

# THE DECLINE OF ECSTATIC PROPHECY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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VIRTUALLY ALL historians of Christianity agree that the institutionalization of the early Church was accompanied by the demise of the ecstatic prophet. Most Protestant historians of dogma connect the prophet's disappearance with the evolution of canonical theology. They argue that the concept of a closed canon of Scripture necessarily implied that no further revelation could take place. According to these historians, canonical theology limited the province of the ecstatic prophet to a distant dispensation, an apostolic golden age when revelation validly occurred. This view is called dispensationalism. Its most sophisticated exponent was Adolph von Harnack, who said of the canon:

Its creation very speedily resulted in the opinion that the time of divine revelation had gone past and was exhausted in the Apostles, that is, in the records left by them. . . . That which Tertullian, as a Montanist, asserts of one of his opponents: "He expelled prophecy, he drove away the Paraclete," can be far more truly said of the New Testament which the same Tertullian as a Catholic recognised. The New Testament, though not all at once, put an end to a situation where it was possible for any Christian under the inspiration of the Spirit to give authoritative disclosures and instructions.<sup>1</sup>

Harnack connected this development with the decline of the earlier "religion of the spirit and of power,"<sup>2</sup> finding in the Church's negative reaction to the ecstatic prophecy of Montanism the theological motivation for the Christian canon. "It was the Montanist . . . crisis," he stated, "that brought the idea of the New Testament to final realization and created the conception of a closed canon."<sup>3</sup> Harnack's contention that the Church responded to the Montanist prophets with a dispensational theology of canon echoes in the more recent works of J. N. D.

<sup>1</sup> Adolph von Harnack, *History of Dogma 2* (tr. Neil Buchanan from third German ed.; London, 1896) 53.

<sup>2</sup> Adolph von Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (tr. James Moffatt; London, 1908) pp. 199-213.

<sup>3</sup> Adolph von Harnack, *The Origin of the New Testament and the Most Important Consequences of the New Creation* (tr. J. R. Wilkinson; New York, 1925) p. 37.

Kelly,<sup>4</sup> Arnold Ehrhardt,<sup>5</sup> Henry Chadwick,<sup>6</sup> Hans von Campenhausen,<sup>7</sup> and Jaroslav Pelikan,<sup>8</sup> to name but a few.

Such a view, though supported by an impressive consensus of historians of Christianity, fails to account for significant ambiguities in the sources. On the one hand, there exist early Christian texts which do imply that the prophets belong to a past era. This group of texts is the support for the dispensational view held by the above scholars. These texts can be appropriately summarized by a phrase from the Muratorian Fragment, which speaks of "the prophets, whose number is complete."<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, there exist other second- and third-century texts which assert that the gift of prophecy was a present and continuing reality in the Church. This group of texts, largely ignored by the above scholars, can be represented by an anti-Montanist tract quoted in Eusebius containing the statement "For the prophetic gift must continue in the whole Church until the final coming. . . ."<sup>10</sup> This article attempts to account for the apparent contradiction in the sources. Further, it denies that the theology of canon itself forced the exit of the prophets and points instead to an earlier and more fundamental doctrinal development which has clearer sociological roots, namely, the enhanced authority of the monarchical bishop. It will argue with Tertullian and against Harnack that the bishops, not the canon, "expelled prophecy."

#### THE ROOTS OF EARLY CHRISTIAN PROPHECY

The concepts underlying the existence of early Christian prophecy participate in the world view common to ancient Mediterranean civilization. Many regions throughout Greco-Roman culture, in fact, had oracles or prophets through whom the spirits of deities spoke.<sup>11</sup> Plutarch gives a first-century description of the most famous of these oracles, located at Delphi, whose body a daimon would enter in order to speak with men.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>4</sup>J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York, 1960) pp. 58 f.

<sup>5</sup>Arnold Ehrhardt, "Christianity before the Apostles' Creed," *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962) 107.

<sup>6</sup>Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth, Eng., 1967) p. 53: "The chief effect of Montanism on the Catholic Church was greatly to reinforce the conviction that revelation had come to an end with the apostolic age, and so to foster the creation of a closed canon of the New Testament."

<sup>7</sup>Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (tr. J. A. Baker; Philadelphia, 1972) p. 234, views the canon as a kind of "anti-Montanist backlash."

<sup>8</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago, 1971) 106.

<sup>9</sup>The Muratorian Fragment, in Robert M. Grant, ed., *Second Century Christianity* (London, 1946) p. 120.

<sup>10</sup>The Anti-Montanist in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5, 17 (tr. G. A. Williamson [Harmondsworth, Eng., 1965] p. 222).

<sup>11</sup>See Erich Fascher, *Prophētēs* (Giessen, 1927).

<sup>12</sup>Plutarch, *Moralia* 384-438 (tr. Frank C. Babbitt 5 [London, 1927] 198-501).

Plutarch's *Lives* illustrates the venerated role of the oracle in the careers of famous men. Not all prophetic oracles, however, were universally respected. Lucian of Samosata, a sophisticated Greek of the second century, describes the careers of two charlatan prophets, Alexander and Peregrinus.<sup>13</sup> Although Lucian is clearly satirizing the activities of each prophet (*prophētēs*<sup>14</sup>), the events he recounts certainly reflect a popular credulity toward such figures. R. M. Grant places this evidence in broader perspective by showing that a belief in oracles as well as other "wonders" of the gods was common to the Mediterranean world of the first four Christian centuries.<sup>15</sup>

Such a belief in oracles is founded on the premise that the human body is animated by spirit, with the corollary tenet that spirits other than one's own can enter the body and control it. A spirit thus can seize the prophet and express itself through the prophet's speech faculties. The word "ecstasy"—from the Greek *ekstasis*, literally meaning "displaced"—has etymological roots in such a setting.<sup>16</sup> Often the ecstatic nature of an oracular utterance was emphasized by abnormal behavior—wild dancing, unintelligible speech, even frenzied fits.<sup>17</sup> Such behavior was apparently common enough to the prophet that "false" or charlatan prophets, whose ecstasy was not genuine, had to feign ecstasy in order to appear authoritative. Lucian describes one such tactic: "Alexander was a man of mark and note, affecting as he did to have occasional fits of madness and causing his mouth to fill with foam. This he easily managed by chewing the root of the soapwort, the plant that dyers use; but to his fellow countrymen even the foam seemed supernatural and awe-inspiring."<sup>18</sup>

It is clear that Hebrew prophecy, although centuries older, partook of this same world view, as is illustrated in the words of the prophet Samuel to the young Saul: "you will meet a band of prophets. . . . Then the spirit of the Lord will come mightily upon you, and you shall prophesy

<sup>13</sup> Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet*, in Vol. 4 of *Lucian*, tr. A. M. Harmon (Cambridge, 1925) 173–253; Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus* (*ibid.* 5, 2–51).

<sup>14</sup> This word is used to refer to both men: Lucian, *Alexander* 22 and 24 (p. 206), 55 (p. 244), 60 (p. 252); Lucian, *Peregrinus* 11 (p. 12).

<sup>15</sup> Robert M. Grant, *Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Thought* (Amsterdam, 1952) pp. 61 ff. Grant connects such credulity with a rise in Neoplatonism and Pythagoreanism, well illustrated in the advice of the Pythagorean Iamblicus: "Doubt no marvel concerning the gods, nor any religious doctrines" (*ibid.*, p. 75).

<sup>16</sup> Albrecht Oepke, "*ekstasis*," in Kittel, *TDNT* 2, 449 f.

<sup>17</sup> Lucian, *Alexander* 13 (p. 192), describes the charlatan prophet Alexander's actions ("uttering a few meaningless words") as "like a devotee of the Great Mother in the frenzy"; for earlier illustrations cf. J. M. P. Smith, *The Prophets and Their Times* (2nd ed.; Chicago, 1941) pp. 4–9.

<sup>18</sup> Lucian, *Alexander* 12 (p. 190).

with them and be turned into another man. Now when these signs meet you, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you."<sup>19</sup> In spite of the noble efforts of pious scholars to protect the later Hebrew prophets from modern psychology, it is clear that this element of ecstasy always remained a part of the Hebrew prophetic tradition.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the line between prophet and madman sometimes disappears even in the so-called "classical" prophets of the Old Testament.<sup>21</sup>

Not all prophets, whether Hebrew or Greek, were wild and frenzied in their ecstasies. But inasmuch as they were oracles, i.e., mouthpieces of the gods, their characteristic rhetoric, especially the use of the first person singular to refer to the god, clearly implies an ecstatic state, i.e., a state in which a human spirit is "displaced" because of an "infilling by a higher power."<sup>22</sup> As ecstasies, prophets could not always be regulated by the rational criteria of stable institutions, for their behavior while possessed by the alien spirit was not always their own. In an ecstasy they sometimes were, in the words of 1 Samuel, "turned into another man." For this reason, prophets and madmen were generally regarded in the ancient world as the same sort of people.<sup>23</sup> Neither would make good kings, loyal advisors, or dependable bishops.

