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**MONSTERS OF MÜNSTER: LESSONS FROM THE  
APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE OF THE ANABAPTIST  
KINGDOM**

by

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NARRATIVE OF THE ANABAPTIST KINGDOM**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role of apocalyptic narrative in shaping collective identity and collective action to help better understand groups that turn to violence. Because such narratives deal with the ultimate and supernatural, they can be effective in causing believers to disregard worldly consequences and forgo worldly benefits to support transcendent goals. In the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster (1533–1535), a certain apocalyptic narrative developed that led to brutal acts of violence within the city, and a desire to spread the kingdom to the entire world. Several prominent elements in the kingdom's narrative developed over time to justify the Anabaptists' use of violence: (1) the arrival of the time of judgment, (2) a clear distinction between those who require judgment and those who do not, (3) a divinely sanctioned administration, and (4) a call for the group to administer justice on earth. These elements were not the inevitable result of starting with an apocalyptic narrative but were shaped by both *internal dynamics* and *external conflict*. By understanding how such elements develop, defense practitioners will be better able to exploit certain internal dynamics and anticipate (or even alter) how their confrontations with such groups affect the development of the narrative.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I.</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II.</b>	<b>NARRATIVE .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>A.</b>	<b>NARRATIVE, PERSONHOOD, AND HUMAN MEANING .....</b>	<b>6</b>
	<b>1. Narrative and Human Meaning .....</b>	<b>6</b>
	<b>2. Narrative and Personal Identity .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>B.</b>	<b>NARRATIVE, RELIGION, AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY.....</b>	<b>12</b>
	<b>1. Religious Narrative and Collective Identity .....</b>	<b>12</b>
	<b>2. Polarization and Radicalization.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>C.</b>	<b>NARRATIVE AND COLLECTIVE ACTION .....</b>	<b>18</b>
	<b>1. Narrative and Social Movement Theory.....</b>	<b>18</b>
	<b>2. Political Philosophy and Ideology .....</b>	<b>21</b>
	<b>3. The Role of Religious Narrative in Collective Action.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>III.</b>	<b>APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>A.</b>	<b>GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>B.</b>	<b>THE APOCALYPSE, CHRISTIANITY, AND THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION.....</b>	<b>32</b>
	<b>1. Christianity and Apocalyptic Expectation.....</b>	<b>32</b>
	<b>2. Signs of the End of the Age during the Reformation.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>IV.</b>	<b>APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE AND THE ANABAPTIST KINGDOM OF MÜNSTER.....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>A.</b>	<b>THE REFORMATION IN MÜNSTER.....</b>	<b>40</b>
	<b>1. Typical Nature of the Reformation in Münster .....</b>	<b>41</b>
	<b>2. Anabaptism in Münster.....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>B.</b>	<b>THE APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE IN MÜNSTER .....</b>	<b>48</b>
	<b>1. Melchior Hoffman and Anabaptist Apocalyptic Beliefs.....</b>	<b>48</b>
	<b>2. Apocalyptic Narrative and the Anabaptist Rise to Power .....</b>	<b>53</b>
	<b>3. The Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster .....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>V.</b>	<b>ANALYSIS, CONCLUSIONS, AND LESSONS LEARNED.....</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>A.</b>	<b>ELEMENTS OF THE ANABAPTIST NARRATIVE .....</b>	<b>79</b>
	<b>1. The Time of God’s Judgment .....</b>	<b>80</b>
	<b>2. Defining the Wicked and the Faithful.....</b>	<b>82</b>
	<b>3. A Divinely Sanctioned Administration .....</b>	<b>83</b>

4.	The Call for the Faithful to Administer Justice on Earth.....	84
B.	INTERNAL DYNAMICS AND INTERACTIONS WITH THE OUTSIDE WORD.....	87
1.	Internal Dynamics and Conflict .....	88
2.	Isolation, Polarization, and Interaction with the World .....	91
C.	CONNECTIONS WITH THE ISLAMIC STATE AND CONCLUDING LESSONS.....	94
1.	Connections with the Islamic State .....	94
2.	Concluding Lessons .....	100
	LIST OF REFERENCES .....	103
	INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST .....	109

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	The cyclical cognitive reinforcement dynamic.....	16
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## I. INTRODUCTION

With the rise of al-Qaeda and its attack on September 11, religiously motivated violence has been the subject of numerous recent academic studies. More recently, the Islamic State (IS) has brought attention to the role of apocalyptic beliefs in motivating violent acts. However, history demonstrates that both religious violence and apocalyptic beliefs are clearly not a new phenomenon, and not isolated to Islam. Thus, it is helpful to examine cases that fall outside our contemporary environment to better understand the causes of religious violence and avoid falsely attributing the violence to factors unique to our situation. The Münster Rebellion during the Radical Reformation in early sixteenth-century Europe provides a case in which an apocalyptic narrative motivated brutality and violence within the city of Münster. This thesis examines this particular apocalyptic narrative to increase our understanding of apocalyptic narratives in general—both how they develop and how they impact a group’s identity and collective action—especially those narratives that motivate violence.

This thesis identified several key elements that developed in the narrative of the Anabaptists Kindom of Münster: (1) the arrival of the time of judgment, (2) a clear and defined distinction between the wicked (who require judgment) and the faithful (who do not), (3) a divinely sanctioned administration, and (4) a call for the faithful to administer justice on earth. These elements were not the inevitable result of starting with an apocalyptic narrative but were shaped the internal challenges of the kingdom and external conflict with the opposing forces that surrounded them. By understanding how such elements develop, defense practitioners will be better able to exploit certain internal dynamics and anticipate (or even alter) how their confrontations with such groups affect the development of the narrative.

The city of Münster is notorious for the Münster Rebellion—a short-lived Anabaptist kingdom characterized by apocalyptic zeal, along with polygamy, communalism, and brutality. The Reformation in Münster began much like other independent cities in the Holy Roman Empire. Nevertheless, when Anabaptists gained control of the city government, the situation took a unique turn that led to a confrontation

with the ruling prince-bishop of the region.<sup>1</sup> The acute trauma and persecution felt by the Anabaptists within the city were placed into an unfolding cosmic battle between good and evil. As the trauma of being under siege increased, it strengthened the apocalyptic narrative that saw Münster as the New Jerusalem called to make a stand against evil to usher in the return of Christ. Faith in their role in God's ultimate plan, combined with the hope of vindication and the pouring out of the wrath of God on their enemies, helped the Anabaptist Kingdom to hold out under siege for sixteen months.<sup>2</sup> The ordeal ended with the slaughter of several hundred Anabaptist residents and the torture of three of the most prominent leaders of the rebellion.<sup>3</sup> Many factors led to the rebellion in Münster; however, we cannot fully understand the brutality and resolute willingness of so many to fight to the end, without considering the underlying apocalyptic narrative they used to justify their actions.

For the Anabaptist participants in the Münster Rebellion, this work unpacks how their apocalyptic beliefs contributed to their violent collective action. This study provides insights on the degree to which their apocalyptic narrative was a primary driver for violence within the Anabaptist Kingdom, and the degree to which the radical movement looked to an apocalyptic narrative to support their violent acts. The narrative of the Anabaptists in Münster emerged to explain the developing situation that the various people shared but from different perspectives.<sup>4</sup> I pay particular attention to the presence of an organized opposition and how conflict shaped both the narratives and the resultant

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis uses the term Anabaptist throughout to refer to all groups during the Protestant Reformation that accepted and advocated for adult, believers baptism. The term Anabaptist (or re-baptizer) is one that carries negative connotations and was used by the opponents of such groups. Anabaptists did not believe that they were re-baptizing people, but that infant baptism was not legitimate baptism, and that adult baptism under one's own volition would therefore be a person's first real baptism. Despite the shortcomings of the term, it is the most common term used to describe such groups of the time, and this thesis follows this convention.

<sup>2</sup> R. Po-Chia Hsia, "Munster and the Anabaptists," in *The German People and the Reformation*, ed. R. Po-Chia Hsia (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 57.

<sup>3</sup> Charles A. McDaniel Jr., "Violent Yearnings for the Kingdom of God: Munster's Militant Anabaptism," in *Belief and Bloodshed: Religion and Violence Across Time and Tradition*, ed. James K. Wellman (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 63.

<sup>4</sup> John R. Hall, "Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect: From Jonestown to Mt. Carmel," in *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, ed. S. A. Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 206. Hall notes how mass suicide narratives from Jonestown influenced the reaction to the Branch Davidians at Waco.



collective actions. The necessary detail of this approach limits the scope of this thesis to one primary case study; however, I draw on other groups during the Reformation for comparison as necessary. In the end, I hope to draw some broad conclusions that will help us to understand contemporary apocalyptic groups and their potential to turn toward violence.

I address these questions based on the understanding that human beings are predisposed to construct narratives to make sense of their lives and the world around them. As such, narrative impacts a group's collective identity and collective action. A narrative approach avoids conceptualizing a group's identity and ideology as if they are fixed entities and accounts for the fact that group identity and ideology can be complex, dynamic, and even fragmented.<sup>5</sup> For any collective action, it is more profitable to examine how it unfolds in relation to both exogenous and endogenous factors, rather than looking for a set of characteristics that lead to an inevitable outcome.<sup>6</sup>

A number of scholars have demonstrated that apocalyptic belief is one of several factors that contribute to collective violent action.<sup>7</sup> This study complements their research by examining in detail the development of a collective apocalyptic identity, expressed as a shared narrative, that led to acts of collective violence. Incorporating the simple notion of the progression of time, which is inherent to narrative, helps us better understand individual and group identity. Understanding how narratives relate to social identity and location can help to reveal if a group is on a trajectory toward conflict. Observable narrative shifts—when the narratives of one group or individual are incorporated into another group or individual—can also reveal how these narratives influence events in ways that exceed rational considerations.<sup>8</sup> Such a shift occurred for the Anabaptists in Münster, when they adopted their dominant apocalyptic narrative.

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew D. Brown, "A Narrative Approach to Collective Identities," *Journal of Management Studies* 43, no. 4 (June, 2006), 731.

<sup>6</sup> Philip D. Schuyler, John R. Hall and Sylvaine Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements, Social Order and Violence in North America, Europe and Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 11.

<sup>7</sup> William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Hall, "Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect," 210.

Before examining the Münster Rebellion in detail, the next chapter explores narrative as a means to understand a group's identity, beliefs, and actions. This chapter looks at the role of narrative in individual human meaning, knowledge, and existence. After setting this foundation, it looks at the role of narrative in forming collective identity and ideology, then the role of narrative in collective action. In the second section, I examine apocalyptic narrative in particular and its relationship to collective identity and collective action. The third section examines the Münster Rebellion, and a final section outlines general conclusions drawn from the case study.

## II. NARRATIVE

This thesis views both individual and group identity as primarily formed around stories, or narratives, rather than fixed beliefs, and sees ideology as best expressed in narrative form. People are predisposed to understand reality in narrative form; they symbolically integrate events of their daily lives into the plot of the larger story they use to make sense of the world.<sup>9</sup> Because of this, group identity takes on a similar narrative form based on the shared larger stories. Often, multiple narrative strands are present in a group with a central identity emerging from the interaction between them.<sup>10</sup> Narratives evolve both through internal struggles for dominance between narratives within the group, and external conflict with opposition groups, authorities, and society as a whole.<sup>11</sup> Thus, a narrative approach is adept at dealing with both the internal complexity of a group and its response to external factors.

With the rise of asymmetric conflicts and the importance of popular support, the Department of Defense has drawn on narrative to influence certain populations. Much of the discussion and analysis among defense practitioners, however, tends to focus on narrative as a deliberately constructed story that is used to support an overarching ideology or strategy.<sup>12</sup> From their perspective, a strong narrative is merely a means to garner popular support and motivate group members toward accomplishing strategic goals. The “battle to win the narrative” is a vital component of success in the overall conflict; thus, it is important to understand how to counter adversary narratives and shape one’s narrative toward the desired end. Although this approach is a step in the right direction that helps to emphasize narrative, it rarely considers the interactive role of

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<sup>9</sup> Douglas Ezzy, “Theorizing Narrative Identity: Symbolic Interactionism and Hermeneutics,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (Apr 1, 1998), 239.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, *A Narrative Approach to Collective Identities*, 743.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, 737.

<sup>12</sup> This is the approach of this 2009 NPS thesis by Case and Mellen. Dean J. Case and Brian C. Mellen, “Changing the Story the Role of the Narrative in the Success Or Failure of Terrorist Groups” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2009).

narratives in creating and shaping a group's identity and determining a group's goals and actions.

From the understanding that people both *create* and *derive* their basic meaning through narrative, it is important to consider how intrinsic narratives influence the development of a group's ideology and the resultant collective actions.<sup>13</sup> This perspective does not reject the notion that groups can and do deliberately create and shape narratives to support an overall strategy, but rather hopes to add to our understanding by examining how narratives give rise to ideology by providing ultimate goals and describing a path to get there. Ultimately, the relationship between narrative and a group's goals is an interactive one with goals shaping narrative, just as narrative shapes goals.

This section on narrative first looks at human beings as individuals and how narrative is foundational for an understanding of human meaning, knowledge, and existence. After setting this foundation, it looks at groups and the role of narrative (especially religious narrative) in forming collective identity and ideology. It then briefly discusses the relationship of narrative to social movement theory perspectives on collective action, and how the framing process relates to broader meta-narratives. Overall, this chapter argues that narrative study is an essential component to understanding collective identity and collective action, particularly for religious groups and religious movements.

## **A. NARRATIVE, PERSONHOOD, AND HUMAN MEANING**

### **1. Narrative and Human Meaning**

The human drive for meaning, communicated through narrative, can help us to understand both how people see themselves and what motivates them. Over the past several decades, the social scientists have increasingly recognized the importance of narrative in motivating and explaining human behavior. Andrew Brown provides a helpful summary of a narrative approach to understanding human behavior from the

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<sup>13</sup> Donald Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Science* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 151–152.

perspectives of psychology, ontology, and epistemology.<sup>14</sup> Narrative psychologists have found that “stories underpin our cognitive and emotional lives as agents of memory, emotion, and meaning.”<sup>15</sup> Ontologically, “social and historic events have an intrinsic narrative structure which require comprehension in narrative terms.”<sup>16</sup> From an epistemological perspective, “storytelling produces a unique form of knowledge about processes of organizing.”<sup>17</sup> Taken together, we can conclude that stories provide a sense of understanding meaning, and belonging that cannot be explained solely in terms of material, worldly benefits.

To make sense of the importance of narrative in motivating human beings and assigning meaning to their lives, one must consider the underlying assumptions regarding human personhood and experience. In Donald Polkinghorne book, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, he examines how “non-material meanings and thoughts” envelope human experience. The material world does not bind human experience; it is the product of a person’s cognitive schemes interacting with his environment. This is evident in the fact that people have the capacity to deliberate before acting. This deliberation “retrieves previous experience and imaginatively creates alternate scenarios which anticipate the consequences of possible actions.”<sup>18</sup> After an event occurs, people also tend to assign meaning and understanding to the event that were not part of the original intent nor evident at the time of the event. Polkinghorne provides the following example: “The significance of an instance of running out of gas can be understood in light of the friendship that subsequently develops with the person who stopped to help.”<sup>19</sup> We can imagine assigning meaning to such mundane events in our own lives when we recall the circumstances of meeting a spouse or another life-changing event.

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<sup>14</sup> Brown, *A Narrative Approach to Collective Identities*, 746.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, 746.

<sup>16</sup> Brown, 746.

<sup>17</sup> Brown, 746.

<sup>18</sup> Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Science*, 15–16.

<sup>19</sup> Polkinghorne, 15–16.

The narratives that explain individual human meaning and purpose are clearly connected to our moral values and underlying beliefs. Christian Smith argues that understanding human beings as “moral, believing animals” provides the best approach to explaining human motivations, actions, and social behavior.<sup>20</sup> Smith stresses that morality is an essential element of humanity.<sup>21</sup> That is, all humans are moral and “human culture is always moral order.”<sup>22</sup> When he describes humans as *moral* animals, he means that we have “an orientation toward understanding about what is right and wrong, good and bad, worth and unworthy, just and unjust.” This moral understanding is not the result of our decisions or preferences but rather originates in our assumptions, values, emotions, and beliefs. In fact, we judge our decisions—even our preferences and desires—based on our moral values.<sup>23</sup>

Morality stems largely from the fact that we are fundamentally believing animals. Smith explains that “believing” refers to the view that we build all our knowledge on “sets of basic assumptions and beliefs that themselves cannot be empirically verified or established with certainty ... We build our lives from presuppositional starting points in which we (mostly unconsciously) place our trust and that are not derived from other justifying grounds.”<sup>24</sup> These unavoidable presuppositions have significant consequences in our perceptions and interpretations; from these, we derive our morality.<sup>25</sup> This is true for both the “secular” and the “religious.” Smith stresses that “a radically ‘unbelieving’ human animal would have no place to begin, no categories, no reason to act, no

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<sup>20</sup> Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 148.

<sup>21</sup> Although this section largely follows Smith, Charles Taylor argues similarly that personhood is inseparable from morality. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 7–8.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, 150.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, 150–151.

identity.”<sup>26</sup> We cannot function in life without committing to a set of basic assumptions and beliefs.

Smith further elaborates that “narrative is our most elemental human genre of communication and meaning-making, an essential way of framing the order and purpose of reality.... The substance of our most important beliefs and moral orders come from the narratives in which our lives are embedded.”<sup>27</sup> Douglas Ezzy similarly refers to the symbolic interpretation of the “objective events of lived experience.”<sup>28</sup> Narratives are more than facts and events in chronological order; the facts or events must be put together in a way that conveys moral meaning. E.M. Forster illustrated this point in his simple distinction between a *story*, “the king died then the queen died,” and a *plot*, “the king died then the queen died *of grief*.”<sup>29</sup> The latter goes beyond a sequence of events and adds causation and meaning.

To summarize: as moral, believing animals, human beings use narrative to make sense of their daily experiences and assign meaning to them. As Polkinghorne puts it: “[Narrative is] the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful.”<sup>30</sup> It is ubiquitous in our lives and provides the framework for how we conduct ourselves in

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<sup>26</sup> Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 55. Given his emphasis on presuppositions and assumptions as the foundation of all human belief systems, Smith rightly anticipates a charge that his position leads to relativism, antirealism, or nihilism, and an end to meaningful debates between opposing views. In response, he contends that his view of moral, believing, narrating animals explains the challenges of communicating across different narratives, and, when acknowledged, could lead to more productive discussion that helps us evaluate and engage other narratives. He introduces a few theories for how this might happen: First, Jeffery Stout, in the field of moral philosophy, has argued that it is possible to find a middle ground in order to get a “God’s eye view” between competing narratives. Next, Alasdair MacIntyre, from the perspective of tradition-centered epistemology, has suggested that a “narrative prevails over its rival which is able to include its rivals within it, not only to retell their stories as episodes within its story, but to tell the story of the telling of their stories as such episodes.” Lastly, Smith points to Roy Bhaskar and critical realism, which “affirms the existence of a real, common, external reality that observers can actually study and know, even given the influences of their own particularistic human perceptions and commitments”—there is a common external reality that can inform our understanding. Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 90–92.

<sup>27</sup> Smith, 90–92.

<sup>28</sup> Ezzy, *Theorizing Narrative Identity*, 242.

<sup>29</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1985), 86.

<sup>30</sup> Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Science*, 1.

mundane interactions within our culture.<sup>31</sup> However, more than that, it provides the framework to link these everyday events into the overall progress of our lives, thereby giving significance to the individual events based on how they affect the broader narrative of our lives.<sup>32</sup> The continuity and progress of an overarching narrative are not necessarily evident as events unfold in the present, but after the fact, individuals and groups tend to provide a coherent interpretation that fits selected events into the plot of the overall narrative.<sup>33</sup>

## 2. Narrative and Personal Identity

The concept of personal identity points questions of human meaning (who am I?) that find their answers in narrative. French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur's concept of *narrative identity* has contributed significantly to understanding personal identity as it persists across time and is worth summarizing here to provide a foundation for the next section on collective identity. Ricoeur points to narrative identity as a way to mediate between what he calls "identity-as-sameness" and "identity-as-self." Identity-as-sameness can refer to fixed characteristics that point to uniqueness or close resemblance of any objects; however, identity-as-self refers to living and changing organisms and must consider the factor of time. Ricoeur uses the example of an acorn being the same as (or having identity-as-sameness with) an oak tree although, as time progresses, they no longer possess the same visible characteristics. Like people who age, the acorn and the tree share an identity based on the function of continuity. We may say they are the same if we can trace the development from acorn to tree. From the opposite perspective, any "discontinuity" in the development would lead us to say that the tree is different from the acorn (i.e., it came from a different acorn).<sup>34</sup> This view of identity, based on continuity,

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<sup>31</sup> Roger C. Schank, *Tell Me a Story: Narrative and Intelligence* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 7–12. Shank develops the role of narrative in our everyday lives using the concept of scripts. We have cultural scripts that tell us how we are to act in a given situation, like ordering food at a restaurant. The transaction goes smoothly because both the waiter and the customer know their part in the script.

<sup>32</sup> Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Science*, 11–18; Ezzy, *Theorizing Narrative Identity*, 239–252.

<sup>33</sup> Ezzy, *Theorizing Narrative Identity*, 242.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Identity," *Philosophy Today* 35, no. 1 (1991), 73–75.



possesses an inherent narrative construct based on tracing an entity across the progression of time.

Ricoeur points to one other sense of identity-as-sameness that considers the progression of time.<sup>35</sup> This sense of identity does not look to observable characteristics at a given point in time, but to the unchanging essence of a thing that remains across time.<sup>36</sup> In this category of permanence, Ricoeur says that identity-as-sameness intersects with identity-as-self.<sup>37</sup> As mentioned above regarding human meaning, narrative identity understands the sense of *self*, like *sameness*, as emerging from the story a person tells about himself.<sup>38</sup> Ezzy, drawing from Ricoeur, concludes that “while narratives can and do change, this does not mean they cannot provide a sense of self-sameness that is substantial enough to justify talking about character as ‘a persistent unity of preferences, inclinations, and motivations.’” Thus, a narrative provides the basis on which a durable identity can form while allowing for change and adaptation over time.

Joseph Davis, in his introduction to, *Stories of Change: Narrative and Social Movements*, summarizes the importance of narrative on individual identity well and is worth quoting at some length:

Identity is not some inner essence but rather an ongoing story that emerges in and through the selection and emplotment of experience. Individuals search for self-understanding by imposing narrative structure on their lives, an interpretive process that both looks back in time and projects into the future. The self-narrative configures key experiences into a meaningful whole, introduces a sense of coherence and temporal unity to one’s development and future direction, and at the same time serves as the basis by which individuals represent themselves to others.<sup>39</sup>

Simply put, people give context to their lives, beliefs, and ideas by giving them a location and purpose in underlying stories; those stories in turn also contextualize and

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<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur, *Narrative Identity*, 73.

<sup>36</sup> Ricoeur, 74–75.

<sup>37</sup> Ricoeur, 75.

<sup>38</sup> Ricoeur, 73–75.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph E. Davis, *Stories of Change: Narrative and Social Movements* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 20.

shape a person's beliefs and ideas.<sup>40</sup> It is in this sense that people both *create* and *derive* their basic meaning—their identity—through narrative, which helps them to make sense of the world and how they ought to live in it.<sup>41</sup> Thus, people *create* basic meaning placing themselves as a character within a larger unfolding narrative; they then, in turn, *derive* meaning when the narrative they embrace shapes their beliefs and actions. With this foundation in place, the next section looks at collective identity and the particular power of religious narrative.

## **B. NARRATIVE, RELIGION, AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY**

### **1. Religious Narrative and Collective Identity**

People do not individually create their self-narratives from a blank slate; they pull from narratives and myths within their cultural and apply them to their varying contexts; it is the dominant shared stories that form the basis for collective identity.<sup>42</sup> Davis explains how shared stories increase solidarity within a group: “the storyteller and reader/listener create a ‘we’ involving degree of affective bond and a sense of solidarity: told and retold, ‘my story’ becomes ‘our story.’”<sup>43</sup> He points to Southern sit-ins in the 1960s to protest racial segregation as an example: “narratives gave coherence and directionality to rapidly unfolding events, helped to constitute and sustain a collective identity, and configure emotions to provide incentives to high-risk participation.”<sup>44</sup> For this to happen, the common narrative must resonate and provide meaning and purpose for the individuals within the group.

