time came, though, on 23 February 1535, after the birth of her child, she received clemency. Anna Rodehos was not so lucky: she revolted against her husband and his second wife, and was executed on 8 June 1535.¹⁴ Another woman, Catherine Kokenbecker, was beheaded for having married and slept with two men; she was not the last.¹⁵ So while men who boasted of having several wives were applauded and encouraged, women who dared do so were put to death.

Having thus reformed the legal system, the King turned his mind to civil works. He recreated the city in his image, renaming public fixtures according to his taste. The great gates lost their sainted and historic titles, and became the North, South, East and West gates, the Gold Gate, the Silver Gate and the Water Gate and so on. He gave similarly drab names to the streets and squares. The cathedral square became Mount Zion, it being the highest point in the city.

Leiden next introduced a bizarre new lexicon, and insisted on choosing the names of all newborn children in order of the ABC (hence Aver, Byde, Connynch ...) or Old Testament figures (Adam, Eve, Isaac, Jacob, Judith, Ruth ...).

The King kept the people distracted from their dire situation by ordering periodic bursts of iconoclasm. The ordinary folk, he knew, loved a good Catholic bashing. This time, he announced, God had commanded them to complete the destruction of every church and all church property.

And so they began tearing down the rest of the cathedral, its bell towers and chapels. They destroyed what remained inside the Church of Our Dear Lady. They utterly desecrated St Martin's Church, inside and out, knocking down the spire and smashing the bells. And they wrecked the churches of St Ludger's, St Giles, St James and St Servatius, as well as the monasteries and nunneries and the smaller churches (except those being used as prisons or storage). They left the tower of St Lambert's standing as a lookout.

He also ordered the complete surrender of any 'surplus' food and clothing, for the benefit of all. Nobody was allowed more than two shirts,

two pairs of shoes, two coats and four undergarments. All other items of clothing were impounded in the King's store, for use in time of need. All food would be stockpiled for shared consumption. Anyone caught hoarding bread, pork, beef or fish faced severe punishment, probably death.

By divine right, Leiden confiscated whatever redounded to his power. Fine garments formerly worn by exiled patricians filled his wardrobe, but most of his clothes were taken from the common clothing pool, restitched and adapted to his style.

Despite imposing a strict regimen of rations on the people, Leiden himself observed no such restraint, indulging his favoured few in gluttonous feasts in the city banquet hall, his palace or the marketplace. The elites sat at long wooden tables, festooned with meat, poultry, fish, fruit and vegetables, and the wine and beer flowed into the night. Leiden's personal organist often played during these feasts, while young clergymen read passages from the Old Testament.

After dinner, his party would dance to the lute and pipes, the prettiest girls performing for His Majesty, while the courtiers sat and boasted over tankards of beer about how many women they had married. Those with the most wives – say, four or five – were admired and envied by those with just two, according to Gresbeck, while the men with just one wife 'sat shamefaced'.¹⁶

THE ROYAL BEDCHAMBER

‘The one designated for the royal bed, in order not to disgust the royal majesty, entered the bathroom, was washed, doused with odoriferous perfumes, and dressed in a purple garment of cotton. Her finger joints were stiff because she wore a large number of rings, and necklaces and chains – laden with jewels – were put around her neck; her hair was tied back with gold; green and fragrant wreathes girded her temples; her womb was covered by a silken cloth; her two breasts shone through the thinnest muslin; and – to sum it up – everything that was able to sexually arouse was prepared by two jaded old women who were very experienced in these matters and served almost like her instructors.’

Hermann Kerksenbrock, an eyewitness to the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster

Not everyone blindly acquiesced to the King’s reign. Their ongoing domestic chaos, Spartan dress and loss of food – not to mention the Bishop’s blockade – turned the thoughts of many to dissent and escape. For now, they kept their feelings to themselves, in fear of severe punishment. The King’s most dangerous challenger at this time arose from a most unexpected quarter: his blindly loyal chief executioner, Bernard Knipperdolling.

It happened around September 1534, during a routine meeting in the marketplace. The King was sitting magnificently attired, dispensing justice as usual, surrounded by his servants and preachers, when all of a sudden the usually sober and grim-faced Knipperdolling leapt up and began to scream: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord! Holy is the Father! And we’re a holy people!’

The burgher rushed over to the King and did a little jig. ‘Lord King, this came to me overnight,’ he cried. ‘I will be your fool!’ He curtsied like a woman, jumped up and down, sat fawning by the King’s feet and grinned at the crowd like a maniac. He rolled in the mud of the street, leapt up, snatched a halberd from a guard and proceeded to march about, shouting, ‘Have a good look, Lord King! We’ll go like this when we march out in our ranks like this, and we’ll punish the godless!’¹

Knipperdolling then turned pale as a corpse, but he continued dancing and harassing the servants and rushing about blessing people. He claimed to be able to heal the blind, spitting on his hands and rubbing them into the sightless eyes of the elderly, shrieking, ‘You are chosen! You are holy! You will see!’ When it became clear that none had regained their sight, he fell on all fours and imitated a dog, then he leapt up and jumped up and down, shouting, ‘I have often danced this way before my women, and now the Heavenly Father commands me to do the same before my King.’²

Was Knipperdolling mocking the King? Or daring to parody Leiden’s power? Or had he gone plain mad? Until now, nobody thought him capable of disloyalty. This was the man, after all, who would have decapitated any of them on Leiden’s nod.

The source of his outburst seems to be Knipperdolling’s intense jealousy of the King. For some time, he had nursed a deep grievance against Leiden, this young upstart, this mere tailor and adulterer who had seduced his daughter and maid, won over the people, crowned himself King, and now presumed to lord it over him, the city’s most prominent businessman, whom the people had once respected. Had Knipperdolling not defended Leiden’s bid for power at every step of the way? Had he not confirmed Leiden’s prophecies, even as his own influence and reputation sank to the role of executioner?

Until now, Knipperdolling had borne his humiliation in silence. Now, at the sight of this ‘king’, this ‘second David’, his resentment seems to have boiled over. In a burst of theatrical mimicry as bizarre as it was unconvincing, the cloth merchant tried to seize the people’s attention. And for a moment they gasped in wonder at the madness that possessed the grumpy old executioner.

Sensing a challenge to his authority, the King acted fast, conjuring a performance that would outdo Knipperdolling’s. Seized by an apparent fit, Leiden fell to the ground, his hands clasped together in prayer, his whole

body convulsing. The womenfolk started to scream. The sight of the King convulsing snapped Knipperdolling out of his insanity. He rushed to Leiden's side, wrapped his arms around him and helped him back onto the throne. Whereupon Leiden fell into a kind of trance.

When he awoke, the King gazed in wonder at his people, as though setting eyes on them for the first time. 'You all look like angels,' he cried happily. By now many women were in raptures, weeping with joy at the recovery of their beloved lord, who now urged them all to go home, his speech lapsing into a violent stammer.

The next day Knipperdolling unwisely resumed his bid for power, dancing and ranting in the cathedral square. This time, however, he made a direct challenge to the throne. He sat on it, and refused to budge when the royal entourage arrived. 'It is I who of right should be King here,' he shouted at Leiden, 'since it is I who made thee what thou art!'³

Enraged, Leiden went home and calmed himself, pondering how best to respond. He needed Knipperdolling by his side. His axeman and viceroy had indeed been a great support, privy to his power grabs and in accord with his prophecies. There was a surer way than peremptory violence to defeat and punish the old man, the King decided: ridicule.

Later that day Leiden summoned the people, mounted the throne and announced that poor old Knipperdolling was out of his mind. The raving executioner knew not what he was saying. The King felt sorry for him; it was sad to see a bout of madness bring down a great man. Whereupon Knipperdolling, fearing death and seeing the concurrence of the crowd, fell to his knees and begged for mercy.

Leiden made a great show of clemency, sentencing him to just three days in prison, after which Knipperdolling returned to the good graces of his King and court, and resumed his job, a tamed and loyal subject.

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After Knipperdolling's challenge, the King felt it expedient to test the people's loyalty and to flush out any dissenters. Mindful of the people's love of spectacle, he decided to hold a feast of flatbread and wine in the cathedral square, with the entire royal entourage, councillors and preachers in attendance. Yet this feast would be different.

On the morning of 23 October, cow horns and trumpets sounded throughout the city. All the people were summoned to the square and told to prepare for a special announcement. Three times the alarum sounded. The preachers let it be known that they were the first of seven trumpets blown by the celestial angels, as told in Revelation.

Was this the moment the people had so long prepared for? The beginning of the End Times? The Day of Judgement? Was the King going to lead them out of the city, like the Israelites in Exodus? To destroy the Bishop's army, join their brothers and sisters, and together march on the Promised Land? If so, they were ready to go.

The people streamed out of their homes, armed with whatever they possessed, and carrying whatever they could. Some men were dressed in chainmail and carried halberds and arquebuses; the women and children bore whatever they could manage. Even the elderly and the sick hobbled into the square, some carried on stretchers. All were fearful of the dawning day, perhaps the last they would see of the world as it was. And yet they were relieved – for were not their torments at an end at last?

Leiden appeared in his usual regalia, astride his white horse, ahead of his entourage and queen. He wore his gold crown and carried aloft his sceptre, a globe mounted with a cross, stuck through with two daggers. He smiled and waved at his subjects with the pretentious humility of absolute power. They swooned and sank to their knees at the sight of the divine in their midst.

The King said nothing. He let the solemnity of the occasion sink in. Then he rose. He seemed in high spirits, delighted to see the thousands crammed into the square in the chill morning. He began by reassuring them: they should have no fear of the enemy. God would strike the Bishop's men a terrific blow and scatter them, and every five brothers of New Jerusalem would gain the strength to kill a hundred of the enemy, just as King David's thirty-seven mighty warriors had smitten many more of their enemies.

So it was true. Their salvation was imminent. They were to leave New Jerusalem. As the King spoke, the townsfolk started gathering up their things in readiness for the great journey. And then Leiden smiled and told them to stay. No, they would not be abandoning New Jerusalem after all – at least not today.

This great meeting was a test of their loyalty to God and to himself, of their willingness to obey him and trust his judgement. Had they abandoned

the city, he warned, they would have deserted the holiest place in Christendom, and left it naked to the Bishop's plunderers.

Later that day, delighted by their fidelity, the King treated the city to a great feast. Tables were bedecked with beef, ham and roast pigs, freshly slaughtered, and the people laughed and sang hymns. The King and his courtiers even deigned to serve them.

Later that evening, the people took communion. The preachers spoke of the importance of the bread and wine, symbols of the body of Christ, whose memory they should revere whenever they ate and drank. Pointedly absent was any reference to the real presence of the Lord in the flat, unappetising loaves that lay on the wooden benches.

Near the end of the celebrations came a shocking revelation. Leiden rose in tears to confess that he was unworthy to be their king. He had failed to punish the godless. He divested himself of his crown and sceptre and other kingly ornaments. It was God's will, he claimed, that he should not serve as their monarch.

The people were plunged into grief. They sobbed and protested and cried out against this injustice. And then, on cue, through the grieving crowd came the ever-reliable John Dusentschuer, the King's pet visionary, shuffling forward to announce a miracle: God in his wisdom has restored Leiden to the throne! In a well-calculated piece of melodrama, Dusentschuer crowned Leiden's sunken head for a second time, and returned the sceptre to his hands. 'Word of the King's greatness will spread far and wide,' he said, sending the brothers and sisters into raptures of delight: their King would one day reign over the entire world!

From that day on, Dusentschuer blew his horn on street corners to remind the people of the coming Apocalypse. At the sound, small crowds would congregate on Mount Zion, in case the End Times had begun and salvation was at hand. And sometimes the King rode smilingly among them on his white stallion.

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Now the King turned his mind to the ancient privilege befitting a crowned head: his divine right to bed whomsoever he chose. By mid-October 1534, Leiden had amassed sixteen wives, most of them in their twenties and exceptionally pretty, but none as beautiful as Queen Divara. They were:

Mary Hecker, Catherine Milling, Anne Laurentz, Angela Kerckering, Anne Averweg, Catherine Averweg, Elizabeth Wantscherer, Elizabeth Dregger, Anne Knipperdolling, Anne Kibbenbrock, Christina Roede, Margaret Moderson, Elizabeth of Busch, Margaret Grolle and Klara Knipperdolling.

Leiden's extended family moved into a magnificent estate in the Lord's Field, owned by Melchior von Buren, the cathedral steward. It contained a mansion for the King and his closest attendants, and a neighbouring wing for his wives and their ladies in waiting. Outside his bedchamber Leiden mounted a board on which his wives' names were listed. To choose a wife for the night, the King inserted a wooden peg in a hole beside her name, and she was summoned. This method sought to avoid disputes over who had the right to enjoy – or endure – the King's bedchamber.

The chosen wife, according to Kerssenbrock, underwent a lavish pre-coital ritual, which transformed her into a shimmering, scented princess, reminiscent of a pagan goddess.

The one designated for the royal bed was, in order not to disgust the royal majesty, entered the bathroom, was washed, doused with odoriferous perfumes, and dressed in a purple garment of cotton. Her finger joints were stiff because she wore a large number of rings, and necklaces and chains – laden with jewels – were put around her neck; her hair was tied back with gold; green and fragrant wreathes girded her temples; her womb was covered by a silken cloth; her two breasts shone through the thinnest muslin; and – to sum it up – everything that was able to sexually arouse was prepared by two jaded old women who were very experienced in these matters and served almost like her instructors.⁴

If the favoured wife was menstruating, or indisposed by illness, she was entitled to shift the peg to another wife. No doubt this system invited abuse; it seems that some women found the King so repulsive that they shifted the peg as often as they could.

Although Leiden bedded at least one wife a night, none bore him any children. At least two wives were pregnant when he married them: Divara, by Matthias, and Knipperdolling's servant girl, by her late husband, a soldier shot during the siege. Few of his wives dared defy him openly, but several were influential, self-confident young women, the daughters or

relatives of once-powerful burghers and members of the inner cabinet, and were not afraid of standing up to him.

We know of at least two who despised and resisted him. Klara Knipperdolling, the executioner's daughter, had been fourteen at the time of her 'first coupling' with Leiden, an experience that left her body so broken that she had to undergo surgery. She henceforth refused to go near him.⁵ The other was Elizabeth Wantscherer, whose relationship with the King would soon degenerate and, in 1535, erupt into open defiance, as we shall see.

Rumours of these happenings horrified the exiled men and women who had once lived in Münster. Many had left behind their husbands, wives, sons or daughters, who, they now feared, faced a horrible death at the hands of Leiden or the Bishop's men. Shame at their family's association with the rebel sect yielded to an intense dread at what would befall their loved ones when and if the city fell. Some parents went to great lengths to try to extricate their children from the Anabaptists' grip. The young, in particular, were drawn to this rebellious sect, with its promise of salvation, its defiance of the established order and its charismatic leader.

The King himself had captured the imaginations of thousands of impressionable young women. One was the daughter of the wealthy Dutch merchant Cornelius Claes. In early 1534, this young lady, whose name we don't know, travelled from Haarlem to Münster to join the faith. Soon after her arrival she was promptly married to the elderly father of six children, a man whose wife had been exiled for refusing to be baptised. The young woman's uncle, Jakob Smonsloe of Haarlem, happened to meet this exiled wife and realised to his horror that his niece had married the poor woman's husband. In a letter of 14 October 1534, Smonsloe urged her to come home at once:

Know, dear niece ... that I and all your friends are very grieved, that you have been thus deceived. Therefore we all have had a great trouble and a great expense to obtain pardon for you from the imperial Majesty ... You are simple-minded and thus it was easy for them to tell you many things ...

You shamed our reputation ... when you left [for Münster] and took a husband with six children ... The real housewife was here with us, and testified that [her husband] had left her because she

would not be baptised. See, dear niece, under which
misapprehensions people lapse ... [6](#)

THE WORD

‘And whether we live or die, as God has it, we know that we cannot be lost. Therefore, dear brethren, arm yourselves ... with the glorious armour of David for the purpose of vengeance, in order to eradicate all Babylonian power and all ungodliness by God’s strength.’

Bernard Rothmann in his pamphlet *On Vengeance*, rallying the region to holy war

After the excitement of the coronation and the great supper, after witnessing their King possessed by the Holy Spirit, Knipperdolling’s dance and the decapitation of sexually unwilling wives, the surrender of property and the smashing of churches, and the show of martial strength and the banquets and festivities, the people of New Jerusalem fell into a grey despond.

Bitter reality began to intrude. Winter was near. Their food supplies were dwindling. They would soon exhaust their ammunition. Only so much shot and cannonballs could be procured. And the Bishop’s blockade seemed to be tightening with every passing day.

Leiden sensed the people’s fear. He was like a juggler of human souls, having to keep them in motion lest the whole mystical enterprise collapsed. And in a deft diversionary tactic, he conceived of a scheme to relieve their privations and deliver them from the Bishop’s threat: he would send envoys to neighbouring towns to seek aid and to tell the world of his coronation as the second King David.

Leiden was a crafty monarch, and tended not to rule by diktat. He used John Dusentschuer to announce important policies to the people as if they were revelations from God. Now the 'limping prophet' was again tasked with unveiling the King's latest scheme.

It was during a routine meeting in the cathedral square that Dusentschuer stood upon a stool to share a fresh revelation. The people fell silent. God had told him that twenty-seven preachers were to leave New Jerusalem and march north, south, east and west, to the cities of Osnabrück, Soest, Warendorf and Coesfeld. With great ceremony he tore the list of preachers into four pieces, and called out the names on the first. At the sound of their names, the first group of preachers stepped forward.

Dusentschuer turned and addressed them. 'Dear brothers, I say to you, as the Word of the Lord, that you are to march into Warendorf in broad daylight, and walk into the city and proclaim peace to them. If they won't accept peace, then the city will sink down on the spot and burn up in hellfire.'¹

The cripple hurled the list at their feet, and the preachers picked it up and consented. He then repeated the ritual for the three remaining groups of preachers. Eight preachers were to go to Soest (including Dusentschuer himself), six to Osnabrück (including the schoolteacher Henry Graes), eight to Coesfeld, and five to Warendorf. Each town would sink into Hell on the spot if the inhabitants refused the King's offer.

At the time of their departure, one night in late October, Leiden was presiding over another banquet. According to two eyewitness accounts, he now indulged in an especially gruesome show of power.

As he strode up and down the long benches, his eye fell upon a foreign soldier whose face was unfamiliar to him. A furtive inquiry revealed that the man was a prisoner, brought by his captors to the feast to show off the city's riches in the hope of converting him. Quoting from the parable of the wedding banquet, Leiden asked, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?'² The soldier replied that he had been dragged to the feast of whores against his will. Enraged, the King ordered the man to kneel before him, and chopped off his head.

It was in the aftermath of this unappetising scene, with the victim's blood still slick on the sawdust, that the King's envoys prepared to depart on their important mission to save the city. Bidding their wives farewell was in itself a lengthy ritual, as they had some 124 wives between them.

The King blessed the mission: ‘Go and prepare a home for us! We will follow with arms, and we will punish those who hate you with the sword ...’³

They were brought by torchlight to the gate from which they would leave the city. A few favourite wives waved goodbye from the ramparts, and off they went, slipping out of the city in the four directions of the compass, to spread the Word of the King just as the Twelve Apostles had spread the Word of Christ throughout the ancient world.

In the meantime, obeying the King’s orders that he use his literary skills in service of the faith, Bernard Rothmann had been busy writing a treatise, which he called *A Restitution of Christian Teaching, Faith, and Life* (October 1534). As its title suggests, the little work called for the rehabilitation of the Apostolic church, which had formed after Christ’s resurrection, but of late had fallen into terrible misuse.

Rothmann’s treatise was a clarion cry to the *Schwärmer*, distinguishing their movement as a third way, distinct from the Lutherans and Catholics. The Lutherans had fought for the *reformation* of the existing Catholic Church, but the Anabaptists wanted the *restoration* of the pure faith – the one that had existed at the time of Christ.

Rothmann’s mind had travelled far since he first smiled upon the destruction of the icons in St Maurice’s Church. He lived and breathed New Jerusalem: he was its voice and its soul. His mission was to rediscover the church he believed Christ had desired, and which had been so thoroughly debased by the power, greed and ostentation of Rome.

To this end, Rothmann applauded Luther’s opening volleys and incendiary polemics. Yet he believed the Lutheran Reformation had foundered and come unstuck, failing to complete what it had begun. It was left to the Melchiorities to finish the job, and create anew the pure, unadorned faith of the Apostles. *Restitution* was thus a reaffirmation of the New Jerusalem as the Holy City, a perfect Christian theocracy as God willed it, governed by the laws of the Bible, where ‘correct Christian doctrine’ had been restored after ‘the horrible decline of all things’. Rothmann called on all of Christendom to follow the glorious example of New Jerusalem.

His words were also a powerful statement of Anabaptist defiance, injecting fresh venom into the theological divide. He attacked Catholics as the disciples of the Antichrist, and accused Lutherans of reverting to papist doctrine. But Rothmann's chief target was the avaricious, lustful and abusive clergy. They were parasites, ravenous beasts who sponged off the poor, while the ordinary people went hungry, deprived of spiritual nourishment.⁴

Copies were dispatched to the Dutch-speaking provinces of Holland and Frisia, and to parts of Westphalia, at around the same time as the departure from Münster of the twenty-seven preacher envoys. That these shocking attacks came from the pen of a preacher confined in a city under siege fired the resolve of the Pope, Luther and the Emperor to cast this damnable sect into the lowest pit of Hell.

Luther's response was swift and brutal. After devouring *Restitution*, he condemned the author and the sect as understanding 'far less about the kingdom of Christ than did the Jews'. The scriptures all led to the Messiah, Luther thundered, but 'you want to make it point to your Tailor-King, to the great disgrace and mockery of Christ'. Worse, the Melchiorites followed 'a new definition of faith' that had utterly debased the true meaning of the concept.⁵

With this furious reaction in mind, let us read more closely the last words that swirled off the quill of Bernard Rothmann.⁶

His language was ferocious even by the standards of his bilious sermons. The Pope was the 'Babylonian whore' who had supplanted what was once the holiest authority in Christendom with an 'abomination of desolation'. Rome's 'poisoned wisdom' and 'pretended holiness' had 'led the Christians into apostasy', with the support of the secular princes of the earth and their 'fleshly violence'. This papal Antichrist sought nothing other than to 'corrupt' and 'suppress' true Christianity, and 'to exalt himself'.

Implicit in Rothmann's polemic was a deep sense of outrage that his own faith had been constantly and brutally persecuted. And yet, he declared, the faith they observed in New Jerusalem was the one true Christian path, which should be followed throughout the world. All others had failed, he argued. All the bold reforms had been half-measures. Even Luther wallowed in 'his own pride and muck', stopping short of a complete reform. The same went for Erasmus, Zwingli and Melanchthon. It was left to the Melchiorites to complete the restitution of the church of the Apostles.

A band of itinerant preachers – Melchior Hoffman, John Matthias, Rothmann and, now, John of Leiden – though regarded by the world as ‘quite uneducated’, would reveal the ‘glorious truth’ to Christendom.

And what was that truth? For Rothmann, it was the Word of God as expressed in New Jerusalem, which he urged all of Christendom to adopt. They should:²

Destroy all books except the Bible

The true Christian ‘should cling only to the Holy Scriptures’, and burn anything that ‘ancient or modern scholars have written’, Rothmann insisted. God Himself had authorised the destruction of all books save the Bible, and New Jerusalem had put this precept into action in March 1534. The Bible acted as a shepherd of kindred spirits towards the Holy Book’s core message: ‘Honour and fear God Almighty in Christ His Son. This is the beginning of all wisdom.’ All the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates, all the Greek and Roman poets and tragedians – every written word that was not God’s Word should be consigned to the flames.

Reject the Virgin birth

Christ was not born of a virgin. ‘For this has been a cruel and blasphemous seceding from the true knowledge of Christ,’ Rothmann wrote. The Lord had not emerged from Mary’s womb, born of flesh and blood. Rather, he had descended from Heaven and ‘became flesh’.

Choose as adults to be baptised

‘If a man is sorry for his sins, and believes and accepts the salvation of Christ, it follows that he be baptised.’ Only by ‘washing away’ his sins can he be accepted into the Lord’s holy congregation. Then, having become a companion of Christ, ‘he must follow the footsteps of Christ in all obedience, justice and holiness. If he persists in this way to the end, he shall be saved.’ In the Catholic and Lutheran heresies, baptism was a mere ‘child’s bath’ and ‘a tin god of water, with all his blowing and greasing’, the preacher wrote. God, by His Grace, ‘gave baptism back to us and restored it’.

