



**Fig. 15.1:** The Protestant reformators gathered around the bright light of the Gospel, which monstrous representatives of the Catholic Church aim to extinguish. Anonymous propaganda painting from the late sixteenth century. Aust-Agder Museum og Arkiv, Arendal, Norway.

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## Chapter 15

# The Image of Jerusalem Destroyed: On Babel, Jerusalem, and the Antichrist in Luther's Confessional Polemic 1521

In a specific sense, the Jerusalem Code was introduced as an interpretive key on both sides of the conflict during the Early Reformation. In 1520, Roman theologian Ambrosius Catharinus Politus accused Luther of heresy, and of representing the apocalyptic figure of the Antichrist. One year later, the allegations were given in turn to the pope in Rome, whom Luther accused of putting himself above Christ. The common understanding of Rome as the New Jerusalem was significant for the papal claim to power and authority. However, Luther ventures to demonstrate that the Holy City has now become the New Babel. As in the ancient Ark of the Covenant, the secret presence of God is the key to understanding the Jerusalem Code inscribed in Luther's argument – if the Church preserves this secret in its heart and its words, while listening to the Holy Spirit, it would still represent the true Jerusalem. However, Luther argues, if the pope makes claims to being the king and ruler of this New Jerusalem, then the same topos has turned into its opposite, that is, Satan's Synagogue in the New Babel. In an epic rhetorical gesture, Luther thus destroys the image of Rome as the New Jerusalem. Moreover, this apocalyptic topology later became defining for confessional rhetoric on both sides.

When writers in the sixteenth century describe Jerusalem, they refer to a topology of the sacred city. This is first of all a *topos* of the sacred text and secondly a place formed by their imagination, but it is nevertheless a *real* place that becomes decisive for political decisions in their own time, and for the *place* they ascribe to themselves and their enemies in the course of history. In this sense, Jerusalem is *more* real than the historical conflicts that take place in their own social and political surroundings. The question of contemporary historical events becomes a conflict of interpretations: who belongs to Babel and who belongs to Jerusalem?

In the conflicts surrounding the Reformation, this topological conflict of interpretations becomes topical. During the early Reformation, from 1520 to 1525, Luther and his adversaries in Rome refer to historical and political facts that were

considered paradigmatic for all later wars: the legendary wars between old Israel and its many enemies, including the kings of Babylon. By the age when apocalyptic movements swept across the Mediterranean world, from the third century BC until the fourth century AC, the ancient wars had become the mother of all later conflicts between kings and peoples, gods and idols, good and evil.<sup>1</sup> According to the author of the Book of Revelation, the conflicts that continuously go on in the heavens above become decisive for conflicts and persecutions that take place down on earth. Hence, this sacred *script* becomes the hidden transcript for the interpretation of historical events and for a religious philosophy of history, eventually also for political expectations of the future end of times as described in the apocalypse. This is the basis for all sorts of political theologies feeding the social and political imaginary of the Christian empires, from the Roman to the Holy Roman Empire, but also for the discussion of the Church as empire – and the pope as emperor – in the confessional controversies between Luther and his Roman-Catholic adversaries (Fig. 15.1).

I will focus on the significant debate between the theologian and legal scholar Ambrosius Catharinus Politus and Martin Luther in 1520–21. Catharinus's competence as a legal scholar indicates that Pope Leo X, who commissioned him to write an apology, was fully aware of the political consequences of the theological disagreements. Catharinus was the first scholar to identify Luther as the Antichrist, according to the historical scheme from the Book of Daniel and the First Letter of John. It was not long before this accusation of representing the Antichrist was given in return, followed by a series of accusations of fraud and false "appearances" within the papal church. The scene was thus set for a historical showdown, which according to Patrick Preston became defining for the confessional rhetoric on both sides, that is, for the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation – a division that dominated Europe for the next century and up to the Thirty Years' War (1618–48).<sup>2</sup> Only fifteen years after Luther's controversy with Catharinus, a Swedish author applied the same rhetorical and political topos in *Några Wijsor om Anti-Christum* (1536). Hence, the identification of the confessional enemy as the Antichrist became significant even in the construction of power in the Nordic countries.<sup>3</sup>

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1 For different and more detailed interpretations of this apocalyptic scheme of history, cf. Marius T. Mjaaland, "Apocalypse and the Spirit of Revolution: The Political Legacy of the Early Reformation," *Political Theology* 14, no. 2 (2013); and "Der apokalyptische Zwerg der Revolution," in *Deutungsmacht: Religion und Belief Systems in Deutungsmachtkonflikten*, ed. Philipp Stoellger (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

