

## *Piers Plowman*, Numerical Composition, and the Prophecies

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### I. Gematria and Alliteration in *Piers Plowman*

It is difficult to say just how much the science of sacred numbers permeated medieval literary-religious works, but there is evidence that the Greco-Hebrew understanding permeated not only into the universities, where it was taught in conjunction with scriptural exegesis, but into more “popular” literature as well. There are for instance several extant manuscripts containing the following lyric:

In 8 is alle my love  
And 9 be isette before,  
So 8 be inclosed above  
Thane 3 is good therefore.<sup>1</sup>

} IHC

[IHC: Greek abbreviation for Ihesous; H=8, I=9, and C=3]

This makes virtually no sense as poetry, but as gematria-composition it clearly indicates the penetration of Greco-Hebrew number-to-letter transposition into the Christian middle ages, for all of the numbers in the lyric directly transpose to letters, forming the Greek JHESUS—the name of Christ was spelled similarly in *Piers Plowman*. What is more, a variant version of the lyric [Balliol College, Oxford, ms. 354] spells out the name in full, the lyric being:

8 is my trew love;  
do before 9;  
put therto 5;  
so well it wil beseme;  
18 twyse told,  
20 betwen.<sup>2</sup>

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And if we do not grasp the riddle right off, the author includes the helpful gloss: "this goth by the letters of the abse as the letters stonde in nombre."<sup>3</sup> At the very least, these lyrics indicate that gematria transposition in poetry existed in medieval Christian culture. That number-symbolism played a central role in poetic composition has been discussed in numerous studies, particularly of *Pearl*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Beowulf* and Wolfram's *Parzival*.<sup>4</sup> But there have been no extensive studies of *Piers Plowman* in this respect, probably because Langland's alliterative encoding and his obscure prophecies are so esoteric that they are skipped by the undiscerning reader, and missed entirely by those who read modern translations, which cannot always carry into the present tongue either the constellations of letters that mark the gematria meanings, or the precise nature of the prophecies.<sup>5</sup> What follows is but a preliminary investigation of the number and letter symbolism in the poem, and of the prophecies with which that symbolism is intertwined.

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There are, as is well known, three major versions of *Piers Plowman* in extant manuscripts: the A version, the B version, and the C version, so named because they correspond to the reconstructed order of composition, the rather limited A recension containing only the prologue and twelve passus, just over 2500 lines, being unfinished; the B version containing the most elaborate symbolic images, as well as the prophecies, in twenty passus; and the C version having much of that obscurity removed, replaced by more prosaic or discursive text, in twenty-two passus.

It is something of a commonplace to say that the A version is the most preliminary of the three texts, containing all the aspects of the moral religious life necessary to salvation, but little beyond that, that the C text contains both a moral and a cosmological understanding with its attenuated prophecies and extended discursive text, and that the B text contains the most complex allusions, all the "riddling texts" and the prophecies, as well as the most complete references to the Apocalypse. All this then is generally understood; I should only continue the classification by noting that the A version corresponds

to the most exoteric, the C version to the more esoteric, and the B version to the most esoteric of religious truths, following the schemata of Frithjof Schuon.<sup>6</sup> This understanding of *Piers Plowman* has two aspects: first, it underscores the religious nature of the poem—for as we shall see, the interwoven net of consonant clusters and prophecies underscores the poem's inseparability from its religious or cosmological meanings—and second, it explains the importance of focussing upon the B text which, as the most esoteric, contains all the essential elements of the others, as well as a cosmological understanding which is only latent within the A and C versions. The analysis which follows is thus based upon the B text, and upon its cosmological implications.<sup>7</sup>

Even the most casual of readers in *Piers Plowman* will note soon enough that the poem is riddled with consonant clusters, appearing in ways which were clearly orchestrated with the consonant clusters in mind, rather than with the sense of the given line. Consider the very first line of the poem: "In a somer seson, whan softe was the sonne." Now clearly "somer" is a "seson"; the word is included for its assonance, not for its sense. And this pattern reappears throughout the poem. The question is: are such patterns merely for alliterative rhythm, or do they have significance in the poem? While certainly there is some truth in both, I should like to argue that the alliteration in *Piers Plowman* is designed to carry esoteric implications for the poem as a whole.