Obey Christ’s Sermon on the Mount

According to Rothmann, the ‘papists’ insisted that only certain acts, the ‘right good deeds’, were necessary for salvation. The Lutherans, on the other hand, proclaimed that good deeds were no use, and that ‘faith alone’ was the prerequisite. Rothmann dismissed both as hypocritical and ignorant, declaring that only obedience to the letter of the Holy Commandments, and to the lessons of the Sermon on the Mount, would be rewarded with salvation.

Share your worldly goods

In New Jerusalem, Rothmann wrote, the power of love and the communal sharing of goods had defeated ‘everything that has served selfishness and property, such as buying and selling; labouring for money, interest, or usury’. His brothers and sisters knew that ‘God wants to abolish such atrocities’ and ‘would rather face death than turn back’.

Marry to have children, reject lust and sodomy

‘Marriage is a union of man and woman to obtain the blessing of God for his glory and according to his will – that is, to bring forth little children fearing God, who praise his name forever. Therefore God created man and woman and blessed them and has strictly forbidden in nature and scripture all practice, pleasure and sodomy.’ A man and a woman in marriage must, under the law of God, ‘seek children, and nothing else’.

If a man, go forth and multiply, with several wives

Rothmann defended polygamy on the grounds that ‘if a man is blessed by God to fertilise more than only one woman ... then he is free, he is even obliged, to take more fertile women into marriage; for illegitimately [outside marriage] seeing a woman, other than according to God’s will and law, is adultery and whoredom’.

If a woman, obey your husband without a murmur

The man is the lord of the woman, Rothmann declared. Just as the man is obedient and submissive to Christ, so the woman must be to her husband. She must accept him as ‘her lord’ without ‘any murmurings and contradictions’. For God had ‘restored the glorious freedom of marriage among us’, and ‘placed among us all women in obedience to men’.

In December 1534 Rothmann wrote a second treatise, which he called *On Vengeance*. This was a call to arms, a *cri de coeur*, a gobbet of defiance. It prescribed the violent punishment of those whose heresies Rothmann had identified in *Restitution*.⁸

On Vengeance hailed Leiden as the new King David, sent to smite God's mortal enemies and prepare the way for a second Solomon and an era of peace, the harbingers of the return of the Messiah. Rothmann seized on strands of the Old and New Testaments to make his case for violent revenge, rather like a malevolent chef snatching at rare ingredients to create a poisonous new recipe. His polemic made a powerful case for revenge, against all who had persecuted and rejected the Melchiorites.

The age before Christ, Rothmann wrote, had been an era of decay and devastation. Then came the Son and the Apostles and the Kingdom of God on earth. It was 'a time of vengeance and restitution of all things'. The Romans, the Jews, the Pharisees and the pagans had rejected the Messiah's reign on earth, and despised and murdered all who believed in and worked for the Kingdom of Christ. But God was silently watching. He saw 'how the godless filled the measure of their wickedness'. He witnessed the slaughter of His Son. He saw the Acts of the Apostles and the rise of the Christian faith. And He saw it debased into 'the cruellest tyranny' in His name, in the form of the Church of Rome.

And God despaired. God despaired of men and their cruel doings on earth, wrote Rothmann (who had persuaded himself, like Hoffman and Matthias, that he could read the mind of the Almighty). God despaired of their suffering, and He despaired of those 'who boast so famously of His name' and yet continue their tyranny with impunity. And God longed for the day of vengeance: 'For when wickedness has risen to the utmost, it must certainly be thrown down.'

Christ would send a sign when it would begin. And then He would return and fulfil the prophecies of Revelation, freeing His people from 'the coercion and abomination of the Babylonian captivity', and delivering them into the Kingdom of Heaven. Until that day, wrote Rothmann, it fell to the people of New Jerusalem to prepare the world for the coming of the Lord. They must avenge their faith. They must fight.

Nothing less than a violent struggle between good and evil – between the Elect of New Jerusalem and the godless – would defeat the ‘terrible and murderous violence’ of the hellish Sodom that lived outside the walls of Münster. ‘God has prepared us for His defence, and will make all His saints so glorious for vengeance,’ as David was said to have written in Psalm 140:

Those who surround me lift up their heads;
let the mischief of their lips overwhelm them!
Let burning coals fall on them!
Let them be flung into pits, no more to rise!⁹

The Melchiorites marched to war ‘under the banner of divine justice’. All who truly served God must be prepared to use it: ‘The time is right now,’ Rothmann declared, ‘all Scripture and all events indicate that the time is already here.’ He was referring to the End Times, as prophesied by Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezra and the Old Testament patriarchs.

Lest the Anabaptist brothers and sisters feared the coming onslaught, the preacher reassured them that ‘God’s strong arm will be with us’. The Lord would supply ‘iron horns and brazen claws’, he wrote, with which to crush the Antichrist, just as Malachi had written in the last book of the Old Testament: ‘And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.’¹⁰

The Melchiorites, he declared, were the foot soldiers of the Lord, the frontline of God’s wrath, the fist of the Almighty. ‘We who are committed to the Lord must be His instrument,’ Rothmann continued. ‘Thus will God’s strong arm be with us, and he will prove his glorious power through his people, who have been so long despised and rejected before the world.’¹¹

Herein lay the essence of Melchiorite identity: they were the eternal victims, the crushed martyrs, a wronged and suffering people doomed to walk the earth forever in exile. At the same time, they were God’s Chosen People. In this sense, they were like Jews dressed up in Christian clothing: they were Christian Zionists.

Thanks to Rothmann's pamphleteering, the brothers and sisters of New Jerusalem hoped and prayed that legions of newly baptised brethren would join them on the appointed day, drawn by the promise of salvation.

Rothmann urged his readers to hurry: 'whoever has joy in the righteousness of God, he shall not loiter. For when the little flag is hoisted, and the trombone is to be heard, many unbelievers will want to join the faithful and come here.' He drew on Jeremiah, prophet of the destruction of Jerusalem (God's punishment of the Jews for worshipping a false god) to set his children on the true path: 'It shall come to pass on that day, declares the Lord of hosts, that I will break the yoke from off your neck, and I will burst your bonds, so underneath you shall no more serve foreign Gods. But they shall serve the Lord their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.'¹²

Now the Lord had 'awakened' a new David, whom they should revere next to God: their very own Prophet, King John, née Bockelson, the tailor from Leiden.

And after David's victory, a new Solomon would rule over an empire of 'peace, splendour and glory, and build the temple of God with wonderful wisdom ... a kingdom established not by us, or by human wisdom, but by God, whom we hold faithfully, and thus we may anger and conquer all the world for His holy covenant. For we are as ready for suffering as for fighting and vengeance.'

With a magnificent flourish, Rothmann concluded *On Vengeance* by appealing to every human being, from the wisest prince to the lowliest serf, to rise up and follow King John, the new David, into the last battle on earth:

Dear brothers, the time of vengeance has come to us. God has raised the promised David, armed with his people for vengeance and punishment of Babylon. Here you have heard ... how gloriously we are to be crowned if we fight bravely and manly.

And whether we live or die, as God has it, we know that we cannot be lost. Therefore, dear brethren, arm yourselves ... with the glorious armour of David for the purpose of vengeance, in order to eradicate all Babylonian power and all ungodliness by God's strength and help.

Do not fear the sacrifice of your goods, woman, child, and body. For if you come freely and willingly, you shall not perish. But if you

stay away and risk nothing, you must be lost ... Always remember that what they have done to you, you can do to them again.¹³

A thousand copies of *On Vengeance* were sent to John van Geelen, one of the King's most zealous followers in the Dutch-speaking lands, and he distributed it among the large Anabaptist minorities in Amsterdam, Delft, Groningen, Deventer and Leiden. Van Geelen also received a hefty sum of gold, with which he bought weapons in order to arm the faithful for their march to Münster.

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In his cell in Strasbourg, the man who had founded the Melchiorites heard of the events that were astonishing Christendom. Melchior Hoffman remained strangely ambivalent. His opinion of New Jerusalem vacillated between insisting that Münster would never be defeated and a world-weary fatalism towards the faith that bore his name.

Eighteen months in his lightless cell had had a sobering influence on Hoffman's mind, pressing him closer to 'reality' – or at least to the brutal condition in which he found himself. No celestial angels appeared to be listening to his prayers, God seemed uninterested in his lot, and by increments his wild evangelism yielded to the plodding numbness of depression.

Despite this, Hoffman never lost faith in his core principles, stubbornly refusing to submit to the worm of doubt. His prophecies would one day come to pass, he believed, and Strasbourg would host the End Times.

And still he refused to give any quarter to his enemies, Catholic or Lutheran. They were 'bloodhounds', 'bloodsuckers', 'raging wolves' and 'shameless liars', he wrote. He remained, in his mind at least, the new Elijah, as he told the Strasbourg Council on 9 September: 'people should realise that they have amongst them the true Elijah who is to come before Christ's day of judgement. God has sent him to us, but we refuse to acknowledge him. He is the last one; God will send us no more after him.'¹⁴

Reading Rothmann's treatises, Hoffman realised that he had inspired many of the ideas of New Jerusalem. Had he not, as a young preacher, justified a 'holy war' against the Babylonian whore of Rome? Yet he had

since renounced violence, and urged the Melchiorites to lay down their swords and be silent witnesses of the End Times.

Hoffman read that Rothmann even named him as one of the triumvirate of prophets who would complete the work of Erasmus, Luther and Zwingli. He saw that Rothmann had appropriated his core principles, such as the universality of divine grace and the freedom of the will. Rothmann had copied from his latest tract, *On the Pure Fear of God*, his invocation to David and Solomon, and his premonition of the Great Supper that Christ would host after the banishment of evil.¹⁵ And Hoffman despaired at the realisation that it was he who had unleashed Rothmann, Matthias and Leiden on the world: men who believed that it had fallen to them to ‘wreak vengeance on the godless’.¹⁶

Who was this tailor who had crowned himself king, Hoffman wondered. Who was this adulterer who, engorged by power and lust, had built a theocracy modelled on the Kingdom of David, and who pledged to force Christ’s foes ‘to lick the earth’?

Melchior Hoffman could only sit in his cell and bewail the forces of darkness which his ideas had inspired. He predicted that Leiden’s reign would end in the same way Korah’s, Dathan’s and Abiram’s had done: swallowed up by the earth for defying Moses.¹⁷ Yet Melchior’s ravings went unheard and unheeded, and only his unbreakable faith in the return of Christ sustained him.

CONFESSIONS

‘Dear gentlemen, do not consider yourselves to be unjustly attacked. For if you will not withdraw, the Imperial and Royal Majesty and the whole Roman Empire will attack and oppress you, and if seven blockhouses are not enough, seventy will be made ...’

Derek Fabricius, the Bishop’s envoy, to the King and his cabinet

Bishop Franz von Waldeck learned via his spies of the twenty-seven envoys, and alerted his diocesan officials at once. ‘We know,’ he wrote to the Westphalian town councillors, ‘that the inhabitants of the city of Münster have sent ... their Anabaptist preachers to our monasteries and cities abroad, intending to cause general uproar.’¹ He commanded them to resist the outbreak with the utmost severity. They were to arrest any visitor found spreading Anabaptist beliefs or baptising adults. Yet not every council was in lock step with the Bishop: Warendorf, for example, was decidedly sympathetic to Münster. The councillors girded themselves for an influx of fanatical preachers.

They did not have long to wait. As they had been instructed, King John’s emissaries walked into their designated towns in broad daylight, and began proselytising and baptising people in the open air, in blatant defiance of the Bishop’s decree. The towns’ reactions varied, revealing all the confusion and fragmentation of Christianity in the lives of small communities knocked about by the Reformation. To some, the visiting preachers were brave and exotic heroes, Apostolic Christians who were willing to give their lives for the Lord. To others they were sadly misguided madmen, who warranted pity rather than persecution. And to others, chiefly

the local Lutheran and Catholic powers, they were disgusting heretics who deserved nothing less than a slow, painful death.

Warendorf was a walled city similar to Münster, although smaller. Its large Anabaptist community rallied behind the King's preachers, Johann Klopriss, Godfrey Stralen, Henry Ummegrove, Anthony Prüm and Derek of Alfen, who baptised some fifty locals within days of their arrival. In fact, their message of salvation so persuaded the people of Warendorf that their council defied the Bishop and tried to seal off the town, just as Münster's had done.

Waldeck's forces swiftly put down the uprising, although they had to drag their heavy cannons to the town and threaten the locals with the direst consequences: unless they surrendered unconditionally and handed over the preachers, they would receive no clemency. Seeing the futility of resistance, the people abandoned the cause and threw open the city gates.

On 22 October the five Warendorf preachers were hauled before the town council, stripped of their sacerdotal robes and possessions (including the gold coins minted in Münster) and taken away in chains to the torture chambers. On the rack, Stralen confessed to having baptised adult locals in Warendorf. John of Leiden had chosen him, he cried, to proclaim the Word of God in the town, to infuse the local people with a seditious spirit and to enjoin them all to come and liberate Münster.

How many had he baptised since arriving in Warendorf, his torturer demanded to know.

Stralen reckoned twenty-seven.

Was he acting 'under compulsion' by Leiden or others?

He was acting in the interests of his own salvation.

How many people were in Münster at that time?

'Probably 1600 strong men and about 5000 women,' Stralen cried.

'They still have enough food for one year,' he added.

And how many wives had he accumulated?

'Three,' the preacher admitted.²

Under Waldeck's stern eye, the authorities rejected the five preachers' appeals. They received no mercy. Klopriss, perceived as the leader, was sent to Cologne and later burnt at the stake. Stralen and three others were taken to the Warendorf marketplace, dragged onto a stage and beheaded. Their bodies were then lashed to giant wooden wheels and raised over the city gates as a grisly warning to the world. Some of the rebaptised were also

executed, including one burgher who had broken off the arms and legs of a statue of Christ during a furious assault on church icons.

Having crushed the Warendorf rebellion, the Bishop rescinded the town's religious liberties and imposed the strictest observance of the Mass and the sacraments.

On entering Soest, the King's preachers put on a colourful display. With swords drawn and Dusentschuer in the van, they burst into a meeting of the town council and shouted, 'Repent! Repent!'

The stunned councillors demanded to know who they were, why they were violently interrupting the day's business, and who had sent them.

'The King of New Zion has dispatched us,' the envoys replied, 'to spread the Gospel.' No power on earth could deny their demands, they said, for they were emissaries of the Word of God.

The burghers of Soest took a different view. They calmly advised the fanatics to communicate with the council through the proper channels, like any other ordinary citizen, and to refrain from disturbing the peace.

At that the preachers resumed shouting and tossing gold coins – inscribed with the Anabaptist motto, 'In God's Power Is My Strength' – at the councilmen's feet, a gesture meaning the Soest burghers were unworthy of the Lord and the Kingdom of God.

The nuisance was shortlived. The preachers were seized, tortured and put to death. Until the last, Dusentschuer claimed that the Lord would protect him – that he could not die, and the sword would leave his neck unharmed. The executioner snorted with contempt and swung a blow strong enough to sever three heads.³

The same fate befell the King's envoys to Coesfeld and nearby villages, where eight were beheaded and impaled on wheels, all lamenting to their last that the phony prophet Dusentschuer had led them astray. One, Hermann Regenwort, confessed before his execution that he had lost faith in Leiden and refused to believe the King's boast that he would rule the world and 'kill all other authorities'. His confession did not save him.⁴

In Osnabrück the preachers first went to see a prominent local, Otto Spiker, thinking him a fellow Anabaptist. They found that he did not share their faith. He warned them that flinging coins at people's feet 'will be the death of you'.⁵

Undismayed, the Münster preachers took to the streets in their familiar frenzy, rushing around and crying, 'Repent!' to the amazed locals, who followed them into the marketplace to listen to their firey sermons. Soon the authorities acted, seizing the troublemakers and locking them in the prison tower, at the base of which a crowd of sympathetic local butchers stood around singing hymns.

The most prominent preacher was Dionys Vinne, the pastor from Maseick, in Olden Eick in the land of Liège. Under torture, he revealed that he had arrived in Münster with Henrich Roll and the Wassenberg preachers almost two years earlier. He claimed that only through rebaptism could people truly understand the Gospels.

Who were the first preachers to rebaptise the people of New Jerusalem, his torturer asked.

Vinne cried out the names: Bernard Rothmann, Henry Roll, Godfrey Stralen, Johann Klopriss and himself.

Who was this King John of Leiden? What had he promised the people?

God had chosen John of Leiden to rule the world, Vinne cried. And he would 'give righteousness to everyone', as written in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who prophesied that in the Last Days a righteous king would reign supreme on earth.⁶

Vinne defended polygamy as God's will. From the very beginning, God had permitted men to take several wives: 'God the Almighty established the holy marriage in Paradise and created man and woman to grow and multiply.' One must marry only for that reason. It was 'mere whoredom', he said, to seek 'carnality, money and goods, or personal beauty' through marriage.

How strong was the city?

Münster had about 2000 able-bodied men from a total 5000 to 6000 people, Vinne calculated. That was well below the Bishop's estimate.

How well supplied were they?

'My brothers and sisters have enough wine, beer and bread to last a year,' Vinne reckoned.⁷

One preacher in the Osnabrück group was spared: Henry Graes, the wily schoolmaster. Graes pleaded with his gaolers to be allowed to speak with the Bishop, claiming he had important information to divulge. Waldeck agreed to hear what he had to say, and so Graes was taken to the Bishop's camp in Iburg. On arriving, Graes recognised Waldeck as he paced the walls and cried out to be unchained.

Admitted to the Bishop's presence, Graes divulged all he knew of Leiden and the 'kingdom' of Münster, and promised to serve in any way he could in exchange for his life. Waldeck granted his wish – he had nothing to lose – on condition that Graes return to Münster as a spy. Graes consented. It was decided that he would re-enter the city before Christmas as something of a miracle: the sole survivor of the twenty-seven preachers.

The men's confessions and the recruitment of Graes gave Bishop Waldeck new confidence. He now resolved to destroy the Münster Anabaptists by a thousand slow cuts. He would strengthen the blockade, crush the people's will to resist, and starve them. No one would be allowed to enter the city, and anyone caught leaving would be executed. Not a scrap of food would pass through the gates. Every road would be closely watched. And soon his spy would be dispatched to witness the city's descent into Hell.

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This time, the bishop would leave nothing to chance. It troubled him that the inhabitants of Münster, in desperation, might charge out of the fortress in a last-ditch bid for freedom. To strengthen his blockade, he appealed once again to his powerful allies.

In a sulphurous letter to Cologne on 25 October, Waldeck and Philip of Hesse exaggerated the Anabaptist threat in order to win support. The 'seductive doctrine' of Anabaptism had 'abolished' Christian chastity in Münster, they wrote, and 'annihilated' all Christian sacraments, ceremonies and good deeds.⁸ Empowered by the 'common mob', the preachers had 'spread this damnable sect and coalition of rebaptism among the simple folk, first at night, secretly, and then by cunning attacks, entreaties and threats, among them various outrageous, bloodthirsty articles'.

'Anyone could see,' they continued, 'that the intentions of the Münsterites were to instigate general rebellion in the Holy Empire, to

proliferate their heresy ... and to rule a new Jerusalem, as they call it, in which every fugitive, malicious and lost man should find refuge and residence, live according to his own will and lusts, by force, and to exterminate and oppress all authority and honourability, Christian religion, harmony and peace.’⁹

Waldeck and Hesse well knew that Cologne was less concerned by the sect’s spiritual degeneracy than by its seditious political message and the theft of private property. ‘As all goods are common,’ they continued, ‘in Münster no one owns anything, one should not obey or bow to any authority, also not to pay due interest or fees, nor to pay any disposals, seals, letters or borrowed or provable debt.’ They had even heard that the Münster rebels used the pretext of Christian sharing to seize the people’s wealth, in order to pay off their own debts. What if such evil should spread?

‘This seditious Münsterian sect,’ they added, ‘in order to strengthen its bloodthirsty unChristian intentions ... and to stir up the surrounding countries and cities to rebellion and disobedience, has welcomed all fugitive, banished and maleficent people ... and given them the houses, courtyards and goods of the honourable, pious citizens whom they have chased away. Moreover, they have sent their secret messengers to the Netherlands, also to other neighbouring countries, and have attracted a large gathering of Anabaptists, many thousands, to go to the city of Münster in order to champion the Anabaptist rebellion.’ Their strength and numbers, they added, threatened neighbouring countries with ‘irretrievable destruction, corruption, and distress’.

Worse, these Melchiorites had deluded themselves into believing that Leiden was the ‘king of Israel’ and would soon win dominion over the whole world. Leiden’s servants had demolished the churches, rejected the sacraments and adopted ‘terrible heretical doctrines ... especially that a husband, when his wife has conceived or is otherwise sick or unfertile, is to marry another, and if she likewise conceives a child, take a third, a fourth, a sixth’.

In short, would Cologne kindly send more soldiers and funds, so that the rebaptisers’ ‘outrageous wickedness’ may be eliminated, and the 700,000 guilders so far spent on the siege be not in vain?¹⁰

In late October, Philip of Hesse persuaded Waldeck to make one last attempt at dialogue. The Bishop reluctantly agreed. Hesse dispatched his envoy, the Lutheran preacher Derek Fabricius, to try to negotiate with the King – his second attempt to persuade the city to surrender after the disastrous foray in February.

On arriving at the city gates, Fabricius announced that he had been sent by the Landgrave on behalf of the electors and princes of Cologne, Cleves and Münster, as well as the Bishop's army. He came offering terms. Would the King grant him safe passage into the city?

The King replied as though he were already the ruler of Christendom. 'I, Johann,' he wrote, 'by God's grace, King of the righteous servants in the temple of the New Jerusalem, testify and make known, that I have granted ... free, straight and safe conduct to this [man] to the Christian empire as certified.' The letter was stamped with the King's coat of arms.

Fabricius later gave Waldeck an account of his meeting with Leiden (in which he exaggerated his courage in speaking out against the Kingdom):

The king sent twelve persons to accompany me inside. But once in the city, I realized the people were forbidden to speak to me. They ran up to me, but appeared very sad, and none spoke to me.

I was then taken to the town hall. There were great alarums and a splendid cavalcade. Twenty bodyguards and six lackeys appeared first, dressed in velvet and silk, with golden collars, followed by two boys, one carrying a golden sword, the other a book, and then came the king in a black velvet overcoat, a white damask cloak, a black velvet cap, a gold necklace wrapped twice around the neck and attached to the coat of arms. He bore a gold-covered rapier. He was followed by his marshal, Knipperdolling, and the other councillors and courtiers, together about two hundred people.

While my letter was read aloud, Bernhard Rothmann, the King's chancellor [sic], said that had I belonged to their sect they would have let me sit with them. Otherwise I would have to stand.

Thereupon I presented our case. I said that we had heard that the sect wanted peace. If they were still of that opinion they should explain how peace could be achieved.

The king and his counsels had thought on this, and replied, that they had never waged war or insulted anyone, nor given any cause

of enmity. It made them wonder how the princes, who call themselves evangelical, could act against them with such gravity ...

To which I replied that the princes were right in acting against the king, and that the city's faith had gravely erred. I warned them that they could not escape punishment if they persisted. I concluded: 'Dear gentlemen, do not consider yourselves to be unjustly attacked. For if you will not withdraw, the Imperial and Royal Majesty and the whole Roman Empire will attack and oppress you, and if seven blockhouses are not enough, seventy will be made, and you will have no help from other cities. For those cities have captured and decapitated the preachers whom you sent out.'

Fabricius dared to lay down his terms, he claimed: if the citizens of Münster dismissed their supposed king, put an end to polygamy and took back their expelled citizens, he would 'seek a good outcome for the city'.

The man's insolence astonished the leaders of New Jerusalem. Their king had been chosen by God, they replied, and they would defend him to the death. Their marriage laws were correct before God. The expelled citizens would be welcomed back, on condition that they accepted the city's faith. They had no objection to the world joining them on these terms. But they would suffer none to live among them unless he or she be of their faith.

'When I asked for their answer in writing,' Fabricius later reported, 'the people of Münster refused and said that they had repeated their answer so often that I could remember it. When I said I wanted to go, they asked me if I would stay the night. I dared to do so, for the King invited me as his guest. He led me round, and showed me their defences.' Fabricius was shown over the repaired ramparts and several gun placements. 'The damage suffered by the city wall was almost nothing,' he noted.

Surveying the ruins of the churches and cathedral, monuments to a broken faith, he asked how the people worshipped without a church.

The Melchiorites answered: 'If we hear preaching, we go to the market, fearing neither hail nor rain. For we well know that nothing arduous befalls us under a sermon.'

He asked whether they would ever return to the Catholic church.

'We would rather eat a child out of its mother's womb and die,' came the answer, 'than resume the papacy and its abuse of the priesthood.'