2 Patrick Preston, "Catharinus Versus Luther, 1521," *History* 88, no. 291 (2003), 68.

3 See Chapter 16 (Otfried Czaika), 298–313.

## The Controversy: Catharinus vs. Luther 1520–21

This conflict between Catharinus and Luther became a controversy on authority, legitimate versus false and thus illegitimate authority. In late medieval Europe, Biblical authority was directly connected to power: the legitimation of religious and political authority was identified with reference to Christ as the true King and the image of Jerusalem as the Holy City governing the sacred empire. Babylon or Babel was the name for the opposite, the site of all evil, of the Antichrist and his angels.<sup>4</sup> This search for the Image of the Kingdom, the true image of the true Kingdom, begins in the heart of Jerusalem. However, not only Jerusalem as we know it today or in the medieval period, but rather the ancient Jerusalem. Not only the Jerusalem of the second temple, that is the Jerusalem Jesus visited while he was walking around from Bethlehem and Jericho to the Holy City, but an even older Jerusalem. It is Jerusalem of the first temple, Solomon's temple. None of the writers I will discuss here had been to Jerusalem. Hence, they were speaking of the *image* of the first temple, as they imagined it would be; the temple they knew from descriptions in the First Book of Kings and the Chronicles. Nonetheless, this was perceived as a real place – a place more real and significant than the places Luther and his opponents in Italy knew from their immediate geography, and therefore even more significant than Rome. Luther describes the connection between the temple and the true kingdom as follows:

The signs of the Church, and the Gospel in particular, were anticipated in the Temple of Solomon, where the two heads on the sticks carrying the Ark, were standing out in front of the oracle, signifying the spirit. Similarly, there is no other sign than the oral and public voice of the Gospel that makes it possible to know where the Church and the mystery of the kingdom of God is hidden. For, just as the heads on the sticks functioned as signs, whereas the Ark in itself was hidden in the Most Holy and something they believed to be there, the Church is also something that no one sees, and yet they believe that it is there merely due to the Word as sign, a Word that cannot sound but in the Church and by the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

For Martin Luther, this is a question of how to define the true Church when there is a conflict of authority. He is careful not to ascribe the true authority to himself, as opposed to the authority of the pope. On the contrary, he ascribes this authority to *Scripture*, which ought to draw the distinction between true and false interpretations. Nevertheless, when the Ark is hidden in the Most Holy – and the Most Holy is

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<sup>4</sup> See also Chapter 16 (Otfried Czaika), 298–313.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Martin Luther and Melchior Lotter, *Ad librum eximii magistri nostri magistri Ambrosii Catharini defensoris Silvestri Prieratis acerrimi responsio Martini Lutheri, Vvittembergae mense Aprili; cum exposita Visione Danielis VIII, De antichristo*, in: *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1929), Vol 7. Future footnotes will reference this work as WA 7,710. There is no English translation of this text in the American edition of *Luther's Works*, hence all translations from Latin are mine and the only references are to the Weimar edition.

the Most Hidden within the church – who can currently speak on behalf of the “two heads on the sticks” – that is, who can function as *oracles* on behalf of the Word? Who is called, and who will let the Word sound that is spoken in the Holy Spirit?

Martin Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses* (1517) on penance and indulgences were written as a merely inner-ecclesial discussion on the uses and abuses of common religious practice. However, as soon as Luther was accused of heresy and threatened with excommunication, the question of authority became acute. Although Luther had theological reasons for rejecting Rome, his resistance to the ecclesial hierarchy and authority was considered political, or rather, theologico-political. In the course of the first three years, Pope Leo X authorized a number of theologians to respond to Luther for various reasons – on the questions of indulgences, truth, and orthodoxy, but also in respect to the interpretation of Scripture. The choice of Ambrosius Catharinus Politus (1484–1553), with the civil name Lancelot Politi, was nonetheless rather surprising. He was a Dominican from the University of Siena, the same age as Luther, but still rather young and thus not an established authority within the church. Yet, he had made himself a name as a cunning rhetorical talent and a clever lawyer and theologian.

In his *Apology* against Luther, Catharinus has chosen to focus on a critical interpretation of the Book of Daniel.<sup>6</sup> Due to its historical schemes, the apocalyptic Book of Daniel came to play a key role in the controversies of the early Reformation. In his visions, Daniel sees how kingdoms and empires rise and fall and prophesies that a great rock will come to crush the kingdom of Babel. Pursuing a common *topos* in late medieval exegesis, Catharinus identifies the new heretical threat to Rome as “Babel,” and thus the enemy of Jerusalem, which in Catharinus’s narrative is represented by the papal site in Rome. He interprets the rock coming to crush the “false king” in the light of Jesus’s words to Peter in Matt 16:18. Hence, the pope as Peter’s heir will eventually crush his enemies. Further, by drawing on quotations from the First Letter of John, in particular 1 John 2:18, Catharinus identifies Luther as the apocalyptical figure of the Antichrist.

