

Early Modern Prophecies in Transnational, National and Regional Contexts.

Lionel Laborie and Ariel Hessayon, eds.

3 vols. Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 324; Brill's Texts and Sources in Intellectual History 23/1–3. Leiden: Brill, 2021. x + 290; ix + 305; viii + 289 pp. €249.

The leading idea of these three volumes, originating from a major international conference in London in 2014, is “to reappraise the importance and impact of prophetic literature both across Europe and throughout the early modern period.” The volumes are organized geographically: volume 1 is dedicated to Continental Europe; volume 2 to the Mediterranean world; and volume 3 to the British Isles. They present important and rare primary sources, dating from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, translated into English for the first time, with references and short introductions; each volume has a general introductory study.

As the authors say, they aim to show “the hot spots of conflict and turmoil in Europe caused or intensified by ideas about true religion and godly society”; these were fortified by the belief that the end times were close and further reformation (of religion, politics, etc.) was necessary (1:21). The first volume has chapters on the Bohemian (Hussite) reformation, which, with its scope of motifs and beliefs, serves as a prelude to and a kind of framework for later texts and authors; on the French Paracelsian physician Jacques Massard (late seventeenth century); on the Danish-German pastor Friedrich Breckling (writing around 1700); and on Huguenot prophecies in the overall prophetic eighteenth-century France. The sources selected here reflect the observation that the belief in an early coming of the latter days was largely present in Protestant countries.

The second volume consists of five chapters plus a general introduction. They cover Sebastianism in Portugal and its expectation of a triumphant so-called Hidden King that arose after 1578; Antonio Viera's prophetic views of a Luso-Brazilian fifth empire in the seventeenth century; prophecies in early modern Spain in the context of the Spanish Inquisition and its control of Christian orthodoxy; Italian quietism in Siena in the 1680s; and the Greek anti-Ottoman “Vision of Kyr Daniel” and the “rise of the army of saints” in the eighteenth century. The perspective of the second volume is that the Mediterranean was a place where Christian, Jewish, and Islamic thought were meeting each other, and thus it was becoming “a space of competition and confrontation” but also “a place of contact and exchange” (2:2). In this framework, the prophetic and messianic ideas were seen as a political instrument to justify a ruler and his actions.

The final volume has three chapters, the first of which is by far the longest contribution of the trilogy. It is dedicated to Jane Lead (one of the English followers of the early seventeenth-century German theosopher Jacob Boehme) and her group of religious dissenters, the Philadelphians. The second chapter discusses the so-called French Prophets and the Scottish Mystics in the early eighteenth century, who were attracted by the teaching of the Flemish Quietist Antoinette Bourignon. The final chapter introduces two eighteenth-century Thanksgiving sermons with apocalyptic ideas, published in London.

Again, the volume is opened by a study that puts the presented texts in the general framework of millenarianism and prophecies that, as the authors remark, were a persisting feature of religion in eighteenth-century Britain (Newton being just one example) (3:1).

The texts presented and interpreted in the three-volume edition shed colorful light on the topic of eschatological, apocalyptic, and millenarist prophecies, their political applications, and their ramifications. Although one chapter deals with the fifteenth century and several texts stem from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it may come as a surprise that more than half of the chapters focus on the eighteenth century. This fact may lead to a revision of our narratives about the period of secularization and Enlightenment that is said to have replaced the centuries of reformatory and religious zeal. As the authors remark, in this period even the enlightened philosophers developed ideas deeply rooted in Christian traditions. This time, it was not the Bible that was the ultimate source of norms, but nature, which, however, for most of the authors was still of divine origin (1:21–22). Thus, the trilogy may serve not only as a handy source of rare primary texts, commented and contextualized in a stimulating way. It may also bring fresh air to the broader way we look at the presence, meaning, and use of eschatological thoughts in European history.

Martin Žemla, *Palacký University, Olomouc*
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Giles Firmin and the Transatlantic Puritan Tradition: Polity, Piety, and Polemic.
Jonathan Warren Pagán.

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\$138.

Giles Firmin was, as Jonathan Pagán acknowledges, “by no means a canonical figure” (261) in the religious debates within the transatlantic Puritan community of the seventeenth century, but his career and writings offer valuable insights into that world. An English Puritan clergyman whose career began as a minister in north Essex, he emigrated to Massachusetts in the 1630s. The congregation-centered church structure of the colony had a lasting impact on him, though he identified more with those, such as Nathaniel Ward and James Noyse, who favored strong ministerial leadership within particular churches at a time when there were no clear lines between Congregationalism and Presbyterianism. Firmin returned to England in 1647 and in the following year was appointed vicar of the Essex parish of Shalford. He was ejected at the Restoration, supporting himself as a medical practitioner and occasionally holding conventicles. In 1672 he was licensed to preach in Ridgewell, Essex, where he lived till his death in 1697.

There is very little biographical detail about Firmin. What we know of him comes largely through the tracts he wrote and what others said about him in their tracts.