Fabricius walked through the little alleyways and across the squares. The city was deserted, he noticed. Weeds grew in the streets. The local people were hidden away behind closed doors. Clearly they had been ordered not to approach him.

Later that day, hoping to impress Fabricius, the King paraded his best soldiers, a cohort about 800-strong, in full battledress.

‘After this I came to the King’s palace,’ Fabricius continued. ‘Four of his wives came to welcome us. I had seen the same in a citizen’s home. I had not believed stories of this abuse of women until then.’

After a ‘good dinner’ – there was ample food left in the King’s store – Fabricius spent the night on the King’s estate, and observed in passing Leiden’s many wives and the strange nocturnal arrangements of the royal bedchamber.

The next morning he summoned the courage to ask Leiden what he truly believed in. The King said that he remained true to the faith that God had revealed to him, and that he would never surrender to the godless.

But surely, Fabricius pressed, the King realised his cause was doomed? Anabaptists throughout Europe were being exterminated. The Spanish rulers of Holland were wiping out the last pockets of Anabaptism in the Dutch-speaking lands. The Archbishop of Cologne was pressing the Emperor himself to intervene and destroy the city of Münster.

The King rejected Fabricius’s warnings. And yet, at some point in these discussions, several of the King’s councillors drew Fabricius aside and said that they were prepared to negotiate with a secular prince but not with Bishop Waldeck, the spiritual lord of the diocese and commander of the enemy, whom they detested.

‘In sum,’ Fabricius concluded, ‘in the city there are many afflicted people. Some are innocent. But whoever contradicts the rulers will be shot or decapitated in the marketplace in front of the cathedral, next to the lime tree.’

The Landgrave’s envoy was escorted from the city, and delivered his report to the princes. Its effect on Waldeck was like the stab of a spur: he resolved to harden the siege. Only brute force, he now saw, would break the resolve of the King of New Jerusalem.¹¹

Waldeck's appeals for further aid bore fruit. On 13 December 1534 a great assembly of princes, from Westphalia, Mainz, Cologne, Trier and the Rhine Palatinate, met at Koblenz, in what was seen as the most important meeting of the imperial estates yet convened on the question of how to deal with Münster and stop the spread of Anabaptist ideas.

The Bishop, busy with the siege, sent a representative, John of Dockheim. Strasbourg declined to attend, arguing that the Anabaptist rebellion did not threaten its interests. Cologne and other cities chafed at the amount of money they were asked to donate or lend to the campaign, but ultimately coughed up. Thwarting the 'horrible evil' and 'terrifying un-Christian' behaviour of the Münster fanatics was worth the cost, they decided.¹² After all, this was no longer some local outbreak of heresy. The Anabaptists' seizure of property and imposition of polygyny had provoked widespread outrage, imperilling a social structure that had taken centuries to build.¹³

For the poison of Münster threatened to contaminate their own domains. Anabaptist breaches of the peace were spreading, thanks to Leiden's envoys and Rothmann's dispatches – a point Waldeck's people kept hammering as they sought to win over princes who still failed to comprehend the magnitude of the shocking events in Westphalia.¹⁴

The envoys' confessions bore out that fear – particularly that of Godfrey Stralen, who had baptised twenty-seven locals in Warendorf, and who 'wanted to destroy and choke my gracious lord [Waldeck], together with the entire nobility and all clergy if they refused to accept the [Münsterite] belief'.¹⁵

These people, Waldeck's men argued, were seeking to decapitate the ruling classes, and disseminate the Melchiorite faith throughout Christendom. Surely the princes had noticed that Rothmann's *On Vengeance*, copies of which were popping up in Holland and Frisia and elsewhere, sought the same outcome? It was an incitement to the common people to rise up and seize their cities, and then help free Münster. Even if they lacked the numbers to fulfil this fantastic goal, the success of Leiden's rebellion set a disturbing precedent.

For this reason Waldeck pleaded through his agents for immediate financial and military help. If it was not forthcoming, the Bishop's strength would be broken, and the zealots empowered. He even likened the Anabaptists to a 'new Turkish kingdom' in the heart of Christendom.¹⁶

In the end, the delegates agreed to help. They would maintain the Bishop's army at 3000 men; promote commanders with solid experience of warfare; sack elderly, insubordinate or incompetent men; appoint a hardened veteran as overall commander; release an additional 15,000 Rhenish florins per month for six months to pay the men; invest in more equipment and ordnance; complete the ring of trenches linking the blockhouses around the city; and closely police the roads into and out of Münster. Moreover, if the Anabaptists mounted an attack, all the neighbouring provinces would come to the Bishop's aid. The envoys agreed to meet at Worms on 4 April 1535 to monitor the siege's progress.

Meanwhile, a far bigger power struggle weighed on the delegates at Koblenz, overshadowing the local crisis in Westphalia. The Holy Roman Empire was under threat from all sides. The loss of Münster excited great foreign interest and menaced the liberty of the free imperial cities of north-west Germany. The Bishop's failure to retake Münster was an open invitation to King Charles V to reinforce his presence in the region.¹⁷ Across the border to the west, the French Burgundian knights had scented a land grab. And from the north the Dutch were sizing up the Westphalian jewels.

For these reasons, Philip of Hesse, the Archbishop of Cologne and the Duke of Cleves hastened to Waldeck's side. The sooner the local powers repossessed Münster, the sooner they would be able to reassert their authority and thwart the looming predators.

THE RETURN OF HENRY GRAES

‘The angel’s eyes burned into me and the angel spoke with a voice like thunder.’

Henry Graes, on his return to New Jerusalem

On hearing that his preachers had been caught and executed, the King announced merely that God had willed that they should die. The world was not ready to receive the Word, he told his brothers and sisters. There would always be more preachers, he reassured them. And in time the world would listen. In this way he rationalised the elimination of his entire ministry.

The people of New Jerusalem went about their business in grim-faced silence. They were traumatised. Doubts preyed on the kingdom’s most devout followers. Yet nobody openly complained. Even the few who privately thought Leiden not a king at all but a leering imposter, a cruel tyrant who would drag them into the abyss, said nothing. They had seen how John of Leiden and his henchmen – chiefly his executioner, Knipperdolling – dealt with dissenters.

Then a miracle took place.

Soon after dawn on a wintry December day, the King received word that one of his preachers had survived. The sentries found him lying in chains, shivering, outside the walls. It was Henry Graes. Word flew around the city: Henry Graes was alive! Henry Graes had come home! They carried his exhausted body, blue with cold, through the parting crowd. The people wept and praised the Lord, and touched and embraced him. They sang hymns of praise. Henry Graes lived!

The happy throng carried the schoolmaster to the King, before whom Graes fell to his knees and wept. Leiden ordered him to be released from his chains and pressed him to tell his story.

Graes revealed how, at Osnabrück, he and his fellow preachers had been betrayed to the Bishop's men, manacled and flung into a dungeon in Iburg, the Bishop's headquarters some fifty kilometres north-east of Münster. He claimed that some of their number were racked and tortured with thumb screws and red-hot tongs, an exaggeration to persuade the city that he had experienced the worst of the Bishop's punishments.

How had he survived, the King asked.

On the eve of his execution, Graes replied, he had experienced a divine visitation, a moment of heavenly grace. In the penumbral light an angel had entered his cell, cradled him in her arms and told him that the Lord had chosen him to return to New Jerusalem. He spoke of the angel's eyes burning into him, and a voice like thunder in his ears. The angel carried him to the walls of the city in his sleep, and he awoke that morning to find himself lying in chains under a bush, outside the city gates.

Lest anyone doubted his story, he held out his shackles. 'These chains belong to the enemy,' he said.¹

Graes persuaded the court and most of those listening. They wanted to believe him. He reassured them with stories of the great commotion that their brothers were stirring up 'everywhere in the world' for the sake of New Jerusalem. And while a few of the less credulous courtiers remained unconvinced by his story, they awaited the King's reaction before they made their concerns known.

Leiden was either utterly seduced by Graes's story, as hostile witnesses attested, or saw in Graes a potential ally in his efforts to keep the people mystified, and in thrall to the possible. Either way, he praised Heaven for Graes's life. Here was a sign of divine intervention: an angel of the Lord had saved the life of their brother preacher and schoolmaster. Graes's return confirmed God's intentions, the King declared, and proved that his brothers and sisters, God's Chosen People, were destined for Paradise.

Such was the King's apparent faith in Graes that he anointed the schoolmaster a prophet, an Old Testament patriarch, of the stature of Abraham. Graes bowed low. He received special lodgings, food and a beautiful green-and-grey robe, gestures of gratitude from the people for his service.

Outwardly, Graes seemed honoured; inwardly, he was terrified. At any moment a prisoner or deserter might denounce him as a spy for the Bishop. And that could only mean a cruel and agonising death. So he hatched a plan of escape as fast as his panic-stricken mind allowed.

Over the next few days Graes fell into convulsions, writhing around in a manner he felt befitted an Old Testament seer through whom the Holy Spirit spoke. On New Year's Day, 1535, seized by another fit, he cried out that God had called on him to save New Zion. God had summoned him to lead an army against the godless! He must go at once to the Low Countries – to Amsterdam, Deventer, Wesel and other cities – and raise a force capable of vanquishing the enemies of New Jerusalem. Graes himself would break the Bishop's siege and liberate the people!

The King and his courtiers were enthralled. Clearly, Graes's powers exceeded those of a prophet, they decided. Was he possessed by the spirit of their saviour?

At once the King entrusted him with the mission. The court lavished him with supplies, money – some 300 guilders – and banners bearing Leiden's coat of arms, the globe pierced by two crossed daggers. He would depart in the first week of the new year. To fortify him on his perilous mission, the King wrote him a letter of introduction, which bore the Royal stamp and was dated 2 January 1535:

We, John, the righteous King of the New Temple, and servant of the Most High God, by means of this letter, make known to all and any Christian brothers, who are allied with us, that We have sent out the bearer of this letter, Henry Graes, an enlightened prophet of the Heavenly Father, with our authority in order to gather the brothers scattered throughout Germany and to teach the words of life for the propagation of our empire and carry out the rest of the orders imposed on him by God and Us. We therefore ask that you believe him in the same way as ourselves, in everything that concerns our cause.²

As Graes prepared to depart, he thanked his Lutheran god that none yet suspected him of being in the pay of Waldeck.

DANCE, DANCE, DANCE

‘Dear brothers and sisters, this joy that has taken place here is God’s will. For I’ve recognised that some of you are going around with a sour look on your face and are scornful that dancing has started up again. There’s no warrant for this ... for we Christians are free in everything that one may enjoy in the world, be it dancing, be it singing, jumping or playing.’

Bernard Rothmann, in a sermon on the pleasures of the flesh

In the meantime, in the weeks around Christmas, as Graes planned his escape, the court found ways to divert the people’s attention from the food shortage and the failure of their preachers’ relief mission. Even as his subjects faced privation and hard times, the King maintained his talent for spectacle.

As one of many such spectacles, Leiden ordered a mock Mass. It would be a great joke. Everyone was summoned to the cathedral, which was now mostly in ruins and stripped bare. The people spread out across the square, filled with hope of a hearty feast and a good laugh at the expense of the hated Catholics and Lutherans. Ridiculing their enemies did wonders for the spirits.

The royal entourage appeared at the ‘Mass’ in full regalia, accompanied by a holy fool named Carl. Carl gave a ridiculous sermon and handed around a plate asking for mock offerings of rubbish and table scraps. Afterwards, the King held a fencing competition and a theatrical joust, and the cathedral ruins became a sporting arena.

The day went so well that the King ordered more lavish entertainments. Near Christmas Day he staged a grander parody Mass, led by three junior

preachers. One of them was John Swerten, who had returned to the city as Henry Graes's servant and disciple, and so was privy to the Bishop's plot.

The preachers packed their sermons with profanities, and were raucously heckled. The parishioners sang a Christmas hymn full of scorn. They made offerings of dead bats, rats, mice, horse legs and cat's heads – the leftovers of what some were now being forced to eat. The food shortage was not yet so severe that they had to hoard these scraps, which they threw first in the offering plate, and then, tiring of the joke, at each other. Small dead animal carcasses flew across the nave and into the chancel.

The mood inside the cathedral was that of a bawdy tavern. There was swearing and dancing along with the food fights; indeed, anything that profaned the Mass was applauded, and the coarser the better. When the 'priest' turned to his assistant to receive the *pace*, the kiss of peace, the latter dropped his robe and revealed his backside to the priest's pouting lips, to uproarious laughter. People began farting on command, like schoolchildren defying authority.

Further days of entertainment filled the cathedral square. The King enjoined the city's best swordsmen to entertain them. The show would go on and on – anything to distract the people from the awful truth, which was that the public food stores were running down, and whatever food remained was being hoarded by the King and his court. Their only hope was that their dear prophet Graes would return at the head of an army of thousands.

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On New Year's Day, the King and Rothmann preached from a window overlooking the square, flanked by Queen Divara and their lesser wives. The royal party and their courtiers and preachers then repaired to the council chambers for a banquet. Poorer citizens were pointedly excluded from these festivities, and told to go home. It began to dawn on the common folk that only a favoured few were getting enough to eat, while most grew hungrier every day. The sharp lines of social rank now divided a people who had once sat as equals at communal tables.

Despair ran in the ruts and alleyways, where the famished now searched for scraps of food. Yet the sight of malnourished children, crying for food, or of elder citizens propped up on sticks, went unremarked through the weeks of entertainment. The favoured, well-fed courtiers ignored the gaunt

faces and skinny frames of their fellow citizens. It would not do to alert the King that New Jerusalem harboured such misery. God frowned on the whining anguish of the mob. The royal court floated above the wretched city like a parliament on a cloud.

The entertainments of the winter solstice, the carnal pleasures of the long, dark nights, and the freedom to ridicule the ‘godless’ absorbed the townsfolk’s attentions, keeping most of them distracted. If any horrible images disturbed them – visions of a future plunged in wretchedness and starvation, or of a people forced to live on grass and horsemeat, even as the rich and powerful gorged themselves at the King’s table – they shunned these portents of catastrophe as mere earthly fears. God would be by their side when the End Times came.

A few plotted their escape, beset by doubts. Were they truly God’s Elect, as their baptism promised? Or had they been terribly misled, doomed to endure the hideous punishments and braying demons of the Antichrist? In any case, most had come too far to turn back. They were wedded to their faith, like an outlawed couple betrothed in secret. They could never surrender. They would press on, praying daily, searching the night sky for a sign, a miracle, a flash of divine recognition.

And in the distance the Bishop’s pyres burned, and from the flames some discerned the hooded figure of Death staring back at them, smiling with recognition.

After the New Year’s Day feast of salted meat and bread and beer, the King led his select circle in a dance in the marketplace. The stronger, better-fed commoners joined in. So long as we can dance, they reasoned, things can’t be too bad, can they? With such thoughts they consoled each other.

Ever alert to the darkening mood, Rothmann seized the pulpit and tried to console the people and validate the King’s actions in the eyes of God. As master of ceremonies, he delighted in the theatrics of recent days. God was smiling on them, he said. The Catholic Mass was a mockery of piety and deserved all their ridicule. Their pleasure in dancing and games was a celebration of their unbreakable faith in the Lord. Surely the Heavenly Father wanted them to enjoy the last days of their earthly existence?

The same went for everything they did: such harmless diversions expressed their joy in the Lord. A spirit of libidinous gaiety possessed the court, as if the punitive spirit of the constitution and the thirty-one articles

had never existed. Yet in the King's mind their revelries had a specific purpose: to buy the regime a little more time.

'Dear brothers and sisters,' Rothmann cried, 'this joy that has taken place here is God's will. For I've recognised that some of you are going around with a sour look on your face and are scornful that dancing has started up again. There's no warrant for this. They may look as they please, for we Christians are free in everything that one may enjoy in the world, be it dancing, be it singing, jumping or playing. Every sort of joy that we can enjoy we may certainly enjoy – provided we have no harm by it – to the praise and glory of God.'

Did that mean, the people wondered, that anything went? Were there no acts that would bring the wrath of God upon them? Were they at liberty to leap about, shriek, run amok, fornicate with whomever they chose, dance in the streets? Were they free to act as the godless acted, so long as they did so in God's name?

The answer was yes. 'All the joys that the godless have and enjoy we too may have and enjoy,' Rothmann declared. 'These are freely available to us. We praise God with them and the godless praise the Devil with them.'¹

This thrilled the city's better-fed youth – the sons and daughters of the courtiers – and in a burst of zeal they danced away the afternoons. They danced and danced whenever they got the urge. They danced in the squares and alleys, in the taverns and church ruins. The older citizens refrained, dismissing the dance craze as immoral and decadent in a time of such penury. Many lacked the strength to dance.

The King loved to see his subjects cavorting in the streets and squares, and designed more entertainments. A footrace in the cathedral square proved the highlight of the first week of the year. The King himself won easily. He ran like the wind, it was said, to the delight of his wives and servants. The people let him win other competitions, too: a sensible concession to Leiden's pride. After these entertainments, the royal entourage performed a 'linked sword dance', in which a long line of men grasped the sheath of the next man's dagger and did a jig. Then everyone sang hymns.

The silent witness Gresbeck was appalled. He dismissed the sword dance as an 'idiot Hollander's dance'.² Many older citizens, too, silently distrusted and even came to loathe the monarchy that ruled New Jerusalem.

Were the King and Queen any different from the emperors and princes who ruled beyond the walls?

On 5 January Henry Graes left New Jerusalem with the King's blessing, amid a flourish of farewells. Leiden even organised a sortie against the Bishop's lines in order to distract the enemy's attention from his departure.

Once outside the city walls, the wily schoolteacher shed his prophet's persona and assumed the hawk-eyed demeanour of a spy. After going through the motions of visiting Wesel, he slipped his guards and companions and hastened to the Bishop's camp in Iburg – to fulfil his side of the bargain that had saved his life.

Brought before Waldeck, Graes divulged what he had found out about the King and the city: the secret signs and codes of the Anabaptists; the whereabouts, in houses and cellars, of their arsenal; the strength of their allies in the neighbouring city of Wesel, eighty kilometres to the west; their heretical plans to defeat the 'Christians' by assassinating the authorities of neighbouring states; their mission to defeat 'all godlessness', as they saw it, and spread their 'heretical and immoral kingdom' as widely as possible.³

And yet the city had only a few hundred cows, Graes calculated, and enough grain to last a month. Morale varied according to whether you had enough to eat. Those who were worst off – mostly women and children – suffered appallingly. He gave the city at best a few months before it fell.

Delighted by this intelligence, the Bishop reported Graes's findings to the Duke of Jülich and other princes and town officials, steeling them all for the final push that would remove forever the 'germinating evil' of Münster.⁴

A new spirit of vengeance, merciless and absolute, emerged. Lutherans and Catholics were now utterly united in their loathing for the *Schwärmer* of Münster, and their feelings intensified with every day the city refused to surrender. None was filled with such hatred as the Bishop. Humiliated for over twelve months by the defiance of the largest city in his diocese, Waldeck now struck a pathetic, lonely figure – the least enviable bishop in Christendom. Yet he would keep his job: nobody else wanted to do it, and it had to be done. So the princes, prelates and officials continued to send cash and arms to their proxy warrior-prince, yet all knew who would take the blame if the siege failed.

Here, then, was the world in miniature: the preening self-importance of princes and bishops, buttressed by wealth and titles and power; the cloying servility of their dependants, bent to the will of the elite; the sullen impotence of the Bishop's army, hungry for vengeance and the spoils of war; the defiance of the Melchiorite artisans and workers, deluded by visions and condemned for heresy; and the peasant labourers, no better than serfs, press-ganged into turning the machinery of war – all huddled under an indifferent moon. All were praying for a miracle, a prophecy, a heaven-sent angel who would validate their righteousness and take their side in a struggle in which everyone claimed to be acting in the name of the one true God.

THE TWELVE DUKES

‘Anyone who suffers epilepsy, leprosy or the French ailment [syphilis] will not contract a marriage unless they first reveal the malady to their bed partners.’

One of the King’s revised laws

Privately, the King felt acutely disappointed. His hopes of relief were frustrated. Rothmann’s incendiary pamphlets had failed to rally a Dutch army. None of the Anabaptist communities in Frisia and Holland who had read *On Vengeance* had dared to take up the sword to defend New Jerusalem.

The Bishop’s blood-curdling propaganda had had its effect. Both Waldeck and Philip of Hesse had dismissed Rothmann’s words as the ravings of Satan, penned by a spokesman for the damned. Hesse had even engaged in a rigorous verbal joust with the Anabaptists over the preacher’s heresies.

Nor had the King heard a word from Henry Graes, in whose mission he had placed such hope. Had the schoolmaster and prophet been caught and executed? Or had Leiden’s confidence in him as their saviour been misplaced? Doubts gnawed at Leiden as the city plunged deeper into melancholy.

In this mood of sneaking despair, the King, his ministers and few surviving preachers resorted to old plans. They briefly resurrected the idea of a great exodus to the Promised Land, under the protection of the hand of the Lord, in which the whole population would march *out* of the city. The success of the plan depended on the people continuing to trust in divine

intervention – or to trust sufficiently to override their terror of the world beyond the walls. Yet it seemed fear now trumped faith, and imagination stanching physical courage. They had seen what the Bishop's men did to Matthias, to the refugees and to their own soldiers, many of whom had been beheaded and mutilated, their body parts impaled on pikes.

To ease their anxieties, the King assured them that an army of Hollanders a hundred thousand strong was due to arrive at the hour of their departure and protect them. Few believed this. The King had lost much authority after the capture and execution of the city's preachers.

He went ahead anyway. In answer to his call, the blast of a horn, a few hundred freezing men and women, hungry and destitute, their miserable children in tow, stumbled onto the cathedral square. They carried their measly possessions and perhaps a spear or a dagger. They trusted in God to do the rest.

Most citizens stayed indoors. The Promised Land could wait. A glance over the walls was enough to make up their minds. There, Waldeck's huge cordon, bristling with armoured *Landsknechts*, their swords and pikes flashing in the morning sun, supported by cannon and arquebusiers, seemed to tighten with every passing day. It was as though a great armoured forest was converging on the ramparts of the city.

The exodus never left town. The sight of the Bishop's blockade drained their resolve. Perhaps to console them, Leiden threw a banquet. It was dismal. 'We shall consume beer and bread until God makes things better,' Rothmann announced hopefully. The few remaining preachers tried to reassure the people. 'We are being tested by the Almighty,' they said as they moved up and down the communal tables of stale crusts and dirty ale.

As the weeks passed, the King became despondent, even depressed. He resorted to authoritarian spasms, perhaps to remind himself of his powers: he issued a revised version of the thirty-one articles, for instance, although they had been reduced to twenty-seven and made more suitable for a monarchy. The articles reminded the city that a single king shall rule the people of God; nobody may pervert the Holy Scripture with his own interpretations; a prophet whose prophecies deviate from the Word of God 'will be removed from the entire people and killed by them'; drunkenness, fornication, adultery, gambling, trading with cash and 'foul debauchery after the fashion of wild beasts' were banned; and defectors who returned to the city would be executed, as would pagans who sought refuge there. 'The

community of Christians shall not become an asylum for criminals,' the law declared.

The twenty-fourth article suggested the King had learned a thing or two about marriage. 'No one will force another into a marriage contract against his will, since such a contract is free and is joined by the genuine and natural bond of love.' And the next revealed an awareness of sexually transmitted disease: those who suffered from epilepsy (then considered a transmittable 'bad omen'), leprosy or the 'French ailment' (syphilis) 'will not contract a marriage unless they first reveal the malady to their bed partners'.¹

Leiden dispatched a flurry of decrees and prophecies that he claimed had been handed down to him by the 'Living God'. At three am one morning, he revealed, God had woken him and said, 'You will set in motion for Me a people beyond count in order to glorify My name.' Another time God instructed him to tell his people to stop chanting hymns in an impious way.² But these divine commandments quickly lost their potency as the ravages of famine took hold.

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Yet, even at his nadir, Leiden was capable of rallying. In early spring he returned to his thespian roots, staging a morality play based on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, as told in Luke 16. The story was hugely popular in the early sixteenth century, when the nobility lived in luxury and most ordinary people scrounged out a wretched existence – precisely the situation inside New Jerusalem, of course. That irony seems to have been lost on the King and his courtiers, who set up a stage in the ruins of the cathedral and encouraged locals to play the roles, which included a crowd of devils.

The play, performed to the accompaniment of three flautists, closely followed the Biblical story, as Luke tells it:

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried

away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.

At which point the crowd of devils dragged the rich man into Hell, to gales of laughter. Out of the flames he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me,' he called out, 'and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.'

Abraham replied, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.'

To which the rich man pleaded with Abraham at least to send Lazarus to warn his family – he had five brothers – 'so that they will not also come into this place of torment'.