Religions are particularly adept at providing a narrative that satisfies our pursuit of ultimate meaning and is thus highly effective at forming a collective identity. Christian Smith provides a helpful, substantive definition of religion that complements his anthropological view: “religions are sets of beliefs, symbols, and perspectives about the

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<sup>40</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 47–52.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 151–152.

<sup>42</sup> Davis, *Stories of Change*, 20.

<sup>43</sup> Davis, 19.

<sup>44</sup> Davis, 19–20.

reality of superempirical orders that make claims to organize and guide human life.” Simply put, religion is “an ordinarily unseen reality that tells us what truth is and how we therefore ought to live.”<sup>45</sup> Humans naturally seek interpretive frameworks that transcend themselves, and superempirical orders inherently satisfy this by providing humans with transcendent stories that give them the meaning and significance they seek.<sup>46</sup>

For purposes of analysis, it is more feasible to look at the religious practices of a defined organization or group rather than ‘religion’ as a general concept. Heather Gregg provides a definition that does just that while maintaining many of the same elements as Smith. She defines religion as “an organization recognized as holy—relating to the divine or supernatural—consisting of beliefs, texts, leaders, a community, resources, and group identity.”<sup>47</sup> Gregg adds both material assets and group identity to a synthesis of the well-known definitions of religion advanced by Emile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz, and Max Weber. Regarding group identity, she helpfully points out that “most religions have a set of beliefs and practices organized around the goal of salvation, of which there is more than one understanding.”<sup>48</sup> Gregg’s understanding of religious identity is a narrative understanding of beliefs that are oriented toward a goal.

Social scientists have advanced numerous theories for what motivates people to join and stay with religious groups. Building on the role of narrative presented thus far, Christian Smith’s “subcultural identity theory” argues that religions form subcultures that provide adherents with both meaning and belonging. The modern world has not changed this basic human drive for meaning; in fact, Smith indicates that modern society may create conditions that exacerbate this need.<sup>49</sup> Because humans are (at their core) moral,

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<sup>45</sup> Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 98. Like others following a substantive definition, Smith was intentional in avoiding the word “supernatural” as it implies that the unseen order must be outside of nature or physical matter, while some religions place unseen orders within the natural world.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, 121–122.

<sup>47</sup> Gregg, *Path to Salvation*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> Gregg, 14.

<sup>49</sup> Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 89–119.

believing animals, the collective identities of these subcultures tend to be morally oriented and built on a collective narrative.

Subcultural identity theory recognizes distinct boundaries that define the members of the group, and help the group successfully construct and maintain their collective identity.<sup>50</sup> These boundaries would be most effective if expressed in narrative form connected to an ultimate goal, rather than a simple set of rules. Effective boundaries flow naturally out of a compelling narrative as it constructs an identity for the group and distinguishes what is sacred from profane. Smith points out that the sacred ideals that define the group boundaries “do not float freely in the sky of ideas ... they are always embedded in and arising from its collective narrative.”<sup>51</sup> He provides a helpful example regarding the source of the widespread American belief in the sacredness of individualism, which functions much like a religious narrative: “the individual conscience is sacred in America not because of some random happenstance but because the larger American Experiment story narrates it for us as sacred...the particular national recounting of the what is true and important in the narrative form of actors, context, plot, action, conflict, and resolution.”<sup>52</sup> The dominant American narrative defines what it is to be an American, and it creates the sacred ideal of the self-reliant individual.

## **2. Polarization and Radicalization**

Once a group defines itself with distinct boundaries, their collective identity tends to form around the more clearly defined, or extreme narratives within the group. Cass Sunstein has done significant work on this phenomenon, which he calls group

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<sup>50</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 89–119.

<sup>51</sup> Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 77–78.

<sup>52</sup> Smith, 77–78. Smith provides the following summary of the American Experience Narrative: “Once upon a time, our ancestors lived in an Old World where they were persecuted for religious beliefs and oppressed by established aristocracies. Land was scarce, freedoms denied, and futures bleak. But then brave and visionary men like Columbus opened up a New World, and our freedom-loving forefathers crossed the ocean to carve out of a wilderness a new civilization. Through bravery, ingenuity, determination, and goodwill, our forebears forged a way of life where men govern themselves, believers worship in freedom, and where anyone can grow rich and become president. This America is genuinely new, a clean break from the past, a historic experiment in freedom and democracy standing as a city on a hill shining a beacon of hope to guide a dark world into a future of prosperity and liberty. It deserves our honor, our devotion, and possibly the commitment of our very lives for its defense.”

polarization. He asserts that when like-minded group members meet regularly to deliberate issues, the group's collective views tend to move toward the most extreme member's version of the group's shared beliefs.<sup>53</sup> It appears that the effect is increased with stronger shared identity or convictions such as religious belief.<sup>54</sup> In terms of narrative, we could view polarization as the process by which less committed members commit to the more extreme dominant narrative as they meet, deliberate, and share stories. The result is that the group ends up with both less variation between the views of individual group members and a more extreme collective view.<sup>55</sup> Not only are their views more extreme, but group members are also more likely to act on those views as part of a group than they otherwise would as individuals.<sup>56</sup>

Group polarization is heightened when the group becomes isolated, thereby reducing, or even eliminating, exposure to competing views.<sup>57</sup> Social and political coercion, such as restrictions on a group's freedom to meet and deliberate, causes groups to withdraw from society and reduce their exposure to opposing views, and increase their interactions within the group. This isolation need not be physical; it could be a psychological separation created by social tension and suspicion of non-members.<sup>58</sup> Tension with the surrounding society based on a group's beliefs and practices causes isolation itself, while simultaneously increasing the risk of state coercion.<sup>59</sup> Reciprocally, a group may interpret the social and political coercion as part of their dominant group narrative to justify a theme of threat and persecution.

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<sup>53</sup> Cass R. Sunstein, "The Law of Group Polarization," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (Jun, 2002), 175–195.

<sup>54</sup> Cass R. Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 42.

<sup>55</sup> Sunstein, *The Law of Group Polarization*, 175–195.

<sup>56</sup> Sunstein, *Going to Extremes*, 2–3.

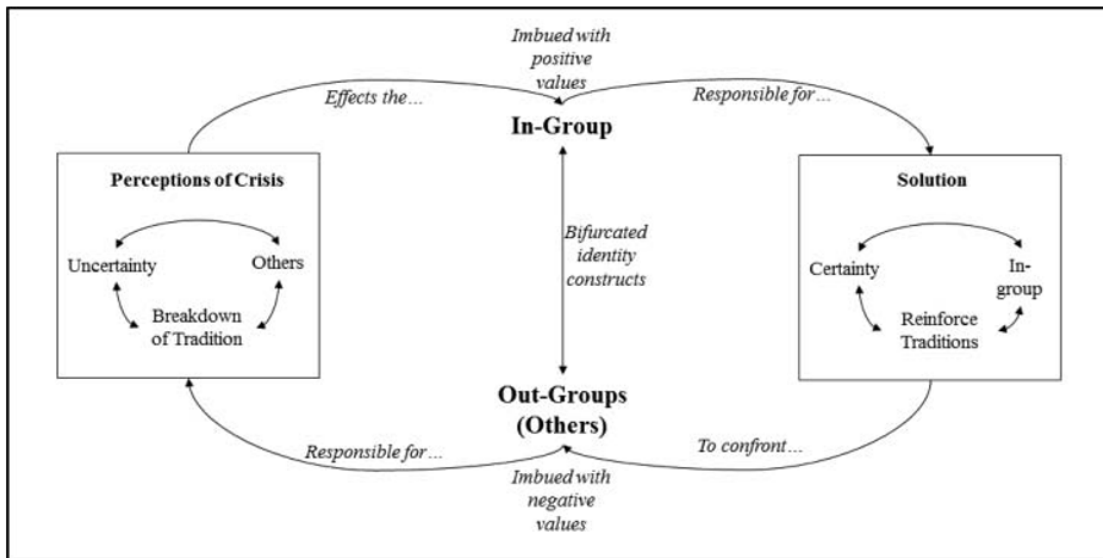
<sup>57</sup> Sunstein, *The Law of Group Polarization*, 175–195.

<sup>58</sup> Sunstein, *Going to Extremes*, 4.

<sup>59</sup> Everton, *Social Networks and Religious Violence*, 191–217

Groups in conflict tend to use narrative to exaggerate the differences between the in-group and the out-group and to denigrate the members of the out-group.<sup>60</sup> Haroro Ingram provides an illustration of the type of narrative that an extremist group might use: “we are the epitome of the ingroup identity, the ingroup’s crises are due to malevolent Others, so support us because we are your champions and protectors who will confront our enemies and restore the ingroup’s glory with our political agenda.”<sup>61</sup> This process is illustrated in Figure 1, taken from Ingram’s article “An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State’s Propaganda War.”<sup>62</sup> In his diagram, Ingram refers to the separation in identity that forms between groups in conflict as “bifurcated identity constructs.” As the separation between the in-group and out-group increases, the crisis, caused by the out-group, will seem more significant and the in-group’s solution will be more likely to be embraced.<sup>63</sup>

Figure 1. The cyclical cognitive reinforcement dynamic<sup>64</sup>



<sup>60</sup> Haroro J. Ingram, “An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State’s Propaganda War,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (September 16, 2016), 4.

<sup>61</sup> Ingram, *An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq*, 4.

<sup>62</sup> Ingram, 5.

<sup>63</sup> Ingram, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Source: Ingram, 4.

Ingram's helpful description of the "cyclical cognitive reinforcement" (CCR) process depicted in Figure 1 provides some additional insight:

CCR is the mutually reinforcing dynamic whereby perceptions of crisis are increasingly attached to malevolent outgroups that in turn exacerbates the benevolence of the in-group and the importance of its solutions. The in-group is thus increasingly perceived as the source of solutions typically due to it offering an explanatory narrative to make sense of the world, a physical sanctuary via a collective of likeminded individuals and a blueprint for tangible action rooted in both. This in turn tends to exacerbate the belief that the Other is complicit in crises.<sup>65</sup>

As polarization often leads to a sense of conflict with another group or the wider society, it can further increase the solidarity and commitment of its members. Stronger solidarity leads to a stronger shared identity, better retention of group members, and an increased ability to mobilize resources.<sup>66</sup> Smith, examining Christianity in America, noted that although it may seem counterintuitive, the churches that assimilate with the prevailing culture to remove that tension often lose their distinctiveness and decline in size and influence. Evangelical Christians, however, see themselves as "embattled" by both the non-Christian world as well as non-evangelical Christians who do not hold to their orthodox beliefs, providing the necessary tension to help them thrive.<sup>67</sup>

This section has begun to touch on radicalization, but it is important to note that radical narratives and beliefs are not always violent.<sup>68</sup> There are clear examples of groups that could be classified as radical and non-violent (such as the Amish). Consequently, it is

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<sup>65</sup> Ingram, *An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 113.

<sup>67</sup> Smith, 113.

<sup>68</sup> John R. Hall, "Religion and Violence: Social Processes in Comparative Perspective," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michele Dillon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 361–361. This thesis looks specifically at violent collective action; therefore it is necessary to define violence itself. John Hall provides a helpful discussion on defining violence noting that "the exercise of force is not always violent," and that some actions are violent even if physical force is not involved. Acknowledging the subjectivity of moving beyond physical violence, he follows Mary Jackman's broad definition. Jackman defines violence as "actions that inflict, threaten, or cause injury," where the actions can be "corporal, written, or verbal" and the injury may be "corporal, psychological, material, or social." Hall points out that "not all social groups and individuals have access to the same tools of violence. Thus, less powerful parties sometimes use extreme violence against more powerful (or better positioned) opponents who are themselves engaged in violent acts, just not always ones that involve corporal injury." A broad definition of violence may help us to recognize the escalation of violent acts as they proceed toward the extreme.

important to identify the specific beliefs and narratives that can contribute to violence. In polarization, Sunstein's points out that some beliefs have a rhetorical advantage in becoming dominant, namely, those that align best with the group's core or prevailing beliefs.<sup>69</sup> For example, in groups with established codes of conduct based on claims of absolute truth, the rhetorical advantage would tip toward those calling for strict adherence; arguments for moderation and compromise would be at a disadvantage. It would follow that some defining narratives could give a rhetorical advantage to views calling for violent action. Sean Everton, building on Sunstein's work, more specifically incorporated the content of the religious beliefs themselves into his model for religious violence. He concludes that "it is far more likely for group radicalization to manifest itself violently if groups believe that the use of violence is divinely sanctioned."<sup>70</sup> He goes on to point specifically to apocalyptic beliefs, a subject this thesis soon examines.

## C. NARRATIVE AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

### 1. Narrative and Social Movement Theory

This section briefly reviews the core tenets of social movement theory (SMT) and shows how a narrative approach fits into the current understanding. Although some scholars find it helpful to define social movements narrowly to distinguish them from other movements, this thesis follows Mario Diani's broader definition that recognizes the utility of applying SMT to a range of collective action. After examining the various definitions of social movement more than two decades ago, Diani concluded that: "Social movements are defined as networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities."<sup>71</sup> This definition allows us to apply the tenets of SMT to divergent situations from the Radical Reformation to contemporary Salafist movements.

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<sup>69</sup> Sunstein, *Going to Extremes*, 38.

<sup>70</sup> Everton, *Social Networks and Religious Violence*, 198., 198.

<sup>71</sup> Mario Diani, "The Concept of Social Movement," *The Sociological Review* 40, no. 1 (Feb, 1992), 1.



Social movement scholars have arrived at a consensus as to the three main factors for examining how and why grievances can lead to social movements. In the introduction to their book, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald identify these as: “political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing process.”<sup>72</sup> As we proceed in this section, it will become clear that frame analysis is the factor most relevant to the narrative approach used in this thesis; however, it is important to note that the three factors are largely interrelated.<sup>73</sup>

*Political opportunities* refer the opportunities (or constraints) that the institutional political system provides for collective action.<sup>74</sup> Scholars who emphasize the importance of political opportunities do so from the conviction that “social movements and revolutions are shaped by the broader set of political constraints and opportunities unique to the national context in which they are embedded.”<sup>75</sup> A group must perceive enough political opportunity for a social movement to be successful, but not so much opportunity that the group may seek other means to address their grievances.

*Mobilizing structures* refer to the organizational structures of informal and formal groups that give rise to social movements.<sup>76</sup> They are the “collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action.”<sup>77</sup> The most prominent theoretical perspective for examining mobilizing structures is the “resource mobilization theory,” which recognizes that formal groups or organizations are often the force behind social movements.<sup>78</sup> Proponents of the resource mobilization theory (RMT) explain social movements based primarily on their mobilization process (and the necessary resources) rather than their intangible grievances. Later scholars

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<sup>72</sup> Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, “Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes - Toward a Synthetic, Comparative Perspective on Social Movements,” in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>73</sup> McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 7.

<sup>74</sup> McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 2.

<sup>75</sup> McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 3.

<sup>76</sup> McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 4.

<sup>77</sup> McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 4.

<sup>78</sup> John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, “Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory,” *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977), 1212–1241.

criticized the original advocates of RMT for its emphasis on formal organizations, rather than recognizing the importance of more informal, or grassroots, mobilizing structures.<sup>79</sup>

Lastly, McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald note that, although political opportunities and organizational structures have much explanatory power, alone they cannot explain the emergence of collective action. There must be grievances that people believe can be addressed by collective action, and *framing processes*, a term coined by David Snow, are the mechanisms that shape people's perceptions toward recognizing both the grievances and the solution.<sup>80</sup> Snow helpfully separates framing into three processes:

There are three core framing tasks: (1) a diagnosis of some event or aspect of social life as problematic and in need of alteration; (2) a proposed solution to the diagnosed problem that specifies what needs to be done; and (3) a call to arms or rationale for engaging in ameliorative or corrective action.<sup>81</sup>

These are summarized as diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing.<sup>82</sup> All three are necessary to mobilize support; diagnostic and prognostic framing serves to form a consensus on the problem and solution, but this does not always lead to action. Motivational framing provides the incentives or justification for the costs associated with acting out.<sup>83</sup> The framing process has an inherent narrative structure, and the three core tasks could be accomplished within a single narrative.

SMT holds that political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing process function interactively within a given movement.<sup>84</sup> Each factor is necessary, and no single factor is sufficient to cause a social movement. For example, the political opportunities and constraints must be present but are not sufficient unless framed in such a way to promote collective action. Also, how they are framed and publically communicated can change the opportunities and constraints placed on a group. Similarly, a group must be

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<sup>79</sup> McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, *Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes*, 3.

<sup>80</sup> McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 5.

<sup>81</sup> Snow and Benford, *Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization*, 199.

<sup>82</sup> Snow and Benford, 200-1.

<sup>83</sup> Snow and Benford, 201.

<sup>84</sup> McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, *Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes*, 8.

“sufficiently well organized to act on [the] shared definition of the situation,” just as the overall narrative and framing process influences how a group organizes and how the group mobilizes resources.<sup>85</sup>

## 2. Political Philosophy and Ideology

In the field of political science, scholars have pointed to the concept of ideology to account for the importance of ideas in motivating collective action. Since the origin of the use of the term *ideology* in the French Revolution, political philosophers and thinkers have ascribed to it various definitions with mostly negative connotations.<sup>86</sup> Since the 1960s, however, social scientists have tended to accept a broader, neutral understanding that does not view ideologies as inherently bad. This view is characterized by Martin Seliger’s definition (in 1976): An ideology is “a set of ideas by which men posit, explain and justify the ends and means of organized social action, irrespective of whether such action aims to preserve, amend, uproot or rebuild a given social order.”<sup>87</sup> Political philosopher, Andrew Heywood provides a three-part definition that follows Seliger’s neutral approach, but adds some helpful specificity:

An ideology is a more or less coherent set of ideas that provides the basis for organized political action, whether this is intended to preserve, modify or overthrow the existing system of power. All ideologies therefore have the following features. They:

- (a) offer an account of the existing order, usually in the form of a “world view.”
- (b) advance a model of a desired future, a vision of the “good society.”
- (c) explain how political change can and should be brought about—how to get from (a) to (b).<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, *Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes*, 8.

<sup>86</sup> Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, 6th ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 3–10.

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Heywood, 10.

<sup>88</sup> Heywood, 10.

Although not explicitly stated, Heywood's approach to ideology is consistent with the narrative approach of this thesis.<sup>89</sup> His definition assumes a broad metanarrative with an appraisal of where one is currently situated within the narrative, an ultimate goal or end to the narrative, and an idea of how to get there. Heywood's definition accounts for both religious and secular worldviews, and understands that "ideologies provide a perspective, or 'lens', through which the world is understood and explained."<sup>90</sup> Thus, we see things through a "veil of ingrained beliefs, opinions, and assumption."<sup>91</sup> Heywood says ideologies "act as a form of social cement, providing social groups, and indeed whole societies, with a set of unifying beliefs and values."<sup>92</sup> His explanation is consistent with the view presented in this thesis that understands these values and principles as expressed in narrative form and connected to an ultimate goal.

Because of the inherent narrative form of Heywood's concept political ideology, many of his insights regarding ideology are directly applicable to examining narratives in relation to collective action. Heywood contends that "ideology blurs the distinction between 'what is' and what 'should be.'"<sup>93</sup> He recognizes that ideologies fall on a spectrum as to how idea-oriented or action-oriented they are, as well as their fluidity or adaptability over time.<sup>94</sup> Finally, he stresses the internal complexity of ideologies, namely that there are "a range of divergent, even rival, traditions and viewpoints" within an ideology. All of these aspects are characteristic of narrative and would be reflected in an ideologies' underlying narrative. Heywood concludes that "ideologies are embraced less because they stand up to scrutiny and logical analysis, and more because they help individuals, groups and societies make sense of the world in which they live."<sup>95</sup> This

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<sup>89</sup> Heywood, *Political Ideologies*, 10.

<sup>90</sup> Heywood, 2. Since they provide a similar social function, Mark Juergensmeyer uses the phrase "ideologies of order" to include both religions and secular ideologies. Following Heywood's definition, this clarifying phrase is not necessary. Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 30–35.

<sup>91</sup> Heywood, 2–3.

<sup>92</sup> Heywood, 3.

<sup>93</sup> Heywood, 11.

<sup>94</sup> Heywood, 12.

<sup>95</sup> Heywood, 14.

understanding sounds strikingly similar to Polkinghorne's point that human beings use narrative to make sense of their daily experiences and assign meaning to them.<sup>96</sup>

Heywood anticipates the question: If ideologies are so malleable and changing, how can they even be distinguished and defined? He turns to Michael Freeden and a structural view of ideology for the answer.<sup>97</sup> Freeden points to a hierarchy of concepts, from "core concepts" to "peripheral concepts," where the core concepts are essential to the ideology, and the peripheral concepts may change over time with the ideology still intact.<sup>98</sup> However, Heywood's definition would be consistent with a narrative concept of group identity that recognizes a core narrative and goal, but with changing evaluations of the existing order and prescriptions of what should be done. One of the strengths of a narrative concept of collective identity is that it explains the solidarity of a group around a shared narrative while avoiding the reductionist pitfalls of limiting the analysis to a fixed set of core beliefs. As touched on earlier, categorical identification of a group (as a cult, extremist organization, etc.) with fixed essential characteristics can cause us to wrongly interpret their collective goals and actions based on preconceived notions of how that ideal-type group should act.<sup>99</sup>

### **3. The Role of Religious Narrative in Collective Action**

Religious groups bring several unique assets to collective action. Christian Smith points to the motivation resulting from having one's goals aligned with God's will and an ultimate purpose, which is transcendental, eternal, and sacred.<sup>100</sup> Any claim of divine imperative is inherently absolute and would supersede even the most powerful worldly authority. Smith uses Martin Luther's words at his trial at the Diet of Worms as an example: "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant

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<sup>96</sup> Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Science*, 1.

<sup>97</sup> Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>98</sup> Heywood, *Political Ideologies*, 13.

<sup>99</sup> Hall, *Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect*, 205–235

<sup>100</sup> Christian Smith, "Introduction: Correcting a Curious Neglect, or Bringing Religion Back in," in *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social Movement Action* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 9.

anything ... Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise.”<sup>101</sup> Social movement theory points out that there must be a grievance or injustice that is susceptible to change through collective action; religion is adept at defining an injustice against divine moral standards and at calling God’s people to stand up against these injustices with an all-powerful God behind them.<sup>102</sup> This motivation can come through intangible rituals, symbols, and shared narrative that help to form collective identity or the more tangible resources that religious organizations bring like legitimate established leaders, organizational authority structures, transnational networks, and financial resources.<sup>103</sup>

Proponents of frame analysis note that preexisting ideas, beliefs, and values influence the resonance of a particular frame in the target audience; these are best expressed and examined as large metanarratives for a group.<sup>104</sup> If the frames are not compatible with the overarching metanarrative of the group or target audience, they are not likely to be effective in motivating action. In light of this, we must consider a group’s defining metanarrative if we would like to predict their support for, and participation in collective action.

Christian Smith illustrates several overarching narratives that represent major systems of thought. One such narrative, the Militant Islamic Narrative, has allowed violent extremist groups to gain support and recruits from the broader Muslim community:

Once upon a time, even while Europe was stumbling through its medieval darkness, a glorious Muslim empire and civilization led the world in all manner of science, art, technology, and culture. Islam prospered for many centuries under faithful submission to Allah. But then, crusading Infidels from the Northwest invaded the land of Islam and over five hundred years have progressively conquered, divided, and subjugated us. Once glorious, Islam now suffers endless humiliations, infidelities, and corruptions through Western colonialism, secularism, socialism, communism, mass consumerism, feminism, and eroticism. Now arrogant Western infidelity

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<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Smith, *Correcting a Curious Neglect*, 10.

