

A.D. 1530

Anabaptist Melchior Hoffman
begins preaching the imminent
return of Christ.

Münster's Monster

What began as prophetic fervor ended in dictatorship and blood.

ROBERT L. WISE

The year is 1530. Protestant thought sweeps like a tornado across a European terrain that has altered little for a thousand years. Caught in the storm, the influential town of Strasbourg (now in France) is gripped by the same fears rampaging through Germany and the Netherlands. The stage is set for revolution. Melchior Hoffman, a furrier, mounts the pulpit to preach another of his fiery apocalyptic sermons. The New Revelation is about to be unleashed.

Earlier that year, the popular preacher had spontaneously started rebaptizing adults. His independent thinking had gone far beyond anything Martin Luther envisioned, but it quickly gathered a large following in the low countries. While historians have difficulty pinpointing the origins of the Anabaptist movement because of its simultaneous emergence in several places, most agree Melchior Hoffman's preaching was the most significant factor in launching the radical wing of the Reformation. His emphasis on a literal millennial reign of Jesus Christ on earth gripped the imagination of the Anabaptist movement.

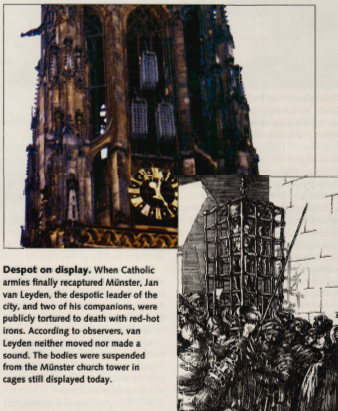
Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anglican Reformers rejected millennialism as "ignorant" and "malicious" speculation. The Thirty Nine Articles, the Augsburg Confession, and the Westminster Confession avoided any notion of a literal, thousand-year reign of Christ. However, such was not the case in Strasbourg, where Hoffman's imagination had been taken captive by Revelation's twentieth chapter and the expectation of a

literal, imminent coming of the physical Kingdom of God.

With all the fire and fury of a frontier revival preacher, Hoffman proclaimed his inspired images and visions. The congregation already knew an age was ending; he convinced them *The End* was at hand. Hoffman's personal charismatic aura made him an indomitable force. The

apex of his innovative claims was that God had chosen Strasbourg as the "New Jerusalem."

After three years of apocalyptic messages pouring forth weekly from Hoffman's church, local authorities had enough. Perceiving him a social threat even though he never advocated violence in establishing the new order, they imprisoned Hoff-



Despot on display. When Catholic armies finally recaptured Münster, Jan van Leyden, the despotic leader of the city, and two of his companions, were publicly tortured to death with red-hot irons. According to observers, van Leyden neither moved nor made a sound. The bodies were suspended from the Münster church tower in cages still displayed today.

man. The town jail could hold the man, but not his ideas. Melchiorites were springing up everywhere.

The New Revelation soon echoed down the Dutch streets of Haarlem and found a welcome in the bakery of Jan Matthys. Matthys was undistinguished by training, but Luther had taught that with Scripture alone, his conscience and insights were as good as anyone's. Having digested Hoffman's sermons, the baker believed himself to be supremely qual-

they discovered the town's leading preacher, Bernhard Rothman, preaching similar Anabaptist ideas (like re-baptism) to large crowds.

Hearing this report, Matthys abruptly had a new vision. Hoffman's eschatological dreams for Strasbourg had not been quite on target. Münster was to be the true site of the New Jerusalem. The baker and his brood migrated south, sealing Münster's tragic destiny.

By February 1534, influence of the

pulpit near a fish market to proclaim the next inspired installment of the New Revelation: for Münster to be prepared for its role in divine history, it must be thoroughly purified. If the reign of Christ was to begin, spiritual corruption from Roman Catholics and Lutherans (and all others failing to embrace Anabaptist doctrine) must be purged from the city. Dissenters should be executed.

Knipperdolling objected to violence on the grounds that bloodshed would invite the wrath and intervention of outside groups. While his warning was to prove genuinely prophetic, he proposed a compromise that the opposition only be expelled. Matthys reluctantly agreed with the caveat that any of Münster's remaining ungodly citizens must be re-baptized. As violence began to seize the city, baptisms continued nonstop for the next three days.

The final battle begins

Meanwhile, Franz van Waldeck, the Roman Catholic bishop of Münster, prepared a barricade outside the city and started the siege.

Although the Anabaptists were confused by the attack, none other than the previously cautious Knipperdolling assured the town's citizens they would prevail. He then began preparing the Münsterites to defend themselves.