His text is published immediately after Pope Leo X’s bull *Exsurge Domine* (15 June 1520) and thus supports the claims of heterodoxy and the threats of excommunication. Catharinus argues that the opponent of Christ, and thus of Peter and the Church, would be destroyed by the huge rock of history. However, Luther, in his response (1521) turns this interpretation of Daniel upside down and argues that the Pope has elevated himself to the place of Christ (*Vicarius Christi*), and due to this *hubris*, he will be judged as the true Antichrist – and crushed by the stone of history.

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<sup>6</sup> See Catharinus Ambrosius, *Apologia pro veritate catholicae et apostolicae fidei ac doctrinae adversus impia ac valde pestifera Martini Lutheri dogmata* (1520), *Corpus Catholicorum* 27 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1956). For the background of this book, see Preston, “Catharinus Versus Luther, 1521”.

Both texts are highly interesting from a theological, historical, political, and literary perspective, but I will have to limit my analysis to Luther's text, with some oblique glances to Catharinus's book on Daniel. I will undertake a rhetorical analysis of Luther's response with emphasis on literary effects such as irony, satire, prayers, and curses, and the *topology* of the text, centering around the apocalyptic juxtaposition of Jerusalem and Babel: Jerusalem, the gateway to heaven and *site* of true faith as opposed to Babel as the site of mockery, hypocrisy, and rebellion to God. Luther applies the text satirically in order to show that the scandals of the church represent a *travesty* of true faith, and that the *facies* (Lat. for visions/illusions) of the church are deceptive. Hence, he identifies the false image of Jerusalem as the true Babel, an image that ought to be destroyed – by the word and by the sword.

## Controversy on the Book of Daniel

The Book of Daniel connects strands of the prophetic tradition in Old Israel with the apocalyptic genre, which spread across the Middle East in the second century before Christ.<sup>7</sup> Apocalypticism played a key role in Persian religion from this period and later in Islam (most typically in Shia Islam). The apocalypses generally emerge in times of acute crisis and they connect dramatic *visions*, often conveyed by an angel, with a prophetic message concerning the end of days. Although their background is often closely linked to a specific historical situation, the message is universal and the outcome of historical events is interpreted as decisive for the future of the cosmos.

In the Book of Revelation this is underscored by the parallel events of universal war between Christ and the Antichrist in heaven and the terrestrial conflicts between the Christians and their adversaries. In Daniel, by contrast, the image of the stone plays a central role, connected to King Nebuchadnezzar's vision of a huge statue. Daniel is the Jewish servant of Nebuchadnezzar and the one who *interprets* this vision as an expression of divine history. The key role given to the mythical figure of Daniel is critical for the book as a whole, and his mysterious power of interpreting the signs of the times has obviously been perceived as both tempting and terrifying by interpreters who saw themselves in a similar role, in times of severe crisis. In his *Apology* (1520), Ambrosius Catharinus Politus had declared that Luther deceived the common people in eleven different ways and thus suggests that he must be considered the new Antichrist. In his *Response to the Book of Ambrosius Catharinus* (1521), Luther unfolds his rhetorical skills in a powerful satirical gesture.

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<sup>7</sup> The following sections are a revised version of an argument first presented in: Marius Timmann Mjaaland, *The Hidden God: Luther, Philosophy, and Political Theology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 142–52.

He is not satisfied with paying back in kind, though. After arguing that Catharinus as well as Pope Leo X represents the Antichrist, he insists that the entire papal hierarchy – in its claim of representing the Roman Catholic Church – qualifies for this dubious honour.<sup>8</sup> With reference to Dan 8:23–25 Luther argues that they all belong to the kingdom of the fiend. Let us therefore take a short look at the Book of Daniel, which is the bone of contention.

The protagonist Daniel was a noble Jew who became a servant of the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, during the Jewish exile. One night the king has a strange dream, but none of his advisors are able to interpret it. In this dream, a huge statue appears which is subsequently destroyed by a massive stone. The king is worried but Daniel offers an interpretation of its meaning, that is the prophecy of four subsequent kingdoms which are crushed, one by one:

And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron; just as iron crushes and smashes everything, it shall crush and shatter all these. (. . .) And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, (. . .) and it shall stand forever.