#### EARLY CHRISTIAN PROPHECY

The prophecy of primitive Christianity included the element of ecstasy, a fact demonstrated by the language ascribed to the prophet Agabus, who began his prophetic word to Paul with the phrase "Thus says the Holy Spirit. . . ."<sup>24</sup> Regrettably, the New Testament gives little direct information about the behavior of Christian prophets. It was apparently clear to the observer when a prophet was speaking "in" or "through the Spirit,"<sup>25</sup> a judgment which probably included some kind of behavior criterion. The ecstatic nature of early Christian prophecy is further illustrated by the pagan rhetoric used in connection with it. Paul admonished the Thessalonians, "Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying,"<sup>26</sup> using the phrase *to pneuma mē sbennute*, which occurs nowhere else in Scripture. Plutarch uses an almost identical phrase to refer to the stifling of prophetic inspiration by an oracle.<sup>27</sup> The ecstatic rhetoric of Christian prophecy does not imply utter irrationality,

<sup>19</sup> 1 S 10:5 ff.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia, 1962) pp. 105-8, 423 f.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, pp. 6 f.

<sup>22</sup> Oepke, p. 451.

<sup>23</sup> The word *ekstasis* includes both connotations; see *ibid.*, pp. 450 f.

<sup>24</sup> Acts 21:11.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Acts 21:4; Ap 1:10, 4:2; *Didache* 11, 7-12 (tr. K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers* 1 [Cambridge, 1912] 327).

<sup>26</sup> 1 Th 5:19.

<sup>27</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia* 402C (p. 302).

however, since Paul insisted that the prophet speak intelligibly.<sup>28</sup> But the rhetoric does imply that Christian prophecy arose from something more than the prophet's rationally derived conviction of the will of God. It was, instead, God Himself speaking in the Spirit through the prophet to the Church.

The question of how commonplace ecstatic prophecy was in the earliest Churches is difficult to answer, since so little data exists in extant sources. We learn from the Acts of the Apostles that the two early urban centers of Christianity, Jerusalem and Antioch, included influential, practicing prophets.<sup>29</sup> Caesarea and its environs had a prophet and four prophetesses.<sup>30</sup> Since Paul counted prophets among the highest Church officials, second only to apostles,<sup>31</sup> it is not surprising that among the Pauline Churches prophets were certainly present at Corinth and perhaps at Thessalonica as well.<sup>32</sup> One of the pastorals mentions a "prophetic utterance" at an ordination ceremony.<sup>33</sup> The Apocalypse of John claims to be a "prophecy"<sup>34</sup> uttered "in the Spirit,"<sup>35</sup> repeatedly admonishing readers to "hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches"<sup>36</sup> and venerating "the spirit of prophecy" as "the testimony of Jesus."<sup>37</sup> These texts suggest that in at least some of the earliest Christian communities the prophet held a recognized and respected office and the phenomenon of prophecy was known and venerated. Such a conclusion is further supported by the growing number of New Testament scholars who, following Bultmann, ascribe some of the sayings of Jesus in the Synoptic tradition to Christian prophets.<sup>38</sup>

Ecstatic prophecy was given its theological basis in Christianity by Paul in 1 Cor 12-14, a text which, as we shall see, had considerable influence on later Christian views of prophecy. According to Paul, prophecy was one of many "gifts" (*charismata*)<sup>39</sup> given "by the Spirit" to the Church. It was an "imperfect" (*ek merous*)<sup>40</sup> gift, given to last until the coming of "the perfect" (*to teleion*),<sup>41</sup> when full knowledge and understanding would be reached—a clear reference to the eschaton.<sup>42</sup> Paul thus implied that the *charismata*, including the power to prophesy,

<sup>28</sup> 1 Cor 14.

<sup>29</sup> Acts 11:27, 13:1, 15:32.

<sup>30</sup> Acts 21:8-10.

<sup>31</sup> 1 Cor 12:28.

<sup>32</sup> Ap 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Ap 19:10.

<sup>34</sup> See M. Eugene Boring, "How May We Identify Oracles of Christian Prophets in the Synoptic Tradition?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972) 501, n. 1.

<sup>35</sup> 1 Cor 12:4.

<sup>36</sup> 1 Cor 13:9.

<sup>37</sup> 1 Cor 12-14; 1 Th 5:19.

<sup>38</sup> 1 Tim 4:14.

<sup>39</sup> Ap 1:3; 22:10, 18, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Ap 1:10, 4:2.

<sup>41</sup> 1 Cor 13:10.

<sup>42</sup> This verdict is reached by virtually every scholarly commentary on 1 Corinthians published in the English language in this century.

belonged in the Church until the return of Christ. The same concept is contained in the opening words of the epistle: "I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God which was given you in Jesus Christ, that in every way you were enriched in him with all speech and all knowledge . . . so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift (*charismati*), as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . ." <sup>43</sup> As that climactic Day was gradually pushed into the distant future by Christian leaders of the first three centuries, we shall see that the Pauline view of the charismata became more significant; for it meant that prophecy was affirmed as proper to the whole Christian age and therefore could never be dismissed a priori as inauthentic.

The Pauline text insisted on the intelligibility of genuine prophecy, <sup>44</sup> which gave the later churches a rational criterion by which to dismiss some of the excesses common to pagan oracles. The text also gave a confessional criterion for prophecy: "No one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus be cursed,' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." <sup>45</sup> A still further check on the prophetic gift was another of the charismata, the gift of "discernings (*diakriseis*) of spirits," <sup>46</sup> for Paul instructed the Corinthians, "Let two or three prophets speak and let the others discern (*diakrinetōsan*) what is said." <sup>47</sup> A less explicit Pauline exhortation to separate the "good" prophecies from the "bad" is given in 1 Thessalonians. <sup>48</sup>

That the prophet continued to be active in some post-Pauline Christian communities is clear from the *Didache*. Scholarly opinion is divided concerning how this document should be dated. A few place it as late as A.D. 150, while Audet has concluded that part of the work was written about A.D. 70 and the rest shortly thereafter. <sup>49</sup> Robert Grant probably represents the current consensus when he states: "Perhaps as a whole the book should be dated about the last third of the first century, possibly around A.D. 90." <sup>50</sup> If Grant's date is correct, then we may say that toward the late first century in some Christian communities the grounds for recognizing true prophecy had shifted considerably. Apparently people were becoming reluctant to exercise judgment about the prophet's word for fear of committing blasphemy against the Holy Spirit:

<sup>43</sup> 1 Cor 1:4-7.

<sup>44</sup> 1 Cor 14.

<sup>45</sup> 1 Cor 12:3; cf. a similar confessional criterion for prophecy along anti-Docetist lines in 1 Jn 4:1 ff.

<sup>46</sup> 1 Cor 12:10.

<sup>47</sup> 1 Cor 14:29 f.

<sup>48</sup> 1 Th 5:19-22: "Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil."

<sup>49</sup> Jean-Paul Audet, *La Didachè: Instructions des apôtres* (Paris, 1958) pp. 187-210.

<sup>50</sup> Edgar J. Goodspeed, *A History of Early Christian Literature* (rev. Robert M. Grant; Chicago, 1966) p. 13.

“Do not test or examine (*diakrineite*) any prophet who is speaking in a spirit, ‘for every sin shall be forgiven, but this sin shall not be forgiven.’”<sup>51</sup> The criterion for true prophecy was not a charismatic discernment of the spirit in which the prophet spoke, nor the confessional soundness of the prophet’s word, nor his intelligibility, but rather his behavior: “But not everyone who speaks in a spirit is a prophet, except he have the behavior of the Lord. From his behavior, then, the false prophet and the true prophet shall be known.”<sup>52</sup> The *Didache* then elaborates several behavioral criteria by which the prophet should be judged, e.g., how long he stays, whether he practices what he prophesies, whether he asks for money while prophesying, etc. The necessity for expounding such standards was perhaps the gullibility of some Christian communities. Lucian ascribes Peregrinus’ temporary acceptance by Christians to the fact that “if any charlatan and trickster, able to profit by occasions, comes among them, he quickly acquires sudden wealth by imposing upon simple folk.”<sup>53</sup> Such problems are reflected in the subtle shift which has taken place between Paul and the *Didache*: now it is the prophet who is being judged, not “what is said” by him. Perhaps it was easier to judge prophets than prophecies.