<sup>102</sup> Smith, 10–11.

<sup>103</sup> Smith, 11–22.

<sup>104</sup> David A. Snow and Scott C. Byrd, “Ideology, Framing Processes, and Islamic Terrorist Movements,” *Mobilization: An International Journal* 12, no. 2 (2007), 132.

desecrates the sacred lands of Muhammed and Palestine with its armies, and by backing our Jewish enemies. But today the tide is finally turning. Islam has awoken and is now returning to fidelity and glory, with a new vision of devotion to faith. All believers must submit themselves to Allah and devote their lives to a holy war to drive out infidels both at home and abroad.<sup>105</sup>

It is important to note that, except for the last two sentences calling for violent actions, many Muslims outside militant organizations would accept variations of this general narrative. It is a final threshold that calls for, and justifies, divinely sanctioned violence to bring the narrative to fruition that is the point of contention. Heather Gregg argues that the goal of salvation (of both individual human beings and the world as a whole) must be considered to understand religiously motivated violence. Smith's narrative would probably be strengthened (and made more accurate) by articulating the ultimate goal of salvation. The next chapter on apocalyptic beliefs builds upon the importance of the goal of salvation as the culmination of an apocalyptic narrative.

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<sup>105</sup> Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 68.

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### III. APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE

In this chapter, I set a foundation to help the reader better understand the apocalyptic narrative that came to dominate the Anabaptist Kingdom in Münster. First, I examine the distinguishing characteristics that make apocalyptic narratives different from other narratives. Second, I briefly consider the origin, general framework, and development of Christian apocalyptic beliefs leading up to the Protestant Reformation. The Anabaptists in Münster made every attempt to ground their apocalyptic narrative in the Christian scriptures; nevertheless, they also built upon apocalyptic teachings that developed over time. This chapter does not comprehensively examine Christian apocalyptic beliefs, but instead aims to highlight the general framework and specific beliefs that contributed most to the Anabaptist Kingdom.

#### A. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE

Apocalyptic narratives present human history as progressing toward a decisive and traumatic end that brings redemption to the faithful and judgment to the wicked.<sup>106</sup> The traumatic end usually culminates with an existential battle between good and evil. Christianity, Islam, and Judaism all have an apocalyptic narrative drawn from ancient traditions or sacred texts that explains how this age will end.<sup>107</sup> There is, however, profound variation amongst local groups within these major religions as to the meaning and significance of apocalyptic narratives relative to other narratives. With varying interpretations, examining a group's sacred scripture to determine the correct apocalyptic interpretation can prove to be a difficult task. This does not mean the texts are irrelevant—they provide an important basis for the credibility of a narrative—but that a particular group's unique apocalyptic narrative must go beyond the text to interpret the events they see and experience in their daily lives as part of God's unfolding plan. New

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<sup>106</sup> John R. Hall, "Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, ed. David A. Snow and others (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2013), 1.

<sup>107</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 146.

revelations, signs, and interpretations based on contemporary events may come to dominate a narrative that was originally based on sacred scripture, causing it to evolve into something far removed from the original version. Therefore, it is important to consider how a group's apocalyptic narrative develops and changes in relation to a group's environment.

Often the prominence of a group's apocalyptic narrative is closely related to its members' assessment of their temporal proximity to the end of the age. John Hall helpfully summarizes how a narrative placing one at the end of the age might be compelling: "Living at the end of history, they will feel a special sense of their own destiny, to have been chosen to take part in the decisive events whereby the ultimate meaning of human existence is to be resolved by the events that unfold."<sup>108</sup> Genuinely held apocalyptic narratives that understand the time of the end as unknowable (or in the distant future) can and do impact the daily lives of such believers. However, for those who believe that they are living at the very end of the age, the apocalypse can become the dominant reality forming the collective identity of the group.<sup>109</sup>

For groups that see an impending apocalyptic end, Hall suggests two questions to understand a group's beliefs more accurately. First, *when in time does a movement see itself relative to the end of the age?* This question distinguishes between pre-apocalyptic (anticipating an impending apocalyptic event) and post-apocalyptic (living in the midst of the wider society that finds itself under judgment) groups. For pre-apocalyptic groups, it is important to note how soon the end will come.<sup>110</sup> The second and related question is: *what is the group called to do during these end-times?* Simply put, does the group have a divinely sanctioned role in bringing about the end? As mentioned above, responses can vary greatly on this question. Post-apocalyptic groups tend to see themselves as "other-worldly" and attempt to withdraw and escape from the old order that is currently under

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<sup>108</sup> John R. Hall, *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), 201.

<sup>109</sup> Hall, 201-203.

<sup>110</sup> John R. Hall, "Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect: From Jonestown to Mt. Carmel," in *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, ed. S. A. Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 207.

judgment. Pre-apocalyptic groups may withdraw from society for various reasons, but they are much more focused on the progression of history as the final judgment is yet to come. A pre-apocalyptic group may also see their role as one of converting others by emphasizing the urgency of accepting salvation before the end. Nevertheless, in extreme cases, such groups seek to support the arrival of the new era through violence and terror.<sup>111</sup> It is important to recognize that the responses of individuals and the group as a whole varies and can shift or evolve.

Although apocalyptic narratives vary, they all deal in the ultimate and supernatural; thus, it is important to reiterate that they can provide an especially powerful narrative that can cause believers to disregard worldly consequences and forgo worldly benefits in support of transcendent goals. Juergensmeyer uses the term “cosmic” to describe such narratives because they transcend human experience and provide the grand scenarios to relate worldly events to a broader metaphysical conflict between good and evil.<sup>112</sup> Embedded within such apocalyptic narratives is the idea that society has been overcome with evil and is responsible for the persecution of the faithful. Since syncretism and compromise with evil are often viewed as major contributors to the decline, such apocalyptic narratives do not support compromise as a way to peace.<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, this does not mean violence is inevitable with a dominant apocalyptic narrative (recall that an apocalyptic group may choose to separate from the world and live a “pure” existence, or it may peacefully seek to convert others to the group’s way of life).<sup>114</sup> Successful apocalyptic narratives do, however, facilitate the formation of distinct boundaries that define the members of the in-group and often define a particularly evil out-group.<sup>115</sup>

As discussed above, distinct boundaries help a group to construct and maintain their collective identity successfully and to mobilize resources.<sup>116</sup> Groups that are united

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<sup>111</sup> Hall, *Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect*, 207. Both of these questions are applied to the Anabaptists in Münster in Chapter V of this thesis.

<sup>112</sup> Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 146.

<sup>113</sup> Juergensmeyer, 146.

<sup>114</sup> Hall, *Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect*, 207.

<sup>115</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 89–119; Sunstein, *The Law of Group Polarization*, 175–195.

<sup>116</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 89–119.

around a common apocalyptic narrative tend to have a high level of social solidarity and a clear separation from the broader social order; both of these conditions appear to facilitate collective action (although they are certainly not sufficient).<sup>117</sup> The actions of such a group can be altruistic, violent, or anywhere in-between; however, any time a cohesive group is motivated by a belief in a righteous, transcendent goal, it has the potential to have a conflict with the wider society.

Apocalyptic groups turn to violence when they believe their violent acts are in accordance with God's plan to bring about the apocalypse. We typically see this violence in the context of battles against an outside adversary, but violence can also be directed at dissidents within the group, or even manifest itself in mass suicide. Regardless, apocalyptic groups see their conflict on earth as part of a larger spiritual clash between good and evil.<sup>118</sup> In such narratives, violence is often more than a means to an end, but the very instrument of judgment and cleansing.<sup>119</sup> Thus, the faithful can be called as the instruments of God to act violently in a variety of ways leading up to the apocalypse.

Here it is important to understand the ultimate goal to which the narrative is progressing. As mentioned earlier, Gregg notes that most religions are oriented around the goal of salvation, both individual and at the cosmic level.<sup>120</sup> Similar to Gregg's emphasis on salvation, Juergensmeyer points to "a persistent recognition [among religious scholars] that much of the religious imagination has been built around notions of the afterlife and the overcoming of human frailty and corruption—often symbolized by rituals involving the avoidance of pollution."<sup>121</sup> Understanding why redemption is necessary, who the adversary is, and the path to get there will help to clarify the range of possible solutions.

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<sup>117</sup> Philip D. Schuyler, John R. Hall and Sylvaine Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements, Social Order and Violence in North America, Europe and Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 12.

<sup>118</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, "Sacrifice and Cosmic War," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3, no. 3 (1991), 112.

<sup>119</sup> Heather Selma Gregg, "Three Theories of Religious Activism and Violence: Social Movements, Fundamentalists, and Apocalyptic Warriors," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (2014), 12.

<sup>120</sup> Heather Selma Gregg, *Path to Salvation: Religious Violence from the Crusades to Jihad* (Dulles: Potomac Books Inc, 2014), 16.

<sup>121</sup> Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 158.

It can be difficult, or even misleading, to identify an apocalyptic group as non-violent or violent as if they were fixed characteristics. Often conflicting tendencies (toward conversion, isolation, or violent confrontation) remain in tension within the same group, especially if the group is newly established. Which narrative becomes dominant depends on both the internal dynamics of the group and the group's interaction with the wider society.<sup>122</sup> As the section on polarization and radicalization in Chapter II argued, escalating confrontations with the wider society can push a group toward its more extreme narratives.<sup>123</sup> If an apocalyptic group's conflict is perceived to be existential, the effects are even greater. Gregg points to "acute personal and collective trauma brought about by catastrophic events or persistent trials" as key factors leading to an apocalyptic war mentality.<sup>124</sup> When a group places this existential threat into a narrative that calls for the faithful to fight for God, its members may turn violent.

In summary, apocalyptic narratives can provide a compelling explanation for the progression of human history that culminates in both salvation and justice. It is important to take note of a group's location within that narrative, their proximity to the end of the age, and what God has called them to do in light of the end. Clear boundaries that distinguish between the faithful who are awaiting vindication and the wicked who are facing punishment tend to be present in apocalyptic narratives that inspire violence. Furthermore, a charismatic leader who can articulate the apocalyptic timetable as it connects to contemporary events and situations can have a significant impact on the acceptance of an apocalyptic narrative and a group's resultant actions.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Hall, *Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect*, 207.

<sup>123</sup> Schuyler, Hall and Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed*, 208.

<sup>124</sup> Gregg, *Three Theories of Religious Activism and Violence*, 12.

<sup>125</sup> Gregg, 12.

## **B. THE APOCALYPSE, CHRISTIANITY, AND THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION**

### **1. Christianity and Apocalyptic Expectation**

It is important to recognize that the entire New Testament was written in the context of a broader Jewish end-times expectation. By the time of Jesus, the province of Judaea had experienced over two centuries of subjugation under first Seleucid, then Roman rule. Although the Romans allowed the Jewish political and religious institutions to function with some degree of autonomy, the Jews were clearly in subordination to the Roman authorities.<sup>126</sup> The Jews anticipated that their predicted Messiah would arise at any moment to deliver them from earthly oppression. He would be a descendant of King David who would come to defeat Israel's enemies and restore the Israelite kingdom and monarchy to its highpoint under King David. It was in this atmosphere of expectation that Jesus preached of the coming kingdom of God that promised redemption for his followers and judgment for all who reject him (Matthew 4:17–23; 9:35). All three of the synoptic gospels present an account of Jesus describing traumatic events that would take place at the end of the age, including great earthquakes, famines, and pestilences (Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21). Some interpreters have used texts such as these to identify their location within the broader Christian apocalyptic narrative progressing toward restoration.

The New Testament book of Revelation provided much of the structural foundation and imagery upon which the apocalyptic narratives of the Protestant Reformation were based. Revelation (and other apocalyptic writings) uses highly symbolic and figurative language to describe visions, and have been interpreted in various ways since the birth of Christianity almost 2,000 years ago. Revelation presents images of divine judgment meted upon the earth through angels to punish the wicked. In a final battle, Jesus destroys his enemies, and his followers receive salvation in a new heaven and new earth. Throughout church history, many have pointed to Revelation to encourage Christians to remain faithful in the face of persecution and patiently await

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<sup>126</sup> Hall, *Apocalypse*, 25.

Jesus's return and the accompanying heavenly rewards.<sup>127</sup> Some interpretations, however, have sought to connect John's visions to specific contemporary events to predict the return of Jesus in the coming months or years and justify extraordinary measures to prepare for his coming.

Revelation belongs to a class of writings with unique characteristics that distinguish them as apocalyptic literature.<sup>128</sup> In fact, the Greek word *apokálypsis* (i.e., apocalypse) means revelation or uncovering.<sup>129</sup> J.J. Collins, drawing from an in-depth study of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature, provides a helpful definition of such literature. Collins explains that apocalyptic literature has "a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another supernatural world."<sup>130</sup> As such, John's Apocalypse unfolds as a series of visions mediated by angelic beings that connect earthly realities to the heavenly realm.

Tracing the development of apocalyptic narrative from the time of Jesus to the Middle Ages is beyond the scope of this study; however, it is important to mention Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202) who was particularly influential on the apocalyptic narratives of the Middle Ages, especially on those narratives that sought to set a specific date for the end.<sup>131</sup> Joachim believed John's visions depicted the progression of history toward a final conflict at the end of the age. A vision in 1183 that gave him a special understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments spurred Joachim to study God's

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<sup>127</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 32–65. The Reformers continued the tradition connecting the two witnesses to Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kgs. 2:11) from the Old Testament, both of whom were taken directly into heaven without dying.

<sup>128</sup> John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 2–3.

<sup>129</sup> Hall, *Apocalypse*, 30.

<sup>130</sup> Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 5. Collins points to numerous works that this definition applies to including: 1 Enoch, Daniel, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, Apocalypse of Abraham, 3 Baruch, 2 Enoch, Testament of Levi 2–5, and the Apocalypse of Zephaniah.

<sup>131</sup> Hall, *Apocalypse*, 63.

plan for the end-times.<sup>132</sup> He conducted an intense study of the book of Revelation over two decades that included numerological calculations and the connection of the seven seals (described in Revelation 6) with key events from the birth of the church until his time.<sup>133</sup>

Joachim's apocalyptic narrative planted many of the seeds that would mature into the apocalyptic narratives of the Radical Reformation. I mention three of the most prominent ideas here. First, Joachim saw the present age culminating with a corrupt Antichrist rising in the West who would be destroyed along with the other wicked before the dawning of the next age. The next age was the age of true spiritual understanding, led by an angelic pope with only "spiritual men" entering.<sup>134</sup> Joachim never criticized the Roman Catholic Church; however, his narrative implied its decline and replacement with a more spiritual church. Shortly after Joachim, more explicit interpretations emerged unambiguously identifying the Roman Catholic Church as the Beast and the Pope as the Antichrist.<sup>135</sup> Leading up to the Reformation, John Wycliffe (d. 1384) and Jan Hus (d.1415) further popularized this general anticlerical narrative largely based on the practice of simony.<sup>136</sup>

Second, although Joachim maintained that the visions of Revelation repeated the same message multiple times, he clearly emphasized the progression of history toward the end of this age. Those who followed Joachim went a step further by asserting that Revelation depicted the history of the world in sequence from the time of the apostles until the end of the age, further increasing speculation as to the nearness of the end.<sup>137</sup> This sequence led to specific date calculations for the return of Jesus and contributed to the identification of many end-times characters with specific contemporary individuals.

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<sup>132</sup> Walter Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages: Apocalyptic Expectation in the Radical Reformation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), 12.

<sup>133</sup> Hall, *Apocalypse*, 63; Koester, *Revelation*, 45. The Reformers continued the tradition connecting the two witnesses to Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kgs. 2:11) from the Old Testament, both of whom were taken directly into heaven without dying.

<sup>134</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 12–13.

<sup>135</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 46.

<sup>136</sup> Koester, 47–48. Simony refers to the sale of clerical office appointments.

<sup>137</sup> Koester, 47–48.



Lastly, to prepare for the coming spiritual age, Joachim emphasized that God would provide special revelation and direction to spiritual men as the end approached.<sup>138</sup> As with Joachim's own vision, this allowed God to communicate directly with "spiritual men" outside the Catholic hierarchy, and thereby open the way for divinely sanctioned challengers to the established order. As we will see, all three of these elements played a significant role in the narrative of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster.

## 2. Signs of the End of the Age during the Reformation

The sixteenth century saw a widespread consensus that the end of the age was near; this was just as true for the magisterial reformers as it was for the Anabaptists of the Radical Reformation.<sup>139</sup> Luther provides the most prominent example of the apocalyptic mindset of the magisterial reformers in the Holy Roman Empire. Klaassen points out that "in 1530 Martin Luther rushed his translation of the book of Daniel to the printers so that it would have a chance to warn people of the coming End."<sup>140</sup> Luther was genuinely concerned that Christ would return before he finished translating the Bible into German.<sup>141</sup>

In the 1520s, Luther compiled a list of signs of the end. Klaassen notes that it included "the general moral decay, the repression and persecution of Christians, the constant universal warfare, the recurring plagues, the degeneration of nature, the new preaching of the Gospel ..., [and] the prevalence and spread of syphilis."<sup>142</sup> The threat of an invading Islamic army at the borders of the Holy Roman Empire provided an external enemy to stimulate apocalyptic narratives during the Reformation further.<sup>143</sup> Luther identified the armies of the Turkish Empire as the primary enemy in the final battle of the

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<sup>138</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 17.

<sup>139</sup> Klaassen, 19–20. Klaassen points to the numerous publications focused on the end-times in the beginning of the sixteenth century.

<sup>140</sup> Klaassen, 21.

<sup>141</sup> Klaassen, 21.

<sup>142</sup> Klaassen, 22.

<sup>143</sup> Hall, *Apocalypse*, 68.

Apocalypse.<sup>144</sup> From Luther's writings, we can confidently conclude that Luther was quite concerned with the chronology of events leading up to Christ's return and that he expected to see it at any time.<sup>145</sup>

The Radical Reformers shared Luther's anticipation of the end but placed them within their unique narrative understanding of the contemporary situation. Thomas Müntzer interpreted the peasant uprisings of 1524 and 1525 as signs of the end; he saw the peasants as both God's elect and the instruments that God would use to bring judgment on unbelievers.<sup>146</sup> In 1525, Müntzer put his belief into action when he led a group of 8,000 peasants to their defeat in the battle of Frankenhausen against a small, but heavily armed professional force led by the ruling prince-bishop.<sup>147</sup> Hans Hut, who was present to experience the peasants' defeat, continued Müntzer's apocalyptic expectation and even took it a step further by predicting that the final judgment would occur in 1528.<sup>148</sup> The army of the Turks would come in 1527, followed by God's judgment in the form of plague, famine, and other natural disasters.<sup>149</sup> Several contemporary variations on this general apocalyptic narrative could be mentioned, but it is clear that the imminent end-times expectation among the Anabaptists was ubiquitous.<sup>150</sup> Melchior Hoffman stands out as one of the most influential Anabaptist leaders when it comes to apocalyptic

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<sup>144</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 48–49.

<sup>145</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 25.

<sup>146</sup> Klaassen, 25.

<sup>147</sup> Müntzer's apocalyptic interests began when he was a priest before the Reformation through studying the teachings of Joachim of Fiore. After splitting with Luther, Müntzer adopted the idea that the church should eradicate the unrighteous and began to preach about apocalyptic war. He gained a loyal following in the town of Allstedt in 1523, where he founded his secret sect called the League of the Elect. Müntzer called on the princes to expel the non-elect from the land; however, when he realized they would not comply, he concluded that he must set up his own elect community to usher in the Millennium.<sup>147</sup> When the Peasants' War started in southern and western Germany in 1525, he gave it a broader purpose by placing it within his apocalyptic narrative. Müntzer assured the peasant's that they would be victorious against the armies of prince-bishop based on visions and signs he had received. Müntzer brought 300 supporters to join the peasants and lead them in an apocalyptic battle, but it was to no avail; the prince's army slaughtered the peasant forces and Müntzer was captured, tortured, and killed. Hall, *Apocalypse*, 69–72.

<sup>148</sup> Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, trans. Trevor Johnson (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 17.

<sup>149</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 26.

<sup>150</sup> Klaassen points to Leorhard Schiemer, Michael Sattler, Hans Hergot, Augustin Bader, and Conrad Grebel, to name a few. Klaassen, 26.

teachings. His apocalyptic narrative is a topic of focus in the next section as it provided the foundation for the apocalyptic fervor of the Anabaptist Kingdom in Münster.<sup>151</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning here that Hoffman shared Luther's view that the Revelation maps the history of the church from beginning to end, and Hoffman likewise saw the events of the Reformation as signs that the end was near.<sup>152</sup>

There were a remarkable number of leaders during the Reformation who saw themselves as fulfilling the role of an end time's prophet. Furthermore, such claims were not isolated to the fringe Anabaptists of the Radical Reformation. In fact, many of Luther's contemporaries thought that Luther was a key character in the end-times narrative; both Zwingli and Melancthon referred to Luther as Elijah, a prophet from the Old Testament who was expected to return at the end of the age.<sup>153</sup> Although Luther rejected many of the detailed prophesies concerning himself, Luther did accept some prediction of his coming saying: "Many prophesies have gone forth, some of which refer to me."<sup>154</sup> As Klaassen points out, the fact "that men like Luther, Müntzer, Hoffman, Schwenkenfeld, and even Servetus, all so unlike each other, could think of themselves as actors in the drama of the endtime, indicates primarily the common powerful certainty of living at the end of time."<sup>155</sup>

The signs of the end created a special sense of urgency for those who lacked the means to defend themselves. The Protestant Reformation was a truly bloody ordeal that often involved a violent struggle for power and control. Those with power used violence to deter and suppress their theological opponents. Catholics killed Protestants when they had the means to do so, and Protestants likewise killed both Catholics and other Protestants. This was true even among the less radical reformers.<sup>156</sup> For the minority

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<sup>151</sup> Hsia, *Munster and the Anabaptists*, 51–57.

<sup>152</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 28.

<sup>153</sup> Klaassen, 80. The Reformers continued the tradition connecting the two witnesses to Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kgs. 2:11) from the Old Testament, both of whom were taken directly into heaven without dying. Koester, *Revelation*, 439.

<sup>154</sup> Quoted in Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 80.

<sup>155</sup> Klaassen, 82.

<sup>156</sup> Hall, *Apocalypse*, 69.

groups, the bloodshed and trauma naturally fed into the already present apocalyptic narratives that saw the true servants of Christ suffering for their faith in the end-times. This atmosphere and the general agreement of the approaching end of the age must be kept in mind as we explore the more specific elements of the apocalyptic narratives of the radical reformation.

Building on Joachim and those that came after him, several specific apocalyptic prophecies, signs, and themes became prominent during the Reformation. Each of these prophecies fit within a broader apocalyptic narrative progressing toward salvation and justice at the end of the age. Using the book of Revelation as a chronological map of end time's events, such signs and prophecies (drawn from various parts of the Old and New Testaments) were connected to contemporary events and placed within an unfolding apocalyptic narrative. Such events not only served as key markers that the end was near but also verify to believers that their understanding of the progress of history was, in fact, true and unfolding before their eyes.

The most significant of the signs and prophecies described above can be grouped in three main themes. The first theme focuses on wicked actors that will arise at the end of the age including the Antichrist, false prophets, and their armies. The Antichrist will come to power, persecute God's people, and lead an army against them. The second theme focuses on God's faithful at the end of the age. God will raise up "spiritual men" and give them new revelations and special spiritual gifts to prepare the world for the end. The Anabaptists connected the open practice of baptism of believers to the spiritual men at the end of the age.<sup>157</sup> Lastly, there will be a New Jerusalem where God will restore his rule on earth. In Revelation, the New Jerusalem comes after Christ's return and the final battle; however, many Anabaptists saw the New Jerusalem established before Christ's return as a sanctuary for God's people and the place from which the gospel would spread to the world.<sup>158</sup> I discuss these three themes in the next chapter as part of my analysis of the narrative of the Anabaptist Kingdom in Münster.

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<sup>157</sup> Ralf Klotzer, "The Melchiorites and Munster," in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521–1700*, eds. John D. Roth and James M. Stayer (Boston, MA: Brill, 2011), 230.