(Dan 2:31–44)

The text introduces a powerful king and a prophet who is able to interpret the mystical dream. This situation is easily translatable to subsequent periods and the dream has influenced endless speculations about the four ages and the coming of the eternal kingdom. The Vulgate uses the word “statue” of the figure in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, whereas Luther translates “image” [*Bild*], which has connotations to the idols that were destroyed by the prophets in the Old Testament. In chapters 7–12 we find reports about further visions, most of them ascribed to Daniel and all of them dealing with the Last Judgement in dramatic terms. The vision that is most thoroughly discussed is found in Dan 8:23–25. The author of The Book of Daniel dates this vision to the third year after Nebuchadnezzar’s death, under Belshazzar’s rule. A wicked king is prophesied, and despite his indisputable strength, he is described as a fraud:

At the end of their rule, when the transgressions have reached their full measure, a king of bold countenance shall arise, skilled in intrigue. He shall grow strong in power, shall cause fearful destruction, and shall succeed in what he does. He shall destroy the powerful and the people of the holy ones. By his cunning he shall make deceit prosper under his hand, and in his own mind he shall be great. Without warning he shall destroy many and shall even rise up against the Prince of princes. But he shall be broken, and not by human hands. (Dan 8:23–25)

Whereas Luther focuses almost exclusively on the signs of this fraud in chapter 8, Catharinus argues with reference to the stone in chapter 2.<sup>9</sup> Daniel has given a prophecy of the cornerstone, Catharinus argues, hinting at a common metaphor for

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Luther, WA 7,712–13.

<sup>9</sup> See Ambrosius, *Apologia pro veritate catholicae*, 27, 224.

Christ: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.” (Matt 21:42).<sup>10</sup> Catharinus identifies this stone with the Rock upon which the Church was to be built, that is Peter (Matt 16:18). With the pope as Peter’s successor on the Holy See, he sees the papacy as the cornerstone of the church and the substitute of Christ on earth, hence with the title *Vicarius Christi*.<sup>11</sup> This is common knowledge in late medieval theology and serves to sustain the papacy as head of the Roman Catholic Church, claiming authority even of the universal Church.

A number of interpretations and inferences in Catharinus’s text are jeopardized by Luther, including some of which are considered common knowledge. The stone described by Daniel must be seen as a prophecy of Christ, he argues, but it cannot be valid for Peter and not at all for the so-called successors of Peter on the Apostolic See. With reference to Paul, he argues as follows: “Paul tells us: ‘what fellowship is there between light and darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Belial?’ Thus, either the rock means solely light or solely darkness, that is, it signifies solely a saint or solely an impious man.”<sup>12</sup> Luther will show that his adversaries are erring, and consequently, that Catharinus’s attempt to put the pope and the See in Christ’s place is an indication of their confusion, darkness, and impiety. He concludes that by showing this, he has conquered their “fortress”: they have no legitimate place for exercising the authority they have captured.<sup>13</sup>

The topographical figure applied here is rather interesting and follows a well-known pattern from Luther’s attack on the “Troy” of tradition: Luther argues that when he unveils his opponents and conquers the alleged *centre* of interpretation, the entire text achieves the opposite meaning. Rome is thus accused of being the new Babylon, and as such it achieves a totally different position in this war of interpretations. Finally, Luther concludes that neither the passage in Dan 2 nor the passage in Matt 21 have anything to do with Peter, and hence, the “godless papacy” is accused of having used these passages in order to put itself in God’s place, on the throne of Christ. His enemies are consequently accused of being impious liars.<sup>14</sup>

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**10** Cf. Ps 118:22–23.

**11** According to *New Commentary on the Code of the Canon Law*, this title was reserved exclusively to the pope since Innocent III (1198–1216). Cf. John P. Beal et al., *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 432.

**12** “Nobis autem Paulus dicit. Quae societas lucis et tenebrarum? Que conventio Chrsiti et Belial? Aut ergo Petra solam lucem aut solas tenebras, id est, solum sanctum, aut solum impium significat (. . .).” Luther, WA 7,717–18; cf. 2 Cor 6:14–15.

**13** “Ruet enim nunc totum illud abominationis Idolum, meris mendaciis hactenus erectum, fultum atque defensum. Praesidia eorum obtinemus, arma forti abstulimus, in quibus confidebat, Goliath decollavimus gladio proprio, Et Palestinos non alia tortura torquemus quam rapina sua.” WA 7,719.