Matthys used the opportunity to consolidate his power. Insisting he had a divine mandate, Matthys seized the goods of the recent exiles. Furniture, clothing, food, and personal effects were consolidated and distributed to the Anabaptist faithful by seven deacons.

Matthys and the town preachers next demanded that all property be held in common. "It is completely God's will that we bring money, silver, and gold together," preached Rothman. "One person should have just as much as another." The New Jerusalem required institutionalized communism.

Opposition was significant, particularly among those recently re-baptized. But the reluctant were



Apocalypticism today. David Koresh's Branch Davidian complex in Waco, Texas, bore many similarities to the Münsterites of the 1500s. Both had controlling prophet-leaders who preached polygamy, met violent ends at the hands of the authorities, and were convinced "the day of the Lord" was near.

ified to preach. Perceiving himself to be especially endowed with the Holy Spirit, he was now the heir to all Melchior Hoffman promised.

Matthys proclaimed he was none other than Enoch, the second witness of the Book of Revelation. With a flowing black beard, the tall, gaunt figure was now the bearer of prophetic authority. Doubters were confronted with threats and intimidation. Those failing to embrace the second Enoch would be cast into hell with the devil and his angels. The baker knew how to turn up the heat.

Matthys's band of followers fanned out in pairs across the low countries, just as Christ dispatched his disciples. Two of them, Jan van Leyden and Gerard Boekbinder, went to Münster, Germany. There

newly arrived Anabaptists permeated the town. Guild leader Bernard Knipperdolling joined Jan van Leyden in street preaching, screaming for citizens to repent. Waves of hysteria followed: people fell in the streets, some foaming at the mouth. Claims of sensational "end-time" visions gripped the populace.

The message of Matthys's minions was clear: while destruction descended on the rest of the world, Anabaptists would survive behind the walls of Münster, the "city of refuge."

Migration began immediately—in both directions. Münster's Lutheran population started to flee. Control of the city shifted into the hands of the visionary from Haarlem.

Matthys mounted a makeshift

quickly assembled, told to relinquish their money or die, and locked inside a church. Hours later Matthys and his armed men explained that compliance was the only means of reentry into the community. The captives had no realistic alternative but acquiescence.

before exhorting the assembled crowd. A hymn was sung, and everyone went home to meditate on any possible error in their ways.

Matthys now had the city in his grasp, controlling even the flow of information. All books except the Scriptures were burned in the cathe-

just as he had the blacksmith.

On Easter Sunday 1534, Matthys descended on Bishop Waldeck like one of the apocalyptic four horsemen—but the ride was short. The bishop's armed guards came to his defense. Matthys was stabbed with a pike, then decapitated. His head was hoisted on a pole for the citizens lining the city walls to observe.

Obbe Philips, a follower of Hoffman who rejected Matthys's violence, wrote of Matthys, "He was so violent that even his enemies . . . were terrified of him, and finally in a tumult, they became too powerful for him, they were so incensed that they did not just kill him . . . but hacked and chopped him into little pieces."

The faithful remnant was undeterred. Jan van Leyden picked up the mantle, anointed himself king, and began his messianic reign by running naked through Münster in wild religious ecstasy. He appointed 12 men in charge of the affairs of the city, instigating a reign of terror and wild innovations including polygamy. He indulged himself in excesses while subjecting the citizens to austerity. The new millennial kingdom was to be short lived.

The weight of history

On May 25, 1535, the bishop's army broke into Münster and quickly captured the city. Killing lasted for two days. When the bodies were finally piled in the cathedral square, the stench was overwhelming. Bernhard Rothman probably perished in the assault, and van Leyden and Knipperdolling were captured, tortured and put to death. The hopes for a New Jerusalem ended in a debacle. Lutheran and Calvinist pessimism about human attempts to establish a Kingdom of God was reinforced. Even today they generally continue their suspicion of all forms of both pre- and postmillennialism. The events in Münster had simply been too monstrous. **CTI**

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Mocking the radicals. Anabaptists were the objects of scorn throughout Europe, as shown in this English engraving from the 1500s.

Matthys also pronounced an unconvicted blacksmith as possessed by the devil and threw him into the town's tower prison. Assembling the citizenry, the preacher publicly denounced the blacksmith for defiling a pure town and sentenced him to death. The blacksmith was lined up against the town wall. Matthys himself shot the man in the stomach

dral square. Then Matthys reported a divine directive to take a few men and assault the bishop's positions outside the city. He assured his followers that God had endowed him with special powers of such magnitude that he could even catch the enemy's cannon balls in the pockets of his cloak. The baker and his boys marched out to dispatch the bishop