

CHARLES WESLEY'S INTERPRETATION OF SOME
BIBLICAL PROPHECIES ACCORDING TO A
PREVIOUSLY UNPUBLISHED LETTER
DATED 25 APRIL, 1754

KENNETH G.C. NEWPORT★
JOHN RYLANDS RESEARCH INSTITUTE,
UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

On at least five occasions in November and December 1762 John Wesley listened to the preaching of George Bell, a Methodist preacher who had come to the conclusion that the world would end on 28 February 1763.¹ Wesley judged Bell to be wrong, but this was not an opinion shared by all. Consequently, although Wesley himself slept soundly on the night of the earth's predicted doom, many others 'were afraid to go to bed, and some wandered about in the fields, being persuaded that, if the world did not end, at least London would be swallowed up by an earthquake'.²

At the time of his attendance at the Bell meetings, John Wesley was engaged also in the task of revising his notes on the Book of Revelation. Indeed, it was probably the enthusiasm of Bell that gave rise to the remark made in the *Journal* for Monday 6 December.

Monday the 6th, and the following days, I corrected the notes upon the Revelation. Oh how little do we know of this deep book! At least, how little do I know! I can barely conjecture, not affirm any one point concerning that part of it which is yet unfulfilled.³

This fundamental uncertainty regarding the meaning of the Book of Revelation was by no means new. Several years before, in the first edition of his *Notes on the New Testament*, Wesley similarly expressed caution regarding the possibility of understanding the prophecies. A correct interpretation of these prophecies had, according to Wesley, eluded 'many wise and good men' and it had once seemed to him

* The writing of this article was made possible by the generous award of a research bursary by the Board of the John Rylands Research Institute. I am grateful also to Oliver Beckerlegge, Gareth Lloyd and Henry Rack for numerous helpful suggestions and comments.

¹ See Nehemiah Curnock (ed.), *The journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols (London: Robert Culley, 1909–16), 4: 539–42.

² *Ibid.*, 5:9.

³ *Ibid.*, 4:540.

that he too might live and die without understanding Revelation at all.⁴

In the very year that John Wesley began work on the first edition of his *Notes on the New Testament*, his brother Charles had reached quite opposite conclusions regarding the Book of Revelation. Far from being uncertain as to the meaning of the prophecies, Charles had come to the view that his understanding was almost complete. Where others had failed in their interpretations, Charles had succeeded. The reason for this success was simple: God's time for revealing the prophecies had come. It was now the 'time of the end' spoken of in Daniel 12:4 and as such it was the time for 'knowledge to be increased'. In the light of this perceived divine promise of wisdom, Charles's optimism knew few bounds. Indeed, he now understood not only the nature of the events predicted in the prophecies, but even the time of their accomplishment. The world would end in 1794. This precise understanding, writes Charles, came to him on 21 March 1754. A few weeks later he wrote the letter which is reproduced in full below.

The prediction that the present world order would end in 1794 is startling enough, but Charles's understanding of the apocalyptic timetable goes much further. Charles is writing in 1754 and is expecting the beginning of the terrible last judgements of God to begin at almost anytime ('tho' they should begin this very year, it would be no way inconsistent with the scripture-prophecies' [§8]). Certainly these judgements will have begun by 1761 or 1762, which is the date given by Charles for the conversion of the Jews since, he argues, in prophecy the conversion of the Jews and the final judgement go hand in hand. The conversion of the Jews leads to their return to their homeland where they set about restoring the temple. However, in 1777 or 1778 they are once again attacked, their newly appointed 'prince' is 'cut off' and they are expelled. Following their expulsion from their land and the destruction of their city and temple, the Jews (and the rest of the saved) are then 'under a cloud' for a time, that is they must suffer a little of the plagues which have come upon the world.

⁴ John Wesley, *Explanatory notes on the New Testament* (1755), 932. Wesley's pessimism apparently lessened somewhat following his reading of the works of Johann Albrecht Bengel (*Apparatus criticus* [1734], *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* [1742], *Erklärte Offenbarung Johannis* [1740]). These works, Wesley states, gave him new hope that he might yet understand the prophecies, or at least a good number of them. Despite this profession of optimism, however, it is clear that by the time of the writing of the first edition of the *Notes*, Wesley still lacks certainty on very many points. Wesley will not undertake to defend all of what Bengel wrote, and indeed some of the prophecies 'will not be opened but in eternity'. The apparent optimism is therefore limited, and it is all but excised by the last paragraph of his introduction to Revelation, which begins 'Yet I by no means pretend to understand or explain all that is contained in this mysterious book' (Wesley *Notes*, 932).

The last judgements fall. Fire, hail and blood rain down from heaven, the sea is turned to blood, rivers are turned to poison, locusts which sting like scorpions swarm the earth. Upon the followers of Antichrist (Rome) come even more terrible things. As a result of these judgements two thirds of the population die. Suddenly angels appear to save those destined for salvation. These angels take the saved to a place of safety where they are nurtured by God. The remaining wicked, however, are slain by massive hailstones which fall from heaven. This final plague marks the end of the judgement and the beginning of the millennium. Christ returns and rules in person on Mount Sion.

The contents of this letter are, then, strange and those acquainted with the wider corpus of Charles Wesley's writings may be more than a little surprised by its contents. For this reason it is worth pointing out that the authorship of the letter is not in dispute; the handwriting (including a short-hand note at the very end) clearly indicates its authenticity, and there is no reason to doubt the comment of the one who wrote on the paper cover into which the letter has been stitched that it is a letter of Charles Wesley to an U[n]known C[orrespondent]. The letter is potentially of great importance, for it gives a glimpse of one side of Charles Wesley's religious imagination which has hitherto remained all but hidden. However, the remarkable absence of similar material elsewhere in Charles's writings alerts us to the danger of making too much of the letter, for while one cannot deny that the contents of the letter are characterized by raw apocalypticism, this kind of thinking seems not to be a noticeable characteristic of the wider corpus of Charles's writings. We shall return to this point below.

It is the purpose of this article first to explain how Charles Wesley came up with his apocalyptic timetable and then to place this letter within the wider context of his overall work and development. Before engaging in this study, however, we must first give the text of the letter under consideration.⁵

St Mungo, 25 April 1754⁶

Dear Sir

- 1 The answer of many prayers is at hand; I mean the Kingdom of our Lord in its fulness upon earth. What of that Kingdom has hitherto taken place since the days of the Apostles, is only the first fruits of it, and what the Scriptures

⁵ The letter (reference DDCW 1/51) is held in the Methodist Archive at the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.

⁶ The reference here to 'St Mungo' is problematic, for it is not apparent where this place was. Charles's own journal gives no information since it has either been lost or was not kept for the period 6 December 1753 – 8 July 1754. According to John, Charles was in London in late February 1754, though on 27th he visited John in Hot Well near Bristol (*Journal* 4.92). In July 1754 he was again with his brother, this time in the neighbourhood of Norwich (*Journal* 4.96). Where he was between these times, however, is not clear.

call *the day of small things*. The fulness of that blessed Kingdom, and the day of its great things, is yet to come, and is now at such a small distance of time that you yourself may, by the course of nature, live to see it. The stone that was cut out of the mountain in the Apostles' days, without hands, by an heavenly divine power and was separated from the idolatrous Roman Empire (which hitherto has gained but a small increase in comparison of what it has yet to gain) will soon become a great mountain, that is a great kingdom and fill the whole Earth; and the kingdoms of the world will become one great and united kingdom of GOD and his Christ.