Abraham refused, saying that the rich man's family should listen to Moses and the prophets.

'No, Father Abraham,' the rich man begged. 'If someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

Abraham walked away, dismissing the rich man's request: 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced by someone who rises from the dead.'³

Afterwards, some among the crowd seemed unable to distinguish between the imagined world of the play and the reality around them. An angry mob lynched the actor who had played the rich man and strung him up in the cathedral square, accusing him of wanting to escape the city and seek the Bishop's pardon. Leiden smiled on their performance; his distractions were working.

But no entertainment, however thrilling, could shield even the most delusional Melchiorite from the grim truth. Their hopes of relief sank. No vengeful angel flew down to smite their enemies with a 'glowing sword', as Gresbeck reckoned had saved King David.⁴ No prophecies or prayers yielded relief or food. The longed-for Dutch army failed to appear. A silence as leaden as the Westphalian sky met their prayers.

And the face of hunger showed itself, in the children's cries for bread and the dismal faces in doorways, terrified of a visit from the 'deacons', who continued their search-and-seize missions, wandering from home to home to confiscate hoarded food and take it to the King's store.

As food grew scarce, the deacons went about their business without sympathy or care. They used brute force, ransacking the people's houses like soldiers hunting for spoils. They upended and tore apart the straw bedding, dismantled the furniture, gouged the nooks and crannies in the attics and cellars. They seized crusts and potatoes, turnips and onions, all of which were delivered to the King's store.

The communal dining halls became the caves of scavengers, where desperate people fought over table scraps. The ideal of the common-wealth was no more than a distant light in the delirium of want. Nor were the people allowed to create their own food: the King outlawed baking and brewing at home. Official millers and brewers who sympathised and colluded with the people – for a fee – ran the risk of execution.

The King turned away from the suffering of his subjects, and shut himself in his palace with his favourites. He was a King, after all: why should he have to endure the sight of such misery? Why should he not rule as other kings ruled, by divine right?

He felt superior even to those distant monarchs. Did Henry VIII have such power as he would soon have, over the secular and spiritual realms after Judgement Day? Would the Emperor himself have any sway over the post-Apocalypse earth? No. Although the extent to which Leiden truly believed that he was destined to rule the world depended on his mood, the political situation and his prayers.

For now, he and his wives, their courtiers and servants, the preachers and the councillors luxuriated in a full pantry, a wine press, ale, baked bread and meat. The King had seized the remaining 200 cows of the 1500 the city had possessed at the start of the siege. He commandeered the cellars and grain stores.

The people well knew the penalty for stealing food. A hungry Frisian nicknamed Tall Albert, reputed to be of gigantic height, had conceived of a plan to drive the cows out of the city and use them as payment for his life. The King got wind of the plot, however, and beheaded Tall Albert himself.

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In response to their growing despair, Leiden now conceived of two new ruses to win over the people. In mid-January 1535, he convened a gathering

in the marketplace and made two announcements of great importance to New Jerusalem.

First, he gave his word that if the city was not liberated by Easter, he would submit himself to execution as ‘a false prophet and criminal’ before a court of the people. In putting his life on the line, he either truly believed that relief or salvation was at hand, or he was recklessly gambling on escaping under armed protection before or after the deadline.

The likely answer was revealed by his second announcement that day: the creation of a new social rank and lever of power in the city. Twelve ‘dukes’ were to be chosen from among the King’s most loyal artisans and guildsmen, and entrusted with the city’s security – with one duke stationed at each of the city’s gates, responsible for its defence.

There are confusing reports as to how the Twelve Dukes were selected. Gresbeck claims that the dukes were chosen ‘fraudulently’: children were asked to pick the names out of a hat, but if the name differed from the King’s preferred name, he simply ignored it and announced his choice.⁵ This seems plausible, because the King demanded the dukes’ total loyalty and thus had a strong interest in who was chosen. He was adept at manipulating events to his advantage, heedless of the people’s actual interests. The fact that he made selection look like a random draw suggests the people were fed up with the self-serving elite that ran the city.

The Twelve Dukes included John Redeker, a cobbler (and relative of Henry); John Denker, a retailer; Bernard tor Moer, a tailor; John Palck, an ironsmith; Nicholas Stripe, a merchant; Henry Xanten, a coppersmith; John Katerberg, a swordsmith; Henry Kock, of Osnabrück; Christian Kerckering, a patrician; as well as Herman Reining, Engelbert Eding and an unnamed reeve of Leeden.⁶ All were rewarded with royal commissions in the King’s army and an array of special privileges, in return for protecting the King.

After their names were announced, the dukes were dispatched to their designated gates, where they established their own little fiefdoms. They were each given attendants, councillors and twenty-four retainers, all of whom were well-fed, well-armed, well-dressed and empowered to crush dissent.

It was quickly clear to whom the dukes answered. At a feast held in their honour, at which they appeared resplendent in silk and velvet doublets, the King declared that they would help him wage war on the godless during the Last Days, and then join him in ruling the world. They would help him

raise an army of the righteous – an allusion to the 144,000 witnesses mentioned in the Book of Revelation – who would eradicate evil. And afterwards each Duke would receive his own personal empire as a reward for his loyalty. Saxony, for example, would go to Denker; Brunswick to Moer; Holland to Eding; Cologne to the reeve of Leeden; Trier to Kock; Mainz to Xanten; and so on. In Lieden's mind, Christendom's horizons extended only so far as his knowledge of it.

The feast ended with the dukes bowing one by one before the King to receive a gift. On silk cords around their necks, Leiden hung some of his best gold and silver pieces, coins and amulets.

Leiden's creation of the Twelve Dukes was an antidote to despair: the more the people felt they were losing hope, the more fantastic the schemes he came up with to revive it. And at first these guardians of the gates made the citizens feel more secure. Yet the people's reaction to the dukes depended on their confidence in the King, and ultimately this amounted to whether they had anything to eat.

Some speculated that the Twelve Dukes symbolised the twelve tribes of Israel, who stood at the twelve gates of the Biblical Jerusalem at the time of the Apocalypse, as told in the Book of Revelation:

It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites ... And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.⁷

Others thought Leiden had in mind Christ's Twelve Apostles. After abandoning their families and giving away their possessions to follow Him, the Apostles asked Christ to name the reward for their loyalty.

'What, then, will we have?' Peter asked the Saviour.

'Truly, I tell you,' Christ replied, 'at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'⁸

Were the dukes, then, modelled on the Apostles, establishing their King as a Christ figure? Did Leiden actually imagine himself as the reincarnation of Christ?

The truth was morbidly pedestrian: the dukes were neither apostles nor Israelite leaders. They were created as an act of royal self preservation, a kind of household guard or private militia – ostensibly to defend the city, but in reality to shield the King and his court from the wrath of the citizens, if and when it came.

And they had the power of slave drivers, which they exercised at once. The people, although weak with malnutrition, stripped of their food and most of their possessions, and dressed in brown smocks or dirty clothes, were put to work. The Twelve Dukes ordered them to reinforce the city's walls and flatten what remained of the cathedral and churches. They must prepare for the coming of the Lord! The holy war before Judgement Day demanded no less.

Many longed to escape this misery, yet they were more frightened of what lay beyond the walls than within them. So they stayed. New Jerusalem offered them hope of salvation, however elusive it seemed.

THE FOUR HORSEMEN

'Dear fellow citizens, God has opened my eyes so that I now see how what we have wrought in Münster is false and poisonous. He has commanded me to hold up for you the mirror of your wickedness, as He has held it up for me. I beg you to open your eyes – it is high time!'

Henry Graes, revealing himself as a traitor to the people of New Jerusalem

The approach of spring brought no joy. The food supplies in Münster were nearly exhausted. Hunger held the people in its skeletal clutch. Time passed slowly, agonisingly, paced by the tolling of the bells and the livid dawns and the bleak wail of the horns that summoned the King's subjects to the communal dining tables, where they hoped for a jug of beer, a crust of bread and salt and maybe some soup.

Younger adults were so weak they used sticks to help them walk. Children bore signs of severe malnutrition. The elderly were confined to their beds, useless. Only the King, the Twelve Dukes, their wives, courtiers and ladies-in-waiting were well-fed and active.

The people lived on whatever they could scrounge. Grains, salt and flour were rationed. Nearly all the horses and mules had been carved up and cooked. On every scrap of earth they tried to grow cabbages, beans and turnips, which the King's men seized. In any case, the march of hunger outpaced the growth of their little gardens, and the food shortage soon claimed its first casualties. People were dying, as Gresbeck observed.¹

Horrific stories flowed into the Bishop's camp, through refugees, spies and the preachers' confessions, portraying a city on the edge of the abyss,

of a wealthy court plunged in debauchery while the ordinary people fell dead around them.

In March, one of Waldeck's spies, a soldier from Frankfurt called Johann Nagel – who was nicknamed Hans Eck, or 'Little Hans', on account of his height – escaped the city, having spent two months inside pretending to be a deserter. Though a hard-drinking carouser, Little Hans was a formidable soldier who would play a crucial role in the city's fall. His testimony largely confirmed Waldeck's worst suspicions.

The crazed King, John of Leiden, believed God had chosen him to lead the people to the Promised Land, Little Hans related. Leiden's mad plan was to charge out of the city and anoint himself 'king of all the world'.² This King believed one Anabaptist worth ten of the Bishop's 'godless' mercenaries. Yet his people were dying. He had seized all the horses and cows while his people starved. And still they imposed polygyny, daily subjecting women and girls to rape and other sexual assault. The King himself enjoyed sixteen concubines and planned to take 300 more after he conquered the world.

Defectors and refugees told similar stories, some extracted under torture or exaggerated to please the Bishop. It was true, though, that the townsfolk had been forced to eat horses and vermin, and that the King had seized all the oxen and cows.

And it was also true that many of Münster's lusty old men kept several wives like concubines in a harem, sexual playthings whom they inseminated whenever they felt the urge. For the law decreed that it was monstrous in the eyes of God to waste one's seed outside one's wife's vagina.³ As John Calvin would write of the sin of masturbation: 'The voluntary spilling of semen outside of intercourse between a man and a woman is a monstrous thing. Deliberately to withdraw from coitus in order that semen may fall on the ground is double monstrous.' Anything to avoid the curse of Onan.

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On Easter Sunday, 28 March, the King ended a six-day retreat, during which he pretended to be sick. He arose, perturbed. Since Good Friday he had been wrestling with how to absolve himself of responsibility for the failure of his prophecy.

Easter was here, but the Lord was not. Indeed, He showed no signs of turning up.

Leiden had promised the city his own head if the End Times failed to start. It was a rash promise, and made him a hostage to fortune. So he spent the morning locked inside his estate, not daring to venture out.

Outside, in the town, there was not a sign of the beginning of the end. The sun had risen on another dreary day of fear and food shortages. The people gazed at the sky, shaking their heads. They were hungry and sick. They sat around the streets and squares, enfeebled, wondering, longing. They wept and prayed. That day they'd been promised deliverance from their pain and suffering, but relief was nowhere to be seen.

The King studied his predicament. What could he say to the people? That the Almighty had forsaken them, and their trials and firmness of faith were for nought? No, that he could not believe. He brooded long and hard, and alighted on a new trick which he willed himself to believe. Certainly, he hoped, it would buy him more time.

He summoned his subjects to the marketplace. Only those who could walk showed up. Most were gaunt and sick, with fleshless skin and eyes that stared out of their bony sockets. The King arrived flanked by his attendants, whose red uniforms hung loosely around their emaciated bodies. He looked in rude health, dressed in a black overcoat trimmed in fur.

Leiden seemed contrite and perplexed. He put his head in his hands. He remained silent for a long time. Then he spoke, and his voice rang with its old flair. He had been weak, ill with worry, he told the people, but the Father had restored his strength. And it pained him greatly to admit that he had wronged them. God Himself had told him that he had erred.

Yes, he had prophesied that the Last Days would begin now, Easter 1535, and their salvation would follow. Deploying all his theatrical flair, Leiden now swooned and muttered a prayer, waffling in a strange tongue – his God tongue. Having snared their attention, he reminded them that he had taken on their sins. He was their great defender, their champion. On their behalf he had borne all the sins of the Israelites, the heaviest burden of woe!⁴

And yes, they were going to be saved, he promised their sad, expectant faces. But not in the way they had anticipated.

God had revealed to him – to him! – that their salvation had already begun, the inner salvation of their souls. External salvation would come too,

in time, so long as they did not fall back into sin. For now, they should be grateful and rejoice in the knowledge that their souls were saved. ‘You are now free from sin,’ he cried. ‘You have received the promised redemption of the spirit.’ Nor would God abandon them: ‘Our present suffering is but His testing of our steadfastness.’⁵

It made no sense, therefore, for the King to sacrifice his own life. Indeed, with God’s help their city could still defeat the Bishop, just as King David had defeated whole armies, despite the fact that New Jerusalem lacked supplies of powder and shot, and Rothmann had shelved ambitious designs for catapults. Nonetheless, ‘dear brethren’, Leiden assured them, ‘this may yet happen to us, for the same God [as David’s] liveth yet’.⁶

The people feebly cheered and managed, shakily at first, to sing a hymn:

Rejoice, rejoice, ye Christian all,
And break forth into singing!
Since far and wide, on every side
The word of God is ringing.
And well we know, no human foe
Our souls from Christ can sever;
For to the base, and men of grace
God’s word stands sure for ever ...⁷

And then they fell back into a morose silence.

Their anguish and misery were too great for them to feel comforted. Most were in acute pain, and terrified of the Bishop’s torturers. The King had prophesied, they all knew, that their earthly torments would be over. If not now, at Easter, when?

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Then confirmation of the townsfolk’s worst nightmare arrived, in a letter nailed to one of the city’s gates. It bore the seal of Henry Graes, the very preacher who had set off to raise an army to rescue them – or so their King had led them to hope.

The guard who found Graes’s letter was so horrified by what he read, and the consequences of being caught reading it, that he quickly handed it

to another guard, who handed it to another, and so on, until the letter passed like a vial of poison up the line to Knipperdolling, who had the dreadful task of giving it to the King.

‘Dear fellow citizens,’ Graes wrote:

God has opened my eyes so that I now see how what we have wrought in Münster is false and poisonous. He has commanded me to hold up for you the mirror of your wickedness, as He has held it up for me. I beg you to open your eyes – it is high time! – and to see that what you have done is against God and His divine command. All the prophets are only men like me.

You poor, stupid fools have been deceived, betrayed, and misled. I know everything. You may still save your lives if you will turn from your path and leave this godless business behind. This is God’s command. So that you will be sure to believe that this letter comes from me, Henry Graes, I have sealed it with my signet ring, which you all know.⁸

Everyone from the lowest peasant to the Twelve Dukes had placed their hope in Graes. He was their avenging angel, their saviour, the gentle schoolmaster who had survived the Bishop’s cells and returned to liberate them. Even the King wanted to believe in the great trust he had placed in Graes, despite the fact that he’d done so chiefly as a means of raising the people’s hopes and prolonging his reign. And now this.

In private the King wept and raged against the schoolmaster. If Graes was a traitor, then all hope was lost. What would this do to his stature, his credibility as their King, coming so soon after the Easter debacle? An army of Anabaptists would not be arriving. The angel of deliverance had flown away. The King’s despair would soon turn on his people, in fits of violence the likes of which New Jerusalem had not seen.

Word flew across town that Graes was a traitor and false prophet. And Leiden found himself once again casting around for a response to the people’s terror and confusion. This time he summoned his trusty orator to do his dirty work.

‘Dear brothers and sisters,’ Rothmann told a fearful gathering in the market square, as the surly King looked on, ‘there are some of you mumbling and grumbling that Henry, the prophet, has abandoned us. Dear

brothers and sisters, let this not be surprising to you. For such false prophets must rise among us. One of which is Henry. It does not bother us, that they have been informed about our plans and that now also the bishop knows of them.’⁹

It wasn’t Rothmann’s most persuasive performance. Gresbeck was in the crowd, and overheard many whispering, ‘What sort of plans do they take seriously, if word of their buffoonery should finally get out?’¹⁰

And an awful question now confronted the few thousand inhabitants left inside New Jerusalem: had their God and King abandoned them? The Lord had not come at the designated hour, and their King’s saviour had betrayed them. They faced death by starvation if they stayed in the city, and torture and execution if they fled.

Beyond the walls, the Bishop’s massed ranks were closing in, bristling with fury and sharpened blades, and the people turned away in despair. All that mattered now was their stomachs. In May the last horses were butchered and eaten, right down to their hooves and intestines. Domestic pets had long since disappeared; dogs and cats were now remembered as delicacies.

So the townsfolk fell on the near-exhausted food stores, granaries and cellars. In panic at losing what food remained, Leiden and Knipperdolling ordered the Twelve Dukes to enforce the ration regime.

Daily, people were caught or accused of stealing food, and severely punished. So they resorted to roasting rodents, snakes, frogs, hedge-hogs, birds and bats on spits over communal fires. And when these grew scarce, they ate slugs, snails, grasses, shoots and bark.¹¹ And then they sucked on leather, and old shoes, and even gnawed on chalk and tallow candles. A few crazed citizens thought the Lord, in His pity, had turned the paving stones into loaves and tried to bite into them.

Some even consumed dried cow and human excrement. According to Kerksenbrock, hunger made them ‘rummage in the latrine by the river Aa’, where they extracted human dung and dried it in the sun. These ‘loaves’ resembled bread, inducing some people to taste it, at which they threw it away with disgust, ‘choosing to die rather than eat such food again’.¹²

And as the shortage deepened, the people preyed on each other like wild beasts, seeking out any hidden food. Rumours of cannibalism were rife. Though Gresbeck wrote that he had not seen any sign of it, Kerssenbrock claimed that extreme hunger drove some to strip human corpses of meat, and even kill and devour children.

‘Starvation made many babies waste away in their cribs in the arms of their helpless mothers and killed them,’ he later wrote, ‘and many were also (I shudder to say it) killed with a sword by their own parents for food.’ After the city fell, he claimed, ‘the bones of such babies were found in brine’. He also stated that the wife of the councilman Hans Mencken had cut up her triplets and preserved their body parts.¹³ Such reports of preserving body parts for consumption were in all likelihood false, concocted by hostile witnesses long after the event. Yet it seems the desperate did indeed consume fresh corpses.

New Jerusalem had become a city of the damned. The people tottered about like the walking dead, their eyes straining from their sockets, their lips drawn tight, their skin black and leathery on their wasted bodies. Hideous diseases linked to severe malnutrition spread: scurvy, infections, skin diseases, oedemas, emaciation, kidney and heart failure.

Sobs and screams punctured the pitiful nights – the wailing of children, the cries of helpless parents, the weeping of the old and sick. People fell dead in their homes and in the streets and taverns. Corpses littered the Holy City. The stench of death hung like a noisome cloud. People were now dying in their hundreds, Kerssenbrock wrote. ‘The King had the bodies cast into large common graves, where they were dug up at night and devoured by the starving.’¹⁴

The more wretched the city became, the more Leiden withdrew into fantasy, his mind corrupted by his absolute power over this speck of Christendom. He and Queen Divara, their courtiers, the dukes and their wives confined themselves to the palace, and gorged on what remained of their private food supply.

The King imagined that God smiled on his works, a world that was his to carve up and hand out to his loyal dukes. The whole of Christendom, he believed, was in his gift. He would crown the shop-keeper Denker the Prince of Saxony! The shoe-maker John Redeker would become the Count of Cleves! He would endow the coppersmith Henry Xanten with the Archbishopric of Cologne!

His golden realm became untethered from earth. While his dukes and courtiers luxuriated in raucous banquets and orgiastic nights, Leiden imagined he was master of the world, even as the remaining commoners staggered around the darkened city, a few thousand walking skeletons desperate to escape. The people's suffering, the King and his court now believed, was the will of God.

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Leiden could be chillingly pragmatic when it suited him. From early April he had allowed any women, children and elderly who wanted to leave to do so. The departure of these helpless non-combatants would ease the pressure on the food supply. The King and his courtiers waved them off with gifts of silver pennies. He even let most of his wives depart, but kept his favourite few, including Queen Divara. Other husbands followed his example, retaining their preferred wife or wives and letting the rest go. It seems they were wearying of their efforts to repopulate the world.

The refugees stumbled, crawled or were carried out of New Jerusalem, like a cursed people fleeing a plague-ridden city. Over the next two months nearly a thousand men and women, and as many children, fled the little kingdom.

Bishop Waldeck had no interest in helping them. He sent a note exhorting 'those in possession of the town' to desist from their 'unChristian practices' and stop sending women and children out. All would be dealt with severely, he promised, regardless of age or sex. He was true to his word.

As the defectors approached the Bishop's formidable barricade – now a deep trench with steep ramparts shielded by bramble bushes – the men were cut down and slaughtered, and the women and children turned back to Münster. The King refused to admit them. They had chosen to abandon his Holy City, and so were now among the godless. In despair, many returned to the Bishop's lines, crying out for mercy and falling straight onto the ends of pikes or swords. For some, this was suicide: a quick death was preferable to slow starvation. The surviving women and children were forced to set down in no-man's-land, that ribbon of mud, battle detritus and decomposed corpses between the city walls and Waldeck's blockade.

In defiance of the Bishop, the King kept sending the sick and hungry out of the city, where they begged the soldiers for food. They gnawed on grass. They prayed for a hasty death, to put an end to their suffering: ‘Oh death, why are you fleeing from us? Why do you not end our grievous misfortunes? Why do you draw out our miseries ...?’¹⁵

Was Hell itself any worse than this purgatory, stuck between a cruel Bishop and a mad King? Some women and girls tried to prostitute themselves to the soldiers for bread. They were cruelly used and then dispatched: some 600 were murdered by the Bishop’s men.¹⁶ And while the women and children expired beneath the city walls, the Bishop’s executioners were hard at work, decapitating between twenty and fifty men a day as they fell into their clutches.

The plight of the refugees moved Waldeck’s commander-in-chief, Count Ulrich von Dhaun, to appeal to his master to be merciful and alleviate their suffering. His men were not there to sit by and watch women and children starve, nor to murder surrendering civilians.

But Waldeck was in no mood for clemency. His series of blistering humiliations had steeled him against this moment. Yes, it was pitiable that civilians should suffer, but he was not to blame, he protested. The defiance of these people had forced him to take up arms and crush their heresy. He had made several offers of peace, all rudely spurned.

In any case, they were Anabaptists! If he let them live, they’d only stir up trouble in other cities. In Amsterdam that same month, more than two dozen rebaptisers were executed for calling on their followers to march on Münster and liberate the Melchiorites. Nor had the Bishop forgotten the debacle at Warendorf.

No, he would give no quarter. His nemesis, Leiden, was on his knees now, and it was Waldeck’s turn to stand back and laugh. The might of the Holy Roman Empire was about to fall on the Anabaptists’ heads. The terrible scenes of the women and children left him unmoved. Let them die in agony: they served his purpose as a warning to those who remained in Münster.

Had Dürer depicted anything more dreadful in his designs for the Apocalypse? Women and children now huddled together beneath the city

walls, while the headless trunks of their menfolk were raised on wheels in the distance, a horrifying image of what awaited the shocked souls gazing down from the ramparts.

Then an illness took the Bishop to bed, and Von Dhaun saw a chance to intervene. He went over Waldeck's head, appealing directly to Philip of Hesse and the Archbishop of Cologne to end the suffering of the refugees. They urged Von Dhaun to act according to his conscience.

At once this decent man sprang into action. He offered the surviving civilians a safe haven and bread, which they tore at like ravenous beasts. He stopped the slaughter of the male prisoners. He sent the Dutch and Frisians and other foreigners home. He freed the women and children. Priests were on hand to hear the deserters' confessions, should they wish to recant. Most did, and willingly signed agreements that they would never again seek to subvert the established church. The male prisoners were interrogated to establish whether they had joined the Anabaptists forcibly or of their own free will. Their fate would be decided once Münster fell.

Von Dhaun's humane initiative accelerated the city's surrender, for the people's want of food and life now exceeded any faith they had in their King.

HOLY WAR

'Who selected you to be a king? What about your promise to die if we were still under siege by Easter? You are a bloodhound, and you will soon face the wrath of God for your sins!'

Nicholas Snider, accused of treachery, before his execution

Now the spirit of New Jerusalem entered a darker place, where the promise of an angel's arrival seemed as feeble and battered as the condition of the people. A crushing sense of disillusionment rippled across town. Many now whispered that Leiden was a false prophet, a bogus king. Some even questioned their faith: had God truly promised them salvation? Or had they all been misled? A few were so bereft of hope that they wondered whether God existed at all.

Rumours of an uprising threw the royal court into panic. Some dukes and councillors decided to dispense with their finery, their ostentatious jewels and gold coins, and began to dress in the coarse clothes of their subjects.