**14** Cf. WA 7,719.



## The Vision of Jerusalem as Fraud

This is merely the introduction, though. As soon as the topography of reading and the roles are distributed, Luther argues that the prophecies of Daniel should be directly applied to the historical situation of his times. Still, the *inferences* from the text differ completely and in every detail from the ones presented by Ambrosius Catharinus. He bases this argument on the typological parallelism of the historical contexts: Daniel spoke against the Babylonians of his times, Paul and John preached against the rulers in Rome, hence the Babel of *their* times. Thus the parallelism continues to Luther's times, which allegedly are suffering under the authority of the pope: "To us, then, who are submitted to the Roman Babylon, are these words directed; the words that were predicted by Daniel, Christ, Peter, Paul, Judas, and John in the Apocalypse, must be fulfilled among us."<sup>15</sup> The problem is not merely that they have denied the gospel or interpreted it inaccurately, he argues; they have simply "smuggled in" their own additions and impositions next to the words of scripture. Hence, the ordinary language is abused and falsified, including the identity and reference of names like God, Christ, Spirit, Church, and Justice.<sup>16</sup>

Daniel warns about a future king who will rely on new, egregious, and powerful weapons, and the decisive feature of this "monstrous king" is, according to Luther's translation from Hebrew, that he will have visions [Latin *facies*].<sup>17</sup> A key question for the kind of historical application Luther aims at is the identification of this monstrous king in the contemporary experience of a crisis. Luther has a particular king in mind, with the following features:

[His weapons] are the visions [*facies*], i.e., external species, appearance, pomp, with another word, through superstitions, rites, ceremonies, what is exposed visually in the form of gowns, food, persons, buildings, gestures, and so on. Among all visions and appearances, there is no more powerful, gracious, and therefore pernicious face than superstition and hypocrisy, which has merely a semblance of piety and superficial religion.<sup>18</sup>

After this disgraceful harangue, Luther concludes that the prospective king must be the Antichrist, that is the fiercest adversary of Christ and his kingdom. Moreover, it is hardly a surprise when this "Antichrist" in turn is identified with the pope, or more precisely, not only the pope in person, but the institutionalized papacy. Luther is

<sup>15</sup> "Nos ergo, qui sub Romana Babylone sumus ea verba tangunt, in nobis impleri oportet, quae Daniel, Christus, Petrus, Paulus, Iudas, Ioannes in Apocalypsi praedixerunt." WA 7,725.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. WA 7,719.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. WA 7,728–29. Luther quotes the Hebrew text, which he uses in order to correct Vulgate.

<sup>18</sup> "Quibus ergo? faciebus, id est, externa specie, apparentia, pompa, hoc est, ut uno verbo dicam, superstitionibus, ritibus, cerimoniais, quae ad faciem exponuntur in vestibus, cibis, personis, domibus, gestibus et similibus. Inter omnes enim facies seu apparentias superstitio et hypocrisis, quae est pietatis species et religionis facies, potentissima, gratissima ideoque nocentissima est." WA 7,729.

hardly known as a friendly and respectful opponent, but in the subsequent passages he surpasses himself in a veritable orgy of curses and allegations. Hence, the following exclamation belongs to the *mild* expressions of his anger: “Oh, you idols of this world! May the Lord Jesus annihilate the papacy, the cardinals with all your faces! Deep into the abyss of hell with it! Amen.”<sup>19</sup> Luther is cursing in the form of a prayer and praying in the form of a curse, thus violating the limits of each form of expression in order to achieve a powerful linguistic effect. The most holy representatives of the Church are identified with the idols of the Old Testament and harshly condemned, not only according to the First Commandment, but also according to the annihilating logic of the Apocalypse, anticipating the coming of the Last Judgement.

## Destroying the Image of Jerusalem

Luther then proceeds directly from the Book of Daniel to the Book of Revelation and interprets his own times in the light of the twelve “visions” in chapters 8–10 of the Apocalypse.<sup>20</sup> The connection is established by the *masked face* [*larvalem faciem*] described in Rev 9, which allegedly refers to the same kind of *false appearance* as prophesied in Dan 8. The twelve visions are seen as testimonies not only against Pope Leo X, but against the very *institution*, thus revealing the true nature of this *ignis fatuus*. The papacy is accused of having put the potency of Satan at the site that *apparently* belongs to Christ.

This application of the Book of Revelation introduces the pattern for how divine authority and judgement is supposed to annihilate the satanic kingdom, a pattern which is full of violent and dramatic images and prophecies. Still, Luther is not prepared to accept a *literal* interpretation of these fantastic images. On the contrary, he warns against killing and bloodshed. The fine distinction emphasized here is extremely significant, but not always accepted by Luther’s contemporaries: the apocalypse is applied in order to interpret and thus better *understand* the contemporary situation of crisis, but the images are nevertheless seen as *images*, and thus they are not applied as an invitation to violence or warfare. The apocalyptic authority of judgement belongs to God – to the *hidden* God – and not to any human power, be it in Babylon, Rome, or Wittenberg.<sup>21</sup> Hence, it is worth noting that he is not prepared to mobilize military power for the apocalyptic war against the Antichrist. Although he apparently aims at destabilizing or even overthrowing the power of the pope, he wages war with words rather than weapons.