The prophets apparently continued to hold a church office in some locales in the late first century, for the *Didache* instructs Christians to give them a share of “all your possessions” inasmuch as “they are your high priests.”<sup>54</sup> The necessary spontaneity of their office is demonstrated by their exemption from the requirement to adhere to liturgy in celebrating the Eucharist,<sup>55</sup> a provision which perhaps gave them the liberty to conduct the sacred meal “in the Spirit.” Yet not all Churches had prophets: “But if you have not a prophet, give to the poor.”<sup>56</sup>

The continued existence of ecstatic prophecy is equally clear in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, an apocalyptic work probably written in Rome. Its date has been placed variously between the late first century and the middle of the second century, and one historian has concluded that the text contains three strands of material, each dating from a different period and with a different author.<sup>57</sup> In spite of these difficulties, it is clear that the *Shepherd* demonstrates the continuing importance of ecstatic prophecy at some time during approximately the first half of the second century:

When, then, a man having the Divine Spirit comes into an assembly of righteous

<sup>51</sup> *Didache* 11, 7 (p. 327); cf. Mt 12:31.

<sup>52</sup> *Didache* 11, 8 (p. 327).

<sup>53</sup> Lucian, *Peregrinus* 13 (p. 14).

<sup>57</sup> Stanislas Giet, *Hermas et les Pasteurs* (Paris, 1963); cf. Goodspeed and Grant, pp. 30-34, for a summary of the evidence bearing on the dating of the *Shepherd*.

<sup>54</sup> *Didache* 13, 1-7 (p. 329).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 10, 7 (p. 325).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 13, 4 (p. 329).

men who have faith in the Divine Spirit, and this assembly of men offers up prayer to God, then the angel of the prophetic Spirit, who is destined for him, fills the man; and the man being filled with the Holy Spirit, speaks to the multitude as the Lord wishes.<sup>58</sup>

This language is novel in some respects ("angel"?), but for our purposes the point is plain enough. The text implies that prophecy was not viewed as an isolated or unusual phenomenon, but was a common event at least to some Western Christian communities.

The place accorded the prophet in the *Didache* and Hermas is not, however, representative of all early second-century churches. In the letters of Ignatius, which were written ca. A.D. 110 and may be roughly contemporaneous with the *Didache* and Hermas, the prophet does not appear at all. Ignatius speaks only of bishops, presbyters, and deacons. Yet ecstatic prophecy does surface, surprisingly, in the person of Bishop Ignatius himself. He reminds the Philadelphian Church:

I cried out while I was with you, I spoke with a great voice—with God's own voice, "Give heed to the bishop, and to the presbytery and deacons." But some suspected me of saying this because I had previous knowledge of the division of some persons; but he in whom I am bound is my witness that I had no knowledge of this from any human being, but the Spirit was preaching, and saying this, "Do nothing without the bishop. . . ."<sup>59</sup>

The fact that Ignatius mentions bishops is not unusual; for they appear in Hermas, the *Didache*, and the pastoral epistles of the New Testament as well. However, the maxim "do nothing without the bishop" is indeed a novelty. Does this explicit assertion of the supremacy of the bishop signal the inevitable demise of the office of prophet? Should a demise of that office, coupled with the fact that the bishop alone seems to possess the prophetic charisma, indicate that prophecy was virtually captured by episcopacy? It is difficult to draw an absolute conclusion on these issues, because it is impossible to state with certainty how representative Ignatius' position is. Yet there is other convincing evidence to support Arnold Ehrhardt's view that "a slow amalgamation of the prophetic ministry with the episcopate was inaugurated."<sup>60</sup>

Perhaps prophecy began to be associated with the presbytery in the pastoral epistles of the New Testament; for 1 Tim 4:14 contains the

<sup>58</sup>Hermas, *Shepherd* 2, 11 (*Ante-Nicene Fathers* [Buffalo, N.Y., 1885-94; hereafter *ANF*] 2, 27).

<sup>59</sup>Ignatius, *Epistle to the Philadelphians* 7, 1 f. (tr. Lake 1, 244-47).

<sup>60</sup>Arnold Ehrhardt, *The Apostolic Succession* (London, 1953) p. 91. Ehrhardt (p. 85) identifies his view with C. H. Turner, *Studies in Early Church History* (Oxford, 1912) pp. 13 ff., 31 ff.



admonition "Do not neglect the gift you have which was given you by prophetic utterance when the elders laid their hands upon you." The *Didache* explicitly refers to the transition when it recommends the appointing of bishops and deacons, who "also administer to you the ministry of the prophets and teachers."<sup>61</sup> The mid-second-century *Martyrdom of Polycarp* indicates that the category of prophet continued to be associated with venerated bishops, for Polycarp is called a "prophetic" man.<sup>62</sup>

Melito of Sardis, like Ignatius, was a second-century bishop who prophesied. Polycrates described him as one "who lived entirely in the Holy Spirit,"<sup>63</sup> and according to Jerome's quotation of Tertullian he was considered a prophet by the later Montanists.<sup>64</sup> His homily *On the Passover*, apparently written A.D. 167-68,<sup>65</sup> contains an epilogue in which the risen Lord speaks to the reader in the first-person rhetoric of prophecy,<sup>66</sup> a text which Othmar Perler rightly describes as "ecstatic language."<sup>67</sup>

Ignatius, then, is not unique among second-century bishops in his appropriation of the prophetic charisma. After him the office of the prophet was virtually unknown, while the charisma of prophecy continued occasionally to appear in the person of the bishop. It should not surprise us that the office of prophet fades from view, for to accommodate both the ecstatic prophet and the monarchical bishop in the Church hierarchy was practically impossible. The two positions simply represented disparate and competing, if not antithetical, concepts of church government. Once Ignatius' oracle "do nothing without the bishop" became accepted, the prophet's essential authority and freedom was dealt a mortal blow, and prophecy curiously contributed to its own demise. Nor should it surprise us that the prophetic charisma was transferred from prophet to bishop; for in Ignatius' monarchical episcopacy, a system which was to characterize the whole Church by the end of the second century, the bishop was the *only* one who had the ecclesiastical authority to speak, in Ignatius' words, "with God's own voice."<sup>68</sup>

Prophecy thus began to be captured by episcopacy in some loca-

<sup>61</sup> *Didache* 15, 1 (p. 331).

<sup>62</sup> *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 16, 2 (ANF 1, 42).

<sup>63</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5, 24 (p. 231).

<sup>64</sup> Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 34 (ed. Ioannes Tamietii [Rome, 1885] p. 36).

<sup>65</sup> The opening lines of the work imply this date; see Goodspeed and Grant, pp. 113-15.

<sup>66</sup> Melito, *Sur la pâque* 101-3 (tr. Othmar Perler [Paris, 1966] pp. 120 ff.).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>68</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Grand Rapids, 1958) p. 217, is only partially correct in stating: "The insistence which Ignatius laid on the supremacy of the single bishop practically excluded the exercise of the prophetic gift." I would add the phrase "by all except the bishop himself."

tions, particularly Asia Minor, perhaps as early as 100 A.D. From all indications, the prophetic gift apparently remained thereafter a harmless and sometimes forgotten tool of the emerging establishment until the late second century, when Montanism raised the embarrassing question "Where are the prophets?" Ignatius' works are important texts in refuting Harnack's thesis connecting the exit of the prophets with canon. They show that the office of the prophet began to disappear almost a century before canonical theology began to emerge in Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus. The ecstatic admonition to the Philadelphians offers a plausible insight, namely, that the monarchical bishop, not the canon, necessarily put an end to the prophet's authority. Ignatius is properly central to this whole question, because his works are the point at which the monarchical bishop becomes explicitly visible and, simultaneously, the office of prophet completely disappears.

