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A MESSAGE OF HOPE FOR THE RUMP PARLIAMENT

by PETER TOON

WE are glad to include in this issue a by-product of Dr. Toon's researches into the work of John Owen, to which reference was made in our editorial paragraphs for January-March.

BY the time John Owen became Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, he was acknowledged with Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye as a leader of the ministers and elders who practised the Congregational way. Between 1646, when he adopted Congregationalist principles, and 1651, when he moved from Coggeshall to Oxford, his influence had been steadily growing through the opportunities offered him by the Generals, Thomas Fairfax and Oliver Cromwell, as well as through the defence of orthodox Calvinistic dogma in various books (e.g. *Salus Electorum*, 1648). He attracted the attention of the army leaders and some Members of Parliament because he provided a theologically-learned and Biblically-grounded defence of the necessity for the overthrow of the "Laudian religion" of the State Church, the removal of the prelates and the monarchy, the punishment of the Irish and then of the Scots, and the establishment by the army of a peace in which a religious liberty could be worked out.

Between the close of the first civil war in 1646 and the dissolution of the Long Parliament in 1653, he preached on eight occasions before the House of Commons. Six of the sermons were published within a few weeks of their delivery; one was published posthumously in 1721 and another was never printed since the editors of his *Works* could not trace it. A study of these seven discourses provides us with a good indication as to how classic Independents, or educated and balanced men who followed the Congregational way, interpreted the revolutionary events through which they lived. Indeed, they form one of the few extant sources from which we can gather this information, since other Independent divines (e.g. Philip Nye, Joseph Caryl and William Bridge) did not feel it necessary or possible to have all their important sermons printed.

We shall look first at the occasion and contents of Owen's sermons and, secondly, examine some of the important theological ideas found in them. In doing this we shall see how important for

Owen was the doctrine of the latter-day glory of the Church and how he related it to the contemporary history of Europe.

I. THE OCCASION AND CONTENTS OF THE SERMONS

In 1646, as the political Independents gained more influence at Westminster, new names began to appear as preachers at the regular monthly fasts kept by the House of Commons in St. Margaret's Church. These were, in the main, men who advocated Congregationalist Church polity and they replaced some of the Presbyterian stalwarts who had dominated the proceedings on the last Wednesday of each month since February 1642.¹ John Owen was one of these new names. His first sermon was preached at the fast in April, 1646, and later given the title, *A Vision of Unchangeable Free Mercy*.² It was from Acts 16: 9: "a vision appeared to Paul in the night; there stood a man of Macedonia and prayed him saying, Come over into Macedonia and help us." The sermon has three important themes. First, the ultimate cause of all events on earth is the determinate will and counsel of God: "all things below in their events are but the wax whereon the eternal seal of God's purposes hath left its own impression, and they in every way answer unto it." Secondly, the sending of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to any particular nation in preference to others is of the mere good pleasure of God, and cannot be understood by men. Thirdly, the people in the world who are in the greatest need are those without the Gospel for "the wrath of God is upon them; they are the people of his curse and indignation". The sermon ends with a call for evangelism: "O that you would labour to let all parts of the kingdom taste of the sweetness of your successes by carrying to them the Gospel of the Lord Jesus."

It was nearly three years later—on January 31, 1649—that John Owen once again addressed the House of Commons, although by this time it was depleted as a result of Colonel Pride's Purge. In the intervening period he had kept in touch with General Fairfax and the Members of Parliament who represented Essex. Whilst Fairfax and his army were besieging Colchester in the summer of 1648, Owen acted as chaplain to the soldiers, and after the Royalists surrendered he preached two sermons to the troops and local

¹ Cf. H. R. Trevor-Roper, "The Fast Sermons of the Long Parliament", in his book *Religion, the Reformation and Social Change* (1967).