<sup>158</sup> Klotzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 232.

#### IV. APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE AND THE ANABAPTIST KINGDOM OF MÜNSTER

This chapter focuses on the Anabaptist rise to power in Münster and the development of the apocalyptic narrative that came to dominate the Anabaptist Kingdom. I separate the events into two main sections: First, I examine the initial stages of the Reformation in Münster up to and including the introduction of Anabaptism. Second, I focus on the development of the apocalyptic narrative in Münster from the introduction of Anabaptism to the fall of the Anabaptist Kingdom. In the next section, I analyze the narrative based on the theoretical foundation provided in Chapters II and III.

Before moving to the events leading up to the events of Münster, it may be helpful to provide a brief note on the most significant sources of information. There are two prominent contemporary accounts of the events in Münster; both were translated into English by Christopher Mackay. The first is the account of Heinrich Gresbeck. Gresbeck provides the only complete eyewitness account of the events of the Anabaptist Kingdom in Münster. He was present in Münster until just before the final siege in June 1535, when he escaped the city. Many Anabaptists who left Münster were arrested and executed; Gresbeck was allowed to live because he provided valuable information and advice leading to the successful retaking of the city.<sup>159</sup>

The second contemporary account is a broader two-volume historical work by Herman von Kerssenbrock completed about 30 years later. Kerssenbrock was present in Münster as a child during the early stages of the Anabaptist regime until he fled the city with other Catholics. Kerssenbrock work, however, is primarily based on historical research, although his time in the city and his animosity toward the Anabaptists certainly framed his understanding of the situation. He collected numerous primary source documents for his work. Kerssenbrock provides much more information than Gresbeck regarding the events leading up to the Anabaptist control of the city. In addition to his

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<sup>159</sup> Heinrich Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers: Henry Gresbeck's Account of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster*, translated with notes and introduction by Christopher Mackay (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2016).

narrative of the events, Kerksenbrock provides written records of much of the correspondence between the Anabaptists in Münster and the prince-bishop, as well as reports from various city meetings and disputations.<sup>160</sup>

In addition to these two comprehensive accounts of the events of Münster, Bernard Rothman's writings provide a valuable source of information for the developing narrative in Münster. Rothman was the primary preacher who brought the Reformation to Münster in 1531, and he continued to play a role as royal spokesman for the Anabaptist Kingdom until it fell in 1535. Rothman published several theological pamphlets and treatises that allow us to trace the development of the narrative over four years. Kerksenbrock records some of Rothman's writings in his text; however, Walter Klassen in his work, *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, provides a valuable English translation of the most important sections of Rothman's published works.<sup>161</sup>

Lastly, in this chapter, I have relied on the analysis of modern scholars and historians to place the primary sources in their proper context and to sort out the chronology of events. In addition to Christopher Mackay's helpful notes and introduction provided in his translations of Gresbeck and Kerksenbrock, I have followed the general outline of events as presented by Ralf Klötzer and James Stayer in their valuable works on the Anabaptists in Münster.<sup>162</sup>

## A. THE REFORMATION IN MÜNSTER

The Reformation in Münster began similarly to other cities in the Holy Roman Empire, but it took a unique turn when several key evangelical leaders embraced Anabaptism. This section outlines the events of the Reformation in Münster before the

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<sup>160</sup> Hermon von Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness: The Overthrow of Munster, the Famous Metropolis of Westphalia*, translated with notes and introduction by Christopher Mackay, Vol. 132 (Boston: Brill, 2007).

<sup>161</sup> Walter Klassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, Vol. 3 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981). Klassen's includes translations of Rothman's *Confession of the Two Sacraments, Baptism and Communion*, (published in October 1533); his pamphlet, *Restitution* (October 1534); and his pamphlet, *On Vengeance* (published December 1534).

<sup>162</sup> Ralf Klötzer, "The Melchiorites and Munster," in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521–1700*, eds. John D. Roth and James M. Stayer (Boston, MA: Brill, 2011), 217–256; James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1976).

apocalyptic narrative became dominant. These events are not unrelated to the eventual apocalyptic narrative; they created the conditions that allowed, and even caused, it to take hold. It was the Anabaptist leaders who introduced the apocalyptic narrative, and the persecution of Anabaptists that helped the apocalyptic narrative to resonate with the people of Münster. It is also important to note that the general effects of the Reformation helped set the conditions for Münster by undermining the authority of a definitive, official interpretation of the Bible coming down through the Catholic hierarchy. This gave ordinary people a sense of freedom to evaluate Biblical teaching for themselves and made it easier for the people of Münster to form their identity around new teaching that came from neither Catholic nor Lutheran sanctioned sources.<sup>163</sup>

### **1. Typical Nature of the Reformation in Münster**

Münster, like other northern German cities, experienced the social unrest of the Peasants' War of 1525 and the anticlerical grievances of the Reformation. Although the grievances in Münster were decisively crushed in 1525, a charismatic priest named Bernhard Rothman revived many of these sentiments when he reintroduced Reformation ideas in 1531.<sup>164</sup> At that time, three competing institutions made up the power structure within the city: (1) the city council and magistrates dominated by the wealthy patrician class, (2) the craft guilds backed by popular support from the main body of citizens (burghers), and (3) the religious leaders made up of the Catholic clergy.<sup>165</sup> Both the secular and religious powers of the city were ultimately subject to the ruling Roman Catholic prince-bishop.<sup>166</sup> The patrician class and the burghers were united by a general resentment of clerical privilege and episcopal authority over the city, but they clashed over the patrician class's efforts to maintain an exclusive right to govern.<sup>167</sup> Willem de

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<sup>163</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 96.

<sup>164</sup> Hsia, *Munster and the Anabaptists*, 52–53.

<sup>165</sup> Hans-Jurgen Goertz, ed., *Profiles of Radical Reformers: Biographical Sketches from Thomas Müntzer to Paracelsus* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1982), 192.

<sup>166</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 2.

<sup>167</sup> Goertz, *Profiles of Radical Reformers*, 192.

Bakker's concise statement sums up the political situation in Münster: "the bishop reigned, the council ruled, and the guilds acted as the tribunes of the people."<sup>168</sup>

From 1531 to the spring of 1533, the reforms in Münster largely resembled other reform movements of the region. R. Po-Chia Hsia describes it well:

A popular preacher echoed Luther's message and called for reform, attacking monasticism and clerical abuses; citizens rallied to his cause, adding their resentment of the church's economic competition to the call for moral regeneration; spontaneous sacramental and liturgical innovations were tolerated by the magistrates, who disagreed regarding their responses; the reform movement became part of the struggle between the burghers and the magistrates, which often took the form of opposition between the guilds and the city council, and a final usually bloodless constitutional reform incorporated many of the demands of the Evangelicals while averting social revolution; cloisters were closed, clerics took civic oaths, ecclesiastical properties were secularized, and reforms institutionalized in a new Evangelical church ordinance; finally, the magistrates came out with more authority, a few ruling families lost power, but social order was preserved.<sup>169</sup>

After significant concessions from the ruling prince-bishop, Münster's Evangelical-leaning city council governed with a significant degree of autonomy. Unlike in other areas, however, these concessions did not reestablish a stable social order. With the tension between the Catholics and Evangelicals not yet completely settled, Rothman and his followers remained unsatisfied.<sup>170</sup>

Following a series of political battles, Rothman stood out as the religious leader of the Münster Evangelicals. Early in his preaching ministry on the outskirts of Münster, Rothman's superiors attempted to censor him for his bold anti-clerical preaching, but he had already gained the support of the citizens of Münster.<sup>171</sup> Kerssenbrock describes how the people came to revere Rothman: "Despite official orders to the contrary, they followed him in crowds from the city on account of their eagerness to hear him speak,

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<sup>168</sup> Goertz, *Profiles of Radical Reformers*, 192.

<sup>169</sup> Hsia, *Munster and the Anabaptists*, 53. This thesis follows Hsia, and other scholars, in using the term Evangelicals to refer to those Christians who split from the Roman Catholic Church during the Reformation.

<sup>170</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 2.

<sup>171</sup> Goertz, *Profiles of Radical Reformers*, 194.



their desire to do so being so great that they considered that there were no preachers but him, and despised, condemned, and cursed the others along with the entire clergy.”<sup>172</sup> The craft guilds intervened on behalf of the common citizens, putting pressure on the city council, and the city council eventually backed Rothman against the Catholic clergy.<sup>173</sup>

In an ensuing dispute, Rothman and the Evangelicals demanded the abolition of all Catholic ceremonies not found in the Bible, while the prince-bishop demanded the expulsion of not just Rothman, but all Evangelical preachers.<sup>174</sup> The conflict escalated through both disputations within the city and correspondence with the prince-bishop. The prince-bishop blockaded the city seizing goods and cattle from the burghers traveling to and from the city; the city council demanded restitution through the local Catholic clergy, while armed men from Münster attacked and captured a delegation of the prince-bishop in the town of Telge.<sup>175</sup> Eventually, city council and the prince-bishop reached a mediated peace agreement in February 1533; it allowed the parish churches to be Evangelical and the cathedral and cloisters to remain Catholic.<sup>176</sup> The following month, elections gave the Evangelicals majority control of the city council.<sup>177</sup> By the end of the political struggle, Rothman was pastor of St. Lambert, the main parish church in Münster, and he had gained enough popular support to give him leverage over both the city council and the guilds by legitimating their political position.<sup>178</sup>

Kerssenbrock preserved a German translation of Rothman’s *Confession of Doctrine* published in Latin on January 23, 1532, which provides a summary of Rothman’s teaching. This document shows that his teachings at that time remained well

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<sup>172</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 217.

<sup>173</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 225; Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 271–272.

<sup>174</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 225–226; Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 282–289.

<sup>175</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 289–381.

<sup>176</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 226; Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 404–408. Kerssenbrock records the specific terms of the peace agreement outlined in 16 points.

<sup>177</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 226.

<sup>178</sup> Goertz, *Profiles of Radical Reformers: Biographical Sketches from Thomas Müntzer to Paracelsus*, 194.

within the bounds of the mainstream Reformation. Rothman's preface claims at length that his written confession faithfully summarizes his teaching without addition or omission.<sup>179</sup> Reverberating the Reformation cry of *sola scriptura*, Rothman opened his confession with a plea to test his doctrine based on the text of the Bible alone; he then followed with his first section "On Holy Scripture."<sup>180</sup> Rothman's confession continued in Evangelical vein, clearly outlining positions antithetical to Roman Catholic doctrine, with no hint of Anabaptism and no mention of the end-times.<sup>181</sup>

The accusations of Rothman's opponents also confirm Rothman's mainstream Reformation teaching. They charge him with "preaching unaccustomed doctrines, introducing novel ceremonies and chants after opposing old ones, and by these acts stirred up a large part of the populace."<sup>182</sup> In the end, the charges and threats from the prince-bishop did nothing to stem Rothman's support. Kerksenbrock notes how the common citizens embraced Rothman's teaching and grew increasingly hostile to the Catholic clergy in Münster, to the point where the prince-bishop feared sedition and even takeover.<sup>183</sup> In addition to the common citizens, Rothman also gained the support of the guilds and some leading men from the patrician class who would be instrumental in the ultimate Anabaptist control of the city.<sup>184</sup>

## 2. Anabaptism in Münster

In July of 1533, a new conflict began that would split Münster into three theologically-based factions and ultimately lead to Anabaptist control of the city. The conflict began when Rothman increasingly came to accept the symbolic, Zwinglian view of the Eucharist. It resulted in a rift between Rothman and the Lutheran city council

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<sup>179</sup> Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 228. Kerksenbrock, a clear opponent of Rothman, deemed it necessary to comment that Rothman's confession was "in a form quite different from what he had often taught orally."

<sup>180</sup> Kerksenbrock, 231.

<sup>181</sup> Kerksenbrock, 231–233.

<sup>182</sup> Kerksenbrock, 231–233.

<sup>183</sup> Kerksenbrock, 243–250.

<sup>184</sup> Kerksenbrock, 244–245. Rothman's supporters included Bernard Knepperdolling, who helped him to secure his position at St. Lambert and came to play a leading role in the Anabaptist Kingdom.

members.<sup>185</sup> At the same time, under the influence of Anabaptist Heinric Rol, Rothman also began to advocate adult baptism.<sup>186</sup> The magistrates associated Rothman's Sacramentarian ideas with the anti-feudal and anti-noble ideas that led to the Peasant's War and saw it as a threat to their role as leaders.<sup>187</sup> The Lutheran city council opposed Rothman but had little means to sanction him without sacrificing some of their hard-earned autonomy from the Catholic Church. The Lutherans first sought to silence Rothman by defeating him in public disputation; however, when this failed, they called for his banishment.<sup>188</sup> Rothman avoided banishment, but the city council forbade him and the other like-minded evangelicals to preach openly and reassigned them to small and insignificant parish churches. However, this effort to marginalize Rothman and his colleagues only served to strengthen both their numbers and their resolve. The conflict spurred Rothman to write a pamphlet titled *Confession of the Two Sacraments, Baptism and Communion*, which solidified the division over baptism and communion.<sup>189</sup>

Rothman's *Confession of the Two Sacraments, Baptism and Communion*, published in October 1533, not only inspired the Anabaptists in Münster but also had an impact in the Netherlands.<sup>190</sup> The following month, with the city council still seeking Rothman's banishment, his supporters gathered in the city center and demanded Rothman be reinstated as pastor at St. Lamberts, the main parish church in Münster.<sup>191</sup> As the conflict escalated, Rothman and his supporters, backed by the trade guilds, armed themselves and showed that they were physically willing to defend Rothman's right to

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<sup>185</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 7. Mackay helpfully summarizes Luther's view of the Eucharist, or communion: "while he rejected the complete conversion of the wine and bread, he nonetheless did feel that in some way the blood and flesh were also present in the sacramental food and drink." Anabaptists rejected this view in favor of a symbolic view in which the bread and wine retain their natural characteristics, and merely symbolize the body and blood of Christ respectively.

<sup>186</sup> William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 155. Anabaptists believed that baptism must be a voluntary, willful, and conscious act that could only be undertaken by someone fully aware of the significance and consequences.

<sup>187</sup> Hsia, *Munster and the Anabaptists*, 54.

<sup>188</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 438.

<sup>189</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 228.

<sup>190</sup> Klötzer, 228.

<sup>191</sup> Klötzer, 229.

remain in Münster freely.<sup>192</sup> In the Netherlands, Rothman's pamphlet motivated Jan Matthys in his attempts to reinstitute the practice of adult baptism.<sup>193</sup> Shortly after that, in January 1534, Matthys sent two emissaries to Münster; they baptized Rothman and several other evangelical preachers, who then baptized their congregations.<sup>194</sup> Jan van Leiden, who would later become king of the Anabaptist kingdom in Münster said that 1400 persons were baptized by the time he arrived a few weeks later.<sup>195</sup>

During the Reformation, disagreements over baptism and communion were not minor issues and led to clear divisions and often persecution. At that time, the magisterial reformers maintained the view that all nominal Christians in society, who were baptized as infants, were members of the church, regardless of their personal conduct.<sup>196</sup> Anabaptists, on the other hand, held that the church consisted only of "true" Christians who properly practiced the tenets of the Christian faith.<sup>197</sup> Voluntary adult baptism signaled that one was assenting to such a view and committing to live one's life in allegiance to the "true" church. On the other hand, both the Catholic Church and the magisterial reformers saw the church and state as closely connected; to be a member of the state was to be a member of the church, and a departure from the established church was tantamount to treason.<sup>198</sup> Some scholars point out that the German Peasants' War (1524-1526) led to the fear of another popular uprising and made the ruling authorities apt to crush any signs of subversion quickly; this likely impacted their response to Anabaptism.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 229.

<sup>193</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 228.

<sup>194</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 12–13. Bartholomeus Boekbinder and Willem de Kuiper were the first to baptize people in Munster.

<sup>195</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 230.

<sup>196</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 7.

<sup>197</sup> Gresbeck, 7.

<sup>198</sup> Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 29.

<sup>199</sup> Michael G. Baylor, *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War* (Boston, MA: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2012), 1–31. Baylor describes the German Peasants War as "the greatest popular rebellion in European history prior to the French Revolution." He notes that "about three hundred thousand peasants enrolled in more than a dozen military bands" at a time when a large national army only numbered in the tens of thousands.

Adult rebaptism was seen as an indication of insurrection and a threat to public order; thus, it brought severe persecution and often executions. In fact, an imperial mandate in 1528 called civil authorities to charge those guilty of rebaptism with “rebellion” and sentence them to death. In 1529, the Diet of Speyer reaffirmed the decree calling for the execution of Anabaptists even without an ecclesiastical trial; this included those guilty of rebaptism and those who refused to baptize their infant children.<sup>200</sup> Although laymen could avoid death by recanting, leaders and those promulgating Anabaptist theology were to be put to death regardless.<sup>201</sup> After examining the statistics of Anabaptist executions, Klaus Deppermann noted that “80% of the Anabaptists who were killed between 1525 and 1618 died within the seven-year period from 1527 to 1533; 41% perished in the years 1528–1529 alone.”<sup>202</sup> Thus, the threat to Anabaptists was at its height when the Reformation came to Münster. It is not surprising that the Evangelicals in the Münster city council—after finally gaining a majority in 1533—would be reluctant to provoke the prince-bishop further and isolate themselves from potential allies by condoning, let alone accepting, the open practice of adult baptism. But for Anabaptists, the threat of persecution often served to build up their collective identity and resolve.

Rothman and the other radical evangelical preachers did not emphasize apocalyptic beliefs and scenarios before they began to advocate adult baptism. Kerssenbrock describes a stark change in Rothman’s habits and demeanor as he began to preach believer’s baptism in the context of an apocalyptic narrative.<sup>203</sup> After this, however, the divisions and persecution resulting from the open practice of adult baptism contributed to the acceptance of this new apocalyptic narrative. With Anabaptists persecuted in other areas, the acceptance of Anabaptism in Münster also led many Anabaptists to seek refuge there. In 1534, this migration, along with the apocalyptic understanding of the events in Münster, helped Anabaptism to become dominant in

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<sup>200</sup> Klaus Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987), 268–269.

<sup>201</sup> Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, trans. Trevor Johnson (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 118–119.

<sup>202</sup> Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman*, 269.

<sup>203</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 434–437.

Münster.<sup>204</sup> Ultimately, Anabaptists would take full control of Münster, and their apocalyptic understanding of the events unfolding around them would largely dictate their actions. I will examine the details of this development in the next section.

## **B. THE APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE IN MÜNSTER**

### **1. Melchior Hoffman and Anabaptist Apocalyptic Beliefs**

Münster's apocalyptic narrative was based on the teachings of Melchior Hoffman and his followers; thus, it is helpful to look briefly at Hoffman and his apocalyptic beliefs.<sup>205</sup> Hoffman was trained as a furrier, but in the early 1520s, he became known for his charismatic preaching in support of Luther and the Reformation. Although Hoffman shared Luther's general view that the events of the Reformation were signs that the end was near, he took it much further than Luther and the magisterial reformers, and eventually identified himself as an inspired prophet called to proclaim the end times.<sup>206</sup> His bold preaching and his emphasis on the impending end of the age caused a split with Luther and got him banished from several Baltic coastal towns.<sup>207</sup>

In 1526, toward the end of his time preaching in the Baltic region, Hoffman began to make specific predictions of the time of the end of the age.<sup>208</sup> He wrote a commentary on the book of Daniel in which he declared that the final seven-year period of the age had begun in 1526.<sup>209</sup> Taking the time periods in Revelation literally, he concluded that the book of Revelation provided details of the events that would take place during this final seven years that would culminate with the return of Christ in 1533.<sup>210</sup> Hoffman saw the Catholic Church as corrupt and transformed into the Antichrist, yet leading up to the Reformation, preachers like Jan Hus served as evidence that God was working to raise up spirit-filled men at the end of the age, as Joachim of Fiore had predicted. His prediction

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<sup>204</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 217–256

<sup>205</sup> Hsia, *Munster and the Anabaptists*, 51–57.

<sup>206</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 28; Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 219.

<sup>207</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 8–9.

<sup>208</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 219.

<sup>209</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 9.

<sup>210</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 28–29.

was to come to fruition in the first three and a half years of the final seven year period when God would raise up a special group of spiritual men to gather the faithful at the end of the age. The second three and a half years would be the judgment of the wicked.<sup>211</sup>

After rejecting Luther's view of the Eucharist in 1529, Hoffman moved to Strasberg, where he refined and expanded his eschatological views. At that time, Strasberg was known for its tolerance of non-conformists, and Hoffman initially found a sympathetic audience among the local Zwinglian religious leaders who shared his views on the Eucharist.<sup>212</sup> Soon, however, they concluded that Hoffman was too radical. He began to incorporate believers' baptism into his apocalyptic narrative, and he eventually gained a significant following in Strasberg and the surrounding area. Hoffman became closely associated with a marginal group known as the Strasberg prophets, who claimed to receive revelation from God in the form of visions.<sup>213</sup> The Strasberg prophets fit Hoffman's expectation of the outpouring of the Spirit on common men, and he accepted their visions as revelations from God.

Using his highly figurative interpretation of prophecy combined with new clarifying visions, Hoffman refined his apocalyptic understanding that would provide the foundation for the narrative of the Anabaptist Kingdom in Münster.<sup>214</sup> Partly from the influence of the Strasberg prophets, he adopted the idea that the free imperial cities would defend against God's enemies to preserve the true gospel in the final apocalyptic battle.<sup>215</sup> Hoffman identified the Pope, the emperor, and the Catholic monks as the beast, the dragon, and the false prophet from Revelation; they would attack God's people, whom he depicted as a spiritual temple.<sup>216</sup> He believed that after God destroyed the false church, symbolically described as Babylon, a new theocracy would arise and flourish on earth. God would raise up a king and prophet to lead God's people and prepare them for

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<sup>211</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 28.

<sup>212</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 219.

<sup>213</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 10.

<sup>214</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 220.

<sup>215</sup> Goertz, *Profiles of Radical Reformers*, 186.

<sup>216</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 28–29.

the return of Christ.<sup>217</sup> In 1531, Hoffman declared that Strasberg was to be the New Jerusalem and prophesied that it would withstand a siege by the Holy Roman Emperor and then serve as the base from which apostolic messengers would spread the gospel to the world.<sup>218</sup>

Using Revelation as his guide, Hoffman explained that 144,000 apostolic messengers led by two witnesses would spread out from the New Jerusalem to proclaim the gospel to the world.<sup>219</sup> Revelation 7 speaks of 144,000 servants that receive a seal that marks them out as the faithful and protects them from God's judgment as it is poured out on the wicked. For Hoffman and his Melchiorite followers, that "seal" was baptism, only to be administered to adult believers.<sup>220</sup> In Revelation 11, two witnesses are given authority and supernatural powers from God to prophesy for 1260 days. When they finish their message, they are killed by another main character of Revelation, the beast, but only temporarily. The two witnesses are brought back to life and taken out of the world before the final judgment of all God's enemies. Hoffman continued to emphasize how the characters and events depicted in Revelation corresponded to his contemporary environment and how they set the stage for the apocalypse to play out in Strasberg.<sup>221</sup>

With visions of the Strasberg prophets to reassure him, Hoffman came to see himself as the returned prophet Elijah, fulfilling the role of one of the two witnesses to prepare God's people for the judgment. God was in the process of revealing his plan for final redemption to contemporary prophets, and Hoffman believed that he was one of them. In 1533, as his final seven-year timetable approached the end, Hoffman willingly went to prison.<sup>222</sup> He had already predicted that one of the two witnesses would be arrested by a great council; this was a necessary event in his prophetic timetable that saw vindication of the faithful and punishment of the ungodly as imminent. Hoffman's

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<sup>217</sup> Goertz, *Profiles of Radical Reformers*, 186.

<sup>218</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 220.

<sup>219</sup> Goertz, *Profiles of Radical Reformers*, 186.

<sup>220</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 12.

<sup>221</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 220.