2 GOD has been pleased to lead me this winter, as it were by the hand, thro' the labyrinth of the scripture Prophecies relative to the latter times. The scriptures say expressly that a great part of the contents of these Prophecies, and more especially what relates to their accomplishment, was to be shut up and sealed unto the time of the end; that is, until the very beginning of those days when they are to be fulfilled. And now these days are begun. He who hath the key of David, who shuts so as no man can open, and opens so as no man can shut, hath taken off the seals, and opened to unworthy me in a very great, tho' not yet in a full, measure, not only the nature of these awful and glorious events which the scriptures say are to be brought to pass in the latter times, but also the very times which the scriptures point out for their accomplishment.

3 As for the events themselves it is only proper at this time to mention in general, that they are the conversion of GOD's antient people the Jews, their restoration to their own land; the destruction of the Romish Antichrist and of all the other adversaries of Christ's kingdom; the inbringing of the fulness of the Gentiles, and the beginning of that long and blessed Period when peace, righteousness and felicity, are to flourish over the whole earth. Then Christ the Lord of hosts shall reign in Mount Sion, and in Jerusalem and before his Elders gloriously.

4 It will appear a Paradox to affirm that all these events will be accomplished in FORTY years time counted from this present year 1754; and the first and second of them, viz the conversion of the Jews and their restoration to their own land, within the short space of seven or eight years time; but what with men is impossible, is both possible and easy with GOD.

5 But O! dreadful days that are coming on the earth before the last of the above mentioned events, I mean before the long and blessed period take place. There is a long train of dreadful judgments coming on the earth, more dreadful that ever it yet beheld; more especially upon these nations, upon whom Christ's name is called, for their neglect and contempt of his glorious gospel. And above all, Babylon shall have her double cup, and be made drunk with the wine of the fierceness of the wrath of GOD as his holy prophets and apostles foretold long ago.

6 Howbeit, before she shall be brought to her final Ruin, power shall be given her to distress the Protestant Churches by wars and persecutions, and many of Christ's faithful ones in those days shall be tried and purified and made white.

7 O the blessed meaning of that expression *made white*! It means no less than that in these trying times they shall be enabled to stand with firmness and constancy to the cause of Christ and the testimony of his word; and shall be honoured to die the martyr's death and get the martyr's Crown and those white robes and palms mentioned in the book of the *Revelation* and be made partakers of that glorious reward which the same inspired book calls the First Resurrection.

8 The Scriptures point out the time when the judgments shall end and when the blessed days shall begin, but do not, so far as I have yet observed, point out the precise year when the judgments are to commence; only it is clear

from scripture that they will begin before the end of SEVEN years hence. And tho' they should commence this very year, it would be no way inconsistent with the scripture-prophecies, but when once they are begun, they will go on in a continued train of one judgment on the back of another, till the end of the FORTY years, counting from this present year. Wars, famine and pestilence shall be but the beginning of sorrows; for besides and on the back of all these, shall follow all the woes contained under the Seven Trumpets and Seven Vials; only that the Vials (the last excepted which extends to the wicked in general over the whole earth) seem chiefly, if not only, for the beast and his followers.

- 9 The whole prophecies relating to the latter times, (which make up by far the largest part of the prophetic books of the Old Testament), are full of judgments which are to be executed upon the earth in these days, and of the blessings which are to be poured forth upon the earth and its inhabitants, and more especially upon GOD's antient people, when once these judgments are over: and when that people are to be made blessed themselves, all the nations of the earth are at the same time to be blessed in them, and along with them, in their national capacity. Read over the prophets once more and you will find them full of the judgments and blessings that are to be poured forth in the latter times; and you will be led at the same time to take notice that generally there is some passage or circumstance which points out the judgment to be about the time of the deliverance of GOD's antient people. The year of his redeemed, the day of his great wrath, and the year of his recompense for the Controversy of Sion, and the destruction of Babylon, go together; and the blessings are to be made good at that time when Israel's Light is come, and the glory of the Lord arisen upon them. Then, say the scriptures, shall the Gentiles come to Israel's Light and kings to the brightness of their rising. And the Apostle expressly says, that GOD's receiving again of the Jewish people shall bring the world and its inhabitants, as it were, life from the dead.
- 10 But to return to the judgments: the scriptures expressly say that by these judgments which are coming on, two thirds of the whole number of mankind on the face of the earth will be cut off, and that a third part will be made to escape and will be refined as silver and be tried as gold is tried. Yet the last judgment that is to be executed on the earth in these times shall be of such a dreadful and extraordinary nature, that none can escape being cut off by it, but the preternatural assistance of angels, whom GOD will send forth to gather his elect from the 4 corners of the earth, unto a place of safety on the earth, where he will provide for them. And where that place is to be is also expressly mentioned in scripture, and then shall be fulfilled that word of the Lord Luk. 18:26 etc, that two men shall be in one bed, the one shall be taken and the other left; and the one shall be taken to a place of safety by the angels of GOD, and the other left to destruction. And two women shall be grinding together at the same mill, and in like manner, the one shall be taken and the other left; and two men shall be working together in the field, at one and the same work, the one shall be taken and the other left.
- 11 But let not them who fear GOD and tremble at his word be afraid beyond measure of these days of judgment which are coming, for many are the promises scattered up and down the word of GOD, for their encouragement. Yea, they will be sealed in their foreheads, with the seal of the living GOD, so that the preternatural judgments will scarcely, if at all, be allowed to touch them; and as to the natural ones of famine, sword and pestilence, they will only be allowed to touch the people of GOD so far as may be for their vastly greater good. The 46 and 91 Psalms are intended in a particular manner for the comfort of GOD's people in these times. Let them also comfort themselves in this, that the days of judgment, distressful as they are, yet are