² In *Works* (ed. W. H. Goold, 1850-53), Vol. VIII, pp. 2ff. He attached to it a tract entitled, "A Country Essay for the practice of Church government there".

people to celebrate the victory. Soon after the close of the second civil war, Charles Stuart was made to face trial for levying war on the Parliament and nation. On Wednesday, January 30, 1649, he was executed. When the House of Commons assembled on the following day for its postponed fast-day, Owen was one of the preachers to whom it listened. He based his solemn discourse on the fifteenth chapter of Jeremiah and especially verses 19 and 20.³ He made no direct reference to the terrible event of the previous day nor did he mention the name of the king (that is if he printed exactly what he said). Yet his hearers and readers were able to deduce from his use of the Old Testament how he regarded the religious policy and fate of the late king. From the story of the wicked king Manasseh recorded in II Kings and with reference to Jeremiah 15, he showed that the procuring cause of God's judgments upon the Jews were such abominations as idolatry, superstition, tyranny and cruelty. Then he pointed out the similarities between the condition of ancient Judah and England as he had known it in the 1630s and 1640s. The heart of the sermon consisted of a call to Parliament to help to establish reformed types of worship, to propagate the Biblical faith, to maintain national righteousness and to avoid cruelty and oppression. He assured the leaders of the people that God's promise of protection to Jeremiah also applied to all those in every age who stood firmly for justice and mercy. There is one interesting passage in this sermon in which Owen recorded his views of the compact of some Presbyterians with the late king:

For a man to take part with the kingdom's enemies is no small crime; but for a commission-officer to run from them by whom he is commissioned to take part with the adversary is death without mercy. Yet have not some in our days arrived at that stupendous impudence that, when, as private persons, they have declaimed against the enemies of the nation, and by that means got themselves into authority, they have made use of that authority to comply with, and uphold, those by an opposition to whom they got into authority?—which is no less than an atheistical attempt to personate the Almighty unto such iniquities as without his appearance they dare not own.⁴

Such treachery was the very opposite of righteousness.

³ *Ibid.*, VIII, pp. 127ff. He also attached to this a tract entitled "Of Toleration and the duty of the magistrate about religion".

⁴ *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 144. Cf. Ivan Roots, *The Great Rebellion, 1642-1660* (1966), pp. 127-9.

This sermon pleased the Commons and he was invited to preach again on March 22 but the fast was postponed first to the 5th and then to the 19th April. It proved to be the last of the regular monthly fasts. Henceforth, fasts were held as occasion demanded. For his text on the 19th Owen took Hebrews 12: 27: "this word, yet once more, signifieth the removing of these things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain." In this sermon he spoke freely of how he related Biblical "prophecies" to conditions in Europe and it was published under the provoking title of *The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth*.⁵ After a careful examination of the various possible interpretations of his text, he felt able to make the following observation:

The Lord Jesus Christ by his mighty power in these latter days, as antichristian tyranny draws to its period will so far shake and translate the political heights, governments, and strength of the nations, as shall serve for the full bringing in of his own peaceable kingdom:—the nations so shaken becoming thereby a quiet habitation for the people of the Most High.⁶

He went on to show how the antichristian tyranny of the papal power had invaded the whole of European life, government and religion—something which he believed was prophesied in the vision of the beasts in Revelation 13. In his opinion, or, rather, according to the Word of God, the kings of Europe who, through the years, had joined the Pope to make war on the elect of God (e.g. against the Lollards and Waldensians), would soon forsake the Papacy, that "Babylonian harlot", and take vengeance upon her for all her former rage and cruelty towards the true Church. For only after the removal of this Antichrist could the nations serve the true interest of Christ. Near the end of the sermon he exclaimed: "O that it might be the glory of this assembly, above all the assemblies of the world, that every ruler in it might be a sincere subject in the kingdom of the Lord Jesus". Before returning to his parsonage at Coggeshall, Owen called upon General Fairfax at his London home where he happened to meet Oliver Cromwell. The latter, who was most impressed with Owen's doctrine that God was shaking the nations in order to bring in governments who would favour and encourage true religion, invited the Essex preacher to join the expeditionary force that

⁵ *Works*, VIII, pp. 244ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 260.

was soon to leave for Ireland. After weeks of hesitation, Owen consented to go with the army as a chaplain, with the added responsibility of looking into the state of Trinity College, Dublin.