<sup>222</sup> Klötzer, 220.



apocalypse never materialized in Strasbourg; he remained in prison there until his death ten years later in 1543.<sup>223</sup>

Vengeance for suffering Christians was a key part of Hoffman's apocalyptic narrative leading up to his arrest.<sup>224</sup> During an interrogation in 1533, Hoffman stated that

[a]ccording to scripture there would be insurrection and unrest in the whole world, indeed, the time for it was there. The whole mob of the clergy would be destroyed. The true Jerusalem could not come into being or be built up until Babylon with all her mob and support would collapse and be brought to ruin.<sup>225</sup>

Not only those who took part in the execution of true Christians but also those who passively condoned them, would be physically killed at the end of the age for their transgression.<sup>226</sup> Although Hoffman was adamant that judgment was coming, he was equally adamant that his followers must not defile themselves by directly committing acts of violence.<sup>227</sup> They were to remain pure while God sent other unbelievers, such as the Turks, to mete out the vengeance on both the Lutherans and Catholics alike.<sup>228</sup> Although Hoffman's insisted on pacifism, his successors easily adapted his apocalyptic framework to justify their brutality and violence in Münster.

Melchior Hoffman was a gifted preacher with a charismatic personality that gained him significant numbers of followers in the Netherlands, many of whom took part in the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster.<sup>229</sup> Deppermann aptly observes that "without the Dutch Melchiorites there would have been no Anabaptist Kingdom in Münster."<sup>230</sup> Hoffman had a cryptic and mystical hermeneutic approach to the Bible that allowed his prophecies to be adapted by his successors. More important, his central view that God

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<sup>223</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 11.

<sup>224</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 220.

<sup>225</sup> Melchior Hoffman, "Interrogation of Melchior Hoffman, 1533," in *Anabaptism in Outline*, 328.

<sup>226</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 220.

<sup>227</sup> Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 105.

<sup>228</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 220.

<sup>229</sup> Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 156.

<sup>230</sup> Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman*, 321.

was giving new revelation to spiritual men at the end of the age, opened the door for new prophets to arise.<sup>231</sup> Through Hoffman's self-proclaimed, divinely inspired successors, we will see how the Kingdom of Münster appropriated the role of the New Jerusalem and took on the responsibilities of the two witnesses and the 144,000. Hoffman's successors maintained his expectation of an imminent apocalyptic confrontation followed by the return of Christ and took it further by taking steps to hasten the process. This began with Jan Matthys, a baker who emerged as the leader of the Dutch Anabaptists after Hoffman's imprisonment.<sup>232</sup>

With Hoffman in prison and the close of the age approaching, his followers were ripe for a new prophet to lead them during the expected final confrontation between good and evil, followed by the return of Christ. Matthys boldly stepped up to take this vacant visionary mantle. He claimed to be Enoch, the second witness of Revelation 11 and quickly asserted himself as the new leader of the Dutch Anabaptists.<sup>233</sup> Hoffman had ordered a ban on baptisms in 1531 after ten of his followers were executed for being re-baptized.<sup>234</sup> Without seeking Hoffman's guidance, Matthys reintroduced the open baptism of adults on All Saints Day in 1533 about a month and a half before the ban was set to end. Matthys declared that anyone lacking the sign of adult baptism would be "subjected to the Father's wrath and punishment."<sup>235</sup> Matthys responded to opposition from some of Hoffman's oldest followers in Amsterdam by condemning to damnation all who had opposed him as a true prophet; then, as they gathered for prayer, he declared that he would lovingly accept all those who would follow him. After gaining their support, Matthys secured his position as the leader of the Melchiorites.<sup>236</sup>

Although Matthys accepted the basic outline of Hoffman's prophetic timetable, he modified many of the details. Whereas Hoffman's pacifism required the free imperial

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<sup>231</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 79.

<sup>232</sup> Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman*, 333–339.

<sup>233</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 46.

<sup>234</sup> Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman*, 331–332.

<sup>235</sup> Quoted in Deppermann, 334. As noted in the previous section, Matthys's decision followed the publishing of Rothman's *Confession of the Two Sacraments*.

<sup>236</sup> Deppermann, 335.

cities to pick up the sword to defend against the Antichrist, Matthys did not hold this conviction and believed that the true believers of the end could be called upon as instruments of vengeance.<sup>237</sup> For Matthys, the reintroduction of baptism was of the utmost importance to seal the 144,000 apostolic messengers of Revelation 7:1 and 14:4 to oppose the gathering enemies of God and usher in the return of Christ.<sup>238</sup> In this, Matthys accelerated Hoffman's prophetic timetable, which saw the defense of the New Jerusalem as the next major prophetic event. Matthys quickly moved to send out emissaries to spread the word and baptize believers. Two of those emissaries, Bartholomeus Boekbinder and Willem de Kuyper, were sent to Münster, where they baptized Rothman and the other Anabaptist preachers.<sup>239</sup> It is here that we observe a narrative shift toward apocalyptic in Münster itself.

## 2. Apocalyptic Narrative and the Anabaptist Rise to Power

When Rothman first began to advocate for a believers' baptism, he presented it with urgency, as a means for Christians to be spared from God's final judgment.<sup>240</sup> Elements of Hoffman's apocalyptic narrative came out immediately.<sup>241</sup> Kerssenbrock recalls that Rothman preached that God would soon punish the wicked with "lethal punishments, being uprooted from the face of the earth with cruel death."<sup>242</sup> Only those who received the new baptism, as a sign of God's covenant with the faithful, would be spared this death, and receive the rewards of God's kingdom.<sup>243</sup> Apparently, a significant number of people in Münster responded to this message; following the arrival of

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<sup>237</sup> Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman*, 337.

<sup>238</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 13.

<sup>239</sup> Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman*, 336. See Gresbeck for a more details on the initial spread of Anabaptism in Münster. Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 61–64.

<sup>240</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness: The Overthrow of Munster, the Famous Metropolis of Westphalia*, 434–437.

<sup>241</sup> Heinric Rol, an Anabaptist follower of Melchior Hoffman is likely the person that convinced Rothman of Anabaptism, and introduced Hoffman's apocalyptic teaching to him. Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 435.

<sup>242</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 435.

<sup>243</sup> Kerssenbrock, 435.

Boekbinder and Kuyper, 1,400 persons in Münster were baptized; that would have been approximately 20 percent of the total population.<sup>244</sup>

In January 1534, as a strong minority of the population, the Anabaptists in Münster were increasing in number and gaining a strong sense of solidarity. They, however, felt the same threat of persecution as other Anabaptists in the Holy Roman Empire. The prince-bishop commanded the arrest of all the Anabaptist preachers in Münster, as well as any citizen who would protect, or even tolerate them.<sup>245</sup> Already an Anabaptist preacher from Münster, sent by Rothman, was condemned to death in a nearby village for re-baptism.<sup>246</sup> Anabaptist men and women, with a shared fear of persecution, began to separate from society and form close-knit groups sharing their resources amongst each other.<sup>247</sup> They saw themselves as the true and faithful Christians. As already noted, persecution can help to strengthen collective identity and solidarity. Moreover, Hoffman's apocalyptic narrative began to resonate and provide meaning for the suffering of the Anabaptists of Münster; Hoffman (and others) saw the persecution of the faithful as further confirmation that the apocalypse was near.

While the persecution of the righteous is an important element of apocalyptic narrative, signs of divine favor are equally necessary for it to take hold. There must be a victory or sign to point to that confirms God's promise to deliver his people. For Münster, this came at the end of January 1534 when the city council determined that the citizens of Münster should not be persecuted for their faith.<sup>248</sup> With the growing power of the Anabaptists, the council recognized their inability to oppose Rothman and his followers directly and attempted to hold on to what peace and stability remained.<sup>249</sup> This meant that they would not enforce the imperial decree sentencing Anabaptists to death as

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<sup>244</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 230.

<sup>245</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 475.

<sup>246</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 230; Heinric Rol faced a similar fate on February 21, 1534, when he went out of Münster to recruit more soldiers to help defend against the siege. Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 505.

<sup>247</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 505.

<sup>248</sup> Kerssenbrock, 505.

<sup>249</sup> Kerssenbrock, 476–478.

the ruling prince-bishop had commanded.<sup>250</sup> While the Melchiorite baptizers sent out by Matthys caused increased persecution throughout the Netherlands and the Bishopric of Münster, the city of Münster became a haven for Anabaptists. Hoffman had taught that baptism accompanied the gathering of spiritual men at the end, and particularly in the New Jerusalem.<sup>251</sup> As a result of the new situation, Matthys concluded that Strasberg had been rejected for unbelief and was no longer the New Jerusalem; Münster had assumed that role and would be the place where God's people would find refuge in the impending apocalyptic battle.<sup>252</sup> For Hoffman and his successors, the New Jerusalem was vital to their unfolding apocalyptic narrative. It was there that the faithful would survive a siege of the armies of the Antichrist, and from there that God's kingdom would expand across the earth.

Even before Matthys came to Münster himself, the narrative in Münster had violent tendencies. Rothman had already displayed a willingness to use the sword for his cause and to defend it theologically. As a newly convinced Anabaptist, Rothman was preaching that Christ would gather the faithful (those who received the mark of baptism) and place a "sword of vengeance" in their hand to destroy the wicked in the earth.<sup>253</sup> Not long after, in November 1533, Rothman's followers took up arms to prevent his banishment from Münster.<sup>254</sup> In mid-January, with the arrival of Jan Beukels of Leiden (better known as Jan von Leiden), Anabaptist leaders began to consider the next step by debating whether the time of vengeance had arrived, and if it was time to start cleansing the city of the impious.<sup>255</sup> Although they concluded that it was not yet time, their discussion shows a progression in their underlying narrative toward what would ultimately happen in Münster.

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<sup>250</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 231.

<sup>251</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 230.

<sup>252</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 86.

<sup>253</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 436.

<sup>254</sup> Kerssenbrock, 453–455.

<sup>255</sup> Kerssenbrock, 477.

As the Melchiorites, including Matthys himself, began to move toward Münster, a rumor emerged that the prince-bishop had an army of 3,000 soldiers poised to enforce his sovereignty in Münster.<sup>256</sup> The Anabaptists who lived in Münster, still a minority, began to call the residents to repent in order to avoid the judgment of God, presumably in the form of the coming army.<sup>257</sup> At the same time, they also began to arm themselves and assemble, demanding that the city defend against the armies of the prince-bishop.<sup>258</sup> At the beginning of February 1534, the Anabaptists and the Lutheran-dominated city council engaged in an armed struggle for control of the city's defenses; the Anabaptists were determined to make preparations for a siege with or without the council's support.<sup>259</sup> Although there was no significant bloodshed, the conflict further strengthened the resolve of the Anabaptists. On February 10, the Anabaptists reported seeing a sign in heaven that would confirm the truth of their salvation and justify the impending punishment of the ungodly, once the Anabaptists gained the upper hand.<sup>260</sup> Kerssenbrock describes what they saw from eyewitness claims:

[They saw] a huge flame of blue and blackish color coming down from heaven and covering the entire city. It was so thick, they said, that sight could not pass through it, though the sun emitted rays of such brilliance through it that the faces of all the people standing in the marketplace seemed to be gilded, and above this flame they saw *a man riding a white horse who was brandishing a sword to kill the impious and impenitent people who spurned the word of God.*<sup>261</sup> [emphasis added]

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<sup>256</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 231.

<sup>257</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 231. Kerssenbrock recounts several accounts of Anabaptist leaders going through the streets "as if seized by divine possession" calling for the people to repent and receive baptism to avoid God's vengeance. Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 480–483. Gresbeck provides a similar account "When it began to get dark in the evenings, the rebaptizers would run through the streets and shout, 'Confess and repent! God is going to punish you!'" Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 52.

<sup>258</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 231.

<sup>259</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 233.

<sup>260</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 231–232. This sign was later looked back upon to justify God's hand in the Anabaptists gaining control of Münster.

<sup>261</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 480–483; Gresbeck also describes an account of the vision. Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 74. Both Kerssenbrock and Gresbeck record accounts of several minor visions and signs that the Anabaptists saw during their rise to power and the early stages of their control. This vision, however, is by far the most prominent.

A day later the City Council reached an agreement with the Anabaptists and reaffirmed the toleration agreement, essentially solidifying the council's defiance of the prince-bishop. As a result, the rumors of siege became a reality and prince-bishop began to prepare an army.<sup>262</sup>

As the Anabaptists prepared for a siege, many of the Catholics and moderate Evangelicals began to depart the city.<sup>263</sup> Many of the more wealthy residents tried to escape from Münster with some of their possessions; however, the Anabaptists, without consulting the city council, tightly controlled the gates and did not allow any provisions to be taken from the city.<sup>264</sup> At the same time, word of the Anabaptist influence in Münster continued to spread. Rothman wrote a letter to Anabaptist leaders in the surrounding area urging them to come to Münster "to restore their new Jerusalem and Zion and the true Temple of Solomon and worship of the eternal God, rejecting all idolatry."<sup>265</sup> This led to a large migration of Anabaptists from northwest Germany and the Netherlands to the city.<sup>266</sup> Combined with the voluntary departure of many Catholics and moderate Evangelicals, the influx of Anabaptists resulted in Anabaptist control of the city council after the election on February 23, 1534.<sup>267</sup> This event marked the beginning of Anabaptist rule in Münster.

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<sup>262</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 232.

<sup>263</sup> Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 495–497; Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 232.

<sup>264</sup> Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 495. Henry Gresbeck describes the situation in his eyewitness account: "At first, when the baptizing first started at Münster, some of the burghers and women straightway got ready to get out of the city and take along what they could drive and carry away. Eventually, no one could have anything driven or carried out. The rebaptizers sat every day at the city gates and examined what people were leaving the city at the gates and what they were taking with them, they took away what the people had from them. They cut of the golden hooks from the women's collars and the buttons from their sleeves, and they couldn't take with them more than just what they had on them." Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 13.

<sup>265</sup> Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 499.

<sup>266</sup> Gresbeck emphasizes the role of the sign the Anabaptists saw in the sky in drawing more Anabaptists to Münster. Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 67.

<sup>267</sup> Hsia, *Munster and the Anabaptists*, 54. One other factor in the Anabaptist control of the city council should be mentioned. By this time the prince-bishop no longer had any sympathy or tolerance for the city council in Münster. As a result many Evangelical members of the council who were opposed to the Anabaptist were left in a difficult position; they were left with the choice to depart the city and face the possible condemnation of the prince-bishop, remain in the city and await the consequences of the rising Anabaptist powers, or join the Anabaptists. By the time of the election, the Anabaptists were left with very little opposition. Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 495.

### 3. The Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster

After gaining control of the city council, the Anabaptists were emboldened. Kerssenbrock describes the Anabaptists after the election as “set ablaze with an incredible madness and eagerness to do harm, marauding throughout the city.” He then goes on to cite specific examples including the looting and burning of a Catholic Church of St. Maurice outside the city walls.<sup>268</sup> The victory confirmed that God was on their side and that Münster truly was the New Jerusalem.<sup>269</sup> There was a significant change in the general outlook of the Anabaptists when they gained control of the city council. As the minority, the Anabaptists in Münster certainly showed a willingness to take up arms to defend themselves, but they also anticipated suffering for their faith and declared they were ready to do so. Once they were in control, there was no thought of surrender, only defense by all means necessary.<sup>270</sup> They recalled the sign that they saw in heaven on February 10, and interpreted the surrounding events as marking a miraculous deliverance that confirmed God’s hand was protecting them.<sup>271</sup> When the Anabaptists won the election, Matthys immediately called for the exile of all citizens who refused baptism as a professing believer.<sup>272</sup>

With more Anabaptists migrating to Münster from the surrounding area, Matthys and Jan von Leiden, both recognized as prophets of God, increased in importance.<sup>273</sup> Jan von Leiden had arrived in late January, with Matthys following a few weeks later.<sup>274</sup> Jan von Leiden, who spoke the local dialect (his mother was from Münster), quickly took on a prominent role; he focused on reaching the unbaptized and bringing them into the community. As a result, he emerged as a natural mediator between the council and the

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<sup>268</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 506–512. Also see Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 68–69.

<sup>269</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 232–233.

<sup>270</sup> Klötzer, 233.

<sup>271</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 236.

<sup>272</sup> Stayer, 234.

<sup>273</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 233.

<sup>274</sup> Klötzer, 231.



common citizens.<sup>275</sup> Matthys, although a complete outsider with no ties to Münster, came in with the status of a significant prophet; he was recognized as Enoch, the second witness of Revelation 11. Rothman affirmed their status as prophets and played a significant role advocating for, and defending their proclamations. Even Melchior Hoffman provided an endorsement of Matthys from prison: “In Münster they have a prophet named Jan Mathis who claims that he is one of the witnesses of God. Münster will not be oppressed.”<sup>276</sup>

*a. Purification and justice in the New Jerusalem*

With the Anabaptists in control, Matthys and Jan von Leiden focused on the purification of the New Jerusalem in preparation for the coming of Christ.<sup>277</sup> Just two days after the election Matthys proclaimed that God’s work in bringing the Anabaptists to power could not be maintained as long as impurity remained in the city. He warned of the dangers of “quarreling and constant sedition” and proclaimed that “the Father wished this new Jerusalem, along with the sanctuary, to be cleansed of foulness.”<sup>278</sup> According to Kerssenbrock’s account, Matthys went on to explain that “[God] thought it useful that a single body and a single community should be established by killing the papists, Lutherans, Sacramentarians and all those who disagreed with his doctrine... since they could be kept pure from the filth of other sects and from the contagion of the impious only if the impious were killed.”<sup>279</sup> Violence may have ensued had it not been for the restraint of Bernard Knipperdolling, the newly appointed burgher master. He argued that, for the time being, it was more prudent to purify the city by exile, so as not to draw themselves into conflict with the surrounding princes.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 234.

<sup>276</sup> Melchior Hoffman, “Interrogation of Melchior Hoffman, 1535,” in *Anabaptism in Outline*, 329.

<sup>277</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 235.

<sup>278</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 512.

<sup>279</sup> Kerssenbrock, 512.

<sup>280</sup> Kerssenbrock, 512–513. Knipperdolling’s restraint was short lived, as he became the chief executioner for the Anabaptist kingdom under King Jan.

The non-Anabaptists were forcefully driven from the city in frigid weather; anyone who remained was commanded to submit to baptism.<sup>281</sup> Matthys fiercely emphasized this point: “Don’t you recognize that God’s vengeance is hanging over your heads? Oh you stupid, senseless band of impious people, come to your senses... unless the impious are willing to be baptized, they are to be immediately driven from the city.”<sup>282</sup> Matthys consistently tied the need of baptism to the purification of the New Jerusalem; the people of God could not pollute themselves through contact with the wicked.<sup>283</sup> Some residents submitted to baptism immediately, while others delayed. Gresbeck explains that Matthys and Jan von Leiden separated those who had not been baptized and made “the men to lie on their faces and pray to God that they might stay in the city and receive mercy.”<sup>284</sup> After an hour, these men were led into St. Lambert’s church on their hands and knees where they remained for three hours praying for God’s mercy, which was eventually granted through a revelation received by Jan von Leiden.<sup>285</sup> After being baptized, the people were issued a copper token that verified their baptism and allowed them admission in and out of the city through the gates.<sup>286</sup>

Rothman was active in both convincing people of their need for baptism, and in continuing to call Anabaptists from the surrounding area to come to Münster. He sought to do both in the context of the broader apocalyptic narrative. Rothman framed the coming siege as an assault of the armies of the Antichrist on God’s people in the New Jerusalem, while the Anabaptist control of Münster was confirmation that God would

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<sup>281</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 69–70; Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 514–516.

<sup>282</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 514

<sup>283</sup> Kerssenbrock, 514

<sup>284</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 73–74. Gresbeck records that there were about 300 men that were forced to endure this forced penance.

<sup>285</sup> Gresbeck, 74–76.

<sup>286</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 234; Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 77.

protect his people there.<sup>287</sup> Rothman wrote to sympathetic preachers in the surrounding area making this case:

The Lord has performed glorious works with us. He freed us from the hands of our enemies and not only freed us but also cast out our enemies. For they were stricken with some fear or another and streamed out in storms. The Lord has borne witness to us that through His prophets that the saintly people of God will be congregated together in this city. For this reason, [the prophets, primarily Matthys and Jan von Leiden] have ordered me to write to you that you should order all the brothers to come here quickly...<sup>288</sup>

In March 1534, the council, under the influence of Matthys and Jan von Leiden, took further steps to purify the city by eliminating what they saw as humanly devised economic practices. They abolished private property to follow the practice of the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 2:44–45), burning the official city documents that indicated ownership of property.<sup>289</sup> The Anabaptists did this somewhat incrementally, first collecting all precious metal (especially gold and silver), then abolishing all property rights, and eventually managing the food supply.<sup>290</sup> Those who did not fully comply and kept some of their money were banished; some were even beheaded. Gresbeck recalls that Jan of Leiden “preached so fearsomely and imposed such a dire penalty... that no one dared to retain anything.”<sup>291</sup>

Rothman, writing later that year, provides the broader narrative behind the purification of Münster. Rothman argued that the church became corrupted shortly after the death of the original apostles when it rejected the Holy Scriptures and turned to

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<sup>287</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 235–236; Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 523–529. Kerksenbrock records a long speech by Knipperdolling that emphasizes many of the same points, and emphasized how the people responded by enthusiastically preparing for the siege convinced that God was on their side.

<sup>288</sup> Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 518.

<sup>289</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 235; Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 520. Kerksenbrock also records the burning of Catholic relics, icons, and books.

<sup>290</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 81–85. These actions could be explained as prudent measures to prepare for a siege, and it is almost certain that the siege was a significant motivation. Nevertheless, it is notable that, in explaining their actions, the Anabaptists turned to a narrative of purifying the true church of godless economic practices. Recall that as persecuted minority, the Anabaptists also redistributed and shared property as a community.

<sup>291</sup> Gresbeck, 83.

“human reason, wisdom, and desire.”<sup>292</sup> Speaking of the community of Anabaptists, Rothman proclaimed: “Behold, this is the true church of Christ from the beginning and still is. For although many others claim to be the church of Christ, as for example the anti-Christian papal crowd do, it is a vain claim. Not all that glistens is gold.”<sup>293</sup> Thus, the banishments, the seizing of property, and punishments were all justified based on the broader understanding that the community in Münster was the true church and must be purified to receive Christ at his return.

**b. *The call to punish the wicked***

Both Matthys and Jan von Leiden concluded that in the last days, Christians would be called upon to bear the sword in judgment of the ungodly.<sup>294</sup> Matthys, as the chief prophet, took on the role of judge sentencing people for their sins against God.<sup>295</sup> Now that the Anabaptists were firmly in control, Knipperdolling (the lead burgher master) became the primary instrument to carry out the judgments of Matthys, although Matthys executed some people personally.<sup>296</sup> Gresbeck records an account of a burgher, Hubert Ruesscher the blacksmith, who spoke out against the prophets. Both Jan von Leiden and Matthys confronted the man publicly and pronounced a death sentence for opposing God. After the sentence, Jan von Leiden struck Ruesscher with a halberd, but he did not die. The next day Matthys and Jan von Leiden pulled him out of prison pronouncing that “the door to mercy was closed;” Matthys then attempted to put Ruesscher against a wall to shoot him, but Ruesscher fell at Matthys’s feet begging for his life. Matthys leaned over and shot him in the back. Interestingly, when Ruesscher did not die immediately, Jan von Leiden declared that God had granted him mercy and

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<sup>292</sup> Bernhard Rothman, “Restitution,” in *Anabaptism in Outline*, 330.

<sup>293</sup> Rothman, *Restitution*, 330.

<sup>294</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 233.

<sup>295</sup> While the city council focus on defending against the siege, Kerksenbrock states that Jan Matthys “usurped control of both sacred and secular affairs, thereby acquiring great influence and repute in the eyes of the people and becoming more important than the burgher masters.” Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 529–530.