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<sup>19</sup> WA 7,740.

<sup>20</sup> See WA 7,736–39.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. WA 7,710.

When Jesus according to John 21:17 tells Peter to tend the sheep, Luther sees this as a demand to Peter's alleged successor to teach the gospel *with a living voice* [*viva vox*]. Yet, in Catharinus's *Apology*, he sees nothing but a defense of the ruling power of the pope *without* the gospel and thus the exercise of "tyranny" and violence in the world.<sup>22</sup> This betrayal of Christ equals the work of Judas rather than Peter, he argues. Pope Leo X and the Papists are accused of having abused that power and thereby "distorted" the words and "prostituted" the church.<sup>23</sup> This is the point where Luther brings the passage from Daniel 8 to its full bearing – literally according to the Hebrew rather than the Latin text, as he points out: "A king will stand there, powerful through visions [*facies*]."<sup>24</sup>

The Latin word *facies* is translated with "visions", but *visibilities* may be a better word, that is the emergence of external *appearances* that cover up the inner devastation of the church, the *waste* land. According to Luther, these *facies* are represented by the visible pomp, hypocrisy, and all the other indicators of the adversary of Christ – in other words the mock appearance of the Antichrist. However, the crucial point is the relationship between Christ and the Antichrist, between being and appearance, whereby the latter is defined as a mendacious image [*mere mendacium*] and thus a mere caricature of the former. This new external image has allegedly *veiled* the image of Christ, and thus the Church has been emptied of its most precious gift: it has become externally impressive but hollow and shallow inside. Thus the argument goes. Appearances such as ceremonies, superstitions, and justice by the works have *replaced* and thereby excluded the original definitions of grace, love, and justice by faith alone, and hence, they cover up and distort the meaning of these words and practices. The hard currency of the word has been devalued by an economy of counterfeit money – a pattern that is recognizable from Luther's critique of indulgences, morality, and metaphysics. The prophecy thus fulfilled is the prophecy of decline and devastation: "He will devastate wonderful things."<sup>25</sup>

Luther notes with amusement that this sentence may be read in different ways: "Daniel is ambiguous here, so that one either can understand these 'wonderful things' as *things* the king will corrupt or the *deeds* of the king are described as corruptive and as such they are characterized as amazing and incredible."<sup>26</sup> This ambiguity is a key point for the whole argument, since it illustrates the *double* face of the monstrous king. On the one hand, he has an impressive appearance through

<sup>22</sup> Cf. WA 7,721.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. WA 7,722.

<sup>24</sup> "*Stabit rex potens faciebus.*" WA 7,728.

<sup>25</sup> "ET MIRABILIA VASTABIT" WA 7,759.

<sup>26</sup> "Ambiguus autem est Daniel, ut possint intelligi vel ea mirabilia, quae invadit rex ille ut corrumpat. Vel opera eius, quae perpetrat in corrumpendis illis, ceu res eius gestas apellet mirabiles et incredibiles." WA 7,759.

pomp, cathedrals, and beautiful costumes. On the other hand, he “devastates” the people from within.

Luther’s decisive point is that the prophesied king of visions has submitted the Word of God to his own opinions and prescribed his interpretations for others. His power is seen as *authoritarian* and *totalitarian*, since he rejects and condemns all other voices. Hence, he demands that all people should merely listen and subject themselves to his words. Moreover, he is accused of putting his own power above all others, including Godself, so that “not even God demands with such majesty and power.”<sup>27</sup> This boldness is according to Luther the final indication of his *success*, and thus of his insolence (the magnification of his heart) which in the near future will bring him to a fall.

According to Patrick Preston, Ambrosius Catharinus’s polemics has probably served as the “literary origin” of the Counter-Reformation.<sup>28</sup> Hence, the controversy plainly invites confessional polemics concerning who is right and wrong in their interpretation of the historical development. The continuation of such debates is hardly relevant today, but it becomes all the more significant to understand their inner dynamic. There are pretensions, pride, and unreasonable allegations on both sides. Still, measured according to literary standards, Luther’s subversive rhetoric is unmatched, exploiting the power of humor, irony, and satire in order to uncover and thus denude the figure of the emperor in his new and holy clothes.<sup>29</sup> This is indeed an effective rhetoric against any abuse of power. Having lived under that threat of excommunication and finally been declared an *outlaw*, Luther holds a certain legitimacy as dissident. With bitter irony he points at totalitarian traits of the system that seeks to control the public sphere and silence divergent voices. Luther challenges this authoritarian power in a language which is scornful and ironic. Could it possibly also be perceived as blasphemous? It definitely moves far beyond the limits of conventional academic discourse, at least.