Before leaving for Ireland he preached again in London. On May 18, 1649, Cromwell and Fairfax crushed a Leveller mutiny at Burford and on June 7 a day of thanksgiving was held in Christ Church, Newgate Street, to celebrate this success against would-be fomentors of chaos amongst the troops. With Thomas Goodwin, Owen addressed the Members of Parliament, senior army officers and aldermen of the city. Their sermons were not printed afterwards but Owen's manuscript was preserved and printed in 1721.⁷ It was from Psalm 76: 5: "the stout hearted are spoiled, they have slept their sleep; and none of the men of might have found their hands". The central theme was that those who oppose the work of the kingdom of Christ will eventually be destroyed, just as was the army of Sennacherib outside Jerusalem in the days of king Hezekiah—an incident to which Owen believed Psalm 76 referred. In expounding his theme he asked the question: "How does one know whether a government is pleasing to God and therefore a government he will not destroy or remove from power in these latter days?" In answer he supplied "six scriptural significations *a posteriori* of such an authority as the Lord will make as a brasen wall".⁸ They were:

1. If it be such as the Lord hath honoured with success in great, hazardous and difficult undertakings for himself.
2. If the persons enjoying that authority abide to act for God and not for themselves after such success and protection.
3. If they subject their power to the power of the Lord Christ, who is Lord of lords, and King of kings.
4. If they are supported by the prayer of a chosen people who seek their welfare, not for their own interest and advantage, but for the advantage of the gospel and the ways of Christ by them asserted.
5. If in sincerity, and with courage and zeal, they fulfil the work of their magistracy in the administration of righteous judgment.
6. If they have not the qualifications of that power which in these latter days God hath promised to destroy. These are two: First, drinking the cup of fornication that is in the hand of the harlot; that is practising any false worship and forms invented besides the Word. Secondly, giving their power to the beast (Rev. 13), or engaging in any ways of persecution against any of the ways of God or his saints in those ways.

⁷ *Ibid.*, IX, pp. 197ff.

⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, pp. 210ff.

The sermon ended with an explanation why the Lord (through the army led by Fairfax and Cromwell) had punished the Levellers. It was because they were enemies not only of the orderly settled ministry of the gospel and its spiritual ordinances, but also of magistrates (i.e. Members of Parliament) whom the "Lord had owned in the darkest day that ever this nation saw".

During the autumn and winter of 1649 John Owen was in Ireland but he returned to London in time to address the House of Commons on February 28, 1650, from Romans 4: 20. His sermon was published as *The Steadfastness of the Promises and the Sinfulness of Staggering*.⁹ After an exposition of the type of faith God wishes to see in His elect people he applied the Word to the contemporary situation in Ireland. "Look upon the affair of Ireland", he begged his hearers; "the engagement of the great God of revenges against murder and treachery, and the interest of the Lord Christ and his kingdom against the man of sin, furnished the undertakers with manifold promises to carry them out to a desired, a blessed, issue." These promises were those found in Revelation 17 to 19 which spoke of the destruction of Babylon. Owen sincerely believed that what happened at Drogheda and elsewhere was God's punishment upon Ireland, which "was the first of the nations that laid wait for the blood of God's people". The sermon ended with a pointed question: "How is it that Jesus Christ is in Ireland only as a lion staining all his garments with the blood of his enemies; and none to hold him out as a Lamb sprinkled with his own blood to his friends? Is it the sovereignty of England that is alone to be transacted there?" Victories in the flesh should be followed by victories wrought by "the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God".

Owen also accompanied Cromwell to Scotland in late 1650 but returned to London several months before the Scottish army left the North on its disastrous journey to Worcester where it was not able to withstand the power of Cromwell as he experienced his "crowning mercy". However, he was asked to preach on October 24, 1651, at a day of thanksgiving for the victory over the Scottish army. His message was from Ezekiel 17: 24: "all the trees of the field shall know that I, the Lord, have brought down the high tree, have exalted the low tree, have dried up the green tree, and have made the bay tree to flourish". In print it was entitled, *The Advantage of the Kingdom of Christ in the Shaking of the*

⁹ *Ibid.*, VIII, pp. 207ff.