<sup>296</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 236., 236.

allowed Ruesscher to be taken home. Ruesscher did, however, die eight days later.<sup>297</sup> Although Hubert Ruesscher's case was unique, executions became more common.<sup>298</sup>

Matthys's tyranny was short lived. Several months prior, he had predicted that Christ would return on Easter day 1534 to judge the ungodly.<sup>299</sup> The day before Easter, at a wedding banquet, Matthys went into an hour-long trance as if communicating with God.<sup>300</sup> The other attendees sat in silence and watched until he suddenly came out of it and said, "O dear Father, not as I will but as you will."<sup>301</sup> The next day, Matthys rode out of Münster with a few companions to face the armies of the Antichrist in battle; he was quickly killed, and his head was raised up on a pike.<sup>302</sup> Kerssenbrock described Matthys as confident and "inspired with wondrous enthusiasm" as he left Münster.<sup>303</sup> Since many Anabaptists believed Matthys was one of the apocalyptic witnesses of Revelation 11 who was to die at the hands of God's enemies, some scholars argue that Matthys thought his death would usher in Christ's return.<sup>304</sup>

*c. The shift in narrative after Matthys's death*

Jan von Leiden was the clear replacement for Matthys. On Easter, the day of Matthys's death, he preached about a potential delay in Christ's return and explained that God would raise up another prophet to lead God's people in Münster.<sup>305</sup> He claimed that God gave him a vision several weeks prior that revealed the manner of Matthys's death

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<sup>297</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 77–79. Kerssenbrock provides an account of the same story with some minor variation. Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 531–533.

<sup>298</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 236; Gresbeck provides other examples beyond Smit. Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 81.

<sup>299</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 50.

<sup>300</sup> Gresbeck says Matthys was "clapping his hands together, nodding his head up and down and sighing heavily, just as if he was about to die. Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 89.

<sup>301</sup> Matthys's words are a clear reference to Jesus's words in Gethsemane before his death recorded in Matthew 26:39. Gresbeck, 89.

<sup>302</sup> Gresbeck, 90; Kerssenbrock; *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 537–538. Kerssenbrock notes that his body was hacked up into pieces and "certain very bold scoundrels also cut off his genitals, and the following night affixed them to the revolving gateway of the Giles Gate [of Münster's city walls]."

<sup>303</sup> Kerssenbrock; *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 537–538.

<sup>304</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 237; Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 50.

<sup>305</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 91.

and the way ahead for the Kingdom. With Knipperdolling's endorsement, Jan von Leiden took the mantle as the chief prophet.<sup>306</sup> Although Matthys advanced the apocalyptic fervor of Melchior Hoffman to new levels in Münster, his disciple, Jan von Leiden took it even further after Matthys was killed.<sup>307</sup>

Jan von Leiden shifted his emphasis from pointing to the city of Münster as the New Jerusalem to focusing on the community of Anabaptists as the new Israel, or the people of God.<sup>308</sup> Claiming divine revelation as his source, he moved to establish a form of government and laws led by twelve elders to more closely model ancient Israel.<sup>309</sup> He presided over a public ceremony to install the twelve elders and mark the transition to the new form of government in Münster. The ceremony was laden with symbols designed to support the developing narrative.<sup>310</sup> According to Kerssenbrock, Rothman opened with a sermon emphasizing that the government of elders "had been ordained by God and was to copy the image of His beloved people of Israel."<sup>311</sup> Jan von Leiden then one-by-one placed a drawn sword into each elder's hand saying, "Take the power of the sword, which God the Father has entrusted to you through me, and cut with this sword according to God's command!"<sup>312</sup>

The city council was dissolved, and the administration of the elders began in April 1534. Alongside the Elders, the office of prophet also became an institutional part of the new government structure.<sup>313</sup> As a result, Jan von Leiden grew in status among the people, both as a prophet and as the elders' official spokesman.<sup>314</sup> Dionysius Vinne, an

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<sup>306</sup> Kerssenbrock; *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 539–540.

<sup>307</sup> Hsia, *Munster and the Anabaptists*, 55.

<sup>308</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 237.

<sup>309</sup> Klötzer, 238. Gresbeck places the establishment of the twelve elders before Matthys's death; however, most scholars agree that it did not happen until after that. Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 85–86. Kerssenbrock details Jan von Leiden's ecstatic prophesying that led up to the appointing of the elders. Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 542–543.

<sup>310</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 255.

<sup>311</sup> Kerssenbrock; *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 543.

<sup>312</sup> Kerssenbrock, 543.

<sup>313</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 238.

<sup>314</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 237.

early supporter of Rothman when he converted to Anabaptism, recalled the calling of the elders and their purpose: “Since the government of this time was chosen by men and God wanted to make everything new, the prophet as God’s representative and at God’s instruction presented twelve godfearing persons to wield the sword of justice.”<sup>315</sup> With Jan von Leiden as the new chief prophet and the elders in place, the punishment of the ungodly became the priority.<sup>316</sup>

The council of elders took their task seriously and enthusiastically setting out to communicate and enforce a new legal code based on the laws of ancient Israel. They issued an edict addressing the people of Münster as Israel and both outlining and justifying how they planned to govern. Before providing a detailed list of crimes, the edict explained that the elders “will strengthen the new polity by making sure that the impenitent will be unable to make any excuses in palliation of their crimes, and by seeing to the needs of any weak or careless people who perhaps exists among us.”<sup>317</sup> It emphasized that the Anabaptists in Münster were the true people of God and that the sword was primarily for their protection. Nevertheless, it explained that “every residual evil must be eradicated from our midst, and this aim is tended to by the ruler in particular.”<sup>318</sup> Stayer helpfully summarizes the list of the crimes in the edict that call for the death penalty: “(1) blasphemy, (2) disrespect for the government, (3) disrespect for parents, (4) disrespect for the head of the household, (5) adultery, (6) fornication, (7) avarice, (8) theft, (9) fraudulent business transactions, (10) lying, (11) gossiping, (12) quarrelsomeness, and (13) sedition.”<sup>319</sup> As the edict stated, “the ruler ... plies the sword established by God in order to terrify the wicked and to protect the good.”<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 237.

<sup>316</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 238.

<sup>317</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 544.

<sup>318</sup> Kerssenbrock, 545.

<sup>319</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 260. Kerssenbrock provides the detailed list of crimes with explanations and bible verses in his record of the council’s edict. Kerssenbrock; *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 544–549.

<sup>320</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 544.

With the elders in control, the executions increased. Gresbeck describes several detailed accounts of executions for violation of the stipulations in the edict.<sup>321</sup> Kerssenbrock notes that they used “new and unprecedented” methods to execute people; he describes “a moveable set of stock for the neck hung from a linden tree, and one after the other they placed their neck in these stocks, and after they were tied in, they were shot by firing squad.”<sup>322</sup> Knipperdolling became a leader among the elders with the official task to oversee or even perform executions.<sup>323</sup> Kerssenbrock notes that Jan of Leiden publicly designated Knipperdolling the “swordbearer” in a ceremony while handing him a sword to “strike terror into the malefactors.”<sup>324</sup> By his own admission, Knipperdolling used that sword to decapitate eleven or twelve people in his role as executioner.<sup>325</sup>

One of Jan von Leiden’s most notorious commands as the chief prophet was to make marriage obligatory and to introduce polygamy.<sup>326</sup> The practice of polygamy was immediately resisted, even by some of Jan’s greatest allies; nevertheless, Jan eventually convinced the elders by pointing to Old Testament examples of polygamy then tying it to the narrative of restoring Israel and need of more progeny to fill the kingdom.<sup>327</sup> Although one might assume lust and hedonism was the initial motive for Jan of Leiden, he defended polygamy based on a theology that viewed sex for procreation only; Jan himself had 15 wives, none of whom became pregnant by him.<sup>328</sup> Despite Jan’s ostensible intentions, abuse became prevalent; Gresbeck describes numerous cases of abuse including sexual intercourse with girls as young as eleven years old; he notes that one even died as a result of her injuries.<sup>329</sup> Before long, about 200 native Münsterites made an attempt overthrow the Anabaptist leaders; they almost succeeded in putting an

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<sup>321</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 88–91.

<sup>322</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 572.

<sup>323</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 256.

<sup>324</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 541.

<sup>325</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 256.

<sup>326</sup> Part of the justification was based on the fact that, at the time, women outnumbered men by three to one. Stayer, 256–257.

<sup>327</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 110–111.

<sup>328</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 257; Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 111–112.

<sup>329</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 113–124.



end to Jan von Leiden and the Anabaptist Kingdom.<sup>330</sup> Ultimately, however, the Anabaptist leaders were able to suppress the revolt.<sup>331</sup> Gresbeck notes that, of 120 prisoners taken at the end of the revolt, 47 were executed over several days and placed in a mass grave in the cathedral square.<sup>332</sup>

In addition to their desire to purify the new Israel of all evil, the elders also increasingly framed the siege as an assault on God's people. Shortly after the revolt over polygamy, the prince-bishop launched a significant assault on Münster in September 1534, attempting to break through the city gates.<sup>333</sup> Once again the Anabaptists survived, and once again, their victory confirmed God's hand in protecting them. As they repaired the damaged city walls, Gresbeck explains that "the preachers informed the common folk that God would [soon] descend from heaven and relieve them [of their burden to defend the city]."<sup>334</sup> The siege served as divine justification that the end was near. On at least two occasions, the elders even directed the narrative toward the siege army by writing letters addressing all those participating in the siege, warning them that if they did not cease their actions, they would face the judgment of God.<sup>335</sup>

*d. A king to rule Münster*

After successfully defending against the siege and crushing the revolt within the city, Jan von Leiden had the status necessary to elevate himself from chief prophet to King. Jan's ascendance to the throne should not be seen as an unexpected turn of events, but rather the natural result of taking his narrative to its conclusion. The community in Münster was the new Israel; just as Israel had a king, so should the restored new Israel. As Stayer notes, it was likely that Jan had been preaching "that the new Israel needed a

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<sup>330</sup> Gresbeck and Kerssenbrock both describe the details of the revolt, which includes the capture of Jan von Leiden, Knipperdolling, and Rothman. It is amazing how close they came to ending the Anabaptist reign. Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 124–130; Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 576–.

<sup>331</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 258.

<sup>332</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 129.

<sup>333</sup> Gresbeck, 131–133.

<sup>334</sup> Gresbeck, 133.

<sup>335</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 553–555, 572–576.

King David.”<sup>336</sup> Jan’s call to the throne happened when a local prophet named Johann Dusentschuer emerged and proclaimed that Jan von Leiden would be King. Kerssenbrock relates the proclamation of Dusentschuer:

Most Christian brothers, the Father has revealed to me from heaven, and enjoined me to make known to you, that [Jan von Leiden], a man of God and a saintly prophet, will be king across the entire earth. He will be lord of emperors, kings, and princes and all the powers of the world. He will be over every ruler and no ruler will be over him. He will hold the scepter and throne of his father David until God the Father reclaims His Kingdom from him.<sup>337</sup>

Afterward, Jan von Leiden claimed that he had received a revelation that he was the promised King David who would take the throne at the end of the age.<sup>338</sup>

After proclaiming Jan von Leiden was the rightful king, Dusentschuer presided over the ceremony to install him as king. It was orchestrated to emphasize the king’s role in bringing justice and vindication to God’s people. Dusentschuer transferred the sword given to the elders back to Jan saying, “Receive the sword of justice and along with it all power, so that with it you will make all the peoples of the earth subordinate to yourself.”<sup>339</sup> Dusentschuer then anointed Jan with oil, as the kings of Israel had been anointed, and declared that Jan was “king of the new temple and God’s people ... King of New Zion.”<sup>340</sup> In his first address to the people as king, Jan compared himself to King David, explaining how God had brought them both to power from humble roots. He then fully embraced the king’s role in wielding the sword, declaring that

power over all the nations of the earth and the power of the sword has been given to me to terrify the wicked and protect the good. Let no one in this saintly city, then pollute himself with crimes, and struggle against the Father. Otherwise, he will be struck with the sword without any remission of the penalty.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 258.

<sup>337</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 583.

<sup>338</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 242.

<sup>339</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 583–584.

<sup>340</sup> Kerssenbrock, 584.

<sup>341</sup> Kerssenbrock, 584.

From the start, King Jan claimed that his reign would be short, and he would soon hand the throne over to Christ at his return.<sup>342</sup> Just as King David's reign was characterized by war and expansion of the kingdom, so would Jan von Leiden's be. As described by Rothman in his pamphlet *Restitution*, this new righteous king would bring justice, cleansing, and expansion:

For a long time the sword was misused among us. But almighty God, when his Word began to grow among us, has also renewed and reestablished the government among us according to his Word ... This is the kingdom and the throne of David, in which, through the sword of righteousness, the kingdom among us is to be cleansed and extended from now on. Thus, the true and peaceful Solomon can enter and possess it.<sup>343</sup>

Even with King Jan's false humility and insistence on a short reign, Jan and the other Anabaptist leaders viewed the king's true dominion as both comprehensive and universal.<sup>344</sup>

Jan von Leiden continued to refine the authority structures and symbols used in Münster to support his reign as the new King David. He dissolved the body of elders and replaced it with a royal household and several councilors.<sup>345</sup> Knipperdolling increased in prominence, becoming the viceroy, while Rothman was formally recognized as the royal spokesman.<sup>346</sup> Again, King Jan was very deliberate in using symbols and ceremonies for all the appointments to emphasize his royal status. The Anabaptists began to refer to the marketplace as Mt. Zion, which referred to Jerusalem, the city of King David.<sup>347</sup> Gresbeck describes how King Jan entered the marketplace to make his appointments: "He was magnificently decked out with velvet and silk garments and gold chains and gold rings on his fingers, and [his councilors] carried the sword before the king."<sup>348</sup> Kerssenbrock describes the king's royal attire in detail, including two intricately designed

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<sup>342</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 242.

<sup>343</sup> Rothman, *Restitution*, 253.

<sup>344</sup> Rothman, 253.

<sup>345</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 243.

<sup>346</sup> Klötzer, 243.

<sup>347</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 156.

<sup>348</sup> Gresbeck, 138.

crowns, a royal scepter, a signet ring, and a necklace with crossed swords and the inscription “One king of righteousness over everything.”<sup>349</sup>

When the king held court, he sat on an elevated throne in the marketplace with all his councilors and attendees at his feet. Gresbeck describes how the symbolism of the court proceedings supported the Anabaptist apocalyptic narrative:

Once the king was sitting on his throne, two small youths stood on either side of the king .... The young man who stood on the right-hand side and had the Old Testament in his hand signified that the king would set himself in God’s place and seat himself on the throne of David (in David’s place), and was to proclaim anew the Word of God, which had been cast in shadow for a long time. The young man on the left-hand side with the sword signified that he was a king of the righteous and a king over the entire world, and was to punish all unrighteousness. Now that the king entered into the Holy Place, and the Apostolic Church was ready, and the king had converted all the folk in the city of Münster (New Israel), because he’d reproclaimed the Word of God anew and had punished all unrighteousness within the city of Münster (but only in the city), Münster was an example to the entire world.<sup>350</sup>

Jan von Leiden had already been preaching that Christ would not return until after Münster had served as a model or example for the rest of the world: “Everything that is unrighteous and is still in sin must be stamped out, since the example is ready. You have entered into the Apostolic Church and you’re holy... Now the example is ready, it shall spread over the entire world, just as it began here in this holy city.”<sup>351</sup> With the purification well underway, Jan believed that the Anabaptists now exemplified the Apostolic Church and were ready to expand into the world. In Gresbeck’s description of the court, the relative positions of the young men are significant, with the right-hand side having priority. Gresbeck describes how King Jan performed a symbolic switching of the two young men’s positions: the man with the Old Testament moved to the left to show that Jan had already “reproclaimed the Word of God anew and was going to prevail,”

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<sup>349</sup> Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 591–593.

<sup>350</sup> The Apostolic Church refers to the early church led by Christ’s Apostles. Both Rothman and Jan von Leiden believed that the church was at its purest form at that time and had only been corrupted since then. Jan used the term Holy Place, which refers to the innermost room of Israel’s Temple, metaphorically to refer to his pure place among the people of God. Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 144–145.

<sup>351</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 91–92.

while the man with the sword moved to the right to signify “that he was to go on punishing all unrighteousness.”<sup>352</sup> At this point, the Anabaptists were confident that they would ultimately gain possession of the world.<sup>353</sup>

King Jan increasingly incorporated the idea of an offensive holy war into the kingdom’s end-times narrative. In fact the defense of the city was always predicated on expansion after defeating the siege army of the Antichrist.<sup>354</sup> In October 1534, Dusentschuer, the same prophet who identified Jan as rightful King, declared that he had another revelation supporting this expansion. God had commanded that Münster must send out apostles into cities to the north, south, east, and west of Münster to proclaim the message of the new Israel in the coming judgment for those who opposed her.<sup>355</sup> Dusentschuer told 27 apostles, including most of the leading Anabaptist preachers and leaders in Münster, “to walk into the [cities] and proclaim peace to them.”<sup>356</sup> For each city mentioned, Dusentschuer declared that, if the city rejected the message of peace, “then the city [would] sink down on the spot and burn up in hellfire.”<sup>357</sup> He then told King Jan that “God orders you to keep ruling and remain a king ... and punish

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<sup>352</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 145.

<sup>353</sup> Gresbeck, 145.

<sup>354</sup> Gresbeck describes a plan revealed to Dusentschuer (the same prophet who identified Jan as rightful King) in a vision that called all the residents of Münster to leave the city after a third heavenly trumpet sounded. They were to travel together to a second Promised Land, leaving Münster desolate. Although King Jan and Dusentschuer emphasized the prophecy with preaching and ceremonial trumpet blasts for two weeks, it never came to fruition. Many people prepared to leave, but the departure was called off at the last moment. Gresbeck describes how the “trumpet of the Lord had not been blown properly” and the people did not want to go outside the gate. It is interesting how out of place the departure was with the prevailing narrative identifying Münster as the new Jerusalem. The emphasis on Münster as the true Promised Land returned once the departure was called off. Perhaps this dissonance had some influence on why the plan failed to resonate with the people of Münster, and why it was ultimately called off by King Jan. Gresbeck, 156–164.

<sup>355</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 266.

<sup>356</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 165; Gresbeck does not identify Dusentschuer by name, but refers to him as “the limping prophet.” Kerksenbrock relates the same events in even more detail than Gresbeck revealing that the prophet was in fact Dusentschuer. Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 617–622.

<sup>357</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 165.

unrighteousness.”<sup>358</sup> The next day, King Jan sent the prophets off by personally beheading a prisoner to symbolically fulfill his duty to “punish unrighteousness.”<sup>359</sup>

Rothman remained in Münster with King Jan, as the apostles carried Duserschuer’s message to the surrounding area. Except for Heinrich Graes, who turned traitor, all the other apostles were arrested and executed.<sup>360</sup> Overall, their message of rebellion against the false church also failed to resonate; many followers of Melchior Hoffman remained convinced of pacifism, and the few uprisings of sympathetic Anabaptists were crushed in their infancy, partly through the aid of Graes.<sup>361</sup> This was a setback for the Anabaptist Kingdom, but they still maintained their confidence in the kingdom and the coming end.

After the failure of the apostles, Rothman set out to communicate the narrative of the Anabaptist Kingdom in a series of pamphlets. With the end times restitution (or restoration) of Israel unfolding before their very eyes in Münster, Rothman made this the topic of his pamphlet published in October 1534. Rothman’s *Restitution* is filled with phrases drawn from the apocalyptic sections of the Old and New Testaments that he applies to the current situation in Münster. For example, Rothman draws from Daniel 11 and 12, where Daniel has a vision of an apocalyptic battle in which an invading army defeats Israel and desecrates the temple with an “abomination of desolation.” Seeing the abomination of desolation in the temple meant that the end was very near (Dan. 12:11; Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14). Rothman explains that “the abomination of desolation totally occupied the holy place, yes, completely inundated Christendom.”<sup>362</sup> Seeing the church as the fulfillment of the temple (i.e., the holy place), Rothman is saying that the

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<sup>358</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 166.

<sup>359</sup> Gresbeck, 167.

<sup>360</sup> Gresbeck, 167–169; Kerssenbrock provides additional details of the arrests and executions of the apostles from Münster, as well as an account of how Heinrich Graes was able to survive by becoming a traitor. Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 622–623.

<sup>361</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 266–271.

<sup>362</sup> In *Restitution*, Rothman also refers to the enemies of the Anabaptist kingdom as the “Babylonian whore” (drawn from the imagery in Revelation 18). He points to “the child of perdition” (another name for the Antichrist drawn from Paul’s first letter to Thessalonica) as present for the final battle. Both will be destroyed in the final eschatological battle. Rothman, *Restitution*, 331.

corruption of Christendom—both the broader Catholic and Protestant Churches—is tantamount to seeing the end times’ abomination of desolation.

In *Restitution*, Rothman speaks of the Anabaptists in Münster as the one true people of God who would be protected in the midst of the impending judgment: “there must be one sheepfold and one flock in which, what was begun by Christ and his apostles will be restored, erected, and preserved. Concerning this much was taught at the time of the apostles, that is, regarding the Day of the Lord.”<sup>363</sup> The Day of the Lord refers to God’s final judgment on the earth as described in the Old Testament prophet Joel. Rothman explains that “what was begun by Erasmus, Luther, and Zwingli has now been gloriously established in the truth first by Melchior [Hoffman] and Jan Matthys and now in our brother Jan van Leyden, who are quite unlearned as the world thinks.”<sup>364</sup> With this, Rothman puts Münster in the context of his broader view of God’s unfolding plan. Luther and many other magisterial reformers would have agreed with Rothman’s views of corruption of the Catholic Church and the eschatological significance of the Reformation, but now Rothman was claiming the mantle of the true Church for the Anabaptists in Münster.

With the true Church established in Münster under the new King David, Rothman explains that judgment day is at hand: “The mouth of the godless must be stopped on earth. All evil, and everything that the heavenly Father has not planted must be rooted out and done away with.”<sup>365</sup> Hoffman and even many of his contemporaries in the more mainstream Reformation would have agreed with the vindication of the faithful and the imminent judgment of evil on earth; however, vengeance belonged to Christ, when he would defeat his enemies at his second coming. Rothman, on the other hand, in his work *Concerning Vengeance* (published December 1534), argues that the faithful must execute God’s vengeance on the wicked as a necessary precursor to the second coming:

There may be those who think that God himself will come down from heaven with his angels to avenge himself on the godless, and who

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<sup>363</sup> Rothman, *Restitution*, 332.

<sup>364</sup> Rothman, 333.

<sup>365</sup> Rothman, 333.

confidently wait for it. No, dear brother. He will come, that is true. But the *vengeance must first be carried out by God's servants* who will properly repay the unrighteous godless as God has commanded them. *God will be with his people* and will give them iron horns and bronze claws against their enemies. For very soon we, who are covenanted with the Lord, *must be his instruments to attack the godless* on the day which the Lord has prepared. Thus, God's strong arm will be with us and he will display his glorious power in his people who have so long been despised and cast out before the world. It is as Malachi says: You shall tread the wicked to death, for they will be dust under your feet on the day which I make, says the Lord of hosts.<sup>366</sup> [emphasis added]

Note that Rothman not only justifies the Anabaptists' use of violence but also provides encouragement that God will be with them and give them the strength to defeat their enemies.

On January 2, 1535, King Jan issued a set of articles to bolster the resolve of the Anabaptist Kingdom and justify his own actions as king. The 27 articles, addressed to "the true Israelites of the New Temple in the present kingdom," clearly outline the apocalyptic narrative as it had developed up to this point.<sup>367</sup> King Jan opened by explaining the importance of the Anabaptist Kingdom as it fits in the overall plan of God going back to Jesus and the apostles:

This kingdom has been foreseen for many centuries now, was promised by the words of all the Prophets, and was begun and passed on by Christ and His Apostles by virtue of the Holy Spirit, and now this kingdom has been restored by the righteous King [Jan], who was placed on the seat of David. Therefore, each and every one of these articles will be maintained under penalty of death for the glory of Almighty God and the increase of His Kingdom.<sup>368</sup>

Note how Jan continues his emphasis on his kingship as the new David, and the need to punish the wicked for the sake of the glory of God.

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<sup>366</sup> Bernard Rothman, "Concerning Vengeance," in *Anabaptism in Outline*, 335

<sup>367</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 653.