The office of the prophet may have vanished in the early second century, but it is important to note that the charisma of prophecy continued to be venerated in some sources as though it was still present. The second-century apologist Justin Martyr claims that "the prophetic gifts remain with us, even to the present time."<sup>69</sup> Toward the close of the second century, Irenaeus, probably reacting against Marcion's rejection of ecstatic prophecy, lists the Marcionite view among his catalogue of heresies:

And others do not admit the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and reject from themselves the charism of Prophecy, being watered whereby, man bears fruit of life to God. And those are the ones spoken of by Isaias; for they shall be, he says, as a leafless terebinth and as a garden without water. And such men are of no use to God, in that they can bear no fruit.<sup>70</sup>

This statement represents a strong and unambiguous veneration of the charisma of prophecy from the pen of a respected bishop. It is a significant statement, because it shows that, in at least some churches on the very brink of the Montanist controversy, prophecy was not viewed as a relic of a past age but as a continuing gift of the Spirit necessary to the life of the Church. In Irenaeus the office of the prophet may be unknown, but the propriety of prophecy itself is clearly still affirmed. The presence of such a view made the Montanist movement possible, and the widespread success of Montanism<sup>71</sup> demonstrates that Irenaeus' statement should not be seen as unique or unusual.

<sup>69</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 82 (ANF 1, 240).

<sup>70</sup> Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 99 (tr. Joseph P. Smith [Westminster, Md., 1952] pp. 108 f.); cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3, 11, 9 (ANF 1, 429).

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel; Philadelphia, 1971) p. 137.

## THE ANTI-MONTANIST POLEMIC

It is in the reaction of the churches to Montanism that we should properly expect to find clear evidence concerning the status of ecstatic prophecy. Unfortunately, Montanism also gives us clear evidence of the serious historical limitations on patristic scholarship. Almost all we know about the early history of the movement is preserved in Epiphanius and in sources quoted by Eusebius. All this material was written well after the fact by enemies of the movement. The sources are sometimes filled with such vicious slanders that they become self-contradictory and ludicrous, leading one historian rightly to conclude: "There is nothing to be gained from reading through this tittle-tattle."<sup>72</sup> Another problem is that contradictory evidence exists concerning the date of the movement's origin.<sup>73</sup> A further difficulty is that the regional synods which dealt with Montanism were among the first ever convoked. Their official records, if any were kept, are not extant. All that is known is that, in the words of the Anti-Montanist quoted in Eusebius, the synods "rejected the heresy."<sup>74</sup> What is important for our purposes is *why* the heresy was rejected. In spite of their serious weaknesses, the sources do imply a surprisingly unanimous answer to this question.

The feature of Montanism which offended most Christian leaders was its ecstatic excesses. The anti-Montanist tract in Eusebius traces Montanus' apostasy to an "unnatural ecstasy. He raved and began to chatter and talk nonsense, prophesying in a way that conflicted with the practice of the Church handed down generation by generation from the beginning."<sup>75</sup> It is not the propriety of prophecy, or even of ecstasy, which is being disputed. It is rather whether a prophet should prophesy in such an extreme and "unnatural" state of ecstasy that his speech loses its rational coherence. The Montanists are thus "pseudo prophets" whose unnatural ecstasy "begins with voluntary ignorance and ends in involuntary psychosis."<sup>76</sup> Epiphanius likewise criticizes Montanism by claiming that true prophets prophesied while retaining their rational

<sup>72</sup> Von Campenhausen, *Formation*, p. 223; Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 2, 98, ignores this polemic element and credulously accepts the charges of the Anti-Montanist: the Montanist prophets "spoke in a loftier tone than any Apostle ever did, and they were even bold enough to overturn apostolic regulations."

<sup>73</sup> Robert M. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine* (New York, 1970) pp. 132 f., accepts Epiphanius' date (A.D. 156-57) on the ground that he possessed Montanist sources; Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (tr. J. A. Baker; London, 1969) p. 181, n. 15, accepts Eusebius' date (A.D. 172) "with the majority of present-day scholars."

<sup>74</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5, 16 (p. 219).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* (p. 218).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* (p. 222).

faculties,<sup>77</sup> and Hippolytus attacks Montanists for not judging their prophecies "according to reason."<sup>78</sup>

Accompanying these rationalistic objections was a biblical argument: "But they cannot point to a single one of the prophets under either the Old Covenant or the New who was moved by the Spirit in this way. . . ."<sup>79</sup> Again, it was not ecstasy itself—that is, an "infilling by a higher power"—which was being denied; for Acts explicitly states that both Peter and Paul had revelations *en ekstasei*.<sup>80</sup> Nor was it the passive nature of ecstatic prophecy; for in stating that man was the lyre and God the plectrum,<sup>81</sup> Montanus stood in a long and respected Christian tradition which held that ecstasy was necessary and proper to inspiration and which frequently explained ecstasy through the image of a musical instrument.<sup>82</sup> Nor was it the first-person rhetoric of the Montanist oracles; for such forms of expression were the commonly accepted language of the prophet in both Christian and pagan circles.<sup>83</sup> Instead, the anti-Montanists were ruling out those who "chatter and talk nonsense," implicitly reasserting the Pauline criterion that prophecy is rationally intelligible, even though ecstatic. Labriolle thus appropriately summarizes the orthodox objections to Montanism: "On these two points, in fact, the orthodox authors remained irreducible. They focused on the distinctions, on the one hand, that authentic prophecy was free from all 'frenzy,' and on the other hand, that the prophet should not renounce at any time his proper rational faculties."<sup>84</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 48, 2 (in Pierre de Labriolle, ed., *Les sources de l'histoire du montanisme* [Paris, 1913] p. 117, ll. 5 ff.).

<sup>78</sup> Hippolytus, *Philosophumena* 8, 19 (tr. F. Legge 2 [London, 1921] 114). On the irrationality of the Montanist mode of revelation, cf. Wilhelm Schepelern, *Der Montanismus und die phrygischen Kulte* (Tübingen, 1929) pp. 17–21.

<sup>79</sup> The Anti-Montanist in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5, 17 (p. 222).

<sup>80</sup> Acts 10:10; 11:5; 22:17.

<sup>81</sup> Grant, *Second Century Christianity*, p. 95.

<sup>82</sup> The acceptance of ecstasy among patristic authors is demonstrated by Pierre de Labriolle, *La crise montaniste* (Paris, 1913) pp. 555–62; Schepelern, pp. 149–59; and Kelly, pp. 62 ff. R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm* (Oxford, 1950), wrongly tends to see the ecstatic element itself as a Montanist innovation, denying (p. 43) "that early Christian prophecy was of the Montanist type."

<sup>83</sup> Schepelern, pp. 149–59, discusses the presence of the "Ich-form" in ecstatic speech, a section which is somewhat misrepresented by Jaroslav Pelikan in *The Finality of Jesus Christ in an Age of Universal History* (Richmond, Va., 1966) p. 40, to contain "the claim of pagan Phrygian influence upon the Montanist sect"; actually, Schepelern draws exactly the opposite conclusion in this section of his work (pp. 155 f.): "That it [the 'Ich-form'] appears to have occurred especially frequently in the Montanist crisis cannot be used as a basis for conjecturing the dependence of the New Prophecy on the Phrygian cult" (my translation).

<sup>84</sup> Labriolle, *Crise*, p. 558; cf. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine*, p. 142, who agrees that the

In spite of the fact that ecstasy itself was not condemned, it is clear that it was the source of much misunderstanding about Montanism. The assertion of Cyril of Jerusalem that Montanus "had the audacity to say that he himself was the Holy Spirit" is probably an example of just such a misinterpretation.<sup>85</sup> Apparently the first-person rhetoric was taken literally, an error of judgment which suggests that in some areas ecstatic prophecy was virtually unknown. For these areas, von Campenhausen is correct in concluding that "the increasing hellenization of the Church, with its emphasis on the spirituality and rationality of the faith, restricts understanding of the very different nature of earlier 'prophecy.'"<sup>86</sup> If ecstasy was unknown in some areas, then prophecy too was of course unknown in those areas; for "nonecstatic" prophecy would have been a contradiction in terms. Hence, in a reply to Harnack's contention that after Montanism prophecy was nonecstatic, Labriolle properly asserts: "Speaking more truthfully, they no longer prophesied at all! In any case, it would be inaccurate to maintain that ecstasy was considered as necessarily suspect."<sup>87</sup>

Ecstasy, then, though it had perhaps faded from view in some Christian communities, was never seen as the heretical feature of Montanism, in spite of the common image of the movement which persists even in the works of respected scholars.<sup>88</sup> Instead, the objectionable element was clearly the appearance of psychosis and irrationality in the ecstatic prophet.