Following the ambiguity of devastation in Daniel, Luther’s critique of images, myths, and idols requires a double approach. On the one hand, there is the power of the world which is growing through success and deceit, yet for Luther this power is only surpassed by the majesty of the hidden God. Hence, the *critical* potential of this notion is at stake. The reader is faced with the exclusive alternatives of scripture: you cannot serve two Lords; you have to serve either God or Mammon (Matt 6:24). Still, the *facies* tend to confuse and thus level the difference between God and idols. Hence, Luther turns to the images of the cornerstone and the cross – figures that target at uncovering and thus *disillusioning* the masks, the monstrosity, and the power

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<sup>27</sup> “Ne deus quidem ipse tanta maiestate et potentia exigit.” WA 7,778.

<sup>28</sup> Preston, “Catharinus Versus Luther, 1521,” 368.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Preston’s significant point: “If in the course of this, Luther revealed a remarkable comic gift, his purpose was nevertheless intensely serious.” Preston, “Catharinus Versus Luther, 1521,” 377.

of the monstrous king, the king of Babylon “in our times.” The separation between two orders of power opens up a space of interpretation and discernment. Luther’s radical critique of power thus follows the pattern of the hidden God in his majesty. However, his most effective and devastating rhetoric is formulated as the *Christological* mockery and subversion of the images of power. Christ is thus the *scandal* who has been devastated and replaced by the monstrous image of the king: he is the (heavenly) king of the true Jerusalem who *destroys* the fake images, the *facies* of Jerusalem in a powerful rhetorical gesture. Luther therefore predicts his imminent return in the form of a stone, that is an iconoclastic destruction of these *appearances* of Jerusalem by the stumbling block – that is, Christ himself.

The apocalyptic visions belong to a contested genre, and Luther gradually turned skeptical to the legitimacy of historical interpretations based on the Book of Revelation. Still, he applies the Book of Daniel in a devastating critique of the papacy and its claims to political power with the authority of representing the *topos* of the New Jerusalem. The “king of visions/faces” is identified with the pope and he counts the four kingdoms as if these visions represented a detailed account of historical events. He also identifies no less than twelve “faces” that prove the alleged hypocrisy, including pageantry, titles of honour, gowns, waste of money, abuse of sacraments, etc.<sup>30</sup> In a key passage he even interprets the visions from the Book of Revelation chapter 9 corresponding to highly concrete references in the history of the church.<sup>31</sup> This is indeed a bold undertaking, although the text betrays that even Luther becomes slightly hesitant when he ventures into concrete interpretations.<sup>32</sup> Could we possibly conclude that Luther’s pamphlet against Ambrosius Catharinus indicates a firm belief in the historical accuracy of the apocalyptic visions?

This is a tricky question and the answer is hardly as obvious as may be assumed by Luther’s direct assaults on his opponents. There is little doubt about the earnestness of his concern, yet at the same time the exposition of these texts are kept in a humorous and satirical tone, with correspondingly ironical distance to the imagery described in the apocalyptic visions. Although he argues in favour of a simple, grammatical exegesis of the text, his own interpretation is anything but sober and literal. Therefore, even if these rules are accepted, it remains an open question as to *how* these images and visions ought to be read without completely misinterpreting the genre. Luther thereby transgresses a few conventional limits for academic and public discourse, to put it cautiously.

One thing is to venture into a direct historical application of the texts, thus identifying singular events as predicted in scripture; another is to keep up these visions of the text as a mirror for the contemporary society, in order to identify certain

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<sup>30</sup> See WA 7,730–36.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. WA 7,736–39.

<sup>32</sup> “Meu hic sensu periclitabor.” WA 7,736–37.

symptoms of power abuse and hypocrisy. Although Luther comes closer to the latter, and thereby differs from Catharinus, he also seems to have a more ambitious goal – to deconstruct a particular reading of Matthew, of Daniel, and of John’s Apocalypse, which supports the status quo and the traditional authority of the papacy in Rome. The *appearance* of Jerusalem is ironically declared “wonderful” in the sense of fulfilling Daniel’s prophecy of decline and devastation: “He will devastate wonderful things.”<sup>33</sup> The God Almighty, who is the hidden God, will according to Luther’s interpretation come to devastate and destroy the wonderful Roman *appearance* of Jerusalem, even if it happens in the Christological sense of a king who arrives on a donkey, who is crucified and suffers, yet who not only speaks, but even reveals and “is” the true Word of God.