<sup>368</sup> Kerssenbrock, 653–654.



The first article was a declaration that “In this New Temple, there should be a single king to rule the people of God and bear the sword of righteousness.”<sup>369</sup> It goes on to say that “the Temple will not be tainted by false doctrine, since it is saintly and everything of those who enter the Temple is pure.”<sup>370</sup> The second article explains that the King and his court will administer “justice and equity according to the word of God.”<sup>371</sup> The remaining articles (fraught with terminology tying them to the prevailing narrative) add to the substantial list of crimes requiring the death penalty.<sup>372</sup> Stayer helpfully summarizes some of the more notable crimes: “perverting of the Scripture, false prophecy, military indiscipline, rebellion, desertion, and the making of unsubstantial accusations.”<sup>373</sup> Following the 27 articles, King Jan became increasingly brutal, taking a more personal role in sentencing and punishing the wicked. He took up the sword himself to perform at least seven or eight public execution within the city.<sup>374</sup> Klötzer calculated that a total of about eighty persons were executed under the reign of King Jan.<sup>375</sup>

Over time, the siege tightened around Münster, preventing any significant provisions from reaching the city. King Jan, with the help of Rothman, pointed to the trauma and privation caused by the siege as signs of the imminent return of Christ.<sup>376</sup> In January 1535, completely cut off from the surrounding area and facing insurmountable odds, they refused an offer of mediation. The offer, from Phillip of Hesse, required Münster to rescind the kingdom and marriage system, which was something they refused to do as it had become an integral part of their defining narrative.<sup>377</sup> Rothman replied that the kingdom was set up at the command of God, and it would be absurd to abolish it.<sup>378</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 654.

<sup>370</sup> Kerssenbrock, 654.

<sup>371</sup> Kerssenbrock, 654.

<sup>372</sup> Kerssenbrock, 653–658. Kerssenbrock provides the full text of the 27 articles.

<sup>373</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 260.

<sup>374</sup> Stayer, 256–258. Jan even beheaded one of his own wives for disobedience within the marriage.

<sup>375</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 249.

<sup>376</sup> McDaniel, *Violent Yearnings for the Kingdom of God*, 69.

<sup>377</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 247.

<sup>378</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 237–238.

As the residents of Münster were hoping for relief from other Anabaptists in the surrounding area, King Jan received several revelations, one of which indicated that final relief would come on Easter 1535, just a few months away.<sup>379</sup> Before personally beheading a prisoner for lying, King Jan confidently said: “If it’s the case that relief does not take place on Easter, then do to me as I will do to this criminal who stands before me, and cut off my head too.”<sup>380</sup> The expectation of relief at any moment was constantly on the people’s minds but never realized. The Anabaptists leaders continually attributed that failure of the relief to sin, unrighteousness, or a lack of faith in God.<sup>381</sup> Gresbeck records King Jan’s words: “Dear brothers and sisters, as it seems to us, we’re relying on our foreign brothers who are supposed to come to us. This is not what we should rely on. God will certainly relieve us when it’s our time.”<sup>382</sup>

In the end, the Anabaptist community in Münster was starving, with only a few hundred fighting men remaining. Stayer recounts several records of doubt among the core of Anabaptists still remaining in the city; however, King Jan was still proclaiming that they would continue to fight until the last man.<sup>383</sup> Before meals, King Jan would sometimes read aloud an account from the Bible of how the Israelites were delivered by an angel with a glowing sword who slew their enemies, adding that “the same thing could happen to us. The same God lives.”<sup>384</sup> In the midst of starvation, Gresbeck records a vision of the king seeing “the city... going around in a circle...”<sup>385</sup> Jan interpreted his vision saying, “This means this much—and it’s a sign from God—that we’re still going

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<sup>379</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 174–176. Kerssenbrock records several prophecies revealed to the king during this timeframe. Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 658–659.

<sup>380</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 175; Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 659.

<sup>381</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 183–184.

<sup>382</sup> Gresbeck, 184.

<sup>383</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 277.

<sup>384</sup> Quoted in Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 248; Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 271. The Bible passage may have been 1 Chronicles 21:16 or 2 Kings 19:35, although no reference is given.

<sup>385</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 200.

to march around the world, and that I'm still going to be a king over the world and lord over it."<sup>386</sup>

The faithful in Münster remained resolute in holding out in the city until Christ's return; they never did surrender, and the rebellion ended only after Gresbeck and another defector betrayed the king and let the prince-bishop's armies in through one of the gates on June 25, 1535. Approximately 600 Anabaptists were killed inside the city walls before King Jan negotiated a truce.<sup>387</sup> Jan von Leiden, Bernhard Knipperdolling, and Bernhard Krechtinck (another burgher master) were publicly tortured to death; their bodies were then placed upright in iron cages that were hung from the tower in St. Lambert's church.<sup>388</sup> Kerssenbrock, writing more than 30 years later, states that "even now these cages can be seen attached as a permanent memorial to the event, the flesh and bones having disappeared. The tongs with which they were tortured can be seen in the middle of the marketplace ... as an example and terrifying deterrent to seditious people who do not obey the lawful ruler."<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> Gresbeck, 200.

<sup>387</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 249.

<sup>388</sup> Klötzer, 250. Kerssenbrock describes the torture: "the executioners first put the king into the stocks and bound him to the stake, then tore him apart with the blazing-hot tongs, ripping at the muscles all over his body. When touch by the tongs, the muscles gave visible flames, and this made such a strong stench that it revolted the noses of all the bi-standers in the marketplace. The others had the same punishment inflicted on them... After the long torment, they were still alive, twitching and quivering, and then the executioners tore at their throats with glowing tongs, constricting them with the heat of the fire, and at the same time drove a dagger into the chest of each man..." Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 715–716.

<sup>389</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 716.

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## **V. ANALYSIS, CONCLUSIONS, AND LESSONS LEARNED**

The apocalyptic narrative that developed in the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster led to brutal acts of violence within the city and a strong desire to expand the kingdom across the entire world. The Anabaptists in Münster saw themselves as playing a primary role in an apocalyptic narrative progressing toward salvation for the faithful and judgment for the wicked. Since a dominant apocalyptic narrative does not inevitably set a group on the path to violence, it is important to look at the more specific features of the narrative that developed in Münster, as well as the internal and external factors that contributed to their development.

An examination of the narrative in Münster indicates that several key elements came together to justify the Anabaptists' use of violence: (1) the arrival of the time of judgment, (2) a clearly defined distinction between the wicked (who require judgment) and the faithful (who do not), (3) a divinely sanctioned administration, and (4) a call for the faithful to carry out God's judgment. These elements were not the inevitable result of an initial apocalyptic narrative but emerged over time as they were shaped by both the internal challenges of the kingdom, as well as external conflict with the opposing forces that surrounded them.

This chapter analyzes the apocalyptic narrative in Münster. First, it surveys the development of each of the four narrative elements mentioned above. Next, it discusses the dynamics and interactions of the Anabaptists that contributed to the development of these elements. Lastly, it touches on several connections with the Islamic State almost 500 years later to draw some lessons that can be applied today. Connections and similarities that cross major religious boundaries and span such a large period of time indicate that these lessons are still applicable today.

### **A. ELEMENTS OF THE ANABAPTIST NARRATIVE**

The unique elements of the Anabaptist narrative are built on the characteristics and assets of religious narratives that help facilitate collective action. By appealing to questions of the ultimate and the supernatural, the Anabaptist narrative provided the

rationale for believers to disregard worldly consequences and forgo worldly benefits in order to gain salvation.<sup>390</sup> It provided a means for deliverance from God's impending judgment due to a transgression against a divine moral standard.<sup>391</sup> Any compromise, even for peace, was thus counter to their ultimate goal; the Anabaptists saw both the Catholic Church and the magisterial reformers deserving God's judgment largely because they had compromised with evil and allowed the corruption of the true church.<sup>392</sup> As a result, many Anabaptists were prepared to (and did) willingly accept death rather than compromise their beliefs.<sup>393</sup>

As discussed in Chapter II, narratives do not give equal attention to every event that unfolds; certain events and images within the narrative are highlighted to provide the hearers or readers with a personal connection to the story. This is especially true for world history meta-narratives, such as apocalyptic narratives, which cover a lot of ground to explain the 'big picture' in a succinct way. As such, prominent stories, described in more detail, may come to represent the larger narrative, even when they are told apart from the broader story. Often, followers may not have a full understanding of the larger narrative, but they trust that it is true because they believe that the broader story is verified by the truth of the smaller stories. Each of the elements described below was sometimes expressed and confirmed individually, yet they weave together to form the broader narrative.

### **1. The Time of God's Judgment**

Before coming to the conclusion that it is the time of God's judgment, a group must first understand itself to be living at the end the age. As discussed in Chapter III, this is related to the first question John Hall proposed for understanding apocalyptic groups, namely *when in time does a group see itself relative to the end of the age?*<sup>394</sup> The Anabaptists in Münster shared the general expectation, common during the Reformation,

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<sup>390</sup> Christian Smith, *Disruptive Religion*, 9.

<sup>391</sup> Smith, *Introduction: Correcting a Curious Neglect, Or Bringing Religion Back In*, 10–11.

<sup>392</sup> Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 146.

<sup>393</sup> Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman*, 269.

<sup>394</sup> Hall, *Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect*, 207.

that Christ could return at any moment. In fact, when the doctrine of adult baptism came to Münster, it was promulgated in the context of a broader apocalyptic narrative that understood their worldly situation as part of a metaphysical conflict between good and evil that was approaching its end.<sup>395</sup>

Revelation provided a map of human history from the time of the Apostles to the end of the age; it was there that the residents of Münster could look for the signs that the end was near.<sup>396</sup> The arrival of the two witnesses from Revelation 11 and other end-times prophets was of particular importance.<sup>397</sup> They not only brought special revelation to clarify and validate the apocalyptic narrative but their arrival in itself served as a sign of the end. The Anabaptists, drawing again from Joachim of Fiore, held the prevalent view that the church had reached a pinnacle of corruption and wickedness at the time of the Reformation, setting the stage for the Antichrist.<sup>398</sup> In Münster, the Antichrist was reified when the prince-bishop gathered his armies for a siege of the New Jerusalem.<sup>399</sup>

Further confirmation that the end was near would come first in the suffering of the faithful and then in signs of divine favor. These two elements are discussed in more detail concerning their role in affecting narrative shifts, so here the focus is simply on their presence as signs of the end. With the persecution of Anabaptists at its height, the Anabaptists in Münster concluded that they must be the end-times people of God, suffering for righteousness' sake at the hands of the wicked.<sup>400</sup> In the initial stages of the

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<sup>395</sup> Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 146.

<sup>396</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 28.

<sup>397</sup> Hoffman claimed to be the first witness of Revelation 11, and Matthys claimed to be the second. Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman*, 333–339.

<sup>398</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 46–48; Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, 16; Koester, *Revelation*, 46–48. The Anabaptists, however, lumped Luther and the other magisterial reformers in with the Catholic Church as part of the forces of the beast or Antichrist.

<sup>399</sup> Speculation about the identity of the Antichrist was not confined to fringe groups, or even Bible scholars; it was much a part of popular culture during the reformation. The general consensus was that the Antichrist was already present on the world stage, even if some thought he had not yet been fully revealed. Rothman, along with other Anabaptists, understood the Antichrist not as one specific individual, but as a composite body of those who would destroy the work of Christ. Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 53–55; Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 232; Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 495–497.

<sup>400</sup> Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman*, 269. Even Luther's list of end time's signs included "the repression and persecution of Christians." Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 22.

spread of Anabaptism, they were ready to accept death as God's end-times martyrs.<sup>401</sup> When the Anabaptists gained control of the city council, however, they saw it as a sign of deliverance from martyrdom and confirmation that God's hand was protecting them.<sup>402</sup>

The establishment of the New Jerusalem meant that God's judgment could be poured out on the Antichrist and the wicked at any time. Leading up to the end, the wicked would still have the opportunity to repent and join the faithful, but there comes a time when salvation will no longer be available. With the surrounding siege forces viewed as the armies of the Antichrist, the Anabaptists in Münster increasingly felt that the time to convert unbelievers was coming to an end, and judgment was all that remained.<sup>403</sup>

## 2. Defining the Wicked and the Faithful

Any narrative progressing toward an ultimate goal of salvation for some and punishment for others inherently defines two distinctly separate categories of people. For the Anabaptists, the *faithful* (sealed with the sign of baptism) would receive salvation, and the *wicked* (without the seal) would receive judgment.<sup>404</sup> As such, adult baptism and the accompanying life changes were of profound importance; they determined the difference between ultimate suffering under God's wrath and salvation under God's care and protection. The categories became absolute for the true believers, who saw syncretism and compromise to gain earthly benefits as costing them their ultimate salvation.<sup>405</sup>

When Anabaptism first came to Münster, Rothman and the other Anabaptist preachers called people to repent and be baptized to join the people of God in Münster. Although they emphasized the threat of judgment and punishment from the outset, there

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<sup>401</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 233.

<sup>402</sup> Klötzer, 232–233.

<sup>403</sup> Klötzer, 235–236; Hsia, *Munster and the Anabaptists*, 55.

<sup>404</sup> As outlined in Chapter IV, the Anabaptist in Münster adopted Hoffman's view that the seal described in Revelation 7 referred to adult baptism. Those that received the seal would be protected from the wrath of God in the final judgment. Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 12.

<sup>405</sup> Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 146.



was still the option to repent and join the Anabaptists.<sup>406</sup> As time progressed, however, the door to mercy began to close, and the Anabaptists began to see an insurmountable divide between the faithful and the wicked. Rather than considering unbelievers as those in need of salvation, the Anabaptists ultimately saw them as a source of corruption that must be cleansed from their presence.<sup>407</sup>

### 3. A Divinely Sanctioned Administration

The arrival of the time of God's judgment and the clear identification of those who need judgment were not sufficient to produce the violence that took place in Münster; it required an administration vested with the authority to administer the divinely sanctioned justice. In Münster, this came to fruition with the establishment of the Anabaptist Kingdom, which further developed early Anabaptist beliefs regarding the kingdom of God. From their split with Zwingli, the Anabaptists held a view of two kingdoms, one of light, and one of darkness, that led them to separate from the world. These two kingdoms would coexist simultaneously in the present age, and within the same boundary; the kingdom of darkness was destined for judgment, and the kingdom of light (God's 'temple' on earth) was destined for salvation.<sup>408</sup> As the kingdom of light was intended to be a model community for the world, there was significant interest in keeping it pure. This developed into the common Anabaptist practice of excommunication or 'shunning;' anyone who would not follow the strict path of the Anabaptist community was shunned and treated as a member of the kingdom of darkness.<sup>409</sup> Given their political status, most Anabaptists concluded that the community of true believers would be a small, persecuted minority until Christ's return.<sup>410</sup>

From this concept of the kingdom, Hoffman predicted Strasberg would be the New Jerusalem, a place to which the faithful could come for refuge and a place from

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<sup>406</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 435.

<sup>407</sup> Kerssenbrock, 512.

<sup>408</sup> Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, 13. This belief can be traced back to the Schleithem Confession of the Swiss Anabaptist in 1527.

<sup>409</sup> Goertz, 15.

<sup>410</sup> Goertz, 16.

which they could spread the kingdom to the world.<sup>411</sup> Strasberg never materialized as the New Jerusalem Hoffman predicted, but for Anabaptists in 1534, Münster began to look like the place they had been hoping for.<sup>412</sup> When the Anabaptists gained control of the city council, the New Jerusalem became more than a place of refuge; it was also a place administered according to God's law as understood by the Anabaptist prophets. Within a couple months of gaining control of the council, the Anabaptists began to take steps to abolish private property, reflecting the practice of the early Church in Jerusalem.<sup>413</sup>

After Matthys's death, Jan von Leiden took the administration of Münster further by abolishing the council and setting up twelve elders to lead the new Israel in accordance with a new legal code based on ancient Israel's laws.<sup>414</sup> Inspired by their victory over an internal rebellion and a failed assault by the prince-bishop, the Anabaptists received another divine revelation; this one called for Jan von Leiden to take the throne of King David, just as in the days of ancient Israel.<sup>415</sup> Once on the throne, King Jan's reign was viewed as universal, subordinate to God alone. Unlike the previous administrations, the king ruled by divine right, with a unique status and authority to carry out God's will as God's regent on earth.<sup>416</sup>

#### **4. The Call for the Faithful to Administer Justice on Earth**

The Anabaptist narrative developed to a point where the leaders of Münster felt they must punish the wicked as a precondition for Christ to return. This provides the final answer to Hall's second question for examining apocalyptic groups: *what is the group*

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<sup>411</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 86.

<sup>412</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 86.

<sup>413</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 235; Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 520. Kerksenbrock also records the burning of Catholic relics, icons, and books.

<sup>414</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 238. Gresbeck places the establishment of the twelve elders before Matthys's death; however, most scholars agree that it did not happen until after that. Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 85–86. Kerksenbrock details Jan von Leiden's ecstatic prophesying that led up to the appointing of the elders. Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 542–543.

<sup>415</sup> Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 583–584; Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 242.

<sup>416</sup> Rothman, *Restitution*, 253.

called to do during these end times?<sup>417</sup> Hoffman consistently emphasized pacifism and conversion to his followers long before the Anabaptists took control of Münster; but even then, he did so in the context of God's approaching judgment, vengeance for the persecution of Christians.<sup>418</sup> It was in the context of this theme of vengeance that Jan Matthys came to see a role of the faithful in delivering judgment to the wicked.<sup>419</sup> With vengeance at the forefront of Hoffman's narrative, it was not a stretch to adjust other elements like pacifism, so that vengeance would come to fruition.

The shift in narrative, from first waiting for God's judgment of the wicked to instead calling on the faithful to administer that judgment was tied to both the establishment of a divinely recognized administration and new revelations from the leading prophets. After Münster was identified as the New Jerusalem, the Anabaptists increasingly had the means to govern as they perceived God would have them do. Immediately after the Anabaptists gained control of the council, Matthys proclaimed that God was calling the council to purify the New Jerusalem by ridding the city of all unbelievers.<sup>420</sup> Initially, they sought to purify the city by conversion and banishment. As the narrative progressed, however, "the door to mercy" began to close and the Anabaptists shifted toward violence to deal with the wicked. By proclamation of both Matthys and Jan von Leiden, the faithful were called to use the sword to punish the wicked within the city walls.<sup>421</sup>

The twelve elders, who had been installed in a ceremony that emphasized their role in wielding the sword to punish the wicked, ratcheted up the need to cleanse the city through violence.<sup>422</sup> They introduced a new set of laws and practices, ostensibly modeled after ancient Israel, that made the death penalty commonplace for even minor

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<sup>417</sup> Hall, *Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect*, 207.

<sup>418</sup> Melchior Hoffman, "Interrogation of Melchior Hoffman, 1533," in *Anabaptism in Outline*, 328.

<sup>419</sup> Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 105.

<sup>420</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 512.

<sup>421</sup> Recall that this call to violence fell on a sympathetic audience that had already been more than willing to defend their cause through armed struggle. Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 231–233.

<sup>422</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 237; Kerssenbrock; *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 543.

infractions.<sup>423</sup> The violent narrative evolved yet further during the reign of King Jan; his calling as king was to purify the new Israel and bring justice to the wicked, for then, and only then, would Christ return.<sup>424</sup> The prophecy calling for Jan to be king, and the subsequent installation ceremony emphasized his commission to wield the sword of justice with impunity.<sup>425</sup> From the royal clothing of the king to the court ceremonies held in the marketplace (now called Mt. Zion), various symbols were employed to support the status of the king and his increasing call for violent justice.<sup>426</sup>

Now that the kingdom was established, the emphasis on the judgment of the wicked soon became an urgent requirement. The development of the narrative is observed in a shift in emphasis from Rothman's pamphlet, *Restitution* (published in October 1534, shortly after Jan von Leiden became king), to his treatise, *Concerning Vengeance* (published just two months later in December 1534). As reflected in the respective titles, the former focused on the restoration of the true people of God at the end of the age, and the latter focused on God's people as the primary means to carry out God's judgment on earth.<sup>427</sup> As mentioned in Chapter III, the violence administered by the Anabaptist kingdom was more than a means to rid the city of the impious; it was the very instrument that God chose to use to judge the world.<sup>428</sup> The true believers in Münster came to believe that they must carry out this judgment in order for Christ to return.<sup>429</sup>

With a kingdom subject only to God and a divine call to judge the wicked in the world, purification and justice within the walls of the city were no longer enough. King Jan proclaimed the need to expand righteous reign by the sword, just as King David had done.<sup>430</sup> Although they never had the means to do so, the narrative expressed by

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<sup>423</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 260; *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 544–549.

<sup>424</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 584.

<sup>425</sup> Kerssenbrock, 583.

<sup>426</sup> Kerssenbrock, 591–593; Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 144–145.

<sup>427</sup> Rothman, *Restitution*, 253; Rothman, *Concerning Vengeance*, 335.

<sup>428</sup> Gregg, *Three Theories of Religious Activism and Violence*, 12.

<sup>429</sup> Rothman, *Concerning Vengeance*, 335.

<sup>430</sup> Rothman, *Restitution*, 253.

Rothman, King Jan, and the prophet Dusentschuer clearly called to expand the kingdom by the sword.<sup>431</sup> Even when attempts to garner support for expansion outside the city failed, the Anabaptist leadership in Münster maintained their belief that the kingdom would ultimately be victorious in expanding across the earth.<sup>432</sup>

Within the Kingdom, King Jan presided over the court and often took part in the executions that were orchestrated to reflect the judgment of God on wicked men.<sup>433</sup> The Anabaptists incorporated their role as instruments of God's judgment into their collective identity; McDaniel explains that the "ceremonialism, especially as enacted through public execution, became increasingly important in binding the community to an ethos of collective terror."<sup>434</sup> The progression of the Anabaptist identity can be traced along with the narrative: (1) they started as the oppressed people of God awaiting vindication at the return of the lord; (2) they became the people of God taking refuge from the Antichrist by divine protection in the New Jerusalem; (3) as they gained the means to do so, they progressively enforced laws to purify the New Jerusalem and new Israel in preparation for Christ's return; (4) finally, they became the kingdom of God on earth and the instrument God would use to judge the wicked. The next section examines the internal and external dynamics that contributed to the shifts in narrative and identity.

## **B. INTERNAL DYNAMICS AND INTERACTIONS WITH THE OUTSIDE WORD**

This section seeks to explore how both internal dynamics and interaction with the wider society impacted the development of the dominant narrative in Münster.<sup>435</sup> Chapter II emphasized that a group's narrative and collective identity are not fixed, but complex,

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<sup>431</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 165–169; Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 617–623.

<sup>432</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 248; Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 271; Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 200.

<sup>433</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 256–258. Jan even beheaded one of his own wives for disobedience within the marriage.

<sup>434</sup> Charles A. McDaniel Jr., "Violent Yearnings for the Kingdom of God: Munster's Militant Anabaptism," in *Belief and Bloodshed: Religion and Violence Across Time and Tradition*, ed. James K. Wellman (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 70.

<sup>435</sup> Hall, *Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect*, 207.

dynamic, and even fragmented.<sup>436</sup> Multiple narrative strands within a group often interact with each other and with external forces to produce a central identity that is often difficult to comprehend without considering such interactions.<sup>437</sup> That is why it is often necessary to examine the details and nuances of a group's dominant narrative in order to understand their actions. For the Anabaptist kingdom of Münster, I traced the narrative as it developed in relation to both endogenous and exogenous factors across time; this section examines these factors separately.<sup>438</sup>

### 1. Internal Dynamics and Conflict

Narratives and collective identity often shift or evolve over time in response to the internal dynamics of a group.<sup>439</sup> In Chapter II, I emphasized that a narrative provides the bases on which a durable identity can form, while also allowing for change and adaptation over time. This concept is consistent with the development of the apocalyptic narrative in Münster. First, the apocalyptic understanding presented by Rothman and the other Anabaptists was not created from a blank slate; it built upon the historic Christian teaching and the trends of the Reformation. It did, however, introduce elements that *created* meaning for the common citizens who had been on the lower rung of the social structure. They became part of God's faithful remnant who were important characters with a role to play at the end of the age, and that role is, in turn, *derived* from the broader narrative.<sup>440</sup> When experienced collectively, as they were in Münster, the shared stories provide both confirmation and solidarity.<sup>441</sup>

Like other narratives, the apocalyptic narrative in Münster spread through the sharing and retelling of smaller stories to make sense of the events surrounding Münster. This narrative spread as common citizens retold the stories because they resonated with

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<sup>436</sup> Brown, *A Narrative Approach to Collective Identities*, 731.