It is equally clear throughout extant anti-Montanist polemics that the propriety of the charisma of prophecy is widely affirmed. Indeed, the orthodox spokesmen reveal some embarrassment that the charisma has become less active among them. Epiphanius, for example, is suspiciously quick to claim, in a late-fourth-century anti-Montanist polemic, "But the gift [of prophecy] is not inoperative in the holy Church, far from it!"<sup>89</sup> In fact, the anti-Montanists appear to give ground to their opponents on the whole question of the propriety of the Pauline charismata,

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explicit criticisms of Montanism revolve around the issue of rationality, but holds that the underlying orthodox motive was a desire to reject the apocalyptic eschatology of Montanism.

<sup>85</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses* 16, 8, tr. Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson, *The Works of St. Cyril of Jerusalem* 2 (Washington, D.C., 1970) 79; the conclusion is Jaroslav Pelikan's (*Finality*, p. 40); for evidence contra cf. the Montanist (?) burial inscription at Numedia in Labriolle, *Crise*, p. 472.

<sup>86</sup> Von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority*, p. 191.

<sup>87</sup> Labriolle, *Crise*, p. 555 (my translation).

<sup>88</sup> E.g., Pelikan, *Emergence*, p. 108: "In the experience of monks and friars, of mystics and seers, as well as in the underground religion of many believers, the Montanist heresy has carried on a sort of unofficial existence."

<sup>89</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 48, 1 (Labriolle, *Sources*, p. 116, ll. 12 f.; my translation).

for Epiphanius admits: "The holy Church of God recognizes the charismata in a similar way (*homoiōs*) [as the Montanists], but ours are real charismata, tested by the Holy Spirit in the holy Church of God from the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord himself."<sup>90</sup>

The Church's acceptance of Montanism's theological basis, i.e., the necessary continuation of the charismata, eventually provided her with a powerful weapon against the movement. Apparently Montanism began to lose its prophetic fervor in its second generation. The Montanist prophetess Maximilla had uttered the eschatological oracle "After me there will be no prophecy, but the End,"<sup>91</sup> and after her death the statement must have been viewed as implying a cessation of the prophetic gift. Epiphanius denied the validity of Maximilla's oracle on the ground that it was "not consistent with the prophecies approved by the holy apostles in the holy Church."<sup>92</sup> The Anti-Montanist in Eusebius more explicitly bases the orthodox doctrinal attack in Pauline theology:

For if, as they claim... Montanus and his female disciples succeeded to the prophetic gift, let them tell us which of their number succeeded the followers of Montanus and the women. For the prophetic gift (*to prophētikon charisma*) must continue in the whole Church until the final coming (*mechri tēs teleias parousias*), as the Apostle insists. But they point to no one, though this is the fourteenth year since Maximilla's death.<sup>93</sup>

This text alone is ground for questioning Harnack's thesis that the Church responded to Montanism with a dispensational theology of canon; for prophecy is plainly not limited to a bygone era, even though canonical theology is affirmed. In the tract's preface the author explains that he is hesitant to write down his opinions because "some people might think I was adding another paragraph or clause to the wording of the New Covenant of the Gospel, to which nothing can be added, from which nothing can be taken away..."<sup>94</sup> Could the author have embraced the principle of canon more firmly? Yet he also asserts that prophecy must continue in the whole Church until the Parousia, a definite reference to the *teleion* of 1 Cor 13. In short, both the Anti-Montanist and Epiphanius firmly deny the dispensationalism which, according to Harnack, simultaneously produced the canon and drove the Montanists out of the Church. Is it not significant that in the two most complete examples of extant anti-Montanist polemic, we find no hint of a dispensational argument, but rather see exactly the opposite

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* (p. 115, ll. 21-26; my translation).

<sup>91</sup> Grant, *Second Century Christianity*, p. 95.

<sup>92</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 48, 2 (pp. 116 f.; my translation).

<sup>93</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5, 17 (p. 222).

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* 5, 16 (pp. 217 f.).

concept explicitly affirmed? How revealing that Harnack views a fixed canon and ecstatic prophecy as antithetical ideas, while Epiphanius and the Anti-Montanist openly embrace them both with no indication of difficulty!

The general acceptance of the propriety of the Pauline charismata, an acceptance which these sources demonstrate, apparently made possible the near acceptance of Montanism at Rome. Tertullian reports that the Roman bishop (Victor?) had admitted the Montanist churches into full communion. But Praxeas, "by importunately urging false accusations against the prophets themselves and their churches, and insisting on the authority of the bishop's predecessors in the see, compelled him to recall the pacific letter which he had issued, as well as to desist from his purpose of acknowledging the said gifts."<sup>95</sup> Tertullian also demonstrates that the Montanists fully exploited the Pauline theology of charismata. In *Against Marcion* he lists the charismata of 1 Cor 12 and challenges Marcion to show that any of them exist in Marcionite churches, claiming that they are "forthcoming from my side without any difficulty."<sup>96</sup>

An eschatological interpretation of the Pauline *teleion* of 1 Cor 13 was the scriptural basis for this whole discussion and, as the Anti-Montanist has shown, was assumed by some orthodox spokesmen. A number of patristic sources demonstrate the representativeness of the Anti-Montanist on this point. Irenaeus implicitly connects the Pauline *teleion* with the eschaton, admitting that "we, *while upon the earth*, as Paul also declares, know in part and prophesy in part."<sup>97</sup> He also maintains that the Gnostics, who foolishly believed that the *teleion* had already come, simply did not understand the eschatological implications of the text: "But if any lover of strife contradict what I have said, and also what the apostle affirms, that 'we know in part and prophesy in part,' and imagine that he has acquired not a partial but a universal knowledge of all that exists, . . . let him . . . tell us . . . the number of hairs on his own head."<sup>98</sup> Origen likewise sees the *teleion* as the eschaton:

And therefore we hope, after the troubles and struggles which we suffer here, to reach the highest heavens. . . . And as many of us as praise him [there] . . . shall be ever engaged in the contemplation of the invisible things of God, . . . seeing, as it was expressed by the true disciple of Jesus in these words, "then face to face"; and in these, "when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part will be done away."<sup>99</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 1 (ANF 3, 597).

<sup>96</sup> Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5, 8 (ANF 3, 446 f.).

<sup>97</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2, 28, 7 (ANF 1, 401; my italics); cf. the same eschatological view of *teleion*, *ibid.* 4, 9, 2.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* 2, 28, 9 (ANF 1, 402).

<sup>99</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus* 6, 20 (ANF 4, 582).

Origen's otherwise antagonist Methodius of Olympus agrees: "For now we know 'in part,' and as it were 'through a glass,' since that which is perfect has not yet come to us, namely, the kingdom of heaven and the resurrection, when 'that which is in part will be done away.'" <sup>100</sup> Archelaus also maintained that "the perfect" referred to the eschaton. <sup>101</sup>

An extant fourth-century dialogue between a Montanist and an orthodox Christian shows the importance of the Pauline *teleion* to the orthodox reaction to Montanism. The orthodox spokesman expounds a lengthy discussion of the eschatological nature of *to teleion*, <sup>102</sup> arguing against the Montanist position that Montanus and the New Prophecy were the *teleion*. <sup>103</sup> He denies the Montanist charge that the orthodox recognized no prophets after Christ. Quoting Paul's list of charismata, he states: "We agree (*homologoumen*) that after Christ prophets were appointed and that the apostles themselves had the gift of prophecy." <sup>104</sup> The only objection to the propriety of ecstatic prophecy within Montanism is that women had exercised the gift: "We do not reject women prophets. . . but we do not permit them to speak in the Church, nor to have authority over men. . . ." <sup>105</sup>

It is easy to see, then, why the orthodox gave ground to the Montanists on the question of the propriety of ecstatic prophecy in the Church. The widely-known Pauline text had stated that the charisma of prophecy would endure until the coming of the *teleion*. The *teleion* was rightly interpreted by patristic authors as an eschatological term. Thus the authority of Scripture itself prevented any a priori dismissal of ecstatic prophecy. Moreover, as prophecy began to wane within Montanism, the Pauline text was put to use against the very movement that had formerly invoked it. The orthodox pointed to the dearth of contemporary prophets within Montanist churches as evidence of their apostasy, claiming that "the prophetic gift *must continue* in the whole Church until the final coming, as the apostle insists." <sup>106</sup>

Here we have the orthodox asserting the very opposite of what Harnack claims. They are using the authority of canonical Scripture to support the existence of ecstatic prophecy, not to discredit it. They assert their verdict with such firmness that it would indeed be remarkable if subsequent generations were able to repeal it. In fact, there is no evidence that they did. Not a single example of anti-Montanist polemic

<sup>100</sup> Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 9, 2 (ANF 6, 345).

