CHAPTER 9

Apocalyptic Violence and Revolutionary Action: Thomas Müntzer’s Sermon to the Princes

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9.1 Introduction

On the morning of 13 July 1524 a curious meeting took place in the Castle of Allstedt. Duke John was present, brother, co-regent, and expectant successor of Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony. He had brought along his twenty-one year old son, Electoral Prince John Frederick. Other likely participants were Chancellor Dr. Georg Brück, councilor Hans of Grefendorf, intendant Hans Zeitz, and other members of the large princely entourage. The uniqueness of the meeting resulted from its purpose, namely the evaluation of a prophet who was anxious to present his message to the princes: Thomas Müntzer. This man

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More recent scholarship holds that the first initiative for the meeting came from Müntzer and not from the princes. The exact point of time of the meeting is not noted in the sources, however the morning of 13 July is most likely. The princes and their entourage had arrived the
had already caused a considerable amount of trouble and adversity for the rulers of Electoral Saxony. He was born probably in the late 1480s or early 1490s in the small town Stolberg, in the southeast of the mountain range Harz. More than a year before the meeting Müntzer had arrived in the town of Allstedt and had since then served as a highly successful but irregular preacher, lacking the obligatory approval of the Electoral Prince. Müntzer knew that, because of his precarious status, he put himself in a risky situation by performing before the princely authorities.

The assembly turned even stranger when Müntzer gave a sermon in which he reenacted a scene from the Book of Daniel and situated his princely addressees in a setting more than 2000 years earlier, in the early 6th century B.C., at the court of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. Thomas Müntzer personified the prophet Daniel facing Duke John as the new King of Babylon. The biblical passage which Müntzer aimed to elucidate in his sermon was the second chapter of Daniel, where the Jewish prophet interprets a dream of the pagan ruler. In this passage we read that Nebuchadnezzar dreamed of a colossal image, splendid and terrifying at the same time, which was composed of several materials.

This image's head was of fine gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass, his legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay. Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces. Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them: and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth.

Daniel's interpretation is well-known: The four parts of the idol represent a sequence of empires, the fourth of which will finally be destroyed and replaced by the Kingdom of God. However, since the stone that becomes a mountain represents the final divine order, it smashes and replaces not just one of the empires but earthly imperial order once for all.

evening before, spent only one night in the castle and left after breakfast. It is not known if this was a sudden departure, caused by the shock over Müntzer’s sermon. In not a single document did the princes ever mention their personal encounter with Müntzer.

4 Elliger (1975, 251).
5 Dan. 2:31–35.