<sup>437</sup> Brown, 743.

<sup>438</sup> Philip D. Schuyler, John R. Hall and Sylvaine Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements, Social Order and Violence in North America, Europe and Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 11.

<sup>439</sup> Brown, *A Narrative Approach to Collective Identities*, 737.

<sup>440</sup> Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 151–152.

<sup>441</sup> Davis, *Stories of Change*, 19.

their experiences. Persuasive communication clearly played a role; Kerssenbrock noted Rothman's skills as an orator.<sup>442</sup> In the midst of the tumultuous changes that resulted from the Reformation in Münster, Rothman provided a compelling case for Anabaptism by connecting contemporary events with broader apocalyptic narrative in a way that made sense to the common people. Later, Rothman's pamphlets and other writings helped other preachers and teachers to communicate a similar message.<sup>443</sup> The Anabaptists embraced Rothman's preaching and teaching and came to trust his interpretations. Rothman's charisma and credibility appear to have played a singular role in the initial acceptance of Anabaptism and the accompanying apocalyptic narrative. After the people accepted the apocalyptic narrative, its development was the product of the interactions and contributions of several other key leaders and social dynamics.

Like nearly all apocalyptic groups coming from scripture-based religions, the Anabaptists in Münster sought to ground their apocalyptic narrative in sacred scriptures. When changes occur, this often leads to a charge that those coming before either did not have all the relevant information or they had a faulty interpretation. This is typical of fundamentalist narratives, which seek to return to the fundamentals of a religion that has been corrupted over time.<sup>444</sup> The Anabaptist narrative likewise pointed to the corruption of the Catholic Church and a desire to return to the pure and true faith as practiced by Jesus's disciples.<sup>445</sup> Based on the common understanding that the world was getting increasingly corrupt, combined with the anticlerical sentiment of many of the citizens in Münster, this idea resonated with a large number of people and helped the new interpretations to take hold.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>442</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 217.

<sup>443</sup> Kerssenbrock, 499.

<sup>444</sup> Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan, "Fundamentalisms: Genus and Species," in *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 90–115. The authors conclude that the "defense of religion is the sine qua non of fundamentalism; without it, a movement may not properly be labeled fundamentalism."

<sup>445</sup> Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, 16.

<sup>446</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 96.

Perceived plausibility can play a significant role when a group evaluates changes or shifts in an accepted narrative. The perception of plausibility indicates whether certain behaviors and events within the narrative could actually happen.<sup>447</sup> The evaluation of plausibility is not solely based on facts, nor on an objective understanding of science, but is defined within the parameters of the narrative. Within their narrative, the Anabaptist had a means to introduce authoritative changes without necessarily looking to sacred scripture for justification. They believed that at the end of the age, God would provide special, authoritative revelation and direction to “spiritual men.”<sup>448</sup> Often this revelation came in the form of dreams and visions that provided a definitive interpretation of apocalyptic passages of scripture in light of their contemporary situation. As shown in the development of the narrative in Münster, prophets like Matthys and Jan von Leiden received revelations from God that guided the trajectory of the narrative toward its violent end.

The prophets added divine authority to Rothman’s effective communication of the narrative. Matthys came in with the elevated status of the prophet Enoch, the second witness predicted in Revelation 11.<sup>449</sup> This gave Matthys the authority to adjust Hoffman’s earlier prophecies. Additionally, Hoffman’s cryptic and mystical way of interpreting the Bible and communicating his own prophecies easily lent itself to reinterpretation.<sup>450</sup> We saw this happen with regard to the early reintroduction of adult baptism, changing the New Jerusalem from Strasberg to Münster, and the role of believers in administering God’s judgment. When Jan von Leiden became king, he had an authority even greater than Matthys, and he put that authority behind revelations that helped advance the narrative to its ultimate conclusion.<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Hyunyi Cho, Lijiang Shen, and Kari Wilson, “Perceived Realism: Dimensions and Roles in Narrative Persuasion,” *Communication Research* 41, no. 6 (2014), 828–851.

<sup>448</sup> Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 17.

<sup>449</sup> Klaassen, 46.

<sup>450</sup> Klaassen, 79.

<sup>451</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 584.



## 2. Isolation, Polarization, and Interaction with the World

Conflict with outsiders that led to isolation and then polarization also played an important role in the development of the narrative in Münster. Even without conflict, distinct boundaries between the faithful and the wicked naturally flowed from the Anabaptist apocalyptic narrative and helped them to construct and maintain a distinct identity and boundaries.<sup>452</sup> Once such boundaries cut off meaningful input from anyone outside the core in-group, the Anabaptists followed a polarizing trajectory toward a more extreme narrative within the group.<sup>453</sup>

There appears to have been a cyclical loop in Münster that progressively strengthened their extreme narrative and increased their isolation. As has already been explained, self-separation as a means to endure persecution and collectively protect group members initiated the isolation.<sup>454</sup> Their closeness and solidarity facilitated the acceptance of the initial apocalyptic narrative that largely resonated because it provided a meaningful explanation for the persecution: they were suffering as God's faithful servants, just as Jesus had suffered when on earth. This aspect of the narrative, in turn, helped to validate the broader narrative that later led to more isolation by purifying the faithful community of all unbelievers. The events of Münster show the progression of the narrative from the purification of the faithful community, through banishment, to the call of the faithful to carry out judgment on the wicked, coinciding with their increased isolation.<sup>455</sup>

It is important to emphasize that the collective trauma, created by persecution and escalating confrontations, combined with their isolation to reinforce the more extreme

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<sup>452</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 89–119.

<sup>453</sup> Sunstein, *The Law of Group Polarization*, 175–195.

<sup>454</sup> As a persecuted minority, the Anabaptists in Münster quickly began to separate from society into a close knit group sharing their resources amongst each other. Within the group they devoted themselves to the teachings of Rothman; preachers and teachers outside the fold could not be trusted. Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 505.

<sup>455</sup> Recall that isolation need not be physical; it could be a psychological separation created by social tension and suspicion of non-members. Sunstein, *Going to Extremes*, 4.

narratives presented by Matthys and Jan von Leiden.<sup>456</sup> Even if the separation between the faithful and the wicked is clearly defined, mental ascent to such categories is not enough to lead to the violent actions; it must be more personal. The identification of those needing judgment and the justification of the call to judgment must be enough to overcome any reluctance to support or even commit acts of violence. Haroro Ingram's "cyclical cognitive reinforcement dynamic," depicted in Chapter II (Figure 1), provides some insight into how deep divides and animosity form between in-groups and out-groups that can be applied to Münster. All who refused the seal of baptism within the city were lumped together with their adversaries outside the gates to form a wicked out-group. This group was imbued with attributes of evil, associated with the Antichrist, and assigned the blame for the crisis and the persecution of the Anabaptists in Münster. Conversely, the Anabaptist in-group was made up of God's faithful servants who were called to confront the evil out-group to bring a solution to the crisis.<sup>457</sup>

Ingram's framework shows how assigning blame to a fixed out-group, and putting the responsibility for a solution on the in-group, creates opposing identity constructs—i.e., the faithful and the wicked—that increases the division between these groups in conflict.<sup>458</sup> For the Anabaptists, this conflict dynamic increased animosity toward the out-group and reinforced the elements of the narrative that defined the out-group as the wicked enemies of God in an existential battle between good and evil. In turn, it impresses on the in-group their need to take action as the only means to rectify the situation. Without the means to defeat the surrounding armies, the Anabaptist could only attack the enemy within the city.<sup>459</sup>

As seen in Chapter IV, conflict and persecution, even if predicted in the narrative, was often not enough for the narrative to resonate with some people. The Anabaptists' rise to power in Münster, starting with the open practice of adult baptism and later their

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<sup>456</sup> Schuyler, Hall and Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed*, 208; Gregg, *Three Theories of Religious Activism and Violence*, 12.

<sup>457</sup> Ingram, *An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq*, 4–5.

<sup>458</sup> Ingram, 5.

<sup>459</sup> Ingram, 4–5.

control of the city council, confirmed God's hand in their endeavors. This victory and hope were vital for both reinvigorating the spirits of the persecuted Anabaptists who, were anticipating a martyr's death, and confirming the truth of other elements of the narrative. If, against all odds, the prediction of the New Jerusalem, which was fulfilled, surely the predictions of the return of Christ would come true as well. Here there is a contrast with Strasberg; the first predicted New Jerusalem that never materialized.<sup>460</sup> Although Strasberg was initially tolerant to Anabaptists, following Hoffman's prophecy, there were no signs or events that could confirm God's choice of Strasberg as a place of refuge for his people. Hoffman went to prison with the imminent expectation of Christ's return, where he remained until his death.<sup>461</sup>

Even with the authoritative prophecy mentioned above, shifts and developments in the Anabaptist narrative were often connected to significant events or signs. As a minority in Münster, the Anabaptists secured the freedom to practice adult baptism openly from the Lutheran-leaning city council.<sup>462</sup> Associating this victory with a heavenly sign, the Anabaptists in Münster and the surrounding area saw this as a sign of God's favor, which ultimately led them to see Münster as the New Jerusalem.<sup>463</sup> So, a compromise by the council to maintain peace with the Anabaptists played into the apocalyptic narrative that would help the Anabaptists gain control of the council.

Threats of siege, and later the siege itself, perfectly fit the Anabaptist narrative that anticipated that the Antichrist would gather his armies against God's people. Two failed attempts by the prince-bishop to regain the city once again confirmed God's hand

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<sup>460</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 220.

<sup>461</sup> Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 11. Here we see the interconnectedness between the narrative and perceived political opportunities, as articulated in social movement theory. The Anabaptists' initial success both confirmed the truth of their narrative and gave them confidence in their chance of success. McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, *Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes*, 2–7.

<sup>462</sup> Klötzer, *The Melchiorites and Munster*, 232.

<sup>463</sup> Both Kerksenbrock and Gresbeck record accounts of several visions and signs that the Anabaptists saw during their rise to power and the early stages of their control; the most significant was on February 10, 1534, before the Anabaptists gained control of the city council. Kerksenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 480–483; Gresbeck, *False Prophets and Preachers*, 74.

of protection on his people.<sup>464</sup> The same could be said of the failed rebellion within the city.<sup>465</sup> These clearly illustrate the negative effects of failed attempts to defeat an enemy with an apocalyptic narrative; such victories for the Anabaptists facilitated the development of the narrative toward its violent end.

There were many external factors that contributed to the events of Münster that could be explained by theories that do not account for narrative developments. Certainly, defensive considerations of being under siege contributed to the banishment and punishment of dissenters within the city and the Anabaptists' measures to control the city gates. It is my contention, however, that it would be a false dichotomy to have to choose between narrative explanations and other explanations. The development of the narrative in Münster shows not only how external factors impact the narrative, but also how the narrative impacts a group's response to those external factors, both general factors, as well as those factors that are specifically addressed in a group's narrative. This is important because it accounts for how we create our identity through narrative; that is, by creating a smaller narrative for ourselves that fits into a broader metanarrative. It is also related to how we derive our identity by applying the same broader metanarrative in which we believe. These narratives provide our individual sense of meaning or identity; moreover, when we share these narratives with others, we form our sense of collective identity that satisfies our need to belong to a group. Without such collective identity, collective action would not be possible.<sup>466</sup>

## **C. CONNECTIONS WITH THE ISLAMIC STATE AND CONCLUDING LESSONS**

### **1. Connections with the Islamic State**

Although almost 500 years later and under the banner of a different religion, the Islamic State shows many of the same elements of the Anabaptist Kingdom in its apocalyptic narrative. In a similar vein to the Anabaptists in Münster, most violent jihadi

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<sup>464</sup> Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness*, 553–555, 572–576.

<sup>465</sup> Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 258.

<sup>466</sup> Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 89–119.

groups ascribe to an end-times narrative that calls for the purification of Islamic territory, followed by the expansion of that territory throughout the world.<sup>467</sup> The Islamic State distinguished themselves from other groups by calling for the immediate establishment of the caliphate in the context of an apocalyptic narrative that sees the caliphate as a step toward the final battle against evil. They separated from al-Qaeda over these specific issues in 2006, but it was at a time when the Sunni insurgency was all but defeated in Iraq. However, the world was forced to take notice of the Islamic State after it took control of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, in June 2014.<sup>468</sup> They were able to take advantage of the chaos and trauma in Iraq and Syria to gain control of significant territory and resources, reestablish the ancient caliphate, and mobilize recruits for cosmic war.<sup>469</sup>

For the Islamic State, evidence that the end was near came from confrontations with the West and the perceived persecution of Muslims from the West. They saw corrupt Muslim governments propped up by the West as one of the means the West used to oppress Muslims. Trauma and persecution experienced by Sunnis in Syria and Iraq helped the Islamic State's apocalyptic narrative to resonate with both local and foreign fighters. In Iraq, the U.S. invasion in 2003 started the path that led to the chaos and disenfranchisement of Sunnis. While it was still an affiliate of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State fomented a sectarian civil war between Sunnis and Shias. After the U.S. withdrawal, the majority elected Shia government severely oppressed the Sunni minority. Lastly, in Syria, the Islamic State took advantage of the development of a sectarian civil war in which the Assad regime specifically targeted Sunni Muslims.<sup>470</sup>

Like the Anabaptists, the Islamic State drew from the historical traditions of its religion. They reinvigorated and contextualized Islamic apocalyptic prophecies from the seventh and eighth centuries. McCants points out how these prophecies were written at a

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<sup>467</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Apocalypse in Islam*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 184.

<sup>468</sup> William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>469</sup> Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 2015), 5.

<sup>470</sup> David Ignatius, "How ISIS Spread in Syria and Iraq--and how to Stop It," *The Atlantic*, October, 2015.

time of sectarian conflict in Iraq and the Levant, and they locate the final end times battle there; thus, they naturally resonate with Sunni Muslims following the events in Iraq and Syria.<sup>471</sup> Filiu observes that “the profound trauma of the [U.S.] occupation of Iraq” was a key event spurring apocalyptic narratives in the Muslim world.<sup>472</sup> Subsequently, the Islamic State framed itself as the means of deliverance for Sunnis experiencing the trauma of the unfolding apocalyptic events.

Starting with its founder, the core leadership of the Islamic State has advanced the apocalyptic fervor by linking the experiences of Sunnis to signs of the end times. Abu Mus’ab al- Zaraqawi identified both Shia Muslims, along with the Americans, as servants of the Antichrist.<sup>473</sup> For Muslim apocalyptists like Zaraqawi, the Antichrist plays a similar role to the one ascribed to him in Christian end-times narratives; he will rise to power at the end of the age and lead a vast army against God’s faithful servants.<sup>474</sup> In the Muslim scheme, the faithful Muslims will be led by the Mahdi, a descendent of the prophet and the rightful ruler of the final caliphate at the end of the age.<sup>475</sup>

Zaraqawi sought to establish the caliphate in Iraq just prior to his death in 2006.<sup>476</sup> His successor Abu Ayyub al-Masri soon announced the arrival of the Islamic State in order to usher in the Mahdi and fight with him in the final battle. McCants notes that Masri “ordered his commanders ... to conquer the whole of Iraq to prepare for the Mahdi’s coming.”<sup>477</sup> Masri’s apocalyptic obsession influenced his military tactics and contributed to the initial downfall of the Islamic State in Iraq; however, they were able to return with similar apocalyptic zeal in 2014.<sup>478</sup>

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<sup>471</sup> McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 107.

<sup>472</sup> Filiu, *Apocalypse in Islam*, 196.

<sup>473</sup> McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 10.

<sup>474</sup> David Cook, *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 184–200.

<sup>475</sup> Cook, *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature*, 126–149.

<sup>476</sup> McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 10.

<sup>477</sup> McCants, 32.

<sup>478</sup> McCants, 45.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi connected apocalyptic prophesies to fighting in Syria in order to call faithful jihadists to “come to your State to raise its edifice. Come... for the Great Battles that are about to transpire.”<sup>479</sup> After gaining control of Mosul in June 2014, the Islamic State released a proclamation that interpreted its victory as a sign that the caliphate was reborn: “Now the [caliphate] has returned; we ask Allah (the Exalted) to make it to be upon the methodology of prophethood. Now hope is being actualized. Now the dream has become a reality... You spoke and were truthful. You promised and kept to your word.”<sup>480</sup> Following this declaration, they unambiguously named Baghdadi the caliph, demanded allegiance from all Muslims, and enforced a brutally strict form of sharia law to prepare for the end of the age.<sup>481</sup>

The Islamic State’s concept of the caliphate, like the Anabaptist concept of the Kingdom in Münster, saw it as the place God had sanctioned for his righteous rule to be carried out on earth. Thus, its dominion was both absolute and comprehensive, and required the full allegiance of all true believers. Fawaz Gerges explains that “the caliphate is not just a political entity, but also a collective religious obligation (*wajib kfa’i*), a means to salvation: Muslims have sinned since they abandoned the obligation of the caliphate, and, ever since, the umma has not tasted ‘honor’ or ‘triumph.’”<sup>482</sup> Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, as the Islamic State’s official spokesman, emphasized that the newly formed caliphate annulled all existing government structures. Calling for all Muslims to submit to the caliphate, he said “it is time for you to end this abhorrent partisanship, dispersion, and division, for this condition is not from the religion of Allah at all. And if you forsake the state and wage war against it, you will not harm it you will harm yourselves.”<sup>483</sup>

As the location set apart for God’s rule, the Islamic State likewise prioritized the need to purify the caliphate. Gerges explains that “any Muslim or co-jihadist who refuses

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<sup>479</sup> Quoted in McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 100.

<sup>480</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, “This is the Promise of Allah,” video transcript (Al-Hayat Media Center, 2014).

<sup>481</sup> McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 146.

<sup>482</sup> Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 28.

<sup>483</sup> Quoted in Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 28.

to submit to the will of the new caliphate faces either expulsion from the land or death.”<sup>484</sup> Apostates in the caliphate, which, for the Islamic State, includes anyone who would disagree with their interpretation of Islam, would be sentenced to death without the option of expulsion.<sup>485</sup> The Islamic state considered many cultural artifacts and monuments as signs of idolatry and destroyed them within their borders.<sup>486</sup> The tragic terrorizing and killing of thousands of Yazidis in the summer of 2014 illustrates the zeal with which the Islamic state attempted to cleanse their territory.<sup>487</sup>

The Islamic State’s use of the Islamic prophesies surrounding a final battle at Dabiq as a step toward expansion and defeating God’s enemies across the earth shows a similar pattern to the narrative in Münster. As the editors of the Islamic State’s English-language magazine explain, they chose to call the magazine *Dabiq* because “the area will play a historical role in the battles leading up to the conquests of Constantinople, then Rome.”<sup>488</sup> McCants notes, however, that the Islamic State’s priority was to “purify Dabiq” before the battle with the armies of “Rome.”<sup>489</sup> The specific identity of Rome varies among jihadist interpretations from the Republic of Turkey to an Infidel Army led by the United States; regardless all agree that it represents the enemies of God’s faithful that will gather to fight at the end of the age.<sup>490</sup>

Islamic State leadership leveraged prophesies regarding a final battle with “Rome” at Dabiq to gain recruits to their cause. McCants cites jihadists from varying backgrounds who “were stirred by the promise of fighting in the final battles preceding the Day of Judgment.”<sup>491</sup> The Islamic State expended extensive resources to take control of the small, unimportant village named in the prophecy.<sup>492</sup> As the United States

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<sup>484</sup> Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 27.

<sup>485</sup> Gerges, 27.

<sup>486</sup> Gerges, 30.

<sup>487</sup> Gerges, 30–32.

<sup>488</sup> Quoted in McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 103.

<sup>489</sup> McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 103.

<sup>490</sup> Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *The Atlantic*, March, 2015.

<sup>491</sup> McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 101.

<sup>492</sup> Wood, *What ISIS Really Wants*.



considered military options in Syria, the Islamic state anticipated the final battle at Dabiq.<sup>493</sup> The Islamic State gave up Dabiq in October 2016, possibly because the invading army of rebels did not fit the conditions for the final showdown (lacking the presence of the Mahdi, and the infidel army made up of vast coalition of God's enemies).<sup>494</sup> Nevertheless, the prominence of the Dabiq prophecies in the narrative of the Islamic State illustrates the pervading cosmic war mindset of the core members of the Islamic State.

This brief comparison of the Islamic State to the Anabaptist Kingdom reveals some striking similarities in their respective paths to violence. Both groups saw the need to purify a territory set aside for the perfect rule of God's faithful people; both thought this perfect reign would eventually spread across the entire world by the conquest of God's people. Similar external factors played a significant role in the acceptance and development of each narrative. Acutely experienced trauma and confrontation played a role confirming the validity of the apocalyptic narratives of both. Anabaptists found themselves persecuted by both the magisterial reformers and the Catholic Church; likewise, Sunnis in Iraq and Syria were strongly oppressed by the dominant Shia governments. In both cases the trauma, although necessary, was not sufficient to put them on the path to violence. Such traumatic events had to be successfully incorporated into their respective apocalyptic narratives.

Both the Anabaptist Kingdom and the Islamic State saw themselves as a faithful minority fighting an oppressive enemy that they could not defeat without divine intervention. However, the signs were not all tied to oppression—striking victories marked major turning points in the ascent of both groups. In Münster the success of Anabaptist leaders in gaining influence and openly practicing adult baptism encouraged oppressed Anabaptists in the surrounding areas to gather at the New Jerusalem and prepare for the coming Messiah. Similarly, the Islamic State's success in Mosul and the declaration of the caliphate gave Sunnis hope to participate in a cause that was backed by God. Interestingly, both groups brutally enforced moral codes of conduct within their

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<sup>493</sup> McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 106.

<sup>494</sup> Uri Friedman, "What is the Islamic State without a State," *The Atlantic*, Oct, 2016.

borders to purify their respective domains in preparation for the coming judgment. As of the writing of this thesis, the Islamic State continues to hold territory; however, they are on a descending trajectory. The fact that the Anabaptist Kingdom failed to rise again after its defeat can provide some encouragement that the apocalyptic zeal necessary to motivate the kind of violence characterized above is difficult to sustain over an extended period of time, especially after losing its territory.

## **2. Concluding Lessons**

From the understanding that people both *create* and *derive* their basic meaning through narrative, this thesis argues that collective identity is best understood as expressed by shared narratives. The shared narratives that help a group to make sense of the world also shape how its members perceive and interpret the events unfolding around them, and how they respond to those events. This is true for all people and groups. After examining the apocalyptic narrative of the Anabaptists in Münster, this thesis has shown the development of several key elements in the narrative that shaped their violent intentions and actions. These elements are (1) the arrival of the time of judgment, (2) a clear and defined distinction between the wicked and the faithful, (3) a divinely sanctioned administration, and (4) a call for the faithful to administer justice on earth. Since these elements were not the inevitable result of the initial apocalyptic narrative but were significantly shaped by both *internal dynamics* and *external conflict*, this thesis concludes that our interactions with such groups have an important impact on their narrative, and the collective actions that result from it.

When examining adversary groups, especially those that are very different from our own, we often wrongly apply our narrative to interpret and predict their actions. Oftentimes, responses and conflicts with such apocalyptic groups reinforce the very narrative that we would like to undermine. This work contends that understanding the details of a potentially violent group's narrative is a vital part of overcoming this tendency. At a minimum, this would help defense practitioners to anticipate how their confrontations may shape the narrative, placing them in a better position to weigh their options, and to avoid potentially devastating consequences. In many situations it should

also help defense practitioners to exploit the internal dynamics of such groups, and to shape their confrontations to undermine the group's narrative.

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