*Kingdoms of the World.*¹⁰ By way of explanation of the text he stated that:

The high and the green tree are the things of the most glorious appearance in the world—persons and States that seem to be exceedingly suited for the work God hath to do, that are in the greatest probability to be eminently instrumental in his hand: but, alas! says God, these will I pull down and cause to wither. Perhaps you will think it strange that a mighty monarchy, a triumphing prelacy, a thriving conformity should all be brought down; but so it shall be, "Every mountain shall be made a plain". The "low tree" and the "dry tree" are things, persons, assemblies, outwardly weak and contemptible—such as wise men do verily believe that God will never use; they will not understand that such Moseses shall be deliverers, but cry, Who made them judges and rulers? But even these will God exalt and cause to flourish: "Every valley shall be exalted".¹¹

Since the Rump of the Long Parliament was in fact a "low and dry tree" it must carefully prepare to meet God in the way of His worship, His providential guidance of national affairs, and His holiness in order to continue under His blessing.

John Owen's last sermon before this Parliament was entitled *Concerning the Kingdom of Christ and the Power of the Civil Magistrate about the things of the worship of God.*¹² It was from Daniel 7: 15-16 and was preached on October 13, 1652, during the period when a committee of the House was discussing the *Humble Proposals for the Propagation of the Gospel* submitted by Owen and others.¹³ After an examination of the experience and mental condition of the prophet Daniel, and after some reflections on what would happen before the Last Judgment, he proceeded to apply the Word to the position of his hearers by way of three observations:¹⁴

1. In the consideration of God's marvellous actings in the world, in order to the carrying on of the Gospel and the interest of the Lord Jesus Christ, the hearts of his saints are often filled with perplexity and trouble.
2. The only way to deliver and extricate our spirits from being under such perplexities and entanglements is to draw nigh to God in Christ for discovery of his will.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, VIII, pp. 311ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 319.

¹² *Ibid.*, VIII, pp. 365ff.

¹³ Cf. G. F. Nuttall, "Presbyterians and Independents", *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*, Vol. X, May 1952.

¹⁴ *Works*, VIII, pp. 377ff.

3. When God makes known the interpretation of things it will quieten your spirits in your walking before him and actings with him.

In closing, he gave some indication of what God had promised concerning divine help to magistrates and what was His will concerning them. He believed that Scripture forecast a time when rulers of nations would themselves be ruled by the gospel and would make sure that it was wholly propagated in their lands. The kingdoms of this world were to become the kingdoms of the Lord and of His Christ. Before this time of the latter-day glory "the Lord engageth that judges, rulers and magistrates shall put forth their power for the good, welfare and prosperity of the Church".

II. THE BASIC IDEAS UNDERLYING THE SERMONS

In preaching before Parliament, John Owen was addressing men for whom the Bible was the acknowledged authoritative book on all subjects spiritual and political, and in whom there was a desire to know what it "said" about the events of the day. Therefore, certain basic interpretations of Scripture relevant to the needs of the hearers reoccur in the sermons. Below, five of these are set out with quotations from the sermons to explain them.

(1) *God's sovereign control over the events of history, though incomprehensible to human reason, is exercised solely for the good of the Church of Jesus Christ.* Preaching on October 24, 1651, he made two important observations:

1. In the midst of all the tumults and embroilments of the nations, that which the Lord takes peculiarly as his own design, into his own management, is the carrying on of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus.
2. Among all the designs that are on foot in the world, there is none that hath either stability, fixedness, or final success, but only the design of God concerning the kingdom of Christ.¹⁵

After the defeat of the Levellers in 1649 he declared:

The care of Salem, Zion, lies at the bottom of all God's powerful actings and workings among the sons of men . . . The whole course of affairs in the world is steered by providence in reference to the good of Salem, Zion hath been the rise and downfall of all the powers of the world; it is her deliverance or trial that is intended in their raising, and her recompense and vengeance in their ruin. God works not among nations for their own sake.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 318.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, IX, p. 199.