- nothing when compared with the long and glorious period of universal peace, righteousness and blessedness which is to follow immediately on the back of the judgments. And as by the oeconomy of nature, silver cannot be brought out of ore, but by means of the furnace, so by oeconomy of Providence, the day of blessedness cannot be brought about, but by the means of the preceeding days of judgment. 'Tis quite vain and inconsistent with the word of GOD, to expect the blessings to be poured forth upon the earth in any other shape. The numbers and periods mentioned in Daniel and the Revelation, when rightly understood and compared together, do point out the time when these things shall be fully accomplished, so as it may be calculated without hazard, and without erring above a year or so.
- 12 The first time I began to attempt the scripture calculations relating to the conversion of the Jews, the fall of Antichrist and the introduction of the fulness of the Gentiles was in the year 1746. And having made myself master of an antient Chronology, I did then make such calculations as happened to become pretty near to what I now find to be the truth: but I afterward saw that my then calculations could not be depended upon, because I did not then observe any scriptures which seemed to fix the year from whence any of the periods assigned in Daniel, or in the Revelations, were to be computed. However, by means of these calculations, and by the predictions of some good men, I was impressed with a notion that these events were at no great distance of time. But on the 21 of March last, after I had by an accurate examination of the scripture prophecies, both of the Old and New Testament, been enabled to penetrate into the nature of the great and awful events that are to be brought about in the latter days, I was enabled also to penetrate into the passages of scripture, which determine the time of their fulfilment. I can only now just give you a glimpse of the first step of the calculation, without giving you the proofs.
- 13 The first step then toward the finding out the time fixed by scriptures for the accomplishment of all these things is the observing that the number 666, assigned Revelation 13:18 for determining the time of the final destruction of the Beast, hath a relation to the *time*, *times* and *half time*, assigned in Dan. 12 for bringing all the events spoken of in that and the preceeding chapters, to an accomplishment, and particularly, for the bringing the end of Antichrist spoken of in the end of the last verse of the 11 chapter; and the final deliverance of the Jews spoken of in the 1 and 7 verse of chapter 12. And so the said period of *time* and *times* and *half* a time is made up of 666 – 666 – 666 – 333 amounting in all to 2331 years, concerning which 2331 years I am able to shew that the scriptures do expressly point out the first year thereof to have been the year 538 before the first of the Christian Aera, being the first year of Darius the Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans.
- 14 I am also able to produce another concurring Prophecy which assigns the same number of years and divides them into different parts, from which Division it appears that the Jews will have returned to their own land, and have an Anointed Prince of their own over them about the year 1771 or 1772; that they will be invaded in their own land and their Prince cut off and their city and sanctuary once more demolished, about the year 1777 or 1778; that they, as well as the whole people of Xt, will remain under a Cloud for a time. But all will be brought to rights again by the pouring forth of the last plagues on the adversaries of Christ, and at length by that total final Destruction which the Prophet calls *The great day of GOD's wrath* about the year 1794. Herewith also concurs the prophecy in Dan. 8:14, which foretells that the Jewish sanctuary is to be cleansed (or justified, as in the Hebrew) that it shall be made fit for divine service at the end of 2300 years, which I am able to shew commences from the same year before Christ 538, being the

first year of the Mede-Chaldean or Mede-Persian monarchy prophesied of in that same 8 chapter of Daniel under the vision of the Ram which had two horns, viz the Medean and Chaldean empires and whose higher horn, the Chaldean, came up last.

- 15 What I have now hinted is only a small part of the scripture-evidences relating to the subject, which you must be content with till the book comes out. Meantime let me commend to you to read over again Fletcher's Fulfilling of the scriptures, and remark the places referred to†. Let me also recommend to you to look into the passages of Sir Isaac Newton on Daniel and the Revelations+, and into Mead's commentary on the Revelations‡, both of whom come very near the truth. And the only thing that hindered them from penetrating more thoroughly into it, was because GOD's time for taking off the seals was not fully come; but had any of these three men been alive at this day, they might in the Divine Providence have made it plain.
- 16 Show this to any who have been of the concert for prayer for the coming of the Kingdom of Christ. I am well assured in my own mind that that very Society, tho' not the only persons, yet are among the persons especially pointed at by the Spirit in those remarkable words [in] Malachi 3:16-17: 'Then they that feared the Lord, spoke often one to another, and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance (i.e. a register) was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought on his name, and they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels (i.e. my special treasure or my peculiar and proper people) and I will spare them as a man spareth his own son that serveth him.' The time when he will more especially spare them is mentioned in the beginning of the 4 chapter: 'For behold the day cometh that shall burn as an oven and all the proud and all that do wickedly shall be as stubble, and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave [them neither root nor branch]'.

The letter printed above is at once both highly informative and annoyingly short on detail. Indeed, one of the most frustrating aspects of the letter is the reference in §15 to a book which Wesley is either planning to write himself or which he expects another to publish in the near future. This work will deal more fully with the topics addressed only briefly in the letter. If the reference is to a work that Wesley was planning to write himself, then no such work ever appeared. However, in the relatively short space of the letter we are able to gain a significant insight into Wesley's interpretation into several key prophecies.

The letter begins with a common enough theme. The Kingdom of the Lord, says Wesley, is rapidly approaching in all its fullness. It emerges in the rest of the letter that what Wesley meant by this was that the literal Kingdom of God was approaching, a process which would reach its consummation in 1794. Like many before him, Wesley rejects the view that the Kingdom of God is

† Edit 1671. p. 29, 32-38, 122-125, 190, 193, 194, 354, 360, 371, 513, 514

+ The 8th edit. 1733 p. 12, 15, 247-251 also p. 245, 246

‡ On chap 20 [shorthand note]. [The meaning of this brief shorthand note is unclear.]

merely a spiritual realm; for Wesley it is a literal spatial Kingdom which God will usher in. The day is coming when Christ himself, the Lord of hosts, shall reign in Mount Sion, and in Jerusalem (§3).

It emerges in the rest of the letter that, somewhat surprisingly, Charles Wesley was a *premillennialist*, that is he looked forward to the appearance of Christ and the executing of the great judgement before the onset of the millennium depicted in Revelation 20. Following this appearance of Christ, the millennium, a period of one thousand years during which Christ would reign upon earth, would begin. Premillennialism, which was relatively uncommon in the eighteenth century, is based upon a basically negative view of mankind, for those who adhere to it hold that mankind (and/or human society) is rotten to the core and that this state of things can be overcome only by the direct intervention of God. Those who hold the opposing view, on the other hand, suggest that Christ will appear only after the thousand-year period. Indeed, it is during this period that the ground is prepared for the Lord's return by means of a radical and hitherto unprecedented spreading of the gospel. It was to this latter group, the postmillennialists, that the majority of Charles Wesley's contemporaries, including, most probably, his brother John, belonged.⁷

The immediate reference in §1 is to the vision of Daniel 2. The vision of that chapter concerns an image of a man with a head of gold, a chest of silver, loins of brass and legs of iron. The whole image was supported, rather precariously, by feet compounded of a weak mixture of iron and clay. At length, a stone, which has been cut without hands, strikes the bottom of the image and the whole statue collapses. The stone grows into a mountain and fills the whole earth.

The meaning of this vision, according to such commentators as Sir Isaac Newton, whose work Wesley recommends to his reader (§15), is fairly plain. The statue represents four kingdoms: Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. The feet represent the divided kingdom which was to follow the fourth kingdom, namely the individual

⁷ See especially Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Millennium and utopia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949). Richard Bauckham's contribution to the entry 'Chiliasmus' in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (1980), vol. 7, 737–45, gives a quick overview of the period with which the present study is concerned, and D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in modern Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 60–3, 81–6, sketches in the broader British scene. John Wesley's views on this matter seem not to have been static. Thus for example in his *Notes* he prints a version of the apocalyptic chart constructed by Bengel, a chart which has some premillennial elements (*Notes*, 1051–2). The extent to which John agreed with the results of Bengel's precise calculations is impossible to judge, but the fact that he has chosen to reproduce so much from Bengel and even refers to him as 'the great Bengelius' and 'that excellent man' surely suggests some level of sympathy with Bengel's scheme. In his sermon 'The general spread of the gospel' (see *Sermons on several occasions: by the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 3 vols [1865], vol. 2, 315–27), on the other hand, John seems much more inclined to a postmillennialist viewpoint.

states into which the empire of Rome eventually disintegrated. The stone, which has been 'cut out without hands' (Dan. 2:34), represents the Kingdom of God which will destroy the kingdoms of this world, replacing them as an everlasting kingdom.⁸ This was a scheme with which Wesley evidently agreed.