Returning to the image from the introduction, Luther refers to the Ark of the Covenant and the two “heads on the stick” indicating where the *secret* of God’s presence is localized. Indeed, this secret is the key to understanding the Jerusalem Code inscribed in Luther’s argument: if the Church preserves this secret in its heart and its words, while listening to its oracle, which ought to be the Holy Spirit, it would still represent the true Jerusalem. Then, God *in Christo* would represent the new Covenant, and thus the divine presence of the New Jerusalem. However, if the pope makes claims to being the *king* and ruler of this New Jerusalem, then the same *topos* will turn into its opposite, Luther argues, and that is nothing less than Satan’s Synagogue in the New Babel. The papal pretense to represent the true Jerusalem would be disclosed as *mere mendacium*. Consequently, Luther argues in a provocative antithesis:

The Pope as sinner is a servant of the Devil.  
 The Church of the Pope is the Synagogue of Satan.  
 The righteous Christ is the king of justice.  
 The Church of Christ is the Community of Saints.<sup>34</sup>

Luther thus argues effectively for the point of view that these apocalyptic texts have less than nothing to do with ensuring secular power and the suppression of common people through religious authority. On the contrary, these texts are apt to ridicule and shatter such power in an epic rhetorical gesture.

Luther adopts a suspicious approach to the dominant *interpretations* of scripture. His suspicion is directed at the *facies* – the dazzling appearance of power. This suspicion undermines its religious and political foundation by ridiculing its authority. Moreover, Luther suspects a hidden atheism to be the source behind all the marvelous symbols of rites and ceremonies; an atheism which is the result not only of hubris,

<sup>33</sup> “ET MIRABILIA VASTABIT” WA 7,759.

<sup>34</sup> “Papa peccator, est minister diabolic / Ecclesia Papae est Synagoga Satanae / Christus iustus, est rex iustitiae. / Ecclesia Christi, est communio sanctorum.” WA 7,712.

but of occupying the place which belongs to Christ and then justifying this occupation with a theory of substitution. A critical description of these *facies* identifies them as idolatry combined with an ideology of power and exploitation, and Luther's hermeneutics of suspicion ends up with a massive critique of this ideology which serves the mere preservation of power.

The apocalyptic text plays a specific role in this textual procedure. It is not merely applied in order to interpret history according to a millennial matrix of events but in a more general sense, unmasking the totalitarian and tyrannical tendencies of papal rule, executed by the system of Canonical Law. By these means, including the authority to interpret scripture, to prescribe laws, to judge perpetrators, and excommunicate political or religious enemies, the ecclesial hierarchy has been able to control and suppress the freedom of expression.<sup>35</sup> The economy of retribution instituted by the letters of indulgences is therefore only a symptom of a total system which penetrates everything from political decisions to the power of eternal life and death, or as Luther points out, claims its sphere of sovereignty to apply even over the gates of hell.<sup>36</sup>

The Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation play a key role in unmasking what Luther sees as systemic abuse of power. It is exactly as *scripture* that it may achieve the role of "revelation" in this political sense, that is revealing the ruling ideology in its most magnificently devastating form and thus exposing it to laughter. The role of these apocalypses is not primarily *historical* but rather *literary*, like a piece of fiction: with literary devices reminiscent of a modern short story by Franz Kafka or a novel by Milan Kundera, it mirrors the structure of society and ridicules the authority of the powerful. Luther does not shrink from the most blasphemous exclamations. In order to provoke scandal he leaves all scruples behind, producing a text which in its imagery demonstrates a wild masquerade of *facies*, and thereby further develops the fantastic genre of the apocalypse rather than simply adapting it to a schematic theory of historical stages.

The apocalypse serves as a model of political expression, but also as a model of thoughts that subverts the dominant structure of society. Hence, Luther is faithful to the idea of destruction, and in this case, it is the image of Jerusalem that is effectively deconstructed and thus destroyed. What further contributes to the efficacy of the genre in this case is that both adversaries refer to the same texts, although in radically differing interpretations of it. Moreover, Luther is faithful to the authority of the text in the sense that he sees it as a form of divine intervention, indeed, an *invention* of the other: unexpected, terrifying, and revealing the true character of hypocrisy and appearances. Hence, the authority of the powerful is haunted by its own ideological foundation.

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<sup>35</sup> See the endless accusations of abuses within the Church in Luther, WA 7,762–69.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. WA 7,708. et passim.

The genre of apocalypse therefore becomes a paragon of the *critical* function of the *deus absconditus* in Luther's thought. The hidden other surpasses the system of rites and rules, and is thus able to break the system open from within, in a violent but possibly liberating gesture of destruction and grace. Therefore, this is the source of the subversive power of apocalypse, literally understood as 'unveiling' or 'revelation' – its ability to *reveal* the seductive structures and masks of power. If the description is trenchant, even though excessive, Christ becomes the model of massive and overwhelming system criticism from within. Luther is not the first or last theologian to make that point, but it has rarely been done with similar linguistic and rhetorical force.