It hardly needs saying that for Owen the Church is the company of the elect. On another occasion he said that "God's works in their accomplishment are oftentimes so unsuited to the reasons and apprehensions of men that very many who have been strong in their desires and great in expectation of them, upon their bringing forth to light, have quite rejected and opposed them as none of His because they were distant from what they had framed to themselves."¹⁷

(2) *Since the fall of the Roman Empire, the majority of the nations of Europe have been dominated in their religion and political government by the power of the Roman Papacy.* "The vials of God's wrath," Owen maintained, "having crumbled pagan Rome into several pieces, and that Empire being removed as to its old form, by the craft of Satan it became moulded up again into a papal sovereignty, to exercise all the power of the first beast in persecution of the saints, Rev. 13: 12."¹⁸ He firmly believed that it would be an impossible task to "name any of the kingdoms of Europe (excepting only that remotest northwards) in the setting-up and establishment whereof, either as to persons or governments, the Pope hath not expressly bargained for his own interest, and provided that he should have the chiefest place in all the oaths and bonds that were between princes and people".¹⁹ And looking back to the forms of worship imposed on the English Church by Charles I and Archbishop Laud he declared:

The darling errors of late years were all of them stories of the old Babel, closing and coupling with the tremendous fabric which the man of sin (the papacy) had erected to dethrone Jesus Christ. They came out of the belly of that Trojan horse, that fatal engine, which was framed to betray the City of God. They were popish errors such as whereof that apostasy did consist which only is to be looked upon as the great adverse state of the kingdom of the Lord Christ.²⁰

Three years later he was even more explicit:

The peculiar light of this generation is that discovery which the Lord hath made to his people of the mystery of civil and ecclesiastical tyranny. The opening, unravelling and revealing of the antichristian interest, interwoven and coupled together in civil and spiritual things into a state opposite to the kingdom of the Lord Jesus, is the great

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 142.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 257.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, VIII, pp. 264-5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 28.

discovery of these days . . . Is it not evident to him that hath but half an eye that the whole present constitution of the government of the nations is so cemented with antichristian mortar, from the very top to the very bottom, that without a thorough shaking they cannot be cleansed?²¹

The reformers of the sixteenth century had, in general, been fairly confident that the power of the gospel would overcome all forces that stood in its way. The resurgence of Catholicism in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century and the experience of the Thirty Years' War and the English Civil Wars had taught Owen that so deeply rooted was Papal influence that only a revolution in any particular country could wholly root out "the antichristian interest".

(3) *Before the nations of Europe can enjoy the full blessing of the gospel freely preached in their lands, and before the whole earth can enjoy the "latter-day glory", the power of the papacy must be shattered.* Unlike the Fifth Monarchy Men and most of his fellow-Congregationalists, John Owen never stated that Christ would return to earth to set up a millennial reign of the saints: indeed, he was sceptical about the premillennial doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ.²² Nevertheless, he looked forward to the time of a glorious, powerful Church on earth purified by the Holy Spirit and enriched by the spiritual presence of Christ. This would come into being after the removal of the Turkish and Papal power in the world and would precede the Second Coming, the Last Judgment and the resurrection of the dead.

God in his appointed time will bring forth the kingdom of the Lord Christ unto more glory and power than in former days . . . Whatever will be more these six things are clearly promised.

1. Fulness of peace unto the Gospel and the professors thereof, Isaiah 11: 6-7; 33: 20-21; 54: 13; Rev. 21: 25.
2. Purity and beauty of ordinances and Gospel worship, Rev. 11: 2; 21: 3. The tabernacle was wholly made by appointment, Malachi 3: 3-4; Zechariah 14: 16 and 20; Isa. 35: 8; Rev. 21: 27.
3. Multitudes of converts, many persons, yea, nations, Isa. 49: 18-22; 66: 8; 60: 7-9; Rev. 7: 9.
4. The full casting out and rejecting of all will-worship, and their attendant abominations, Rev. 11: 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 274.

²² *Ibid.*, VIII, pp. 263, 373. Cf. G. F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints* (Oxford, 1957), pp. 143ff.

5. Professed subjection of the nations throughout the whole world unto the Lord Christ, Daniel 2: 44; 7: 26-7; Isa. 60: 6-9; the kingdoms becoming the kingdoms of our Lord and His Christ (Rev. 11: 15), amongst whom his appearance shall be so glorious that David himself shall be said to reign.
6. A most glorious and dreadful breaking of all that rise in opposition unto him, Isa. 60: 12,—never such desolations, Rev. 16: 17-19.²³

Yet before this time of glory for the Church on earth can come the Antichrist, the Pope of Rome, and his influence in European Churches and government must be removed. Happily, prophecy indicated that the ten kingdoms of Europe would all throw off allegiance to Rome and then destroy the Papacy itself (Rev. 17: 16). "God will shake the heavens and the earth of the nations round about until all their Babylonish rubbish and all their original engagements to the man of sin be taken away."²⁴