Wesley, like some others of his day, divides the arrival of the 'Kingdom of our Lord' or 'Kingdom of God' into two basic phases. In the vision of Daniel 2, commentators noted, the Kingdom of God arrives as a 'stone' but grows into a 'great mountain' which fills the whole earth (Dan 2:35). Some rather naturally took this to mean that the growth of the Kingdom of God was to be gradual; as the stone 'grew' into a mountain, so the Kingdom of God, which arrived in its infancy with the first advent of Jesus, would eventually grow into a utopia upon earth.⁹ Others, however, argued that while the kingdom had arrived in a small measure with the first advent of Jesus, the final consummation of the kingdom would be marked by an eschatological *rite de passage*. This was the opinion of, among others, the eminent scientist and nonconformist theologian Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), who argued that the little stone represents the beginning of the Kingdom of God, which, at its inception, was but 'inconsiderable'. However, the little stone will become a mountain at the second advent when all empires will be overturned and 'some infinitely better state of things' be introduced in their place.¹⁰ In this letter Wesley comes close to this opinion, for it later becomes quite clear that the kingdom which he is expecting is not of a spiritual, but a literal nature and its arrival preceded by the terrible punishments sent by God upon the unjust. It is after these climactic events, and only then, that the 'kingdoms of the world will become one great and united kingdom of GOD and his Christ' (§1 cf. Rev. 11:15).

Wesley's reference to the 'idolatrous Roman Empire' (§1) and the 'Romish Antichrist' whose destruction is foretold in the prophecies (§3) similarly reflects a view widely held among

⁸ See Sir Isaac Newton, *Observations on the prophecies* (1733), 24–7.

⁹ See above n. 7.

¹⁰ *The theological and miscellaneous works of Joseph Priestley*, 25 vols (1817–31), vol. 12, 309–43. A third view on Daniel 2:35, 45 is found in the works of one of Priestley's associates, Robert Edward Garnham ('An Enquiry into the Time, at which the Kingdom of Heaven will commence' in Joseph Priestly (ed.), *Theological repository*, 6 vols [1769–88], vol. 6, 244–84. Garnham argued that the stone in no way represents the kingdom established by Jesus at his first advent, for the kingdom established at that time was only spiritual and thus differs not in degree, but in kind from the kingdom that will be set up when Christ comes with power. Garnham's conception of the Kingdom of God is quite clear. For him the kingdom was literal not spiritual and its arrival would coincide with the visible coming of the Son of Man (253). Indeed, according to Garnham the phrase 'Kingdom of God' conveys 'the uncompounded idea of the government to be set up, when he shall hereafter come in the clouds' (245).

eighteenth-century Protestants that the Roman Church was the incarnation of Antichrist. This identification has been well documented already and it is enough to refer to some of the literature.¹¹ Wesley does not mention here any particular prophecies which lead him to identify the Antichrist with Rome, but those most commonly cited were Daniel 7:8 together with its interpretation in Daniel 7:24–25 and Revelation 13. Similarly, many commentators of the period identified ‘the man of sin’ mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 with the Pope.¹²

The second paragraph of the letter is of particular interest. Throughout Wesley makes it clear that he considers the days in which he is living to be the ‘latter times’ spoken of in Scripture. For Wesley, the end of the present world order is near indeed. The reference to the shutting up and sealing of the prophecies until the time of the end is again taken from Daniel, who right at the end of the book is told ‘But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased’ (Dan. 12:4). Those who were living, as they believed, in this ‘time of the end’, naturally saw in this passage a promise that at this time the contents of the book of Daniel, together with those of Revelation, were to become plain to those who were wise (Dan. 12:10). The knowledge that was to be increased is knowledge of the book of Daniel. Wesley is clearly of this opinion, for he says later in the letter that neither Newton nor Mede,¹³ skilled as they were in interpreting the prophecies, could really gain an accurate insight into all truth since God’s time for the unsealing of the book had not come in their lifetimes. The time has now come, however, and a full knowledge of the prophecies is therefore possible. This had been said before Wesley, and it was said again after him. Indeed, it is generally the case that interpreters of the prophecies imagine that they are living in the closing stages of the world’s history and that this being the case, they alone may witness the unsealing of Daniel’s book.

Wesley here is perhaps also reiterating another fairly common theme: the identification of Daniel’s book with the ‘scroll’ of Revelation 5. In that chapter we read of a book which has seven

¹¹ See for example David Brady, *The contribution of British writers between 1560 and 1830 to the interpretation of Revelation 13:16–18 (the number of the beast): a study in the history of exegesis* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983); ‘The number of the beast in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England’, *Evangelical Quarterly*, 45(1973), 219–40; ‘1666: the year of the beast’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 61(1979), 314–36; Christopher Hill, *Antichrist in seventeenth-century England*, rev. edn (London, Verso, 1990).

¹² See for example G. Benson, *A dissertation on 2 Thess II:1–12 in which ’tis shewn that the bishop of Rome is the man of Sin . . .* (1748).

¹³ The references here are to Newton’s *Observations on the prophecies* (1733) and Joseph Mede’s *The key of the Revelation* (1643).

seals and the question is asked 'Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof' (Rev. 5:2). The only one judged worthy is 'the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David' (Rev. 5:5; cf. Wesley's remark that the prophecies have been open to 'unworthy me'). Christ, then, can open the sealed book of Daniel and reveal the mystery of its prophecies. Newton certainly identified Daniel and the scroll, stating that '*John saw, in the right hand of him that sat upon the throne, a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals, viz. the book which Daniel was commanded to seal up*'.¹⁴ This may have been Wesley's thinking also. The description of Christ as the one who has the key of David is from Revelation 3:7; the reference to the one 'who shuts so as no man can open, and opens so as no man can shut' is from Isaiah 22:22 (cf. Rev. 3:8). Wesley then is here in confident mood; it is to him that the secrets of the prophecies have been revealed. Living as he does in the 'time of the end', he may now gain full knowledge.

In the final words of §2 we find a most remarkable statement. Not only the nature of the prophecies have been revealed to Wesley, but even the time of their accomplishment. This is not a remark to be passed over lightly, for it goes beyond a mere statement that the last days have arrived. Wesley's timing of last-day events was unusually precise. The conversion and restoration of the Jews to their own land would take place in about 1761 (§4). About the year 1771 or 1772 they will have 'an Anointed Prince of their own over them' (§14). They will be invaded in their own land and their prince be cut off and their city and sanctuary once more demolished' in about 1777 (§14), and the end of all things will come in 1794 (§14). Such precise date fixing is somewhat unusual, though by no means unique. This is a point to which we shall return below.