<sup>101</sup> Archelaus, *The Disputation with Manes* 36 f. (ANF 6, 210).

<sup>102</sup> Labriolle, *Sources*, pp. 93-96, esp. p. 94, ll. 15-26.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93, ll. 11-18.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97, ll. 3-6 (my translation).

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105, ll. 23 f.; p. 106, ll. 2 ff. (my translation). Irenaeus notes that Paul had allowed women prophets (1 Cor 11:4 f.); cf. *Against Heresies* 3, 11, 9 (ANF 1, 429).

<sup>106</sup> The Anti-Montanist in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5, 17 (p. 222; my italics).



contained in Labriolle's exhaustive collection includes a dispensational argument. The Church simply did not respond to Montanism by limiting the charisma of prophecy to a bygone apostolic age.

That ecstatic prophecy and canon were not perceived as antithetical concepts is evident in the fact that Montanists accepted the emerging canon and readily participated in its development.<sup>107</sup> Epiphanius testifies that the Cataphrygians accepted "all Scripture," both Old and New Testaments.<sup>108</sup> The Montanist Tertullian was himself a champion of the emerging concept of canon. He warns: "If it is nowhere written, then let us fear the woe which impends on all who add to or take away from the written word."<sup>109</sup> Kelly sees in Tertullian an ominous indication that Montanist revelations were "regarded as supplementing 'the ancient scriptures.'"<sup>110</sup> It must be conceded that the Montanists did circulate books containing their prophecies.<sup>111</sup> However, there is no evidence that they were elevated to canonical status. "In fact the practice of circulating works of spiritual exhortation and narrative, and of holding them in high esteem, signified no new departure, but corresponded to normal custom everywhere."<sup>112</sup> Kelly's conclusion ignores the canonical implications both of the Montanist Tertullian's exegetical maxim "what Scripture does not note, it denies,"<sup>113</sup> and his direct affirmation "Nothing of novelty is the Paraclete introducing."<sup>114</sup> Von Campenhausen's verdict is thus superior to Kelly's: Tertullian's Montanism "makes no difference to his basic attitude toward and opinion of the biblical canon."<sup>115</sup>

#### THE EVIDENCE FOR DISPENSATIONALISM

Given, then, the conclusion that canon and ecstatic prophecy were not viewed as antithetical concepts by either orthodox or Montanist participants in the Montanist controversy, what can be said about the evidence which Harnack and others use to assert the contrary thesis? Here we come into contact with the group of sources which seems to limit prophecy to a past era. This group is well typified by the previously quoted phrase from the Muratorian Fragment, "the prophets, whose number is complete." The most significant of such sources are Hip-

<sup>107</sup> See von Campenhausen, *Formation*, p. 222.

<sup>108</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 48, 1 (Labriolle, *Sources*, p. 115); cf. *ibid.* 49, 2 (p. 140, ll. 10 f.).

<sup>109</sup> Tertullian, *Against Hermogenes* 22, 5 (*ANF* 3, 490).

<sup>110</sup> Kelly, p. 59, based on the citation (n. 1) of Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 63 (*ANF* 3, 594).

<sup>111</sup> Hippolytus, *Phil.* 8:19 (*Legge* 2, 113 f.).

<sup>112</sup> Von Campenhausen, *Formation*, pp. 229 f.

<sup>113</sup> Tertullian, *On Monogamy* 4 (*ANF* 4, 62).

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* 3 (*ANF* 4, 61).

<sup>115</sup> Von Campenhausen, *Formation*, p. 227.

polytus and Origen, both of whom speak of "the prophets" exclusively in the past tense. Before we consider these two figures, however, it is important to notice the literary tradition from which the term "the prophets" is derived, namely, Christian Scripture and other patristic authors.

The New Testament, with surprising uniformity, speaks of "the prophets" as the predictors of the Messiah whose writings are contained in Jewish Scripture, a definition illustrated in the words of the Matthean Jesus at his arrest: "But all this has taken place that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled."<sup>116</sup> Acts makes the definition more specific by telling us that "all the prophets who have spoken" foretold the Christ.<sup>117</sup> The Epistle to the Hebrews further identifies "the prophets" with Judaism in comparing the inferior revelation "to our fathers by the prophets" with the superior revelation "in these last days... by a Son."<sup>118</sup> There are eighty-eight references to the plural word "prophets" in the New Testament, of which fifty-nine contain the definite article without another modifier. With only one conceivable exception,<sup>119</sup> *hoi prophētai* always refers to the prophets whose prophecies are recorded in Jewish Scripture. They are unquestionably a closed group confined historically to pre-Christian times. It is of these prophets that the Gospel of Luke speaks in declaring that "the law and the prophets were until John."<sup>120</sup> The parallel passage in Matthew underlines the element of finality: "for all the prophets and the law prophesied until John."<sup>121</sup> Speaking of "the prophets" exclusively in the past tense is therefore as much a characteristic of Christian Scripture as of later sources. In the other twenty-nine references to "prophets," references in which either no definite article is used or the article is used with an additional modifying adjective, the word has a less consistent definition, referring sometimes to contemporary Christian prophets and sometimes to the literary prophets of the Old Testament.

The exclusively Jewish definition of the phrase "the prophets" occurs with remarkable consistency throughout patristic literature, including Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Justin, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Origen.<sup>122</sup> Finally, the phrase "the prophets" is so closely connected with Jewish Scripture that "the two Testaments are referred to simply as 'the Prophets' and 'the Apostles.'"<sup>123</sup> It is thus within a long-standing tradition that the Muratorian Fragment speaks of "the prophets" as a

<sup>116</sup> Mt 25:56.

<sup>119</sup> Ap 22:9.

<sup>117</sup> Acts 3:17-24.

<sup>120</sup> Lk 16:16.

<sup>118</sup> Heb 1:1-2.

<sup>121</sup> Mt 11:13; cf. Lk 11:50-51.

<sup>122</sup> For a convincing series of citations, see von Campenhausen, *Formation*, pp. 257 f., n. 257.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330.

completed number of canonical authors, in the same way that the Nicene definition uses the past tense in the phrase "who spoke by the prophets," and in the same way that the New Testament states "The law and the prophets were until John." The plural phrase "the prophets" holds the status of a proper noun throughout the New Testament and patristic literature. It refers to the literary prophets of the Old Testament (sometimes broadened to include the Apostle John) or to the Old Testament in general, not to Christians who possessed the charisma of prophecy. In this larger context, it is difficult to see the Muratorian Fragment as implying anything more about the cessation of the Christian charisma of prophecy than the Gospel of Luke implies in claiming "The law and the prophets were until John." Instead, the Muratorian Fragment merely states that the Old Testament canon is now firmly closed.

It is more difficult to make the same case about Hippolytus, a presbyter in Rome in the early third century. He is clearly a strong proponent of canon, for he claims: "There is, brethren, one God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures, and from no other source."<sup>124</sup> Such a statement can indeed be interpreted as a denial of the charisma of prophecy. Moreover, the Roman presbyter could have Montanism in mind when he comments on the disillusionment of false apocalyptic hopes: "This is what happens to uninstructed and thoughtless people who do not keep carefully to the Scriptures, but pay more heed to human traditions, to their own fancies, dreams, inventions, and old wives' tales than to them."<sup>125</sup> It also could be that he appeals to a dispensational theology of canon when he states that the Montanists "imagine that they learn more through [their own books] than from the Law, the Prophets, and the Gospels."<sup>126</sup>

Yet there are contrary indications. Hippolytus never explicitly denies a priori the propriety of claiming a divine charisma. Instead, he objects that the Montanists "glorify these wenches [Priscilla and Maximilla] above Apostles and every charisma,"<sup>127</sup> implying, perhaps, that the charismata do have a proper role in the Church. Surely it is inconceivable that the learned Roman presbyter was unaware of the theological implications of the word "charisma," or of the fact that prophecy as

<sup>124</sup> Hippolytus, *Against the Heresy of One Noetus* 9 (ANF 5, 227).

<sup>125</sup> Hippolytus, *Commentaire sur Daniel* 4, 21, 1 (ed. and tr. Maurice Lefevre [Paris, 1947] p. 301); Lefevre denies that the text refers to Montanism (*ibid.*); contra, Labriolle, *Crise*, pp. 146 ff.

<sup>126</sup> Hippolytus, *Phil.* 8:19 (Legge 2, 114).