The King appeared to share their shame for a while, shunning the gowns and doublets of his elegant wardrobe and mucking in with his people. Then he thought again. Feeling unappreciated on his throne, he sulked. Was this how the people repaid him after all he'd done for them? Had he not risked his life to protect them from an army of the godless? And for what? To rule a starving, embittered people? To endure their faithlessness, cowardice and treachery?

A true king, he resolved, lived above the ordinary rabble. A true king dazzled and awed his subjects. A true king ruled by divine right! So Leiden

once again adorned himself in his jewels and coins, took up his sceptre and summoned the people. ‘Thus you should know, dear brothers and sisters,’ he announced, ‘that God has chosen me for this ... You should also know, that it was not you who made me king. God has made me a king. So I will wear the golden chains ...’¹

Nightly, in his lonely palace, he prayed for the destruction of his enemies and the people’s salvation. He had created this holy kingdom. And he resolved to defend it – to the death, if need be, until the Lord came to his relief.

Even if the King’s prayers were sincere, his actions were pitiless. Still enraged by Graes’s treachery, Leiden approached the punishment of dissenters and traitors with new ferocity. Guilt by association was assumed. Within days of Graes’s letter, the schoolmaster’s wife was put to the sword, ostensibly for exceeding her horsemeat ration.

Executions were summary, or after confessions extracted by torture. There were no trials. When the King discovered that a young Danish nobleman, nicknamed ‘Turban Bill’, whom he’d once trusted, had disappeared, he thrashed about in paroxysms of rage. Three women – Margaret Tunneken, Anna Hoenes and Else Drier – confessed, under torture, to having helped Bill escape. Tunneken, a former prostitute, had given Bill money and a letter pleading for her life.

The King and court condemned all three to death. In her terror, Drier, who had been Knipperdolling’s mistress, now accused her erstwhile lover of being the true traitor – in reply to which, Knipperdolling snatched the sword out of the executioner’s hand and chopped off her head himself, screaming that God the Father had willed it.

Stealing food usually meant instant death, no matter your age. In April, a ravenous ten-year-old boy, as punishment for stealing a few vegetables, was viciously flogged by his schoolteachers in full view of his fellow pupils. When the boy offended again, he was hung from an oak tree in the Lord’s Field – with the King’s assent.

In late May, a new ultimatum from the Bishop threatened imminent destruction of the city unless it surrendered at once. The King replied that God’s truth had inspired his people, and they would defend the city ‘with all our strength until our dying breath’. Unusually, he also suggested that he might be open to negotiation, even to appear before a tribunal of ‘uncorrupted judges’ – and then withdrew the offer. The Holy Roman

Empire had no uncorrupt judges, he wrote: it was as corrupt as the Fourth Beast in the Book of Daniel, ‘exceedingly terrifying, with its teeth of iron and claws of bronze’,² which would kill all the true saints of God – which was to say, Leiden’s brothers and sisters – by ‘smashing, slaughtering, destroying, robbing, smashing and trampling on everything in its path’.³ Naturally, this did little to advance his case.

At times, the King found it within himself to forgive his subjects, to display lenience, to cleave towards sanity. But such moments were rare now. His general practice was to enforce the harshest penal code.

Such was the King’s whimsical cruelty that those who defied his matrimonial laws now received summary execution. Women who refused their husband’s sexual demands were previously allowed to plead their case, and often offered clemency in return for ‘good behaviour’; now they were dispatched without a hearing, as were those who fought over their husband’s new wives. When, on 8 June, Anne Rodehos gamely threatened to smash a chair over her husband’s head unless he sent away a younger woman whom he had taken as his second wife, she was executed.

Suspected traitors received the cruellest punishment, such was the King’s paranoia after the Graes incident. An especially grisly case was that of the tailor Nicholas Snider of Northorn, who was executed in early June after the King’s agents intercepted a letter he’d written to the Bishop, offering to reveal a secret entrance to the city. Racked until he revealed the extent of his treachery, Snider was then dragged to the place of execution in the cathedral square, his body already broken.

Just before the blade fell, he shouted at Leiden: ‘Who selected you to be a king? What about your promise to die if we were still under siege by Easter? You are a bloodhound, and you will soon face the wrath of God for your sins!’

‘Do you think you will be there to see that happen?’ Leiden screamed back, and took off Snider’s head with a stroke of the sword.

Snider’s body was then laid on a bench and chopped into twelve pieces, which were then nailed above each of the city gates. His head was impaled on a long pole and stuck out of the cathedral tower. The man’s heart and

liver, Gresbeck claimed, were ‘carried home by a Hollander, who boiled and ate them’.⁴

A terrible fate befell Elizabeth Wantscherer, the beautiful daughter of a blacksmith. She had been twice married under the polygamy law before she turned twenty, first to a young man with whom she tried to escape the city. When he died, she was wed again, at her father’s cruel bidding, to a pock-marked old drunk, to whom she refused sex.

A year or so earlier, charged with disobedience by her father and husband, she had been bound and presented to the King, who, noticing her attractive figure, asked if she had been married against her will. She nodded. A popular account claims she replied by wondering how anyone could marry such a stinking old goat as her husband.⁵ The King jailed her briefly for disobedience, chastised her father and husband, and dissolved the marriage.

He then offered to take her ‘as a wife’, if she promised to be modest and obey him. At the time, late 1534, she replied that she would be honoured to do so; indeed, she would be willing to wash the feet of the King’s wives, ‘or any more humble part of them’, if only he would free her from prison.⁶ Leiden admired her sly sense of humour. Days later she became his tenth wife, second only to Divara in his affections.

Unlike the loyal and submissive Divara, Elizabeth was a spirited woman of considerable intellect and self-confidence. As the city sank into debauchery, she dared to speak up, chiefly against the King and his harsh policies. By May 1535 she could bear no more. Decrying her husband’s cruel reign, and despairing at the scenes of torment all around her, Elizabeth handed back her jewels and gifts and asked for permission to leave the city.

Such insolence and ingratitude drew out all the King’s wrath. On 12 June 1535 Leiden dragged her to the market square, where he pronounced her punishment: death. He tried to execute her himself, but botched the job; a more experienced swordsman had to step up and complete it.

After this gruesome spectacle, the King’s remaining wives sang ‘Glory Be to God the Highest’. The odious Rothmann looked on approvingly while the King trampled on Elizabeth Wantscherer’s headless corpse.⁷

That same month, young Henry Gresbeck had had enough too, and decided to risk his life to leave Münster – the city’s true name was now returning to people’s lips. Indeed, many hard facts were reasserting themselves as the sacred promises of New Jerusalem dissolved.

Gresbeck had always despised the King and the Anabaptists, yet he’d been forced to submit to them in order to survive. Now hunger, the city’s imminent fall and fear for his wife and family compelled him to flee, to try to secure their safety from the Bishop.

It wasn’t the first time he’d tried. Some months back, he’d risked death by writing a letter to Count Robert Manderscheid, his old patron, pleading for help. In that letter he had told the Count that he came to Münster with his young wife in order to visit his sick mother. He had never intended to remain. Once caught up in the Anabaptist rebellion, he’d had no option but to stay and protect his family. He resided with his wife’s mother, the matriarch of a family of wealthy patricians called Clevorn, in order to protect their home from being commandeered by Anabaptists.

Forcibly baptised under Leiden’s laws, Gresbeck was compelled to join the army and help defend the city.⁸ A dreadful choice now presented itself. ‘I must either stay here and starve,’ he wrote, ‘or escape and risk death at the hands of the Bishop’s soldiers.’ He was willing, he told the Count, ‘to leave the city and cross over’, and asked Manderscheid to tell the Bishop’s soldiers to shout ‘Hans of Brielen’, a code name affirming that his message had been received and accepted, on the nights when he guarded the Cross Gate. ‘In heaven’s name, though, do not let anyone call me by my name,’ he pleaded, ‘or I will lose my head.’⁹

By late May the Count had not replied – it seemed the Bishop’s agents had intercepted the letter – so Gresbeck decided to escape anyway, driven by the hope of freedom and food for himself and his family, whose rescue would depend on the success of his plan. So he threw in his lot with five guards who also wanted to escape. One was the ebullient Johann Nagel, the Bishop’s former spy, otherwise known as ‘Little Hans of Longstreet’.

Little Hans stood barely five feet high. He had been a mercenary in the Bishop’s army, a clever, resourceful soldier who excelled as an engineer of siege equipment and a cavalryman of great skill, galloping along like a jockey. Caught in the crossfire during the second storming, he had deserted the Bishop and fled to the apparent sanctuary of Münster.

There, he ingratiated himself with the King. Little Hans's stout spirit – he would rather live with wild animals, he said, than serve another day as one of Waldeck's mercenaries – and his willingness to help improve the city's fortifications delighted the court. And Little Hans's superb horsemanship impressed the King, and the diminutive *Landsknecht* soon wormed his way into the royal trust, becoming privy to the secrets of the court.

Little Hans was now wearying of the city and its doomed inhabitants. The deserter would now desert his new master. Before midnight on 23 May, Little Hans joined Gresbeck and four other guards, and they crossed the moat in a wooden raft. As they reached the other bank, the clouds dispersed and the moonlight revealed their positions to Anabaptist guards on the walls, who raised the alarm.

The deserters fled in different directions. Little Hans ran into the night.

Gresbeck groped toward the 'Cleves' blockhouse, a fortified shelter, driven by the hope that the Bishop's soldiers might be merciful, given his willingness to betray the city. Near the blockhouse he fell into the trench that surrounded it. The Bishop's men spotted him hiding under a thorn bush, and joked about who would have the pleasure of killing him.

Gresbeck cried out that he had valuable information, and pleaded to be taken prisoner: the city had gone mad, and people were dying of hunger.

'He's just a youngster,' said one soldier. 'Let him live.'

The guards hauled him out of the trench. He was strip-searched and then taken to their senior officer, a captain in the Bishop's army, who offered him food and ale.

Gresbeck asked them to spare Little Hans and his other accomplices.

That was up to the Bishop and their commanders, the soldiers said, and the omens weren't good: few male defectors had been allowed to live.

Gresbeck then asked to see his old patron, Count Manderscheid. He was taken before Count Ulrich von Dhaun, with Manderscheid present. The starving young man divulged everything he knew about the city. He drew detailed diagrams of the ramparts, the earthworks, the gates and the towers, and later, on the earthen floor of his prison cell, he recreated a rough scale model of the city. He was, after all, a carpenter, and a close observer of the events in the city. This combination of skills probably saved his life.

Meanwhile, Little Hans had given himself up to his old commander, a famous general called Meinhard von Hamm, whose headquarters were in

the nearby town of the same name. Little Hans threw himself upon Meinhard's and the Bishop's mercy, begging them to exonerate his crime of desertion in exchange for his knowledge of the city and how best to infiltrate it. He even promised to lead the attack.

Little Hans was spared. In fact, the Bishop offered him a cash bounty if he succeeded. Not only was he an informed source on the layout of the city, he was a trained soldier, determined to redeem himself in battle.

Now, with two defectors who had intimate knowledge of the city, Bishop Waldeck held the best hand yet in his campaign to crush the Anabaptists. Before he played his next card, however, the Bishop moved Gresbeck and Little Hans to villages within a mile of Münster, where they could be of most use. Both would prove vital in the Bishop's new plan to conquer Münster.

This time, he would leave nothing to chance. Alcohol was strictly forbidden to the soldiers on the eve of battle. To test Gresbeck's loyalty, he ordered the young man to escort a night patrol on a final inspection of the ramparts. Freed from his chains, Gresbeck was ordered to swim the moat and examine the walls. He bravely did so. At several places, he noted, the fortifications were weak and the guards had abandoned their posts. And he found a small, undefended door near the Cross Gate that opened into the city.

A secret entrance and the absence of guards made Münster exceptionally vulnerable. This was all the Bishop and his commanders needed. Gresbeck was thanked, unchained and retained as an adviser.

For two days, as the *Landsknechts* prepared for battle, a terrific thunderstorm drenched the field and threw hail against the ramparts. The moats spilled their banks, and the downpour drove the guards away from the walls and into shelters.

The Bishop's men sharpened their swords and pikes and cleaned their arquebuses. They fixed their armour and tried to stay sober. Some struck deals on the likely spoils. The King was said to have amassed tons of gold and silver, jewels and coins, and rich stores of food – as well as a harem of beautiful women.

And all this time, under the cover of the storm, the blockade was on the move, like a giant, secret mobile city. Hundreds of indentured peasants were hauling up siege ladders, cannon, grappling hooks, catapults and gangplanks.

Of the various accounts of the battle, the most accurate was Gresbeck's. After sunset on 24 June, as a roaring wind whipped up around the city and crimson clouds spread across the darkening sky, Gresbeck guided Little Hans's advance party of thirty-five *Landsknechts* over the earthworks to the bank of the outer moat, opposite the Cross Gate.

There he slipped into the water and swam the moat, dragging a gangplank tied to his body. On reaching the inner bank, Gresbeck pulled the gangplank into place. Little Hans's patrol crossed the partially drained inner moat by throwing in branches and bails of straw, crept up to the unguarded door and waited beneath the walls.

Now Wilhelm Steding, a senior officer, took charge of the raid. He led scores more soldiers over the gangplank – at one point it broke, pitching them into the water – and over the inner moat. They surmounted the earthworks and crept into the city via the little door.

They quickly dealt with a few Anabaptist guards who were near the door, 'bidding them peace' with sword and halberd, and stabbed others they found in the huts along the walls. They spared the life of one of Leiden's guards, in exchange for the night's password: 'earth'.

Some *Landsknechts* raised the siege ladders and scaled the walls, finding the ramparts poorly sentried. 'The other *Landsknechts*,' wrote an officer in the besieging army, Count Wirich of Falkenstein, 'attacked the city wall with scaling ladders, helping each other up with their spears and halberds, so that in a short time up to 500 knechts with some captains and ensigns scaled the wall and entered the city.'¹⁰

It was now eleven pm, and some 500 invaders were inside Münster. And still the alarm had not sounded. Their plan was to advance on the cathedral, seize the city's arsenal, capture the Cross Gate, and lower the drawbridge to Von Dhaun's main force of 3000 men, who were waiting in the field beyond the walls.

At first, all proceeded according to plan. At the Lord's Field, across the River Aa, Steding sent a patrol to seize the Anabaptists' supply of arquebuses and powder, which Gresbeck had said were hidden in the cathedral. So far, his intelligence had been admirably accurate.

It was then that the Anabaptists got wind of the breach and sounded the alarm. The King's guards and the militias of the Twelve Dukes

outnumbered the enemy, and mustered the strength to strike back. Hundreds converged on the cathedral square, forcing Steding to change plan. He led his men into the back alleys rather than face Leiden's best fighters in the open.

The *Landsknechts* unleashed carnage in the backstreets, slaughtering whatever miserable human forms strayed into their path. These ordinary people were in no state to resist well-fed mercenaries, and they hid away in cellars and attics, in alleyways and church ruins.

Yet the Melchiorites knew every inch of the city, and laid ambushes in dark alleys and dead ends, inflicting scores of casualties on Steding's men. At the same time they seized the Cross Gate and the little door, slammed and bolted it shut, locking the Bishop's advance party inside the city.

From the ramparts and rooftops, Leiden's loyal womenfolk now came alive, hurling fiery projectiles down on the intruders, shouting obscenities and invoking God's wrath. 'This is what happens to those who deny God!' they cried. 'You say that we are broken by hunger and loss of strength? Send us more of your men to slaughter!'¹¹ The women's fearless screams and ferocious spirits momentarily disoriented the mercenaries, who had not encountered a foe like this before. They likened their enemy to an army of Furies from Hell.

For a moment fortune smiled on Leiden's commanders. They had trapped Steding's few hundred men inside the city, and all they needed to do now was surround and annihilate them. In the cathedral square they built a huge barricade of furniture, jugs, rocks, planks and debris and poured fire onto their attackers, driving the Bishop's men back. It was only when Steding managed a surprise counterattack that he averted catastrophe. His men smashed through the barricade and hacked down the King's defenders, sending a slick of blood over the square.

It went on all night, each side stabbing and hacking and shooting at the other. 'They chased each other up one street and down the next, forcing each other all over the place,' wrote Count Wirich.¹²

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The King looked down on the chaos from his palatial rooms. When the fighting grew fiercer, and he heard the Bishop's pipes and drums and saw his banners waving, Leiden wondered whether the enemy's entire army had

penetrated the city. In fact, only a few hundred remained of the 500 who had breached the walls, and they were now surrounded. The Twelve Dukes had taken up defensive positions at every exit, blocking escape.

At around three o'clock in the morning, the trapped remnant of Steding's men found themselves on the point of defeat. Leiden's commanders even opened negotiations, but Steding rejected as dishonourable an offer of safe passage out of the city, on condition they disarmed. So the battle resumed.

Some Melchiorite soldiers were aghast at what they saw as a godless battle, shouting out that the Bishop's men were worse than wild beasts, and that this was how barbarians and pagans behaved, not those claiming to be moved by Christian forgiveness. They pleaded for each side to come together in peace, to replace their weapons with the Word of God. If they did not, the attackers should leave the city at once, and let the kingdom live in peace.

Steding ignored the entreaties of a people he regarded as loathsome heretics who had no right to invoke God. They had kept his men at bay for sixteen months now, and he was determined to fight on. He received a great boost when the standard of the main force appeared over the city walls. Von Dhaun had taken the decision to attack. 'Münster is ours!' his men yelled. 'Charge! Charge!' At this, scores of fresh *Landsknechts* scaled the walls, made short work of the Melchiorite women and their boiling pitch, and poured into the streets.

Fearing the city was on the verge of being overrun, the King and his closest courtiers fled out the back of the palace to St Giles' Gate, possibly because it was the most heavily fortified. Some hid in the cellars of the fortifications, others on the upper floors.

By first light, Steding's men had seized several gates and forced the Melchiorites to retreat to the vicinity of St Michael's church. From the ramparts the victorious soldiers waved and shouted to the rump army to join them, whereupon a drawbridge was lowered and thousands surged into the city. Count Wirich reported that he led his regiment into Münster first via the Jews' Field Gate and then the Cross Gate, the most poorly defended.

Most of the King's men were now in retreat or hiding. A few put up astonishing last stands, such as Tile Bussenmeister, a huge, one-eyed sharpshooter nicknamed 'Cyclops'. He managed to hold off several enemy

knights at a bridge on the River Aa; he fell to his knees several times, before being run through and cast into the river.

At the same time, 300 of Leiden's men locked themselves in a series of fortified wagons, under the brave leadership of Bernard Krechting, Henry's brother – whom some saw as Leiden's successor as king – and prepared to fight to the death. But they were soon overrun.

'Münster is ours!' the Bishop's commanders cried, waving their standards in the cathedral square.

Messengers raced to the Bishop's camp, anxious to be the first to report the fall of the city. On 25 June 1535, Waldeck officially announced victory over Münster, and the defeat of the Anabaptists. Judgement Day had arrived for Leiden's kingdom, and the Almighty was nowhere to be seen.

Waldeck's mercenaries were in no mood for mercy. They were told to spare only the leaders – Leiden, Knipperdolling, Krechting, Rothmann and a few others. Every other adult male was put to the sword. The women and children pleaded for mercy. Their pleas were granted, and they were held captive, pending banishment to the Dutch lands, England and elsewhere.

The *Landsknechts* were now on the hunt for spoils, of which a tenth would go to the commanders and the rest divided between the soldiers and the estates that financed the siege.¹³ So far they had found very little, just household goods, and they furiously ignored their restraining orders. They burst into people's homes, ran into the attics and cellars and seized the terrified occupants, demanding to know where the city's riches were hidden.

These bewildered men and women were so weak and malnourished that their skin fell from their bodies like old sacks and their heads were indistinguishable from skulls. Now they were dragged out of their homes by the hair and put to death in the streets. Their decapitated torsos bestrewed the alleys and squares.

'That is how ruined the common folk were, having listened for so long to the preaching of the apostles and prophets,' Gresbeck reflected, with grim sarcasm.¹⁴

A week after the city's fall, the inhabitants were still being 'found and stabbed', according to Justinian of Holzhausen.¹⁵ Herman Tilbeck, for

example, the city elder who had helped Leiden suppress the Mollenhecke revolt, was cut down and flung into a cesspool. Many prominent citizens met a similar end. Some tried to disguise themselves as peasants, but were denounced and executed. Of the few hundred people who survived the siege 213 recanted; the rest were executed.¹⁶

As for the leaders of the Münster rebellion, their capture was as banal as the lies they told to prop up their kingdom. The Bishop's soldiers cornered Leiden in his fortified hideout, and he promptly surrendered. Stories that they chased him through his palace were fictional, though it seems an armed bellhop did enter the palace and souvenired the King's golden spurs.

Queen Divara, Leiden's only remaining wife in the city, refused to recant and was beheaded on 7 July, along with Knipperdolling's wife and a few other prominent Anabaptist women.

It took several days to find Knipperdolling himself, until the woman in whose attic he was hiding betrayed him to the Bishop's commander, in exchange for her life.

Rothmann disappeared. He was later thought to have been killed, disguised as a soldier, but his body was never found.

On his arrest, Bernard Krechting pleaded for a quick death, but he, like the other leaders, faced a far harsher punishment.

In the King's and dukes' apartments the invaders found food stores – butter, cheeses, meat and vats of wine and beer – as well as jewels and fine clothing, but none of the promised gold and silver, and only one or two of the famously beautiful wives. Their fury rose, and they resumed pillaging the people's homes.

To curb the soldiers' excesses, Steding appointed booty masters to draw up an inventory of the city's possessions, which included abandoned houses, furniture, valuables and whatever else they could scrounge. They would sell the proceeds: half would go to the Bishop, under his contract, and half would be shared among the mercenaries. The exiled owners were permitted to repossess their homes.

Yet the booty masters found little treasure – no gold or silver, few jewels and coins – so little, in fact, that Bishop Waldeck, according to Justinian of Holzhausen, warned that he would not be able to pay his men their full fee.¹⁷

At this, the enraged mercenaries went on a fresh rampage. They stormed the City Hall, clapped the booty masters and keepers of the

treasury in chains, and racked several until they revealed where the promised gold was hidden. None knew, and Steding soon put an end to this little revolt, executing the ringleaders.

At the final reckoning, the city was found to have yielded no more than half a ton of gold, equal to about sixteen guilders per man. The eight days of slaughter and pillage culminated in the recovery of the King's battered gold crown and sceptre. On 13 July Waldeck would issue a proclamation throughout the diocese, thanking God for his victory over the heretics.

JUDGEMENT DAY

‘Are you a king?’

Bishop Waldeck, to John of Leiden after the fall of the city

‘And are you a Bishop?’

Leiden’s reply

Bishop Franz von Waldeck entered Münster under heavy military escort in a majestic coach drawn by six white horses. It was 29 June, four days after the city fell. The streets had been cleansed of corpses, but the stench of death still hung low. Amid much pomp and ceremony, Waldeck’s commanders knelt before him. Von Dhaun handed him the keys to the city on a velvet cushion, along with the greatest prizes of all: Leiden’s crown, sceptre and sword.

The soldiers held back the crowds, many of whom were out-of-towners anxious to see the ‘king’. The surviving locals were a pitiful sight, bone-thin and dressed in rags, as though they’d risen from their graves.

So eager was Waldeck to exult in his victory over the man who had ridiculed him and humiliated his army for eighteen months, that he had Leiden brought before him at once. It was an unwise decision. The Bishop had not counted on Leiden’s sharp wit, charisma and sense of theatre, even in extremis. The dethroned king appeared before the Bishop manacled, dirty, barefoot and in rags, but his charm and youth aroused immediate sympathy. Even now, after six days in a dark cell under the Rosenthal convent, Leiden found the strength to rise to the occasion.

The Bishop inspected him as one might inspect a venomous insect stuck to a board. ‘Are *you* a king?’ Waldeck asked, using the familiar ‘you’, and displaying a measure of contempt that was unwittingly reminiscent of Pilate’s encounter with Christ.

‘And are *you* a Bishop?’ Leiden fired back.¹

This was of a piece with Leiden’s defiant, often amusing, insolence, which had been on rich display as he bantered with the crowds, who gawped at this man with sixteen wives of whom they had heard so much.

Leiden was packed off in a wagon to the dungeons of the Bishop’s castle in Dülmen. Bernard Knipperdolling, Bernard Krechting and Christian Kerckering followed in separate wagons. On the way, Kerckering’s stopped, and the nobleman, who was deemed to have committed lesser crimes – and who was related to the Bishop through marriage – was dragged out onto a grassy clearing beside the road, where he was beheaded. His end was mercifully swift.