The catena of events listed in §3 outlines Wesley's expectations for the future. Like many of his contemporaries, Wesley thought that before the end could come, the Jews must first be converted to Christianity.¹⁵ This expectation was based in part upon the numerous predictions found in the Old Testament relating to God's final gathering of dispersed Israel (e.g. Deut. 30:1-5; Isa. 11:11-12).¹⁶ But perhaps most importantly of all, Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles, clearly expected that the Jews would one day be restored to their rightful place as God's people; this is the point of Romans 9-11. Indeed, given that Wesley here mentions also the 'the

¹⁴ Newton, *Observations*, 259.

¹⁵ See Christopher Hill, 'Till the conversion of the Jews' in Richard H. Popkin (ed.), *Millenarianism and messianism in English literature and thought 1650-1800* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), 12-36.

¹⁶ See for example the comments on these texts made by Joseph Priestley (*Works*, vol. 11, 296; vol. 12, 164).

inbringing of the fulness of the Gentiles', it seems that he may have had his eye on Romans 11:25–26.

Wesley links the predicted restoration of the Jewish people with another prophecy which states that one day the Jewish sanctuary would be restored (Dan. 8:14). This 'cleansing' of the sanctuary Wesley understood quite literally; the 'sanctuary' was not, as some others had argued, the earth which would be 'cleansed' at the second advent, but the literal rebuilt sanctuary in Jerusalem. Wesley predicts that this event will take place in the year 1761 or 1762.

That the Pope and his minions were the Antichrist was almost a given among Wesley's contemporary Protestant interpreters. Antichrist's days were, however, numbered and again Wesley can predict the final destruction of this evil beast fairly precisely: Antichrist will fall in the year 1794. The basis of this calculation is examined below.

In the second half of §3 Wesley refers to 'that long and blessed Period when peace, righteousness and felicity, are to flourish over the whole earth'. It is at this time that 'Christ the Lord of hosts shall reign in Mount Sion, and in Jerusalem and before his Elders gloriously'. The 'long and blessed period' is surely the millennium, a period of peace and joy which was the hope of many. Millennial belief is rooted in Revelation 20, where we read

And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil and Satan, and bound him a thousand years. And cast him into a bottomless pit . . . till the thousand years be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season. And I saw thrones, and they that sat upon them, and judgement was given unto them; and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and had not worshipped the beast, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years (Rev. 20:1–4).

The precise nature of this millennium, its purpose, its timing, its length (was it literally a thousand years or just a very long indefinite time?) was, of course a matter of great debate. This is an area into which we need not go here, for it seems fairly clear that Wesley at least was a premillennialist (he believed that Christ would come before the start of the millennium) and that he thought that the period of the millennium could be inaugurated only by God. In this letter Wesley shows no sign of belief in the gradual emergence of a utopian state. For him the rock which strikes the statue is cut 'without hands'; it is God's work, not man's.

Wesley's apocalyptic vision of the future is thus outlined in §3 and over the course of the rest of the letter he fleshes out this skeletal frame. The millennial reign of Christ is coming, but before that event God's judgement must be poured out on the unrighteous. Chief of all sinners is the mystical 'Babylon' of Revelation 17 and

passim (§5, 9). This 'Babylon' was no other than Rome, the great Antichrist himself. However, Wesley warns, the destruction of Babylon is not quite yet and before it does come, she must gain the full measure of her increase (§1) and 'distress the Protestant Churches by wars and persecutions' (§6). But the faithful need not fear, for despite such afflictions, which might even include a martyr's death, they will be 'made white' by God (§6–7 cf. Rev. 3:4, 7:14).

Wesley looks again to the Book of Revelation for information concerning the nature of the judgements. He is not clear on how long this period of judgement and punishment is to last, although he does know that the period will end in the year 1794. He says also that the judgements will have begun by 1761 at the latest (§8).

The judgements themselves consist of the events outlined in the Seven Trumpets and Seven Vials of Revelation. The first six of the Seven Trumpets are found in Revelation 8–9 and the seventh in 11:15. The blowing of these seven trumpets announces the coming of various calamities upon the earth. At the blowing of the first trumpet, for example, hail, fire and blood rain down upon the earth; when the second trumpet is blown a great mountain burning with fire is cast into the sea and a third of the sea is turned into blood. The next two trumpets continue in this vein, but worse is yet to come, for when the fifth angel blows, a pit is opened and monstrous creatures, half-locust half-scorpion, swarm out across the earth stinging men as they go. The sixth trumpet issues forth an army of 200,000,000 horsemen of terrible appearance. As far as we can tell, for Wesley these terrible events were all still future and part of the awful judgements and punishments that God was to send upon the earth.¹⁷

The Seven Vials (Rev. 15–16) are no less terrible, though Wesley draws some comfort from the fact that Revelation 16:2 suggests to him that the first vial is poured out upon 'the men which had the mark of the beast, and upon them which worshipped his image'. Further in Revelation 17:1 it is said that one of the seven angels who had the seven vials came over and talked to John and showed him 'the judgement of the great whore'. This 'great whore' is Babylon, that is, to Wesley, Rome. Wesley is therefore inclined to

¹⁷ Wesley's interpretation of the trumpets is somewhat unusual, for the norm among writers of the period was to interpret the trumpets symbolically. Further, most commentators located the trumpets, at least the first six of them, in the past. So, for example, Priestley thinks that the first trumpet represents the invasion of the Goths under Alaric in A.D. 395; the second represents the coming of the Vandals (with Burgundians and Alans) in about A.D. 407–455 etc. The locusts are the Saracens under Mahomet and period of 'five months' mentioned is from about 612–762 (Priestley shares Wesley's view that one prophetic day = one literal year). See Priestley, *Works*, vol. 14, 459ff.

think that at least the first six of the seven last plagues are designed mainly as a punishment to be inflicted upon Rome and her followers. Wesley's reference to the 'mark of the beast' is taken from Revelation 13:16, though quite what Wesley understood this mark to be is not clear. However, the beast is surely Rome.

Wesley does not expect the righteous to be immune from all the terrible things that come upon the earth during the final judgements, but rather that they will be tried and refined by the experience. They will come through it victorious.

But let not them who fear GOD and tremble at his word be afraid beyond measure of these days of judgment which are coming, for many are the promises scattered up and down the word of GOD, for their encouragement. Yea, they will be sealed in their foreheads, with the seal of the living GOD, so that the preternatural judgments will scarcely, if at all, be allowed to touch them; and as to the natural ones of famine, sword and pestilence, they will only be allowed to touch the people of GOD so far as may be for their vastly greater good (§11).

It is not surprising given the nature of these terrible events that many will perish. Indeed, Wesley is expecting that some 'two thirds of the whole number of mankind on the face of the earth will be cut off' (§10). The one-third that remains is a mixed group: some, though they suffer now, are destined for salvation, others are to be destroyed.