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*; it is therefore difficult to see how von Campenhausen, in *Formation*, p. 235, n. 134, after citing Hippolytus, can speak of "the disappearance of the loan word 'charisma.'" Epiphanius, in *Panarion*, also uses the word, and repeatedly.

*charisma* was the theological cornerstone of Montanism. Hence his willingness to use such a loaded word as *charisma*, especially within a passage refuting Montanism, may be significant. Hippolytus also claims that before the return of Christ the two prophets of the Apocalypse of John will appear on the earth. They will be none other than Enoch and Elias redivivus, returning with "signs and wonders" to prophesy the imminent eschaton.<sup>128</sup> Expecting such events, Hippolytus could hardly confine the *charisma* of prophecy to the apostolic era alone.

Our difficulties with Hippolytus are compounded by the fact that many Protestant historians continue to see him as the father of canonical dispensationalism. The most distinguished among this group is Jaroslav Pelikan, who states:

There was another way to meet the doctrinal implications of the Montanist challenge, and in the long run that was the way orthodoxy took. The first articulate spokesman of this viewpoint of whom there is record was Hippolytus of Rome. . . [for whom prophecy] had ended with the apostle John, whose Apocalypse Hippolytus maintained was the last valid prophecy to have come from the Holy Spirit. And though John was entitled to claim the inspiration of the Spirit for his prophetic work, later so-called prophets had no such right.<sup>129</sup>

The work which Pelikan cites as evidence for these conclusions is Hippolytus' *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, a work which the author of this article has read repeatedly with a view toward substantiating Pelikan's claims. Here is the most relevant part of the passage which Pelikan cites: "For you [prophets] saw these things yourselves first, and then you proclaimed them to all generations. You ministered the oracles of God to all generations. You prophets were called that you might be able to save all."<sup>130</sup> This text states that the prophets mentioned in the work, who include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and the Apostle John, spoke not only to their contemporaries but to "all generations." It is thus a strong affirmation of their canonical status. The fact that it speaks of the prophets in the past tense is significant in the same way that the Muratorian Fragment claims that the number of the prophets is complete. In other words, the canonical prophets are a historically limited group because the canon is closed.

Hippolytus' frequent implications that "the prophets" belong to a past era are simply affirmations that there exist no more canonical authors. His statements which confine the knowledge of God to the revelation in Scripture are claims made in the heat of polemic battles, claims which submit doctrinal debate to the absolute priority of Christian Scripture.

<sup>128</sup> Hippolytus, *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist* 43-47 (ANF 5, 213).

<sup>129</sup> Pelikan, *Emergence*, p. 106.

<sup>130</sup> Hippolytus, *Antichrist* 31 (ANF 5, 210).

Such statements say nothing about the charisma of prophecy unless one assumes, as Pelikan apparently does, that canon and charisma are necessarily antithetical concepts, an assumption which, as we have seen, is contradicted even by extant anti-Montanist sources.

We can readily grant that such an assumption might appear more plausible to a twentieth-century Protestant than to a third-century Roman presbyter, but there is still no basis for Pelikan to claim that Hippolytus "maintained" that John's Apocalypse "was the last valid prophecy to have come from the Holy Spirit." Nowhere in the *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist* does Hippolytus set forth any statement remotely approaching such an explicit claim.<sup>131</sup>

Only in Origen do we find explicit statements necessarily limiting prophets to a past era. For Origen, however, that era is not the age of the apostles, as Harnack would claim, but pre-Christian times. He states: "since the coming of Christ, no prophets have arisen among the Jews, who have confessedly been abandoned by the Holy Spirit on account of their impiety towards God, and towards Him of whom their prophets spoke."<sup>132</sup> For Origen, the beheading of John the Baptist marked the end of the "fitting season of the law and the prophets," after which God gave the Jews a "bill of divorcement" signified by the destruction of Jerusalem and the fact that "there is no more a prophet."<sup>133</sup> It is in this sense that "the grace of prophecy was taken away from the people."<sup>134</sup>

Thus Origen too writes in the tradition of those sources which take as their basis the scriptural affirmation that "the law and the prophets were until John." Justin had indeed said as much, claiming that the prophetic gifts among Jews had ended, but he went further, stating that they were then transferred to the Christians.<sup>135</sup> In Origen, however, no transfer takes place. When the Jews fell from favor, the prophets ended. Origen can therefore quote the words of Celsus' Christian prophet and dismiss them immediately because he knows that "no prophets bearing any resemblance to the ancient prophets have appeared in the time of Celsus."<sup>136</sup> He dismisses Montanism in the same way. Commenting on the statement of Jesus that "no prophet should perish outside Jerusa-

<sup>131</sup> The text closest resembling Pelikan's conclusion is perhaps the statement in *Antichrist* 31 (ANF 5, 210), "You [prophets] died with Christ; and you will live with Christ." Such words, even if their ambiguity could be removed, are still a great distance from Pelikan's claims.

<sup>132</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus* 7, 8 (ANF 4, 614).

<sup>133</sup> Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 11, 1 (ANF 9, 431); 14, 19 (pp. 507 f.); cf. *ibid.* 11, 11 (p. 440).

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* 10, 22 (p. 429).

<sup>135</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 82 (ANF 1, 240).

<sup>136</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus* 7, 11 (ANF 4, 615).

lem,"<sup>137</sup> he concludes that no prophets could possibly exist after the city's destruction without contradicting Jesus' word, thus ruling out the Montanists as "falsos Phrygiae prophetas."<sup>138</sup> For Origen, then, Montanist prophets were heretical simply because prophets did not properly belong to the Christian era. They were, instead, a Jewish phenomenon.

In spite of the fact that there are no Christian prophets in Origen, there exists something not unlike the charisma of prophecy: "And there are still preserved among Christians traces of that Holy Spirit which appeared in the form of a dove. They expel evil spirits, and perform many cures, and foresee certain events (*hōrosi tina peri mellontōn*), according to the will of the Logos."<sup>139</sup> This "foreseeing" is not called prophecy, to be sure. And the word "traces" does imply some kind of decline. But Harnack's verdict that Origen "looks back to a period after which the Spirit's gifts in the Church ceased"<sup>140</sup> represents an exaggeration of Origen's position. Clearly, the phenomena described would have been called *charismata* in other sources, and the word "traces" implies lingering, not cessation. Harnack cannot use Origen to demonstrate his thesis that the decline of prophecy is linked with the rise of canon, because Origen fails to recognize the ecstatic prophet as ever having been integral to Christian communities. In Origen, the ecstatic prophet cannot make the exit from the Church which Harnack claims, because he was never there to begin with.

#### CONCLUSION

We must, then, grant the fact that extant sources do often speak of "the prophets" as relics of a past era. In the case of the Muratorian Fragment "the prophets" are synonymous with Old Testament Scripture. In Hippolytus the group is occasionally enlarged to include other canonical authors. In Origen "the prophets" are confined to Judaism. Together these texts stand in a long tradition of patristic literature which has linguistic roots in the New Testament. Throughout this literature the plural term with the article, "the prophets," is a proper noun always referring to the literary prophets whose oracles are written in Scripture. In none of these cases does the term include the Christian ecstatic prophet. Therefore these sources do not signal the necessary demise of the charisma of prophecy. They are statements about a closing canon, but Harnack's dispensational thesis is neither explicitly expressed nor necessarily implied in them.

Other sources clearly and explicitly show that Christian leaders

<sup>137</sup> Lk 13:33.

<sup>138</sup> Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 28 (Labriolle, *Sources*, p. 54).

<sup>139</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus* 1, 46 (ANF 4, 415); cf. also *ibid.* 1, 2 (pp. 397 f.), 7, 8 (p. 614).

<sup>140</sup> Harnack, *History of Dogma* 2, 107 f., n. 4.

continued to affirm the propriety of ecstatic prophecy throughout the conflict with Montanism, and that eventually the necessary permanence of the charisma of prophecy was asserted against a waning Montanism whose original prophets had died.

Several conclusions, therefore, suggest themselves. Neither Montanist nor "orthodox" prophets were driven out of the Church by an assertion that an "epoch of revelation" (Harnack's term) had closed, in spite of the logical appeal of such a theory to the minds of Protestant historians. It indeed would have been both historically significant and convenient for historians had such a statement ever been made. But the facts are that such a statement was never made and that the matter is unfortunately not that simple. The theological basis for Christian prophecy, the Pauline charismata, continued to be espoused by orthodoxy despite so serious a threat as the Montanist enthusiasm. Labriolle is correct in concluding that "they continued to proclaim theoretically the permanence of prophecy,"<sup>141</sup> even though its actual role in the Church practically disappears in the third century and beyond.