The other three were kept alive, in separate cells, bound to the walls by iron collars, and subjected to several interrogations, or ‘confessions’, some of which were extracted under ‘painful’ conditions. Torture, however, was minimal. The Bishop had no need to rack them. He had everything he needed to impose the most excruciating of deaths on his captives.

At least once the Bishop visited Leiden in his cell, inquiring whether the ‘king’ knew how much it had cost the diocese to defeat his kingdom – money always being uppermost in Waldeck’s mind.

Leiden is said to have offered an ingenious solution to the Bishop’s pecuniary woes. Well aware of his fame and notoriety, he suggested that he and Knipperdolling be put in a cage and taken on a tour of Germany, like zoo animals. ‘Charge everyone a penny to take a look at us,’ he said.

‘You’ll earn more money than you ever spent in our war.’²

Waldeck did not take Leiden up on the idea.

In late July the formal inquisitions of the three prisoners began. With an eye on making a public example of the Anabaptist leaders, the Bishop aimed not only to extract their confessions to lay crimes, but also to compel them to publicly recant their heresies and win them back to the ‘one true faith’. They should die remorseful.

The ‘true faith’, however, was a shaky entity, given Waldeck’s Lutheran leanings and the immense reforms that were sweeping Germany. What was the one true faith? Finding the answer to that question was about to plunge the Holy Roman Empire into a century of bloodshed, culminating in the Thirty Years War (1618–48), in which the German lands alone would lose up to forty per cent of their people, and half their male adults.

For now, however, the Catholic and Lutheran leaders were united in their determination to humiliate and destroy the rebaptising heretics. Even the gentle Melanchthon urged the Bishop to impose the harshest of punishments.

One unusual factor in the present case was that the handsome young leader of the Anabaptist revolt still excited great interest, even sympathy, among some of the nobility, particularly women. Many ordinary people, too, admired what they saw as Leiden’s heroic defiance. That an impoverished Dutch tailor had seized a city and led it against the might of the Holy Roman Empire was a source of boundless fascination. This was why the Bishop declined to put Leiden on public display, like an animal: it would merely serve to enlarge the public’s sympathy.

On 25 July, Knipperdolling, the former businessman and Leiden’s chief executioner, was brought in chains before the Bishop’s inquisitors, who were led by a clever Lutheran theologian called Antonius Corvinus, a humane man and close friend of Philip of Hesse. This signalled that the Lutherans would control the case, which was a great relief to the prisoners, given the Catholics’ penchant for racking heretics. Corvinus asked Knipperdolling to answer, ‘without pain’, to the charges of heresy and sedition.

‘A strange, dark manner had overcome me in Münster,’ he replied, ‘such that I did not know what I was doing.’ He said he had been the target of ‘the devil’s deception and seduction’.³

Who had incited the people to rebel against the Bishop and steal the city’s property?

Matthias and Leiden, Knipperdolling said, were ‘the first to incite the people’ and to enforce common ownership of property. Leiden, he recalled, had clapped his hands in the marketplace and shouted with a loud voice, ‘Gather your money, gather your money, and share it among the people.’

Why did the people follow Leiden?

‘The King was always consoling us,’ the prisoner answered, ‘telling us to be of good cheer. He promised everyone that we would be redeemed by Easter of 1535. And if he was wrong, then the people should cut off his head.’ And yet, when Easter came and ‘we weren’t saved’, the King rescinded his prophecy, and said that salvation should be an inner experience of the soul.

How many people had he, Knipperdolling, personally executed?

‘About eleven or twelve people with my own hand,’ he replied, grossly understating the likely total.

Had the King starved the people?

‘If the King together with his councillors had had more food, it was because they had saved and preserved theirs better ... They wanted to stay, live and die with the people, until the last man.’⁴

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On the same day, Bernard Krechting, the former Chancellor of Leiden’s Kingdom, appeared before the Bishop’s interrogators.

What had been his role in the city?

‘I was one of the six judges.’

Where was his brother, Henry, the King’s chancellor?

Bernard didn’t know. ‘I thought my brother had escaped.’

How much food was left in the city when it fell? ‘Very little.’ He knew of seven bottles of wine.

How many wives could a man take?

‘A preacher of the Word of God could have no more than one wife, but the others could very well have more than one ...’⁵

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John of Leiden, ‘the supposed King of Münster’, gave a ‘full’ confession ‘without pain’ on 20 January 1536.⁶ Corvinus and his fellow interrogators adopted a warm and friendly approach to their famous prisoner, conducting their interviews around a fireplace – in pointed contrast to the freezing cell in which Leiden was being held.

Leiden spent much of his interrogation retracing his childhood and youth, but interspersed this with answers to sharp questions about his role in the Anabaptist ‘kingdom’. What follows is a truncated account.

When were you rebaptised, they asked.

‘On All Saints’ Day in the year 1533,’ Leiden replied. ‘John Matthias baptised me in his house in Leiden.’

Why did you choose to be rebaptised?

‘Only by being baptised will I be saved.’

Have you rebaptised anyone?

‘I baptised nobody in Holland, only in Schöppingen, and then I moved to Münster, where I baptised people.’

The interrogators were intrigued by Leiden’s motives. Did he truly believe in the Anabaptist heresies, they wondered, or was it a monstrous charade to satisfy his lust for power, wealth and women?

Along these lines the interrogation resumed. Who had first incited violence against the Bishop?

‘John Matthias was the first to demand the use of the sword against the authorities,’ Leiden replied. But he, Leiden, had only used violence in defence of the city, not to attack anyone, he added.

How had Leiden become king?

Leiden said that he had received a vision from God – that he had been chosen to lead the people to salvation. He realised, with ‘a great grievance in my heart’, that it was he to whom the Lord referred when He had said, ‘I want to awaken my servant David in the last days.’

Was there a secret agreement among the city’s elders that he should be made King?

‘No. The thought was in my mind. But I had not made myself a king, nor had I wanted to be made a king.’ He said that John Dusentschuer had announced his royal ascension entirely of his own volition, declaring that he, ‘John of Leiden, should be their King and should rule over them’. But Leiden claimed he had had no prior conversations or secret agreements with the ‘crippled prophet’. He had not intended to rule; he had wanted only to create a holy kingdom in the name of God.

Were his ‘prophecies’ mere ruses, designed to trick the people? Had he and his accomplices devised a conspiracy against the people?

Leiden said he knew of ‘no secret agreements, no deception or conspiracy’ involving himself, Rothmann, Knipperdolling, Krechting or anyone else in Münster. ‘All our hopes and consolation had been placed in God alone and in no man,’ he said.

He claimed that he had had no prior knowledge of Matthias's death. 'It came to my mind at Knipperdolling's house,' he said, 'where I had a vision that I would see John Matthias pierced with a spear, and that I should then marry his wife.'

Leiden knew of no secret slogans or signs by which the Anabaptists recognised one another. And he denied any knowledge of treasure hidden in the city.

Nor had he sent Hille Feicken to murder the Bishop. 'She herself sought to do it,' he told his inquisitors. 'Everyone else considered it a fantasy but let her go.'

Had he personally executed people?

Leiden admitted that he had decapitated 'seven or eight people by his own hand', possibly accurate, as the King tended to delegate the dispatch of his victims to the executioners.

Had the people consumed the flesh of children?

He knew nothing about the killing and eating of children, he swore. 'It didn't happen, or so he surely believes,' noted the interrogator.

Leiden claimed that 'no young girls had been raped' in Münster. Women, he said, had had sexual intercourse with their husbands 'only if they desired or acquiesced to this'. But he confounded this statement by adding that women were punished if they refused.

He protested his utter sincerity: he believed in his faith, and it was the true path to God and salvation. 'I came to Münster not for money, goods, nor glory and honour,' he told them, 'but alone to hear the word of God.'²

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The next day Knipperdolling was subjected to a 'painful confession' – probably the rack. The interrogators held the former patriarch in special contempt, deeming his role in the Anabaptist rebellion a betrayal of his class and faith.

Knipperdolling cried out that he had not done anything 'out of hatred and envy'. He had not appointed the Twelve Dukes; the King had done so. One of them, Gert Koeninck, was still alive in Schöppingen, he added.

He had not encouraged anyone to deceive the people with false prophecies: 'So many strange things had taken place in Münster, one after another, that one did not know where it all came from.'

And while he had never incited the people to demolish the churches, he admitted to helping them. ‘For the Babylonian whore must be overthrown,’ he said, ‘and God alone be honoured in ... the hearts of men.’

If the Catholic and Lutheran faiths had been upright and strong, Knipperdolling said, he would never have been baptised into the new faith. Had he incited rebellion against Leiden?

‘No,’ he replied. ‘But it was true that I had had evil impulses.’⁸

Some days later, Leiden was summoned for another interrogation. The Bishop already had all he needed to decide Leiden’s fate and the manner of his death.⁹ But he had not yet extracted a recantation, and he was curious as to the nature of Leiden’s ‘faith’ and motives, as were many powerful princes, noblemen and church leaders.

Corvinus asked Leiden about crucial matters of theology. Leiden replied intelligently, and his knowledge surprised his inquisitors. But he steadfastly refused to recant, or to abjure the tenets of Anabaptism. Though he conceded that he leaned towards Luther’s concept of justification by faith rather than by deeds, he stuck fast to his view of the Eucharist as a symbolic representation of Christ’s body and blood, not a literal transformation into bread and wine.

Nor would he be moved on the subject of baptism. He refused to amend his belief in the absolute imperative of choosing to belong with Christ through adult baptism, even as his interrogators repeatedly pressed him to disavow this heresy, invoking the authority of St Paul’s references to the holiest sacrament in his epistles.

Nor would Leiden accept that he had abused the sacrament of marriage, claiming that man should not be denied ‘what was permitted to the patriarchs in the Old Testament’. Corvinus argued with him, invoking the secular law of marriage, but failed to point out that the New Testament explicitly insists on a husband having one wife.¹⁰

Leiden replied: ‘I am consoled by the certainty that we cannot be damned for doing what the fathers were permitted to do. I prefer to be with them and not you.’¹¹

Leiden ended the interrogation with a remark that betrayed a mind in the grip of a vast delusion. ‘He believed,’ stated the interrogator’s

transcript, 'that from the time of the Apostles until this present, there had not existed anyone who had a better understanding of the truth than he.'¹²

The first angel blew his trumpet, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were hurled to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up.

The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water ...¹³

The trumpets of Revelation, the angels of the Lord's retribution, once so vivid in the minds of the Melchiorites, were as far from the city of Münster that day as the spirit of mercy. The executions of Leiden, Knipperdolling and Krechting were to proceed on 22 January 1536, the day after the feast of St Agnes, the patron saint of girls, chastity, rape victims, virgins and gardeners. According to Catholic belief, Agnes, born AD 291, was dragged naked through the streets of Rome as punishment for following Christ, and dumped in a brothel. She was just twelve years old. Her legend tells that those who tried to rape her were struck blind and one was killed. Agnes forgave her molesters and prayed for them. When they tried to burn her at the stake, the wood would not catch fire. So they beheaded her.¹⁴

On the eve of his execution, perhaps Leiden hoped for a similar miracle. Had God intended that he should die like this?

He was offered the services of a priest, to whom it was hoped he might confess his sins and recant. He replied that he was not afraid to receive the advice of an understanding man, and agreed to meet John von Siberg, the Bishop's priest.

Siberg emerged from his first meeting with Leiden triumphant, according to an account of their meeting by Corvinus.¹⁵ Leiden had expressed great regret, Siberg reported, and openly confessed his crimes

against the Bishop. ‘He said he surely deserved death ten times over.’ The fallen king ‘lamented’ the uprising and the violence resulting from his actions, Corvinus reported Siberg as saying. It ‘caused him the greatest pain’ that he had spurned the authorities ‘so arrogantly’.

Leiden recognised that he, in his pious zeal, had been wrong to fire on the Bishop’s men, and to ridicule their offers of peace. He was even said to have offered, in exchange for clemency, to join forces with Melchior Hoffman and publicly disown the excesses of Anabaptism. If Philip of Hesse had been present in his cell, ‘I would beg him for forgiveness, and fall at his feet’, Leiden said. He added that he hoped his wife, Divara, would show the same contrition – apparently he believed she was still alive. (It is unclear whether he was ever informed of her beheading before he was put to death.)

And yet Leiden’s confession was far from being a victory for the Catholic Church, as the triumphant Siberg well knew. Although Leiden admitted to and asked for forgiveness for his mortal crimes, still he held fast to the tenets of his Anabaptist faith, refusing to renounce ‘the fallacy of adult baptism and the human nature of Christ’, according to Siberg. He would not recant, and that was his worst offence in the eyes of the church – it was a crime for which there could be no mercy.

Knipperdolling and Krechting refused to see the priest. Both protested their innocence. All they had done in Münster was search for God’s glory and their own salvation.

‘With the same presumption,’ Corvinus wrote, ‘Knipperdolling accused us, the Lutherans, of being only Protestant insofar as we come together from time to time to sing a few psalms amongst ourselves. But since the time of his rebaptism he had proven his Christianity not through songs but through the thing itself; yes, he had always lived according to the Father’s will, and afterwards he was not guilty of anything ... what would one call Phariseeism if this isn’t the games of a Pharisee?’

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At eight am the next morning, 22 January 1536, the three prisoners were led from their cells to the Münster marketplace, the scene of so many of Leiden’s sermons. Their affrighted eyes took in the crowds, the stage, the executioners. On the platform – wagons covered in planks – were three

stakes fitted with iron collars, two iron braziers filled with red-hot coals, and four iron tongs, which were ‘horrifying to look upon’.¹⁶ And directly opposite the executioner’s stage, gazing down from the window of a local grandee’s mansion, sat Bishop Franz von Waldeck, bedecked in his finest ermine gown.

The newly appointed city judge, John Wesserling, mounted the stage with his clerks and read out the prisoners’ crimes. Leiden had sinned against God and the Bishop, perverted the true faith with Anabaptist heresy, polluted the sacraments, plundered and destroyed churches, supplanted the city’s authority and driven residents into exile.

Leiden replied that he had erred against the authorities but he had not offended God. He confessed to the crimes but refused to recant his faith. Neither Knipperdolling nor Krechting attempted to deny similar charges.

They would die slowly, and in great agony, by the hideous method – common enough at the time for the worst heretics – of tearing the living flesh apart with white-hot tongs. The executioners heated the iron tongs in the braziers until the forceps glowed.

Leiden, naked from the waist up, was first. He fell to his knees and prayed quietly. Then the executioners bound him to a stake and took up the tongs.

Flames burst forth where the hot irons clasped his body, and tore off a chunk. The smell of burning flesh filled the square, revolting the crowd. During the first three tearings of his flesh, Leiden bore the excruciating pain in silence. ‘Not once a sound, as a witness to the pain, did he utter,’ Corvinus observed, suppressing his admiration of the man. He believed that all heretics shared the quality of demonic courage: ‘Satan had given those in whom he keeps his snares entangled strength and bravery.’¹⁷

The mutilation of the man continued for an hour, as required by the sentence. Towards the end, Leiden pleaded for God’s help. ‘Father, have mercy on me!’ he cried again and again.

The Catholic priests in the audience revelled in the torment of their most hated enemy. Corvinus observed great applause and joy on the part of the priests: ‘The only thing that would have increased their joy would have been if the Lutherans were to suffer the same punishment and be eradicated from amongst them.’

Some Lutherans, too, took a morbid pleasure in Leiden’s torment. He should die howling for mercy: they were determined to deny him any hope

of martyrdom.

Yet Leiden defied them, dying with astonishing courage. Near the end, he murmured the last words of Christ on the cross: ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’

Hearing these sacred words in the mouth of the heretic infuriated the priests, some of whom clearly wanted the punishment to continue. But there was nothing left to torment. The executioner had stabbed the victim through the heart, as the law prescribed. John of Leiden was dead.

Then it was Knipperdolling’s turn. As the executioner bound him to the stake, he cried out, ‘God be merciful with me, a sinner!’

Horrified by the sight of Leiden’s death, Knipperdolling was said to have tried to hasten his own end by choking himself on the iron collar. To avoid this, the executioner fed a rope through the victim’s mouth, like a bit, and pulled it tight around the stake, binding Knipperdolling’s head to the back of the collar.

Lastly Krechting. For two hours he had witnessed the ghastly deaths of his friends, and he too appealed to Heaven as the tongs tore at his body: ‘Oh Father, oh Father!’

Still, some in the crowd delighted in this hideous cruelty. ‘There were many here who could not imagine anything better than this sight,’ Corvinus wrote of the priests and monks who relished the bloody end of the Anabaptists.

Many others, however, from ordinary farmers to nobles, found the punishment grotesquely cruel. ‘But for us and others,’ wrote Corvinus, ‘who reflected that whatever was happening here was taking place because of our sins, it wasn’t in any way so appealing. True, they were gotten rid of for the right reasons and through their own deeds: who would not confess that he was of healthy mind? But still we also have to confess our sins at the same time, whose excess and scale God wanted to avenge at the same time through these prisoners.’

The three mutilated bodies were placed in iron cages and hauled up the tower of St Lambert’s church, as a reminder to the world of what had happened here – ‘to frighten off restless souls,’ wrote Corvinus, ‘so that

they should not dare to attempt to do something similar in future. This was the terrible ending of this evil tragedy.’

Their skeletons lay in the cages for fifty years, when they were removed. The original cages hang from the tower of St Lambert’s to this day.

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All of Christendom seemed satisfied that justice had been done, by God and mankind.

In Wittenberg, Martin Luther had been closely following the events:

Ah! what and how ought I to write against ... these poor people from Münster! Is it not clear that the devil reigns there in person, or, rather, that there is a whole troop of devils? Let us, however, recognise here the infinite grace and mercy of God ... still the Father of all mercy withholds the devil from striking his deadliest blow and gives us paternal warning of the gross game Satan is playing at Münster.¹⁸

The hideous last days of the siege elicited a forgiving reaction from the wandering preacher Menno Simons, who saw in the wreckage of Münster something peaceful, simple and honest, even if it had gone terribly awry. Menno’s followers would give his name to adherents of the gentler Christian movement that he led out of those ashes: the Mennonites.

THE GREAT WORLD

‘I recognised the pitifully great hunger, want and need of the God-fearing, pious souls, for I saw plainly that they erred as innocent sheep which have no shepherd’

Menno Simons, on salvaging something from the destruction of the Anabaptists

Melchior Hoffman languished in his cell in Strasbourg, hearing snippets of news of the fate of Münster and the End Times, and rallying now and then to put his thoughts on paper. His faithful friend Cornelius Poldermann tried to smuggle out these tracts, in which he railed against the Eucharist and infant baptism, and continued to defend the Melchiorite doctrines of free will, adult baptism and the denial of original sin.

Melchior’s influence ended as abruptly as it had begun. Strasbourg’s patience was exhausted. As the siege of Münster worsened, the fate of the Anabaptists was sealed. In late 1534 Hoffman’s writing was banned and his voice silenced. Anyone caught reading his work or harbouring an Anabaptist was arrested. Parents who refused to baptise their infant children were forced to.

The big guns of the Reformation tore down whatever theological credibility Hoffman still enjoyed. Martin Bucer fired ferocious broadsides against the Melchiorite ‘faith’. Melancthon, too, renewed his condemnation of the Anabaptists, heartily applauding Hoffman’s incarceration. Luther’s contempt for the *Schwärmer* deepened as the horrors of Münster became known. The siege poisoned all strains of the brethren,

until the very name ‘Anabaptist’ became a synonym for not only heretical madness but also violent insurrection.

The diehard members of the sect who chose to stay in Strasbourg despaired. ‘Brother, what are you doing coming to this godless town?’ Lienhard Jost asked David Joris, a charismatic Anabaptist leader who arrived in the city after fleeing persecution in Holland.¹

Even Melchior Hoffman’s convictions wavered. Having started the year brimming with confidence in his prophecies, he ended it in despair. The solitude, the damp dungeon, the loss of his pulpit, the ban on his writing, the dreadful food, the beatings his new warden inflicted on him – all began to break him.

Only one thing sustained him: his iron faith that it was God’s plan to free him. He simply postponed the timing – to 1535, then to 1537 and lastly to 1539. Pushing out the deadline sustained his spirits and surely prolonged his life.

Hoffman was indifferent to the outcome of the Münster rebellion, and disowned the Melchiorite men of violence who had taken his name. He felt nothing for Leiden, Matthias and their acolytes, and expressed no emotion at the news of the fall of the city and Leiden’s execution.

He took to writing notes on bits of cloth: twenty-four pieces were discovered in his cell in 1537, covered with extracts from the Bible – chiefly the books of Revelation and Ezekiel, and St Paul’s Letter to the Hebrews. He had listed the names of sixteen prophets, including Elijah and Daniel.

His health weakening, he began writing letters to the Strasbourg Council, pleading for clemency and apologising for the intemperate language he had used in his pamphlets. He loved the city, he told the councillors, which would one day become the true New Jerusalem. He wrote, he said, with ‘the heart of a dove’.²

In early 1539 Hoffman began exhibiting symptoms of dropsy – acute swelling of the face and legs, brought on by a lack of protein – and he pleaded to be allowed to see the sun again. For the first time in three years he enjoyed a month in the light. His refusal to die spread a rumour that he was indestructible, indeed Heaven-sent.

In his final days of life, feverish attempts were made to encourage him to recant. Preachers were sent to his cell to press him to abandon the ideas they deemed heretical. But Hoffman stuck fast to his core beliefs, on

baptism and the Eucharist. Yet he utterly rejected the violent application of his doctrines by the Münster Melchiorites, and the practice of polygamy.

His most fervent followers never abandoned him. In December 1542 they bribed his wife and gained entry to see their beloved prophet. By this time the door to his cell was often left open, but Melchior refused to walk to freedom. He still believed he would be freed through divine intervention. When they heard of the breach, the Strasbourg Council disallowed any further visits and locked the dungeon again, feeding Hoffman by lowering a basket through the ceiling.

He died there, wrapped in blankets on the cold slab floor, in November 1543, after a severe illness. The man whose teaching had spawned the most defiant sect in Christendom ended his life preaching an ascetic, bourgeois morality and monogamy within a Christian marriage, utterly obedient to the secular government.³

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Melchior Hoffman won the hearts of many peaceful Christians who otherwise despised the revolutionary creed of Matthias and Leiden. Two were the Philips brothers, Obbe and Dirk. Both were active members in the peaceful branch of Anabaptism that established itself in the Netherlands after the fall of Münster. Obbe baptised, among others, Menno Simons, and Dirk later became an important Mennonite leader.

Obbe remembered Melchior Hoffman with great tenderness:

He died in prison, and all his ... prophecies, the Elijah-ministry and the exodus of the Apostles from Strasbourg were destroyed and condemned ... The most gracious God must have pity on his poor soul and be merciful. For any intelligent man can easily imagine how his heart must have felt when his prophesied time expired, and neither salvation, help, nor consolation were bestowed on him.⁴

Münster had betrayed Hoffman's dream, Obbe felt. 'There the godless perished and were punished,' he wrote. 'Everything was ruined. All their prophecies were false and lied.' The followers of Leiden had been horribly deceived, but Obbe forgave them: 'Had it not been for my love of so many

simple-minded hearts that were daily deceived by false brethren, I would have left them long ago.’

The events in Münster, he knew, would condemn them all: ‘The whole world persecuted us to death for our faith’s sake, with fire, water, sword and bloody tyranny.’⁵

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In July 1535 an Imperial Diet, or assembly, was convened in the city of Worms, to debate and decide how to end the curse of Anabaptism in Europe. High on the agenda was the fate of Münster: the reconstruction of the city, the distribution of plunder, the repayment of the Bishop’s military costs and the return of the citizens who had been forcibly exiled. It was necessary to reconvene the Diet on 1 November, so weighty were the issues under examination.

The second meeting placed the entire bishopric of Münster under the authority of the Empire, subject to the ancient Catholic religion. The bishop and his successors would rigorously impose the old faith, at the point of the sword. The priesthood would regain their churches, lands, wealth and privileges; the exiled burghers and landowners would have their property and political rights returned. Any deviation from the ‘true Catholic faith’ would be dealt with summarily and violently. Thus, Münster fell back under the sway of the Holy Roman Empire.

To administer the city, the old system was resurrected. The Bishop regained the power to appoint twenty-four councilmen – twelve patricians and twelve ‘other wealthy citizens’ – who would elect two ‘Burghermasters’. Their immediate business was ‘to prevent – which God forbid! – any future sedition and disobedience, to restore, stabilise and maintain peace, obedience and tranquillity among the burghers and inhabitants of the city of Munster ... and to keep the good men safe and defend them against oppression at the hands of the wicked’.⁶

In time, the city, its churches and fortifications were rebuilt, at a cost of more than 7800 gold florins, and regional authorities made gifts of some 1800 oak trees and large amounts of lead, stone and bronze.