Those destined for final salvation are, then, among the one-third still alive at the end of the sixth plague. The seventh plague is, however, different from the rest and none can survive it. It is the sending of hail made up of stones each weighing 'a talent' (Rev. 16:17–21). It is in this passage that we meet the phrase 'the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath' which is given to Babylon as mentioned by Wesley in §5. From this final plague none can escape. It is not only for the beast and his followers but 'extends to the wicked in general over the whole earth' (§8). It destroys all.

Before the outpouring of this last judgement, then, God will intervene directly to save his own. His angels will take them away to a place of safety. In support of this claim Wesley refers to what he considers the complementary prophecy of Jesus in Luke 18:26 (*sic* Wesley is actually referring to Luke 17:34ff). According to this text there will come a time when some of the population will simply disappear; there will be two men in one bed, one shall be taken, the other left. There will be two men at work in the field, one shall be taken the other left. There will be two women at the mill, one shall be taken, the other left. Wesley integrates this into his vision of the end. During the course of the first phase of the last judgements (= the seven trumpets and the first six vials) two-thirds of humankind shall perish. Of the one-third that is left, some are destined for salvation and these will be whisked off by God before the concluding part of the judgement, the outpouring of the seventh vial, is begun.

This whisking off is accomplished by angels 'whom GOD will send forth to gather his elect from the four corners of the earth, unto a place of safety on the earth, where he will provide for them' (§10).

The drama is almost complete. The final destruction, which is to be accomplished by the seventh plague, now takes place. Babylon, the Antichrist, is destroyed. The millennium, 'that long and blessed Period when peace, righteousness and felicity, are to flourish over the whole earth' (§1), may now begin and 'Christ the Lord of hosts shall reign in Mount Sion, and in Jerusalem and before his Elders gloriously' (§1).

Enough has now been said to indicate that this previously unpublished letter is a work of some significant importance. It gives us a glimpse of an aspect of Charles Wesley's thought that has hitherto received only slight attention.¹⁸ Perhaps the most interesting aspects of the letter are, however, not the predictions of the above mentioned events themselves, but the way in which Wesley sets about calculating when they are to take place. Wesley is prepared to set fairly precise dates and the methodology he employs to set those dates is somewhat unusual.

It is clear from the letter that Wesley had been interested in date setting for some time. He refers back to 1746 in which year, he says, he had begun to study the prophecies and had come close to the truth. However, it was only in 1754, on 21 March of that year to be precise, that the full picture had come to him, and by the time he wrote the letter a little over a month later his confidence is obvious.

The numbers and periods mentioned in Daniel and the Revelation, when rightly understood and compared together, do point out the time when these things shall be fully accomplished, so as it may be calculated without hazard, and without erring above a year or so (§11).

It is a great shame that Wesley does not say a little more about the methods he employed to arrive at his apocalyptic timetable for there is much in the letter that is left unclear. However, Wesley himself warns in §12 that 'I can only now just give you a glimpse of the first step of the calculation, without giving you the proofs'. Nevertheless, the thinking which lies behind some of what Wesley says in the letter is relatively easy to track down.

The clearest prophetic date in the letter is the year 1794, the

¹⁸ The only substantial study of Charles Wesley's eschatology is J.C. Downes, 'Eschatological doctrines in the writings of John and Charles Wesley' (Ph.D thesis, Edinburgh, 1960). Downes is more concerned with John than with Charles, and naturally does not have access to the letter under consideration here. Consequently his treatment of Charles Wesley's eschatology is limited and, in places, inaccurate (e.g. Downes's remark that Charles rejected date-setting absolutely [125]).

date given for 'the accomplishment of all these things' (§13 cf. §4). Wesley arrives at this date in a highly unusual way. The basis of this prediction is Daniel 12:6–7, a verse near the very end of Daniel, where we read of two men standing on either side of a river. One man says to the other 'how long shall it be to the end of these wonders?' to which the other replies 'it shall be for a time, times and half a time'. For Wesley this statement is crucial. Daniel's vision of the entire course of world history is almost completed, and the question 'how long shall it be to the end of these wonders?' is, for Wesley, a question about the end of the present world order.

If Wesley is to figure out when the prophecy of the time, times and half a time ends, and thus know the date for 'the accomplishment of all these things', he must have two pieces of information: he must know when the period begins and how long it is to last. It is the first of these problems that prevented his full understanding of the prophecies before 21 March 1754 (§12), but he now understands that the period begins in 538 B.C. He states

I am able to shew that the scriptures do expressly point out the first year thereof to have been the year 538 before the first of the Christian Aera, being the first year of Darius the Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans (§13).

This date is probably taken from Daniel 11:1 which introduces the vision of which Daniel 12:7 is a part. Alternatively, since Wesley links the vision of the Seventy Weeks in Daniel 9 with the 'time, times and half a time' of Daniel 12, he may have taken the reference to the 'first year of Darius the Mede' from Daniel 9:1. In either case the conclusion is the same: the period begins in 538 B.C. The start of the period, then, is known to Wesley, but what is the meaning of the 'time, times and half a time'?

Wesley's understanding of the phrase is extremely interesting, for he takes the unusual step of linking the phrase to the number of the beast mentioned in Revelation 13:18.¹⁹ He writes

The first step then toward the finding out the time fixed by scripture for the accomplishment of all these things is the observing that the number 666, assigned Revelation 13:18 for determining the time of the final destruction of the Beast, hath a relation to the *time, times and half time*, assigned in Dan. 12 for bringing all the events spoken of in that and the preceeding chapters, to an accomplishment (§13).

It was Wesley's view that a 'time' is equal to 666 years and that a 'time, times and half a time' is therefore equal to 2,331 years (§13).

¹⁹ It is quite possible, perhaps even probable, that Charles has drawn here from the works of Bengel, who similarly linked the number 666 to the 'time, times and half a time' period. Bengel's reasoning is ingenious, and involves an interpretation which is a good deal more complex than the relatively simple one proposed by Wesley. A summary of Bengel's views may be found in Brady, *Number of the beast*, 218–21.

At the end of this period will mark 'the end of these wonders', that is, the end of the present world order.²⁰

Wesley now has both pieces of the puzzle: the period begins in 538 and lasts for 2,331 years. The answer to the question 'how long shall it be to the end of these wonders?' asked by the man in Daniel 12:6 has, for Wesley, been deciphered; the end will come in 1794. Wesley has left a little room for doubt since he says that the years 'may be calculated without hazard, and without erring above a year or so' (§11), but Wesley expects the end by 1795 at the very latest.

The date 1794 is thus fairly firmly fixed as the point at which the judgements will end and the period of great peace begin; the reason for Wesley's adoption of this date, even if imaginative, is nevertheless relatively clear. A second date, 1762, is also reasonably easy to pin down, though again there may be an error of not more than one year. This is the date mentioned by Wesley in §4 where he states that 'the conversion of the Jews and their restoration to their own land, [shall be] within the short space of seven or eight years time'. Wesley seems to have calculated the date on the basis of Daniel 8:14, which states (in the King James Version) 'unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed'. This period, says Wesley, begins in 538 B.C. (§14).