In the first and second points quoted above, Owen cites Revelation 21 as describing the latter-day glory of the Church on earth. This clearly indicates that he followed in what we may call the Brightman tradition. All the early English reformers, the Marian exiles included, understood the last two chapters of Revelation to speak of the life of the elect after the Last Judgment, that is, the life of eternity. But Thomas Brightman believed they referred to the glory of the Church on earth before the Last Judgment. In this he was followed by Owen, who also seems to have accepted the general lines of interpretation set out by Finch and Gouge in 1621, except that he did not emphasize so strongly as they did the centrality of the converted Jews in the latter days.²⁵

(4) *The influence which Antichrist had held in English religion and government was broken by the victories of the armies of Parliament in the Civil Wars.* In his first sermon before the Commons, Owen told his hearers that "from the beginning of these troubles you have held forth religion and the Gospel, as whose preservation and restoration, was principally in your aims". Three years later he declared that the prelacy which had been removed by order of Parliament was "a mere antichristian

²³ *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 334.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 374.

²⁵ For the development of the doctrine of latter-day glory in Puritanism and in Dutch Protestantism see *Puritans, The Millennium, and The Future of Israel: Puritan Eschatology 1600-1660* (Jas. Clarke, 1970), edited by me and with contributions by five scholars, including Professor J. Van Den Berg of the Free University, Amsterdam.

encroachment upon the inheritance of Christ". He viewed the crushing of the Levellers as merely "the after-drops of a former refreshing power" and an "appendix of goodwill for the confirming of a former work which God hath wrought"—he meant victory over the king and Royalists. His feelings after the victory at Colchester in 1648, which he witnessed, show how deeply he was committed to the cause of Parliament. He told the soldiers that:

Your enemies are bread ready to be eaten and yield you refreshment. Do you think if our armies had not walked in a trodden path they could have made such journeys as they have done of late? Had not God marched before them and traced out their way from Kent to Essex, from Wales to the North, their carcasses had long ere this day been cast into the field. Their work was done in heaven before they began it... The work might have been done by children though he was pleased to employ such worthy instruments (as you).²⁶

The success was planned in eternity in the counsel of God. It was part of the working-out of His purposes in the last days. After the victory over the Scots at Worcester which raised great hopes for the progress of the "good cause", Owen had the following to say to a small but jubilant Parliament:

There are three principal seasons of the Lord's eminent appearance to carry on the kingdom of Christ and the Gospel, and all are attended with dreadful providential alterations: and unto one of these heads may all particular actings be reduced.

1. The first is the promulgation of the Gospel among the Jews by the Lord Christ himself and his apostles. What this was attended withal is graphically described, Matthew 24: 6-7, "And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars..." ... The Judaical State, in all the height and glory of it was utterly consumed; so that all flesh, all the Jews, were in danger of utter destruction.

2. The second is in the further carrying on of the Gospel after the destruction of Jerusalem throughout the world of the Gentiles, subject then in a great proportion to the Roman Empire. And what is the issue hereof? The opening of the six seals immediately follows thereon, Rev. 6; which, after manifold and various alterations, end in that dreadful dissolution of the pagan Empire which you have described from verse 14 to the end of the chapter.

3. The most signal is the coming of the Lord Christ to recover his people from antichristian idolatry and oppression; which, of all others, is, and shall be, attended with the most astonishing alterations and desolations,—pulling down of high trees and exalting them that are low. Thence is that war described in Revelation 17: 14

²⁶ *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 97.

and that mighty vengeance poured out by the Lord Christ on the nations, their kings and captains, 19: 11 to the end of the chapter; which the Holy Ghost describes by a collection of all the most dreadful expressions which are anywhere used to set out great devastations in the Old Testament.