Bishop Waldeck spent his last days bitterly reflecting on the Anabaptist seizure of the capital of his diocese, and the resulting blow to his power and prestige. He died, a humiliated man, in Wolbeck on 15 July 1553.

The events in Münster provoked a frenzy of condemnation in the press and literature. Mass-market pamphleteers delighted in the scandal of a polygamous sect. Newspapers were packed with articles which, like the prurient press of our own age, pored over the scandalous detail even as they affected moral outrage.

The Anabaptists were goths, savage wolves, barbarians, the devil's handmaiden, vagabonds, and evil, blaspheming foreigners.⁷ Few in number, they were the perfect scapegoat for a society in the throes of spiritual crisis. They were, like the Turks and witches, everyone's favourite demon. Worse, they were a demonic sect who would plunge Europe into another Dark Age. The Lutherans and the Papists were united against a people they damned as instruments of the devil, Satan and the Antichrist. Never had Satan had so much fun, Gresbeck argued, as when instituting Leiden's polygynous regime.⁸ The local press agreed.

Leiden himself was cast as a monster, a bloodthirsty tyrant who created a depraved society behind the city walls, and personally beheaded women who refused to have sex with their husbands. A nugget of truth lay beneath the hyperbole. Yet Leiden's better angels – his courage and his sincere determination to defend his faith and his followers – went unacknowledged. Ignored, too, was the fact that the Melchiorites came to power legally, through a majority vote, and had turned to violence in self-defence, to defend their faith. Were they really worse than the power-gorged princes and greedy bishops who sought their bloody destruction, and who applied hideous methods of torture to any Anabaptist they captured?

This was the age of Niccoló Machiavelli's *The Prince* (published 1532), and even if the ordinary people of the Holy Roman Empire could not read the Italian philosopher's tract, they were familiar with his portrait of a cruel society governed by absolute power. The injustice of it enraged them, fuelled the Peasants' Wars and drove men like Matthias and Leiden, along with many others, to seek bloody vengeance.

The Melchiorites were at least sincere in their simple, fervid attachment to their beliefs. And they were exceptionally brave: if caught, they would inevitably be subjected to a peculiarly horrible death. That they were willing to die defending their faith exposed the Bishop's mercenary army as cynical and corrupt, mere plunder-hungry opportunists.

In Münster, though, the Melchiorites' high ideals went terribly astray. The newspapers of the time lit on hunger and polygamy as the most horrifying manifestations of a depraved creed. When the grain ran out, the people ate cats, dogs, bats, birds, herbs and roots. And 'quite a few' resorted to cannibalism, the press claimed: urged on by 'ferocious hunger', they did 'not spare human flesh', it was reported. They 'cut up those they had killed or who had recently died' and distributed the flesh. They even cured the meat with salt, or, according to one unconfirmed report, 'turned these pieces [of human flesh] into sausages'.⁹

Although shocking, violence and cannibalism in a city being slowly starved to death were comprehensible. But the wanton sexual violence against girls and women under the cloak of 'marriage' breached every threshold of morality. The horrors inflicted on women during the siege were encapsulated by the image of the solitary female surgeon, stitching together the torn bodies of young girls, restoring them to health as best she could.

Yet none of these crimes figured highly in Bishop Waldeck's case against the city. The theft of property and the insult to his office piqued the old philanderer's rage far more than multiple cases of child rape.

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As these details emerged, the *Schwärmer* came to feel the full force of the wrath of the Empire. Fury against the Anabaptists spread throughout Europe. An edict issued by Emperor Charles V on 10 June 1535 was the Anabaptists' death warrant. If princes had been inclined to mercy before Münster, now there would be none.

Every member of 'the accursed sect' must be hunted down and subjected to the 'most extreme punishment', the Emperor announced. Captured Anabaptists should be forced to recant – using the rack – and then put to death or sentenced to hard labour. Banishment risked merely spreading the pernicious doctrine. Anabaptists who refused to recant would be burnt alive; those who were 'truly sorry' might be beheaded. Female adherents were to be 'buried in a pit' alive, or tied to heavy rocks and drowned.¹⁰

All this smacked of overkill, given the heretics' paltry numbers.¹¹ But quantity was not the point. Even peaceful strains of Anabaptism were perceived as a diabolical threat. They were not some fringe group; though

their views were extreme, they were central actors in the Reformation, and their teaching was a logical extension of Protestant thought. Their purity of purpose and sense of social justice, and their core message of salvation through adult baptism, offered hope to the spiritually vulnerable and won sympathy among rich and poor alike.

But the dark side of the faith, its fierce iconoclasm and upending of the social order, terrified the establishment – so much so that even the more tolerant cities unleashed ferocious crackdowns. Strasbourg, Cologne and the Rhineland were determined to eradicate these ‘foreigners’.

Cologne had burnt its first Anabaptist in August 1533, before the Münster siege, when its Catholic councillors had been more agitated about Lutheran reforms and barely considered the rebaptisers a threat. Now, though, many more deaths were ordered. Even Strasbourg, once a safe haven for the persecuted, refused to tolerate a rebaptiser within its walls. Many of the accused were branded Münsterites even if they had no links with the city. Often their tongues were seared or cut out, to stop them defending themselves or preaching their ‘heresies’, as they were hastened to the block or the stake.

By the end of 1540, little more than fifteen years after their first appearance, the Anabaptists had virtually ceased to exist in continental Europe. Many had fled to England, where they received a scant welcome, and eventually to America, where Anabaptist ideas were influential in the formation and development of the Baptist Church.¹²

A wisp of the faith survived and lingered in the Dutch and German lands, thanks to the peculiar moral courage of Menno Simons, who discerned in the ashes of Münster the glowing embers of a more hopeful creed.

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Menno’s story is worth recounting, because his singular vision rescued the best of Anabaptism from the fires of persecution. Born in 1496 into a peasant family in the Dutch village of Witmarsum, in Friesland, Menno grew increasingly disillusioned with Rome after finding no basis for infant baptism in the Scriptures. He came to believe that the Catholics were ‘deceived about infant baptism’.¹³

Horrified by the brutal persecution of the Anabaptists, in 1535, after a long period of self-doubt, Menno formally renounced Rome. And yet what had been done by those in Münster revolted him. While he shared their belief in the rightness of adult baptism, he loathed their methods, their violence and their polygamy. Worse, Münster had inspired a family tragedy: an Anabaptist uprising in Friesland in 1535 was brutally put down, with the deaths of some 300 people, including Menno's own brother.

So Menno forged a new path, vowing to turn the residue of the persecuted sect into a peaceful and compassionate faith, with a clear structure and rigorous guidelines. 'This change was so deep,' wrote Harold Bender, a biographer of Menno, 'so thorough, so complete, and gave him such a sense of divine mission, that he was enabled by the grace of God to be an inspired leader, a mighty tower of strength to his bitterly persecuted people, for more than twenty-five years.'¹⁴

Yet Menno Simons and his few disciples were alone, naked to the world. He had no aristocratic protection, as Luther had. He had no university, no fixed abode, no support of a city, as had Zwingli, Melancthon, Bucer and Calvin. He bore in supreme isolation the storm of hatred for the splintered faith he was determined to resurrect. For a time he preached in his home village, as an evangelical on a Catholic pulpit, from which he condemned the power of the Pope as vehemently as he condemned the violence of the Münster uprising. Gradually there crystallised in his mind a pure and simple vision, born of his dream of the return of the Apostolic church, the union of Christ and humanity in direct relationship.

And Menno found a growing band of followers, who pledged themselves to this man who worked without pride or conceit. He was no puffed-up prophet. He spoke with the humility of an ordinary man, and yet possessed the strength of will to realise a powerful moral vision. In 1537 Menno's brothers asked him to lead them, as chief shepherd of the church that would later bear his name.

Menno accepted, and Obbe Philips ordained him as their bishop. Menno's writings at this time demonstrate an honest awareness of his own flaws:

[M]y heart was greatly troubled. For on the one hand I saw my limited talents, my great lack of knowledge, the weakness of my

nature, the timidity of my flesh, the very great wickedness, wantonness, perversity and tyranny of the world, the mighty great sects [the persecuting state churches], the subtlety of many men and the indescribably heavy cross which, if I began to preach, would be the more felt; and on the other hand I recognised the pitifully great hunger, want and need of the God-fearing, pious souls, for I saw plainly that they erred as innocent sheep which have no shepherd.¹⁵

Menno, though lame and reliant on a crutch, thus embarked on the perilous, itinerant life of an outlawed preacher, always on the move and in hiding, writing 'heretical' books and treatises, debating and delivering 'blasphemous' sermons in far-flung corners of his 'diocese'. He lived through the 1550s always with a price on his head. Posters in Friesland and the northern German-speaking lands demanded his capture. An imperial edict offered 100 gold guilders for his arrest.

His greatness lay not in his writing or teaching – others were more eloquent or persuasive – but in his ability to discern human goodness where others were blind to it, and his plea for moderation instead of extremism and violence. As Bender wrote:

The ideals of Menno ... constitute the genius of the Mennonite Church. Out of them was born the ideal of complete separation of church and state, of toleration and freedom of conscience, of high moral and social ideals, of the preaching and practice of peace, of the supreme sovereignty of Christ over his own in this worldly world of ours.¹⁶

Around Menno's name arose a legend grounded in something real: the creation of the church of the Mennonites, whose essence lay in the realisation on earth of a peaceful faith, moderate and charitable, as Christ Himself had taught. According to Menno:

[T]rue evangelical faith is of such a nature that it cannot lie dormant; but manifests itself in all righteousness and works of love; it dies unto flesh and blood; destroys all forbidden lusts and desires; cordially seeks, serves and fears God; clothes the naked; feeds the hungry; consoles the afflicted; shelters the miserable; aids and

consoles all the oppressed; returns good for evil; serves those that injure it; prays for those that persecute it; teaches, admonishes and reproves with the Word of the Lord; seeks that which is lost; binds up that which is wounded; heals that which is diseased and saves that which is sound.¹⁷

None of this appeased the wrath of Rome. Mennonite leaders who were captured were subjected to ferocious interrogation and hideous torture, with the object of forcing them to recant before their inevitable executions.

A particularly horrible case was that of the Mennonite woman, Anneken Hendriks of Friesland, who was living in Amsterdam. Aged fifty-three, she could neither read nor write. She was sentenced to death because she had married according to Mennonite custom. Severely tortured in an attempt to extract the names of other Mennonites, she refused to recant and was put to death in the town square on 10 November 1571. The manner of her execution was exceptionally cruel. She was tied to a ladder – her mouth filled with gunpowder – raised over the ignited stake and thrown into the flames.

The case of Jacob de Roore, a candlemaker, religious teacher and a prominent Mennonite in Flanders, epitomised the divisions between the new faith and its Catholic persecutors, and provided a fraught example of mutual intolerance in the darkening world that prefigured the terrible religious wars of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

De Roore and a fellow Mennonite, the tailor Herman van Vlekwijk, were arrested in Bruges in May 1569 and brought before their inquisitor, Friar Cornelis, a Franciscan monk. They were racked and condemned to death as heretics. Both men went to the stake as martyrs to their faith, steadfastly refusing to recant or to disclose the names of their fellow Mennonites, according to the *Martyrs Mirror*, a record of Anabaptist persecution, edited in sympathy. Its themes – papal power, religious hatred and fierce disagreement on baptism and the Eucharist – would divide the Christian world for centuries. His refusal to disavow adult baptism sealed De Roore's fate, in the last moments of his inquisition:

Friar Cornelis: But now, since you Anabaptists so little esteem baptism, that you allow children to die unbaptized ... why then do you ... teach others, that they must also suffer themselves to be rebaptized, if they would be saved? Ah, bah, is this not a hellish, devilish madness; frenzy, demonianism, and fascination?

Jacob de Roore: We, according to the command of Christ, baptize the believing, but you, contrary to His commands, baptize the unbelieving ...

Friar Cornelis: Well, I have no desire to dispute any longer with you. I shall go my way, and let the executioner dispute with you, with a burning faggot and afterwards the devil in hell, with burning pitch, brimstone and tar, see.

Jacob de Roore: No; for Paul writes ... 'If our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.'

Friar Cornelis: Bah! In hell, in hell. Expect nothing else than to go through this temporal fire into the eternal; hell yawns and gasps for your soul, you accursed, damned Anabaptist that you are, see.¹⁸

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On the eve of his execution Jacob de Roore left a series of letters for his wife and children.

'My affectionately beloved and chosen wife,' he wrote, 'be pleased to know that my mind is tolerably well ... except that I am very sorrowful for your and for the children's sake, since I love you and them from the heart.' He had nothing to leave his family save the love of God, he wrote. The Mennonite brethren would care for them. He parted with a prayer for his 'dear and much loved wife, that you do the best with my children to bring them up in the fear of God with good instruction and chastening, while they are still young'.¹⁹

To his children, he wrote: 'This is the most special request that I make to God, that you may be eternally saved, and that the name of the Lord may be praised through you.' Refrain from backbiting and beware of lying, he beseeched them, 'for the mouth that lies slays the soul'. Do not envy one another, he continued, nor anyone else. Instead, 'love one another out of a pure heart, as brothers and sisters ought to'.

Their father was burned alive on 8 June 1569.

AFTERWORD

As I was writing *New Jerusalem*, several people asked me why. The story of a militant sixteenth-century religious sect intrigued them, but they wondered how it could possibly be ‘relevant’ to readers today.

Leaving aside the point that anything (or nothing) is relevant depending on your point of view, I would mutter darkly about ‘the forces of chaos that lurk beneath the veneer of civilisation’, and how the same thinking that had pervaded Münster in the 1530s – eschatological nihilism in the guise of religious devotion – is still with us today. Indeed, it’s flourishing.

That didn’t persuade my interlocutors. So I’d try a different tack, appealing to their sense of history. ‘All the issues that plunged Christendom into the wars of religion were boiling in and around Münster in 1534–35. Was Christ’s flesh and blood actually in the bread and wine? Are infants born “fallen”? Will faith alone get me to Heaven, or must I do “good works” too? Was Mary really a virgin when she became the mother of Jesus?’

Again, this would meet with blank faces. ‘That’s all very well. But tell us,’ my listeners wondered, ‘why should all that concern us now?’

‘Okay,’ I replied. ‘Let’s fast-forward to today. What do we see? Neo-crusaders and jihadists who invoke God or Allah to justify war or terror; religious extremists who would impose Biblical or Koranic law on us, trampling over hard-won secular freedoms; Christian Zionists who await the mass conversion of the Jews to Christ, supposedly ushering in the End Times; Islamic militants who shriek “Allahu Akbar” before incinerating or mutilating their victims; a fascination with following millenarian cults and bogus saviours and corrupt televangelists. Anyone who participates in such activities shares psychological traits with the Münster Anabaptists and their persecutors. That is, a militant monotheism which utterly rejects any other belief.’

Mainstream faiths were also associated with this story, I would continue. ‘The violence between Catholics and Protestants – which

culminated in the Thirty Years' War of 1618–48, and killed up to 40 per cent of the German-speaking people – was seeded in Münster and the religious persecution of radicals, crushing Luther's hopes of a gradual, peaceful, "magisterial" reformation.

'And what of the frenzied iconoclasm that gripped the Anabaptists and militant Protestants?' I would ask. 'Is that not relevant to us today? What distinguishes the Protestants' wholesale vandalism of Catholic churches and monasteries in northern Europe in the sixteenth century from the Islamic State's destruction of shrines and ancient cities in Syria and Iraq in recent times – other than the god in whose name they acted? The result is the same: the deletion of historical memory.'

At this point I would be wondering whether to continue. Usually my listeners would be nodding, but a little nervously.

'Well, how's this for relevance,' I'd say. 'There are conservative leaders of supposedly enlightened Western democracies who would impose Biblical law, if not a full-blown theocracy, on their people, if they got a chance.'

At this, my listeners would shake their heads. 'He's living in the dark ages,' they seemed to conclude.

Then three things happened that made the point.

Firstly, the Christian Zionist movement applauded as a sign of divine providence President Trump's decision, in May 2018, to move the American embassy to Jerusalem. By this act, Trump stood 'on the right hand side of God', declared one Baptist preacher.¹ Christian Zionists, or 'premillennials', believe that the return of the Jews to Israel and the Jews' conversion to Christianity will usher in the Apocalypse and the Second Coming of Christ – in other words, precisely what the Münster Anabaptists believed, although in a different time and context.

The second event was the publication in August 2018 of a well-researched biography of Mike Pence, the vice president of the United States, which portrays a religious zealot utterly convinced that he's on a mission from God to lead his country according to Biblical precepts. *The Shadow President: The Truth About Mike Pence*, by Michael D'Antonio and Peter Eisner, reveals a man determined to bend the nation to his repressive version of Christianity. According to a *New York Times* report: 'Trade Trump for Pence and you go from kleptocracy to theocracy.'²

The third event was this: Jeff Sessions, the US Attorney General at the time of writing, justified the separation of thousands of children from their

parents on the US–Mexico border by referring to St Paul’s Letter to the Romans. ‘I would cite you,’ Sessions said in a speech to law-enforcement officers in June 2018, ‘the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained the government for His purposes.’ Sessions thus joined a long line of politicians and theocrats – including John of Leiden – who have perverted Paul’s words in order to defend cruelty and oppression. Romans 13 was similarly invoked to validate slavery at one time, and subservience to George III during the American Revolution.

St Paul’s exact words were: ‘Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.’ Context is everything. Scholars believe that at the time – around AD 55 – Paul was appealing to the Roman people to respect their government’s orderly reintegration of Jewish and Christian exiles back into Roman society. Indeed, the overwhelming message of the Bible, cited in numerous passages, is that a true Christian or Jew should befriend, feed and clothe strangers and foreigners, not turn them away. ‘Love your neighbour as yourself,’ St Paul writes.

Reading St Paul’s gentle words, one cannot escape the conclusion that he was appealing to the better angels of our rulers’ natures, urging them to lead equitably and judiciously, and to protect the people, especially our children.

Any fair-minded reader will conclude that, in advising people to respect their government, Paul did not have in mind gangster regimes like Vladimir Putin’s, corrupt family fiefdoms like Donald Trump’s, vicious theocracies like the Islamic State, or monstrous one-party dictatorships like Kim Jong-Un’s or Xi Jinping’s.

Nor did Paul have in mind theocracies like the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster, where John of Leiden once also cited Romans 13 to justify his own tyranny. ‘Therefore,’ the King proclaimed, ‘whoever resists the government resists the ordinance of God. And those who resist shall receive their own judgement. For rulers cause no terror to those doing good, only to those who do evil.’

Leiden’s words could have come straight from the mouths of many religious and political leaders today, who twist the meaning of their sacred texts to justify tyranny and torture. As such, their message is a world apart

from the compassionate example of their Messiah. Were He to return to Earth today, He would surely hang His head and weep at what is being said and done in His name.



BILDAGENTUR-ONLINE/UIG VIA GETTY IMAGES

Martin Luther, the father of the Reformation, condemned the Münster rebellion – which sparked a century of religious persecution – as the devil’s work and the Anabaptists as a childish evil.



Melchior Hoffman, in prison in Strasbourg, persuaded the people he was the prophet Elijah and that Christ would return to the city to liberate him.



The Münster rebellion so humiliated Bishop Waldeck that he determined to exterminate the Anabaptist movement in his diocese.



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ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

The severed head of John Matthias, who succeeded Hoffman as leader of the Melchiorites. He seized control of Münster and declared it New Jerusalem.



ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

John of Leiden, who led the city after Matthias's death, turned Münster into a theocracy and crowned himself king – with bloody consequences.



cupferstich. Bartsch 183 317 x 223 mm
Abb. 110. Heinrich Aldegrever. Der Wiedertäufer Knipperdolling
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ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

Bernard Knipperdolling had been a prominent businessman in Münster before Leiden appointed him chief executioner of New Jerusalem.



ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

Bernard Krechting, a priest of a patrician family, was seen as Leiden's successor and fought bravely to the end in defence of the Münster theocracy.



MENNONITE ARCHIVES OF ONTARIO

‘Queen’ Divara, the favourite of Leiden’s many wives, thought to be as many as sixteen, stood by him throughout the siege.



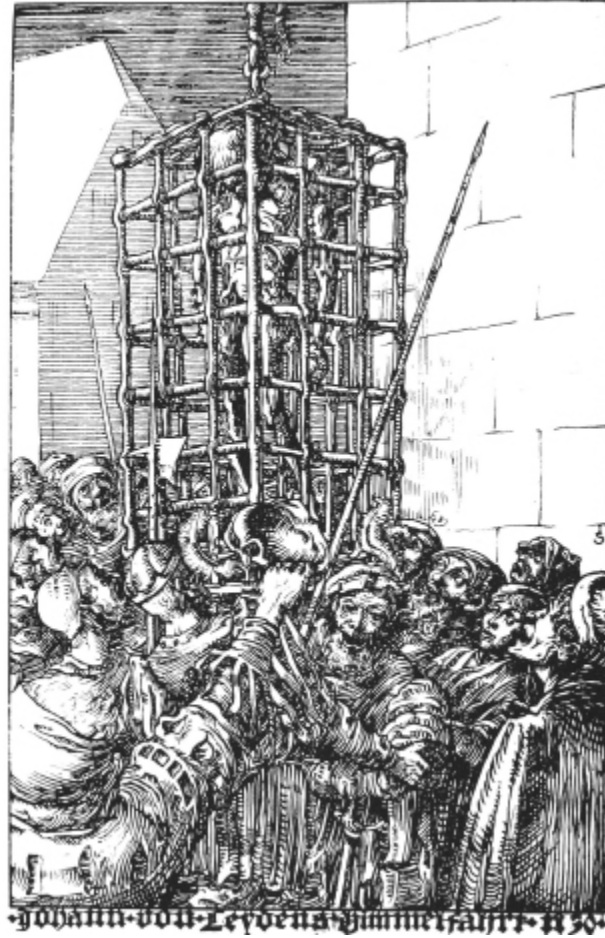
ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

Leiden tries to behead Elizabeth Wanscherer, one of his wives who dared to criticise his rule. He was later said to have danced on her corpse.



FALKENSTEINFOTO/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

The executions of Leiden, Knipperdolling and Krechting in Münster in 1536. The excruciatingly painful method revolted many of the witnesses.



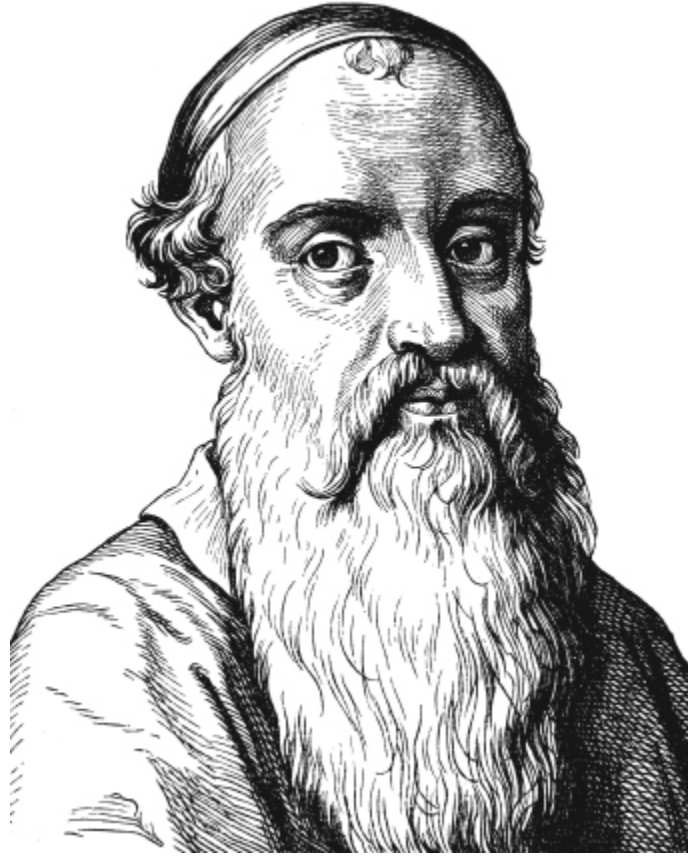
GRANGER HISTORICAL PICTURE ARCHIVE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

The three leaders' mutilated bodies were placed in iron cages and hung from the steeple of St Lambert's Church. The cages remain there today.



BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES

The burning of the Mennonite Anneken Hendriks, on 10 November 1571.
Savage persecution of Anabaptists continued throughout the sixteenth
century, long after the Münster siege.



BILDAGENTUR-ONLINE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Menno Simons forged a new faith out of the remains of Anabaptism, which lives to this day as the Mennonite Church.