If ecstatic prophecy was never ruled out theologically, then we must look elsewhere to find explanations for its decline. Schepelern points in the right direction when he notes that by the time Montanism appeared, there had *already* occurred "the decisive phase in the development of ecclesiastical organization and ecclesiastical office"<sup>142</sup> which made the official acceptance of the movement impossible. Labriolle argues along similar lines.<sup>143</sup> The evidence suggests that the ecstatic prophecy of Montanism was rejected because of developments more sociological than theological. The Church was undergoing the profound changes of becoming an establishment. The pressures of institutional success demanded an authority structure dominated by responsible establishmentarians, not erratic ecstasies. The bishops and prophets, manifesting a type of conflict which has analogues in every century of Church history, found that they did not share common goals for the Church. The prophet, whose authority lay in the spontaneous inspiration of ecstasy and whose apocalyptic and ascetic demands might have tended to thin the ranks of the faithful, became a major threat to establishmentarians, whose spokesmen were the emerging monarchical bishops. Through them the Church subordinated the creative but troublesome elements of spontaneity and ecstasy to the monolithic vision of stability, uniformity, and human responsibility.<sup>144</sup> Tertullian's account of the Roman

<sup>141</sup> Labriolle, *Crise*, p. 562 (my translation).

<sup>142</sup> Schepelern, p. 162 (my translation).

<sup>143</sup> Labriolle, *Crise*, p. 568.

<sup>144</sup> This thesis accounts for the rural character of Montanism, since bishops were strongest in the more urban areas; cf. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine*, p. 141; W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (London, 1965) p. 219.

bishop's condemnation of Montanism is thus significant and revealing, for the prelate was convinced to take action by a consideration of "the authority of the bishop's predecessors in the see."<sup>145</sup>

This whole process was not accomplished, as Harnack and his friends would have us believe, by a theological coup in which the earlier religion of the Spirit was explicitly repudiated and limited to a distant golden age. The bishops were wiser and more subtle than that; for their authority lay in their continuity with the primitive Church and its apostles, and they therefore were not free to make the radical break with the past that Harnack sees. Instead of declaring theological war on ecstatic prophecy, they simply captured it and used it for their own ends, a process which was at the same time less traumatic and far more effective. The charisma of prophecy, then, became the special province of the bishop, and the relics of the dying gift were to remain ever beneath the episcopal mitre.

Ignatius, as we have seen, gives the clearest early indication of this trend. A century and a half later, Cyprian, the respected bishop of Carthage, represents its culmination. Cyprian unquestionably venerates ecstasy, and himself has revelations through visions which he records in the form of oracles, ordering them circulated for all to read.<sup>146</sup> In short, he is able to do virtually everything that the Montanists do.<sup>147</sup> Yet because he is a bishop, and because, like Ignatius, he has claimed that "if any one be not with the bishop. . . he is not in the Church,"<sup>148</sup> he is able to condemn the Montanists without even blinking. He condemns them not for prophesying but because "they have separated themselves from the Church of God. . . where the elders preside."<sup>149</sup> In Cyprian, office and charisma are thus combined.<sup>150</sup> We see in the pastorals, the *Didache*, Ignatius, Polycarp, Melito, and finally Cyprian a relatively clear trend: the office of bishop at the same time defended the propriety of ecstatic prophecy, used the charisma for its own ends, and rendered it powerless in the hands of others.

It is thus impossible for Harnack's theory to do justice to the data. The

<sup>145</sup> Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 1 (ANF 3, 597).

<sup>146</sup> Cyprian, *Epistle* 9, 4 (ANF 5, 290), *Epistle* 7, 4-7 (p. 287), *Epistle* 68, 9 f. (p. 375); cf. a false ecstasy in *Epistle* 74, 10 f. (p. 393). Von Campenhausen is thus not quite correct in claiming that "Enthusiastic promptings, raptures, and visions are in general forced out on to the periphery of the Church and into heresy. . ." (*Ecclesiastical Authority*, p. 191). The Church did not expel them; it captured them. They became less common but were never regarded as necessarily heretical.

<sup>147</sup> Hence Bauer's appropriate observation about Montanist fasting can be accurately enlarged to apply to many criticized features of the movement: "something is condemned with language that can scarcely be surpassed and is exhibited in ugly caricature, although when it takes place in the context of orthodoxy, it is worthy of the highest praise" (p. 137).

<sup>148</sup> Cyprian, *Epistle* 68, 8 (ANF 5, 374 f.). <sup>149</sup> Cyprian, *Epistle* 74, 7 (ANF 5, 392).

<sup>150</sup> Cf. G. S. M. Walker, *The Churchmanship of St. Cyprian* (Richmond, Va., 1968).



fact that he and his followers can find dispensational theology in the texts suggests that they are working from a theological model which is foreign to the ancient sources. It is a model which distorts both elements in the thesis—Montanism and canon. It distorts Montanism in exaggerating its excesses while ignoring its significant points of doctrinal continuity with orthodoxy.<sup>151</sup> It distorts canonical theology by viewing it as an assertion of radical disjunction between the apostolic age and subsequent Christian history.<sup>152</sup> The Harnackians take the clear fact that Scripture came to be viewed as a doctrinal norm<sup>153</sup> and, using Protestant logical categories which are never expressed in patristic sources, reach the reasonable but false verdict that Tertullian, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus limited all revelation to the era of the original apostles. Such a conclusion utterly divorces the theology of the canon from the motives of its framers, who were concerned more than anything else to assert their continuity with earliest Christianity.

The Harnackian view reflects an unconscious attempt to resolve historically what has always been a central problem in Protestant theology, namely, the issue of Scripture versus Spirit. The dispensational interpretation has had strong appeal to reasonable Protestants who were threatened by mystics or ecstasies. Richard Baxter argued it against George Fox, Conyers Middleton against John Wesley, Alexander Campbell against frontier revivalists, B. B. Warfield against faith healers, and modern fundamentalists argue it against Pentecostals. The bearers of this polemic tradition are understandably prevented from seeing in the sources a verdict which could destroy their own theology.<sup>154</sup>

The truth is that the early Church did not resolve the tension between Scripture and Spirit by asserting dispensationalism but by asserting episcopacy. The charisma of prophecy was not consciously driven out of

<sup>151</sup> Cf. von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority*, p. 188: "for the Montanists were not heretics. Hippolytus, and even Epiphanius, state frankly that on questions of dogma they were in entire agreement with the Catholic Church. It is only later controversialists who at a more advanced stage try hard to stigmatise the 'Kataphrygians' as also trinitarian heretics."

<sup>152</sup> A good example is K. Aland, "The Problem of Anonymity and Pseudonymity in Christian Literature of the First Two Centuries," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 12 (1961) 49: "The apostolic age was a closed epoch of the distant past fundamentally different from the present"; cf. Pelikan, *Emergence*, pp. 107 f.

<sup>153</sup> For a summary of patristic evidence on this point, see Kelly, pp. 29–51.

<sup>154</sup> The absolute cessation of revelation is crucial to this tradition as a safeguard against the theological claims of Roman Catholicism. A very revealing statement from a spokesman for this viewpoint is that of A. Cleveland Coxe, in the *ANF* introduction to Tertullian (3, 4 f.): "Since the late council of the Vatican [i.e. Vatican I], essential Montanism has become organized in the Latin Churches: for what are the new revelations and oracles of the pontiff but the deliria of another claimant to the voice and inspiration of the Paraclete?"

the Church as an inappropriate relic of a past golden age. Instead, the charisma of prophecy was captured by the monarchical episcopate, used in its defense, and left to die an unnoticed death when true episcopal stability rendered it a superfluous tool. But the traces of the charisma remained; for the authority of episcopacy lay in its continuity with earliest Christianity, established not only by its faithful adherence to the apostolic norm of Christian Scripture, but also by the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit in the bishop himself. The charisma was no longer called prophecy, but it functioned in the same way; for Cyprian urged all to "have respect for Christ, who by his decree and word, *and by his presence*, both rules prelates themselves, and rules the Church by prelates."<sup>165</sup> It was thus not separation from the apostolic age but continuity with it through both Scripture and Spirit which became the hallmark of the catholic Church.

<sup>165</sup> Cyprian, *Epistle 68*, 9 (*ANF* 5, 375; my italics).