At this point reference must be made to the view widely accepted in Wesley's day that in prophecy a prophetic day is equal to a literal year. Newton, for example, says simply that 'in *Daniel's* Prophecies days are put for years'.²¹ Joseph Priestley also accepts this principle, and consequently is cautiously optimistic that the fulfilment of the Daniel 8:14 prophecy will occur 'in our own times'.²²

²⁰ The number 666 had, of course, attracted a great deal of exegetical attention and, though details differ, it was generally assumed that the number was in some way to be linked to the Roman Church. Very popular was the view that the key to the 666 riddle was to be found by adding up the numerical value of the beast's name. The word 'Lateinos' (λατεινος) was a particular favourite, but other suggestions included 'Romanus' (Ρομανος) and 'Vicarius Fili Dei'. A second view was that the number referred not to the name of the beast, but either to the time at which he was to arise (1666 was a favourite) or else to the period during which he was to exercise power (e.g. 855–1521, 1050–1716, 1143–1810). See further Brady, *Number of the beast* and '1666: the year of the beast'. The 'time, times and half a time' was more generally understood as the period during which Rome would exercise her power. Commentators argued that a 'time' is a year and 'times' is two years. A 'time, times and half a time' was, therefore a total of three and a half years. It was further argued that a prophetic day is equal to a literal year, and further that a prophetic year is composed of twelve equal months of thirty days each. The total period covered by the 'time, times and half a time' was therefore calculated to be 1,260 years. This phrase was then linked to the 1,260 days in Revelation 11:3; 12:6, the forty-two months in Revelation 13:5 and, naturally, to the 'time, times and half a time' of Revelation 12:14. Opinion as to when the period began and ended was, as ever, divided. See L.E. Froom, *The prophetic faith of our fathers*, 4 vols (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1946–54), vol. 2, 787, for a list of some of the more popular suggestions.

²¹ Newton, *Observations*, 123.

²² Priestley, *Works*, vol. 12, 329. Priestley's imprecision is a result of his belief that prophetic numbers are round numbers and not exact ones. If the number 2,300 were exact, states Priestley, then the prophecy of Daniel 8:14 would be fulfilled in 1757, but 'as no number under a hundred is mentioned, it may extend near a century beyond this time'.

Working on the assumption that in prophecy a day is equal to a literal year and knowing as he does that the starting point for the 2,300 days/years is in 538, Wesley must have therefore calculated that the period would come to an end in 1762. This ties in with his 'seven or eight years time' statement in §4. It is in this year that the 'sanctuary', apparently taken by Wesley as a literal sanctuary which is to be restored by the converted Jews in their own land, will be cleansed. Again, Wesley's thinking is fairly plain. The Jews will be converted and restore the sanctuary in about 1761. The end of all things will come in 1794.

The dates 1794 and 1761 are, then, relatively clear. From this point on, however, things become less obvious. Wesley has clearly given attention to the seventy week prophecy in Daniel 9:25–27, and it is this prophecy which underlies his remarks in the first half of §14. The prophecy reads

Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy and to anoint the most Holy. Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be build again, and the wall, even in troublous times. And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined. And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate, even until the consummation, and that determined shall be poured upon the desolate.

It was generally accepted by commentators of the period that this was a prophecy relating to the first advent of Jesus. Since Wesley does not accept this interpretation we need not go into detail here.²³ In fact Wesley's interpretation is quite unusual, for he proposes that the prophecy is related to the end time, and not to the time of Christ's first advent. Unfortunately Wesley does not say

²³ The thrust of the majority opinion was that the seventy weeks were to be calculated as 490 years (the year-day principle is once again invoked). The 'prince' mentioned in the prophecy is Jesus and the prophecy relates to his first advent. The 'going forth of the command to build Jerusalem' takes place in about 457 B.C. and ends in about A.D. 34 with the death of Jesus. Newton, for example, adopts this scheme (*Observations*, 128–43). Another view was that the seventy weeks ended with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. It was at this time, so commentators argued, that the seventy weeks determined for 'thy [Daniel's] people' finally came to an end. This view was taken by Joseph Mede (see Mede's *Daniel's weekes. An interpretation of part of the prophecy of Daniel* [1643]) and argued for by Richard Parry (*An attempt to demonstrate the messiahship of Jesus from the prophetic history and chronology of the messiah's kingdom in Daniel* [1773]).

much in this letter relating to how he has calculated this prophecy and no pattern is immediately obvious. The only part of Wesley's interpretation of the prophecy that does seem plain is that he has taken the 'one week' during which the Prince confirms the covenant with many as a period of seven years from c.1771–78. How the rest of the prophecy fits together in Wesley's mind is far from clear. However, that Wesley took the unusual view that the seventy week prophecy relates to the events surrounding the second and not the first advent and that the 'prince' mentioned in the prophecy is someone other than Christ, seems relatively certain. Again, it seems that on both of these points Wesley took a relatively unusual view.²⁴

The remainder of the letter seeks to encourage the reader to engage in his own study of the prophecies. The promised book mentioned at the beginning of §15 never appeared. The references to Newton and Mede have been explained above,²⁵ though it is worth pointing out that there is much in these works that Wesley disagrees with in this letter. The reference to Fletcher's work is intriguing. This cannot be John Fletcher of Madeley (1729–85), since Charles indicates that the Fletcher in question is already dead. Some other Fletcher must be in mind, though who it is is unclear and the reference to the work 'Fulfilling of the scriptures' seems untraceable.

In the very last paragraph the sectarian note is very noticeable. Wesley turns this time to Malachi 3, seeing in the reference to a special group which God would preserve when all else is reduced to stubble for burning a reference to those who are of 'the concert for prayer for the coming of the kingdom of Christ.' This little group, says Wesley, will be preserved during the last judgements. The picture we are left with is of a small band of faithful believers miraculously saved by God just before the final destruction of the wicked.

It must be pointed out that the contents of the letter printed above are not typical of Charles Wesley's work and it would indeed be easy to overestimate the importance of this letter. However, that Charles Wesley did have a definite apocalyptic streak, which on occasions manifests itself, seems relatively certain. Of course, this is not in any way a surprising fact; apocalypticism may have gone out of fashion in the twentieth century, but in the eighteenth it was very much alive and well.

²⁴ Priestley also argued that the 'prince' in Daniel 9:25 is someone other than Jesus; see J. Priestley *Works*, vol. 2, 368; vol. 12, 438–41; vol. 20, 230–1; cf. Clarke Garrett, *Respectable folly: millenarians and the French Revolution in England and France* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1975), 132.

²⁵ See above n. 13.