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Above and Below: Stone battlements and the Buddenturm in Münster today, relics of the powerful defensive system that helped Leiden to withstand the Bishop's forces for months. The white tower, built in 1150 and restored after World War Two, is the oldest surviving part of the old city walls.



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



DASHA NIKOLAEVNA/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

The square at St Paulus Dom, the cathedral in the centre of Münster, was the scene of John of Leiden's bloodiest and most ostentatious demonstrations of power.



ZOONAR GMBH/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Above and Below: St Lambert's Church in Münster, with the three cages attached to the steeple. They serve as a macabre reminder of what happened here, some 500 years ago.



WERNER OTTO/ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

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When I mentioned to Marie-Morgane, my wife, that I was thinking of writing a book about a religious sect who occupied a small German-speaking town in the sixteenth century, I worried that she might think me slightly nuts. On the contrary, she immediately ‘got it’ and championed the idea from the start. A writer can only hope for understanding, and Marie understood. *Merci beaucoup mon amour ...*

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NOTES

Note: New Jerusalem is written through the eyes of the key participants, many of whom believed in a literal interpretation of the Bible. The Holy Book thus merits referencing as a primary source.

Chapter 1: The Preacher

- 1 Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 40; Hoffman, *Commentary on Daniel*; Phillips, *Confession: Recollections of the Years 1533–1536*, in Williams and Mergal, pp. 209–10
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., Matthew 20:16
- 4 Revelation 21:1–8
- 5 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4
- 6 Revelation 11:3; or 1290 days, as told in Daniel 12:11
- 7 Revelation 11:6
- 8 Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, p. 29
- 9 Deppermann, p. 73; Revelation 12:13
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Malachi 4:5–6
- 12 Genesis 3:21
- 13 Krahn, p. 14
- 14 Deppermann, p. 36
- 15 Exodus 20:4
- 16 Krahn, p. 82
- 17 <http://catholicism.org/epistle-of-straw.html>
- 18 James 5:1–6
- 19 Deppermann, pp. 48–9
- 20 Williams, p. 622
- 21 Deppermann, p. 53
- 22 Weaver, p. 74
- 23 Matthew 5:3, 5:5

Chapter 2: Elijah

- [1](#) Ganss, 'Johann Tetzl', in Herbermann, pp. 539–41
- [2](#) Bax, p. 78
- [3](#) Luther, Preface, *Commentary on Romans*
- [4](#) Vogel, 'The Eschatological Theology of Martin Luther',
<http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1809&context=auss>
- [5](#) Klaassen, p. 28
- [6](#) Roper, pp. 15, 106
- [7](#) Hoffman and Karlstadt, A2a
- [8](#) Hoffman, IVa
- [9](#) Deppermann, pp. 96–7
- [10](#) Ibid., pp. 99–100
- [11](#) Krahn, p. 83
- [12](#) Deppermann, p. 116
- [13](#) Krafft, p. 445
- [14](#) Deppermann, p. 125, 121
- [15](#) Krahn, p. 87
- [16](#) Ibid., p. 90
- [17](#) Goertz, pp. 62–4
- [18](#) James 2:14–17
- [19](#) Weaver, p. 79
- [20](#) Klötzer, 'The Melchiorites and Münster', in Roth and Stayer, p. 220;
see also Waite, *David Joris and Dutch Anabaptism, 1524–1543*, p. 41
- [21](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, Introduction
- [22](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 40; see also Weaver p. 82

Chapter 3: Apocalypse

- [1](#) Deppermann, p. 274
- [2](#) A variation on Hoffman's *Commentary on Daniel*, quoted in Goertz, p. 42: 'The higher man rises in nobility, power and worldly wisdom, the less can God's wisdom and Christ, the bright sun, warm him ...'
- [3](#) Deppermann, p. 349
- [4](#) Quoted in Bax, p. 104

- 5 See Driedger, ‘Thinking inside the Cages: Norman Cohn, Anabaptist Münster, and Polemically Inspired Assumptions about Apocalyptic Violence’, *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol. 21 No. 4, May 2018; pp. 38–62
- 6 Luther, ‘An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation’, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 2, p. 161
- 7 Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, p. 43
- 8 Von Ranke, p. 568
- 9 Waller, ‘A forgotten plague: making sense of dancing mania’, *The Lancet*, Vol 373, Issue 9664, 21 February 2009, pp. 624–5. See also: <http://www.digitaljournal.com/article/258521>
- 10 Deppermann, pp. 207–10
- 11 Klaassen, p. 22
- 12 Stayer, *The German Peasants’ War and the Anabaptist Community of Goods*, p. 109
- 13 Matthew 6:24
- 14 Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, p. 79
- 15 Ibid., p. 73
- 16 Romans 13:3–4
- 17 Klaassen, pp. 60–1
- 18 Ibid., p. 24
- 19 Deppermann, pp. 81–2
- 20 Cohn, p. 236

Chapter 4: Schwärmer

- 1 Clasen, pp. 20–1
- 2 Klaassen, p. 49
- 3 Deppermann, p. 131
- 4 Zwingli, pp. 233–87
- 5 Schaff, Vol 1, p. 375; Christ’s words are from John 17:11
- 6 Clasen, pp. 110–11
- 7 Luke 22:19
- 8 Matthew 26:26–29
- 9 Roper, p. 165
- 10 Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, p. 188
- 11 Clasen, p. 14
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- [13](#) For a full history, see Pleysier, *Henry VIII and the Anabaptists*
- [14](#) Williams, ‘Studies in the Radical Reformation (1517–1618): A Bibliographical Survey of Research since 1939’, pp. 46–69; see also Hege and Bender, ‘Martyrs’ Synod’
- [15](#) Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, pp. 18–20
- [16](#) Wappler, pp. 268–9
- [17](#) Arthur, p. 10
- [18](#) Estep, p. 57
- [19](#) Klötzer, ‘The Melchiorites and Münster’, in Roth and Stayer, p. 221
- [20](#) Clasen, pp. 338–9
- [21](#) *Ibid.*, p. 92
- [22](#) Braght, p. 88
- [23](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80
- [24](#) *Ibid.*, p. 71
- [25](#) *Ibid.*, p. 109
- [26](#) Clasen, p. 409
- [27](#) *Ibid.*
- [28](#) Deppermann, p. 307
- [29](#) *Ibid.*, p. 306
- [30](#) *Ibid.*

Chapter 5: Enoch

- [1](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 39
- [2](#) Dyck, p. 45
- [3](#) <http://www.anabaptists.org/history/the-schleitheim-confession.html>
- [4](#) Deppermann, p. 335
- [5](#) Klaassen, p. 46
- [6](#) Schmidt & Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 40
- [7](#) Genesis 5:24
- [8](#) Joel 3:10
- [9](#) Deppermann, p. 232
- [10](#) <http://www.anabaptists.org/history/the-schleitheim-confession.html>
- [11](#) Hut, ‘On the Mystery of Baptism’, in Baylor, p. 166
- [12](#) Rempel, ‘Anabaptist Religious Literature and Hymnody’, in Roth and Stayer, pp. 393–4
- [13](#) Rainbow, pp. 52–3
- [14](#) Revelation 7:2–3

- 15 Ezekiel 9:4
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20 Rainbow, p. 53
21 Clasen, pp. 96–7
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24 Matthew 28:19–20
25 Mark 16:16
26 Acts 2:38
27 Matthew 3:16–17
28 Goertz, p. 52
29 Luke 18:17
30 Mark 9:42
31 <http://www.anabaptists.org/history/the-schleitheim-confession.html>
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33 Ibid., p. 96
34 Krahn, p. 13
35 Zwingli, pp. 74–5, 83
36 Clasen, p. 99
37 Ibid., p. 105
38 Ibid.

Chapter 6: Exodus

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3 See Nash, *Blasphemy in the Christian World: A History*
4 Bax, pp. 112–13
5 Cohn, p. 20
6 See St Augustine, *The City of God*
7 Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, p. 5
8 Kirchhoff, p. 1

Chapter 7: Münster

- 1 Munro, *Selections from the Laws of Charles the Great*
- 2 Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 1, pp. 112–14
- 3 Ibid., p. 140
- 4 Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 1, p. 167

Chapter 8: The Bishop

- 1 Ibid., p. 245
- 2 Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Gresbeck, p. 55
- 3 Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 1, p. 248
- 4 Ibid., p. 208
- 5 Ibid., pp. 261–2
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- 9 Ibid., p. 279
- 10 Krahn, p. 123
- 11 Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 292

Chapter 9: White Bread Bernie

- 1 Romans 13:11–14
- 2 Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 361
- 3 Von Ranke, pp. 552–3
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- 5 Von Ranke, p. 549
- 6 Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, pp. 397–8
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- 8 Von Ranke, p. 573
- 9 Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 420
- 10 Ibid., p. 424
- 11 Becker, text of a lecture before the Grafschafter Museumsverein, 25 November 1998
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- 13 Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 31
- 14 Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 435
- 15 <https://www.muensterlandzeitung.de/Staedte/Stadtlohn/Stutenbernd-Von-Stadtlohn-nach-Haltlos-6892.html>
- 16 Von der Lippe and Reck-Malleczewen, p. 7

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- [18](#) Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, pp. 370–1
- [19](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 33
- [20](#) Ibid., pp. 35–38
- [21](#) Ibid., p. 38
- [22](#) Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 1, p. 230
- [23](#) Romans 13:4
- [24](#) Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 1, pp. 238–42
- [25](#) Ibid., pp. 455–7
- [26](#) Ezekiel 9:4–6
- [27](#) Arthur, p. 23

Chapter 10: New Jerusalem

- [1](#) Deppermann, p. 327
- [2](#) Revelation 21:10–21
- [3](#) Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, pp. 87, 108
- [4](#) Krahn, p. 137
- [5](#) Kirchhoff, p. 24; Stayer, p. 133
- [6](#) Huntston Williams (ed), *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, p. 216
- [7](#) Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 472
- [8](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 45
- [9](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Gresbeck, p. 62
- [10](#) Ibid.
- [11](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 469
- [12](#) Ibid., p. 467
- [13](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 49
- [14](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 468
- [15](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 46
- [16](#) Ibid., p. 47
- [17](#) Ibid., pp. 54–60
- [18](#) Ibid., pp. 63, 81

Chapter 11: The Chosen People

- [1](#) Bax, p. 99
- [2](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 104
- [3](#) Bax, p. 96
- [4](#) Krahn, p. 145

- [5](#) Bax, p. 97
- [6](#) Kirchhoff, p. 24
- [7](#) Bax, p. 97
- [8](#) Stayer, *The German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods*, p. 127
- [9](#) Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, p. 84
- [10](#) Clasen, pp. 318–19, 323, 330
- [11](#) Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 481
- [12](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, pp. 61–3
- [13](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, Note 72, p. 68
- [14](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 507
- [15](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, pp. 61–3
- [16](#) Ibid.
- [17](#) Arthur, p. 39
- [18](#) Schmidt & Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 535f
- [19](#) Arthur, p. 41
- [20](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, p. 69
- [21](#) Schmidt & Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 541
- [22](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, pp. 76–8
- [23](#) Klaassen, p. 86
- [24](#) Arthur, p. 62
- [25](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 78
- [26](#) Ibid., p. 103
- [27](#) Deppermann, p. 341; Stayer, pp. 128–9
- [28](#) Arthur, p. 49
- [29](#) Psalm 6:8–10
- [30](#) Psalm 46:1–3, 5–6
- [31](#) Psalm 124:6–8

Chapter 12: A False Prophet

- [1](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 81
- [2](#) Acts 4:32–37
- [3](#) Matthew 5–7
- [4](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, p. 82
- [5](#) Arthur, p. 53
- [6](#) Krahn, p. 142
- [7](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, p. 83

- [8](#) Stayer, p. 131
- [9](#) Clasen, p. 189
- [10](#) Hut, ‘On the Mystery of Baptism’, in Baylor, pp. 153–4
- [11](#) Clasen, p. 189
- [12](#) Stayer, p. 134
- [13](#) Arthur, p. 60
- [14](#) Clasen, p. 187
- [15](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 269
- [16](#) Bax, p. 110
- [17](#) Cohn, pp. 264–5
- [18](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, pp. 40, 104
- [19](#) Stayer, p. 228
- [20](#) Matthew 12:30
- [21](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, pp. 87–8; Kerssenbrock dates these arrests to June
- [22](#) Arthur, p. 55
- [23](#) Ibid.
- [24](#) Klaassen, p. 50; Arthur, pp. 54–6. See other accounts of this event in Gresbeck and Kerssenbrock
- [25](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 551f.
- [26](#) Ibid.
- [27](#) Ibid.
- [28](#) Ibid., p. 554
- [29](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 81
- [30](#) There are various accounts of this event. See, for example, the translations from Kerssenbrock in Bax, p. 119 and Arthur, pp. 63–4
- [31](#) Judges 6:1–6
- [32](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 104
- [33](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 538
- [34](#) Revelation 11:12

Chapter 13: John of Leiden

- [1](#) Schnur, p. 88
- [2](#) Ibid., p. 90
- [3](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, pp. 264–9
- [4](#) Ibid.
- [5](#) Ibid.

- [6](#) Schnur, p. 104
- [7](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 274
- [8](#) Cohn, p. 238
- [9](#) Ibid., pp. 241–2
- [10](#) Ibid., p. 241
- [11](#) Ibid., p. 239
- [12](#) Ibid., p. 238
- [13](#) Lindberg, p. 148
- [14](#) See Bax, p. 123; Goertz, p. 30; Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, p. 91
- [15](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 539
- [16](#) Ibid.

Chapter 14: The Kingdom of God

- [1](#) ‘Solymorum’ is genitive plural of Solyma, which is an abbreviation of the Latin transcript of the Greek name of Jerusalem ‘Hierosolyma’ – Schmidt
- [2](#) Schmidt & Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 574f
- [3](#) Arthur, pp. 76–7
- [4](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, pp. 91–2
- [5](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 372f
- [6](#) Bax, p. 123
- [7](#) Ibid., p. 124
- [8](#) Ibid., p. 125
- [9](#) Romans 13:1–4
- [10](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, pp. 578–9
- [11](#) Ibid., pp. 580–2
- [12](#) Leviticus 24:13–15
- [13](#) Exodus 22:28
- [14](#) Deuteronomy 21:18–21
- [15](#) Leviticus 20:10–16
- [16](#) Ephesians 5:22–23
- [17](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, pp. 578–9
- [18](#) Revelation 22:14–15
- [19](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, pp. 550–3

Chapter 15: Storming the City

- [1](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, pp. 100–3

- [2](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Von Dülmen, p. 126
- [3](#) Ibid.
- [4](#) Ibid.
- [5](#) Krahn, pp. 156–7
- [6](#) Arthur, p. 45
- [7](#) Ibid., p. 47
- [8](#) Kirchhoff, p. 24. Kirchhoff gives a total of 7755. The actual population varied before and during the siege, with other estimates placing it in excess of 10,000
- [9](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, pp. 587–8
- [10](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Von Dülmen, p. 130
- [11](#) Ibid., p. 128
- [12](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, Note, p. 103; Kerssenbrock claims the bombardment began on 19 May
- [13](#) Ibid., p. 105

Chapter 16: Daring the Empire

- [1](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Von Dülmen, p. 133
- [2](#) Ibid., p. 135
- [3](#) Ibid., p. 136
- [4](#) Ibid.
- [5](#) Ibid.
- [6](#) Snyder and Hecht (eds), p. 290
- [7](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, pp. 95–6
- [8](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Von Dülmen, p. 277
- [9](#) Snyder and Hecht (eds), p. 295
- [10](#) Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 568
- [11](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Von Dülmen, p. 139
- [12](#) Ibid.
- [13](#) Snyder and Hecht (eds), p. 291
- [14](#) Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 570

Chapter 17: Maidens and Wives

- [1](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Von Dülmen, p. 145
- [2](#) Ibid.
- [3](#) Ibid.
- [4](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, p. 113

- [5](#) Genesis 1:28
- [6](#) Krahn, p. 144
- [7](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, pp. 112–13
- [8](#) Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 580
- [9](#) Roth and Stayer, pp. 451–2
- [10](#) Arthur, p. 93
- [11](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Gresbeck, p. 63f
- [12](#) Berkowitz, pp. 162–3
- [13](#) Ibid., p. 161
- [14](#) Ibid., p. 160
- [15](#) Ibid., pp. 163, 167
- [16](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Gresbeck, p. 63f
- [17](#) Rothman, *Restitution*, p. 141; see also Roth and Stayer, p. 454
- [18](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Von Dülmen, p. 274
- [19](#) Arthur, p. 104
- [20](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Gresbeck, p. 117

Chapter 18: Women Revolt

- [1](#) Ibid.
- [2](#) Joel 2:28–29
- [3](#) Snyder and Hecht (eds), pp. 1–14
- [4](#) Ibid., p. 33
- [5](#) Bochenski, p. 244
- [6](#) Roth and Stayer (eds), p. 435
- [7](#) Williams, p. 763
- [8](#) As Haude concludes
- [9](#) Snyder and Hecht (eds), p. 11
- [10](#) Roth and Stayer (eds), p. 430
- [11](#) Jelsma, p. 71
- [12](#) Snyder and Hecht (eds), pp. 1–14
- [13](#) Ibid., p. 9
- [14](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Gresbeck, p. 124
- [15](#) Ibid., pp. 125–30
- [16](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 625
- [17](#) Ibid., p. 626
- [18](#) Ibid., pp. 626–7
- [19](#) Ibid.

- [20](#) Arthur, p. 104
- [21](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Gresbeck, p. 124
- [22](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 178

Chapter 19: The Blockade

- [1](#) Luebke and Lindemann (eds), p. 21
- [2](#) Ibid.
- [3](#) Ibid.
- [4](#) Ibid., pp. 51–2
- [5](#) Ibid., p. 52
- [6](#) Mackay (transl), Kerksenbrock, Vol 2, p. 600
- [7](#) Ibid., p. 602
- [8](#) Ibid., p. 605
- [9](#) Schnur, pp. 124–5
- [10](#) Bax, p. 132
- [11](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, p. 132
- [12](#) Bax, p. 133
- [13](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, Note p. 233

Chapter 20: King David

- [1](#) For various sources for his coronation see: Williams, *Radical Reformation*, pp. 571–80
- [2](#) Bax, p.134
- [3](#) For a full description of Royal Court, see Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerksenbrock, Vol 2, pp. 589–94
- [4](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerksenbrock, Vol 2, p. 635
- [5](#) Ibid., p. 636
- [6](#) Quoted in Schur, pp. 125–6
- [7](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerksenbrock, Vol 2, p. 636
- [8](#) Jeremiah 23:5
- [9](#) Ezekiel 37:24–25
- [10](#) Romans 13:1–5
- [11](#) Jeremiah 23:16
- [12](#) Schnur, p. 128
- [13](#) Arthur, p. 113
- [14](#) Kirchhoff, p. 171
- [15](#) Ibid., p. 172

[16](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Gresbeck, p. 163

Chapter 21: The Royal Bedchamber

[1](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, pp. 197–8

[2](#) Arthur, p. 201

[3](#) Schnur, pp. 130–1

[4](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, pp. 663–4

[5](#) Ibid., p. 662

[6](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 170

Chapter 22: The Word

[1](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Gresbeck, p. 165

[2](#) Matthew 22:1–14; Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 636

[3](#) Ibid., p. 620

[4](#) Klaasen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, pp. 76–80

[5](#) Arthur, p. 137

[6](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 196

[7](#) Beachten (transl), various extracts from Rothmann, *Restitution*

[8](#) Rothmann, *On Vengeance*, p. 205

[9](#) Psalm 140

[10](#) Malachi 4:3

[11](#) Rothmann, *On Vengeance*, p. 205

[12](#) Jerome 30.8, adjusted to resemble Rothmann’s understanding of the text

[13](#) Rothmann, *On Vengeance*, p. 205

[14](#) Depperman, p. 353

[15](#) Ibid., pp. 343–5

[16](#) Ibid., pp. 346–7

[17](#) Numbers 16

Chapter 23: Confessions

[1](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 172

[2](#) Ibid., p. 175

[3](#) Arthur, p. 124

[4](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 192

[5](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 629

[6](#) Jeremiah 23 and Ezekiel 30, 37

[7](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 178

[8](#) Ibid., p. 183

[9](#) Ibid.

[10](#) Ibid.

[11](#) Ibid., p. 186

[12](#) For more on the Koblenz meeting, see Haude, pp. 123–7

[13](#) Ibid., p. 148

[14](#) Ibid., pp. 123–7

[15](#) Ibid., p. 137

[16](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 641

[17](#) Haude, pp. 143–4

Chapter 24: The Return of Henry Graes

[1](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 631. In Gresbeck's account, Graes said that he had heard a prophecy, telling him to return to New Jerusalem. So he climbed out a window and walked through the night to the walls of Münster

[2](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 182

Chapter 25: Dance, Dance, Dance

[1](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, pp. 189–90

[2](#) Ibid.

[3](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 182

[4](#) Ibid.

Chapter 26: The Twelve Dukes

[1](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol. 2, pp. 655–7

[2](#) Ibid., p. 658

[3](#) Luke 16:31

[4](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, p. 186

[5](#) Ibid., p. 246

[6](#) Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 660

[7](#) Revelation 21:12–14

[8](#) Matthew 19:27–30

Chapter 27: The Four Horsemen

- [1](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, p. 234
- [2](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 664
- [3](#) Thatcher, pp. 184–5; Laderman and León (eds), p. 770
- [4](#) Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 670
- [5](#) Schnur, p. 138
- [6](#) Ibid.
- [7](#) Ibid., p. 139
- [8](#) Various translations, in Arthur, p. 142; Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, p. 285
- [9](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Gresbeck, pp. 170–1
- [10](#) Ibid., p. 171
- [11](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 672
- [12](#) Ibid., p. 673
- [13](#) Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, pp. 673–4
- [14](#) Arthur, p. 147
- [15](#) Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 677
- [16](#) Schnur, p. 135

Chapter 28: Holy War

- [1](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Gresbeck, pp. 243–4
- [2](#) Daniel 7:19
- [3](#) Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 683
- [4](#) Arthur, p. 146
- [5](#) See Paulus, *Die tönernen Füße*
- [6](#) Mackay (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 687
- [7](#) Arthur, pp. 158–9
- [8](#) Kirchhoff calculates that 213 women, 20 men and five children were forcibly baptized, p. 13f
- [9](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Gresbeck, pp. 286–8
- [10](#) Ibid., pp. 291–5
- [11](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerssenbrock, Vol 2, p. 695
- [12](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Gresbeck, pp. 291–5
- [13](#) Kirchhoff, p. 3f
- [14](#) Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Gresbeck, pp. 278–9
- [15](#) Mackay (transl), Gresbeck, pp. 288–91
- [16](#) Kirchhoff, p. 22
- [17](#) Ibid.

Chapter 29: Judgement Day

1 Schnur, p. 142; Arthur, p. 168

2 Ibid., p. 170

3 Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 269

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p. 272

6 Ibid., p. 274

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 278

9 Ibid., pp. 264–9

10 1 Timothy 3:2 and 1 Corinthians 6:16, 7:2

11 Arthur, p. 173

12 Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, pp. 264–9

13 Revelation 8:7–10

14 <http://thecatholictraveler.com/st-agnes/>

15 Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, pp. 281–3

16 Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Kerksenbrock, Vol 2, p. 714

17 Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, pp. 281–3

18 Michelet (ed), *The Life of Martin Luther Gathered from his Own Writings*, p. 166

Chapter 30: The Great World

1 Deppermann, p. 311

2 Ibid., p. 355

3 Ibid., pp. 379–80

4 Schmidt and Markiewicz (transl), Van Dülmen, p. 104

5 Ibid.

6 MacKay, Kerksenbrock, Vol 2, p. 720

7 Haude, p. 20

8 Ibid., p. 23

9 Ibid., pp. 35–6

10 Braght, pp. 442–3

11 Clasen, pp. 18–21. They were more numerous than Clasen's study suggests, argues Sigrun Haude, because his figures excluded parts of northern Europe.

12 According to recent scholarship, Anabaptists have had a more fundamental influence on the rise of the Baptist Church than

previously thought. See the work of Underwood; Estep; Shurden, 'Turning Points in Baptist History'; and Gourley, 'A Very Brief Introduction to Baptist History, Then and Now',

<https://yellowstone.net/baptist/overview.htm>

13 Bender, introductory biography in *Menno Simons' Life and Writings*, p. 8

14 Ibid., p. 25

15 Ibid., p. 15

16 Ibid., p. 29

17 Simons, 'Why I Do Not Cease Teaching and Writing'

18 Braght, pp. 774–94

19 Braght, p. 798

Afterword

1 Vox, 14 May 2018:

<https://www.vox.com/2018/5/14/17352676/robert-jeffress-jerusalem-embassy-israel-prayer>

2 Bruni, Frank, 'Mike Pence: Holy Terror', *The New York Times*, 28 July 2018

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