CHAPTER FOUR

Volumen biblicus seu propheticus: prophetic numerology

4.1 THE SEALS, TRUMPETS AND VIALS OF REVELATION

Alsted’s main work of chronology is not a systematic treatise but an historical commonplace book. Astrology and Neoplatonic speculation produces an optimism regarding the terrestrial future which falls short of millenarianism. It might therefore seem inevitable that the key to the emergence of millenarianism in Alsted’s thought should be found in the third of the three volumes reflected in his ‘Speculum mundi’: the volume of biblical prophecy. Millenarianism strictly speaking is defined with respect to the interpretation of certain verses in the twentieth chapter of Revelation. More generally, the fundamental principle of sola scriptura demanded that all Protestant theological doctrines be founded directly on the text of scripture. Given the bibliocentrism of Alsted’s Puritan contemporaries and the intimate association of millenarianism and biblical fundamentalism in more recent times, students of English eschatology have expressed little hesitation in deriving the emergence of millenarianism from the long tradition of historical interpretation of the Apocalypse reaching back to the Reformation. The principal narrative treatment of the English apocalyptic tradition claims this explicitly. ‘The new enthusiasm’ for the doctrine of millenarianism, it states, ‘was built on the foundations of the historical apocalyptic tradition as it had developed on the continent.’ In the case of Alsted in particular, his interpretation of ecclesiastical history ‘was to form the basis of his defence of millenarianism’, and the two computations underlying his dating of the outset of the millennium in 1694, we are told, were those mainstays of the English apocalyptic tradition, the seven seals, seven trumpets and seven vials of Revelation and the final verses of the Book of Daniel.¹

A systematic survey of Alsted’s early works undertaken with such expectations, however, will be severely disappointed. We have already seen how little of the historical as opposed to astrological material laboriously

assembled in Alsted’s large treasury of chronology directly relates to his eschatology. In the case of apocalyptic commentary, on the other hand, there is no sustained early treatise to study whatsoever. While speculative and hermetic schemes of the kind just described proliferate in dizzying variety, sustained attempts at apocalyptic exegesis are nowhere to be found. The first edition of the Thesaurus chronologiae contains only a brief outline of the Apocalypse, broken down into seven separate visions, some 200 words in length. A second brief summary of the Apocalypse, scarcely longer than the first, is printed as an afterthought on the final leaves of this edition ‘ne sequentes pagellae vacarent’. The second edition of the Thesaurus alters the original outline and adds a more detailed identification of each of the seven seals, trumpets, and vials; but these two schemata combined still fill only two of the book’s six hundred pages. The Diatribe contains another tiny outline of the seven visions of the Apocalypse but no general exposition of the seals, trumpets and vials whatsoever. A search through Alsted’s other early writings produces several equally rudimentary summaries but no more extensive treatments. The nearest thing to a systematic exposition is found in the final volume of Alsted’s theological encyclopedia, the Theologia prophetica of 1622; but even this is not an exposition of prophecy as such but a treatise on the art of preaching which concludes by outlining a series of sermons on the whole of scripture. In the years around the appearance of the Diatribe, in effect, Alsted could scarcely have devoted less attention to the systematic exposition of the Apocalypse and its application to history. It was not until 1633 that he composed a full-scale commentary on the Apocalypse, the Trifolium propheticum, published posthumously in 1640. Thus within the chronology of Alsted’s works, extensive exegesis of the books of Daniel and Revelation clearly follows rather than precedes the advent of his millenarianism.

The Trifolium propheticum, to be sure, constitutes impressive prima facie evidence of Alsted’s growing commitment to systematic prophetic exegesis: its three hundred and fifty quarto pages present, as the full title indicates, three interlocking commentaries on the Song of Songs, the Book of Daniel, and

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2 Thesaurus chronologiae (1624), p. 47, fols. Aa3r-v; (1628), pp. 142-3, 147-9; Diatribe, (1627), pp. 29-31 (= Beloved City, p. 13). Other such outlines include Praecognita theologica (1614), ii. 117-18, 507-8, 534-5, 651-2; cf. also ii. 519-28; (1623), pp. 248-9, 599-600, 729-30; and Triumphus Bibliorum (1625), pp. 493-5, 467-8.


4 Trifolium propheticum, id est Canticum canticorum Salomonis, prophetia Danielis, Apocalypsis Johannis sic explicata, ut series textus, et series temporis prophetici e regione postiae lucem menti, et consolationem cordi ingerant (Herborn, 1640). Although the work was published posthumously, the preface is signed ‘Alba Julia 4. Kalendas Septembris. M D C XXXIII’. and several indications in the text (e.g., p. 181) indicate that it was finished in the same year.