Charles Wesley believed the standard eighteenth-century doctrine that Christ was to return to this earth upon the clouds of heaven. Indeed, his hymn 'Lo! He comes with clouds descending' is one of the great masterpieces of Advent expectation, and this was by no means the only hymn that Charles wrote on the topic. It has been noted above that the question of the chronological relationship between this return of Christ and the onset of the millennium was a matter of some dispute, but the belief that Christ would one day appear was common. It was Charles Wesley's view (at least in 1754) that it was only after the second advent that the millennium would begin. This itself goes against the grain of general eighteenth-century apocalyptic expectation and marks Charles out as being unusual (though not unique) among his contemporaries. These topics are nowhere fleshed out in Wesley's writings (except of course in the letter printed above), but their truth is assumed. In his belief in the literal coming of Christ (though not in his premillennialism), then, Wesley was typical of his age.²⁶ However, there is little outside of this letter to suggest that Charles ever went further than expressing the general eighteenth-century belief in the eventual fulfilment of Christ's promise to return.²⁷

The letter therefore appears to be quite unusual in the intensity and detail of its raw apocalypticism. Indeed, it is only in this letter that we find such intensity and only here that we get a glimpse of Charles's apparent interest in date setting. However, it does appear that eschatological matters were of at least some concern to Wesley. We know for example that he had been in the business of seeking to interpret the prophecies at least since 1746 (§12), which fact alone suggests that this was no passing fad. Indeed, from this letter it seems that Charles had spent some considerable time in his attempt to interpret the prophecies; he speaks highly of other prophetic interpreters and seems to have read the works of the highly influential prophetic interpreter Bengel.

²⁶ See Downes, 'Eschatological doctrines'. It is quite noticeable, in fact, that although the bulk of Downes's work is based upon the writings of John Wesley, on the specifically eschatological doctrines of the second advent, the judgement and the millennium, references to the work of Charles become much more frequent.

²⁷ It ought to be pointed out that Charles Wesley shared in the general excitement engendered by the earthquakes which struck London in February and March 1750. These earthquakes, which are mentioned in the journals of both Charles and John, gave rise to some considerable apocalyptic expectation. It was at this time that Charles wrote the sermon 'On the Cause and Cure of Earthquakes'. The sermon, which was incorrectly attributed to John, has definite apocalyptic overtones, although Charles stresses the extent to which on an individual level the judgement may come at any time, since one never knows the hour of one's own death (*Sermons on several occasions*, vol. 3, 435–50). Charles also composed hymns relating to the earthquakes (see Thomas Jackson, *The life of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.*, 2 vols [1841], vol. 1, 547–60). However, Charles is here typical of a general upsurge in apocalypticism, an upsurge which was not to last. His 1754 letter, on the other hand, seems to represent a much more considered and long term interest in the prophecies.

This last point can be developed further. On 23 September 1747 (i.e. sometime after the date given by Wesley for the beginning of his interest in prophetic interpretation) Dr J. Robertson, from Pitcomb, near Bruton, Somerset, wrote a letter to Charles concerning Bengel.²⁸ It appears from this letter that Robertson had written to Charles earlier to enquire about Bengel, and in response Charles had told Robertson of an unsubstantiated rumour that Bengel had died. The letter from Robertson thus begins 'Reverend and Dear Sir, I am much afraid of the Account you had of Bengelius's Death is too true; else I might have hoped to have heard from him before now'. The letter continues with a request that Charles seek to obtain some of the works of Bengel, especially his 'smaller edition of the New Testament', his 'Harmony of the Evangelists' and his 'Exposition of the Apocalypse'. Robertson thinks that Charles may be able to get these on account of his acquaintance with several Germans. The letter then goes on to discuss a few key points from the works of Bengel. The letter is clearly from a well educated individual, who is capable of quoting not only from the Latin and Greek, but also from the Hebrew. Robertson agrees with Bengel in suggesting that Antichrist will fall in 1836. In fact Robertson is even more detailed. The 'last pope, the man of sin' will appear (i.e. be elected pope) on Monday 19 October, 1832; he will receive 'great power' on the following Tuesday (28 October, 1832) and the millennium will begin on Sunday 18 June, 1836. Robertson continues: '89 years don't seem a long time for the Series of affairs yet to come before the final Destruction of the Beast (the Papacy) in which there is also included a grand Revolution (or rather two)'. We need to go no further into Robertson's interpretation of Revelation, for already it is clear that he, like Charles, sees the book as a timetable of last events which may be charted with precision. It is perhaps a fair guess (though no more) that Robertson knew of Charles's own interest in the prophecies, including his acquaintance with the works of Bengel, and for that reason wrote to him on these matters.

The extent of Charles's interest in apocalyptic matters is, then, uncertain. But that he once had an interest seems clear. This letter may be extreme, but it seems to be but a part of a more general concern with the end that appears elsewhere, albeit briefly, in Charles's other works. How high on his agenda such matters were is impossible to judge. However, like many others he may have developed an interest at certain times, only to drop it later on. It is perhaps telling that among Charles's hymns on Revelation included

²⁸ J. Robertson to C. Wesley, 23 September 1747. The letter, which is held in the JRU1.M, is not catalogued, but may be found in the volume entitled 'Letters chiefly addressed to the Revd C. Wesley', leather vol. 6, 67

in his 'Short hymns on select passages of Holy Scripture' there is nothing akin to the contents of this letter. The importance of this fact is heightened when we note that the collection was published in 1762, the year given in this letter for the restoration of the Jews and the latest date for the beginning of the judgements. Charles's apparent change of heart may, then, have come about as a result of the failure of his earlier predictions. It must also be quite possible that the unfortunate effects of the George Bell affair took their toll on his enthusiasm for prophetic date setting.²⁹ In either case, it seems that by 1762 at the latest Charles had thought better of his earlier attempts to pinpoint apocalyptic dates. However, that such topics were of interest to him as a younger man seems highly likely.

This then is a remarkable letter. The question of how it fits into Wesley's individual development has been briefly addressed above, but clearly a fuller study is called for. It is certainly worth asking why it is that the intense and raw apocalypticism evident in the letter seems to play such a small rôle elsewhere in Charles's writings. The suggestion that this letter represents a brief flirtation with such doctrines and that it was not an area with which he was in general much concerned is, as we have seen, less than fully satisfactory. The fact that Charles says in this letter that he had arrived at a partial understanding of Revelation in 1746 (§12) indicates that this was not an interest which had only a short life span. At the very least Charles had been concerned with the prophecies for some eight years.

The letter is remarkable also in that on several key points Wesley seems to take a relatively unusual, at times unique, line in his interpretation of biblical prophecy. This is especially apparent in his understanding of the number 666 and its link to the 'time, times and half a time'. His conviction that the whole of Daniel 9 relates to the events surrounding the second and not the first advent is also a relatively uncommon one, as is his apparent identification of 'the Prince' of Daniel 9:25 as someone other than Jesus. His view that the seven trumpets are still future also displays variance from the norm. Neither is the clear premillennialism in this letter typical of Wesley's age, for, as we noted briefly above, the standard view during this period was that Christ would return only after the millennial period of 1,000 years. The letter is therefore of importance not only in that it gives us a picture of Wesley that has seldom before come into view, but also in that it demonstrates Wesley's imaginative freedom from the norms of prophetic interpretation.

²⁹ On the aftermath of the George Bell affair see L. Tyerman, *The life and times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.*, 3 vols (1870–71), vol. 2, 438–9 and Robert Southey, *The life of Wesley and the rise of Methodism*, edited by J.A. Atkinson (1889), 421.