And this is the head whereunto the present actings of Providence in this nation are to be referred; they all tend to the accomplishment of his main design therein. He that thinks Babylon is confined to Rome and its open idolatry knows nothing of Babylon nor of the new Jerusalem. The depth of subtle mystery doth not lie in gross visible folly. It hath been insinuating itself into all the nations for sixteen hundred years and to most of them is now become as marrow in their bones. Before it be wholly shaken out, these heavens must be dissolved, and the earth shaken; their tall trees hewed down and set a howling, Rev. 18, and the residue of them transplanted from one end of the earth to another. This, I say then, is the work which the Lord hath now in hand; and this is the day of thankfulness in reference to what he hath done for us in this nation.²⁷

Here we have an unambiguous statement from Owen that he believed he was living in the days when God was destroying the enemies of the gospel and when the dawn of the latter-day glory was imminent. His friend, Thomas Goodwin, and many others, expected not the dawn of the latter-day glory of the Church to follow the collapse of the papacy but the Second Coming of Christ to inaugurate the millennium, and the reign of the saints on earth.

(5) *In the aftermath of God-ordained victory, the duty of Parliament is to make the propagation of the gospel and the enlargement of the kingdom of Christ its first priority.* "If now England has received more culture from God than other nations," Owen warned in 1646, "there is more fruit expected by God from England than from other nations." Parts of Britain were without godly ministers and he felt compelled to cry out, "Doth not Wales cry, and the North cry, yea and the West cry, 'Come and help us?'" After his visit to Ireland he expressed the hope that there would be "one Gospel-preacher for every walled town in the English possession in Ireland" because "the land mourneth and the people perish for want of knowledge". As to the relationship of Church and State, in his tract, *Of Toleration*, attached to his sermon which was preached on January 31, 1649, he stated that a lesson of history was that "the great design of grasping temporal power upon a spiritual account will prove at last to be the greatest badge of Antichrist". He believed that "wherever the Gospel is

²⁷ *Ibid.*, VIII, pp. 321-2.

by any nation owned, received and embraced, it is the blessing, benefit, prosperity and advantage of that nation". And also "the rejection of the Gospel by any people or nation to whom it is tendered is always attended with the certain and inevitable destruction of that people or nation: which sooner or later shall without any help or deliverance be brought upon them by the revenging hand of Christ". Therefore, "it is the duty of magistrates to seek the good, peace and prosperity of the people committed to their charge, and to prevent, obviate, remove and take away everything that will bring confusion, destruction and desolation upon them; as Mordecai procured good things for his people and prosperity to his kindred, Esther 10: 3."²⁸

III. CONCLUSION

It is perhaps necessary to point out that Owen was not alone in seeing recent, contemporary and imminent history described in Revelation 16-20. Ever since Luther gave a historical application to the Apocalypse of John in the second edition of his Notes on the New Testament, there had been a growing number of divines—and they included the majority of English Puritans—who interpreted Daniel and Revelation as if they were charts or maps of world history describing events up to about 1700. Nor was he alone in expecting the years of grace to end with a period of world-wide spiritual revival including the conversion of the Jewish people to Christ. This doctrine, which may be traced in its origins to Beza's notes on Romans 11: 25 and to the marginal notes of the Geneva Bible at the same place, was adopted by the representatives of the Congregational churches and made part of their *Declaration of Faith and Order* (1658).

Owen's exegesis of Revelation was, in the main, completely wrong. Living in an age of revolution he was sadly mistaken in his interpretation of events around him as the fulfilment of the symbolic visions of John on Patmos. By many he is regarded as the greatest-ever theologian of the Congregational churches; that such a gifted man could have made such serious mistakes in regard to prophecy is perhaps a lesson to all of us. Great care is needed in the interpretation of prophecy; dogmatism on disputed points is dangerous; and the attempt to see the fulfilment of prophecy in such contemporary events as the restoration of a political Israel, the growth of the Common Market, and the spread of world

²⁸ *Ibid.*, VIII, pp. 391-2.

communism is fraught with dangers. Let Christians beware.

Concerning Owen's doctrine of the latter-day glory we need say little. Modern postmillennialists teach a similar doctrine (without of course the political context in which Owen set his teaching). Only when Christ actually returns to earth will the truth or falsehood of this interpretation of prophecies relating to the close of the age be revealed. Meanwhile, let Christians refrain from uncharitable dogmatism.²⁹

*Edge Hill College,
Ormskirk, Lancs.*

²⁹ For a recent study of Owen see *The Correspondence of John Owen, with an account of his life and work* (Jas. Clarke, 1970).