Given the medieval poems to which we referred earlier—in which the lettering of the abse "goth" by numbers—as well as the penetration of gematria into the Christian West in the late middle ages,<sup>8</sup> and the "tectonic" studies of other medieval works, one naturally wonders whether so prominent a feature of *Piers Plowman* might not have some esoteric significance. Indeed, the poem itself coyly hints at this in passus VII, where we find Piers being asked how he came to be "letted a litel—who lerned thee on boke?" (VII.132) Piers replies:

"Abstynence the Abbese," quod Piers, "myn a.b.c. me taughte,  
And Conscience cam afterward and kened me muche more."  
(VII.133-34)

This passage has several numerological aspects: it occurs in the seventh passus, which is a pivotal number in the Christian apocalypse

generally, and especially in this poem; it appears furthermore in the 133rd line, 10 and 100 being numbers of perfection, 33 being affiliated with Christ.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, in the word "Abbesse" we have a pun on the medieval "abse," the term for the alphabet, and the 133rd line has in it three A's, followed in the next line by three C-sounds—"And Conscience cam afterward and kened me muche moore." Each of these is linked to the Trinity, the A's as the three Ones, the three C-sounds that "cam afterward," linked to the mystery of the number nine, with which Dante was so enthralled in his *Vita Nuova*,<sup>10</sup> nine being the Trinity manifested in the "three worlds."<sup>11</sup> There are no alliterative B's because the essential mystery here is that of the Three in One, the Unicity of the Trinity.

Now line 136 has the "preest" advising Piers to be a "divinour in divinite, with *Dixit insipiens* to thi teme," to which Piers responds indignantly "Lewed lore!" "litel likestow on the Bible; / On Salamons saws selden thow biholdest—" (VII.137-38). At this point we have moved from the theme of triplicity, to that of fours and twelves: line 136 has three D's which, as the fourth letter, make twelve, leading naturally into the next line—Piers' reiterated L's, including "lewed lore!" Since L is the twelfth letter, we have here a natural transition between the "fallen" world, the world of Zodiacal symbolism, into which the twelve disciples were sent, and then, with the reiterated S's of "Salamons sawes selden thow biholdest," a suggested return to the realm of the sacred, of *spiritus sanctus*.

In this passage alone we can see how complex the meanings of alliteration can be: the symbolism of the letters is almost always possessed of several radiating meanings. The repeated D's for instance are superficially sacred: "divinour," divinite," and "*Dixit insipiens*" all refer to the Divine—but in the full context they imply also the falseness of the "preest's" advice, and an ironic reversal. With the L's here we also have a multivalent implication, the twelve mediating between the celestial and the fallen world—and the S's are linked with the Son, with the sacred, with *Spiritus Sanctus*, but also are linked with the serpentine waxing and waning patterns of the Moon, and with the Serpent.<sup>12</sup> The reference to Solomon, too, possesses a dual symbolism: Solomon is a sacred figure, but the line's implication is that the "preest" is far from truly knowing his "saws," that the

“preest” has something of the serpent about him. In brief: here the alliterative meaning underscores *Piers Plowman’s* indictment of the existing Church while simultaneously reinforcing, and drawing upon, the preexistent and sempiternal sacred, the standard by which one judges.

This kind of dual symbolism is everywhere present in the alliterative letter-number patterns, as when we find the letter F repeated in triple sets. F is of course the sixth letter, so we would naturally expect the patterns of FFF, or 666, to be affiliated with the Anti-Christ, and indeed throughout the poem we find that F is often affiliated with evil, falseness, fear, foolishness and folk. However, six itself is traditionally the *numerus perfectus*, because as St. Augustine and many others have observed,  $1+2+3=6$  (“ . . . unum enim et duo et tria sex fiunt”).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, as Bede points out, following St. Augustine, it was in six days that God created the world.<sup>14</sup> In general, the number six implies cosmological completion or perfection, and in this lies the mystery of the triple F’s, or triple sixes as well—for evil is necessary in order that the apocalypse come about, and the final return to celestial order.

Just as the six days of creation are completed by the seventh day of rest, so too Christ was crucified on the sixth day,<sup>15</sup> while the number seven is associated with Holy Spirit, as in the Christological heptad—*nativitas, baptismus, passio, resurrectio, in inferno descensio, ascensio, Spiritus sancti missio*.<sup>16</sup> Admittedly, seven has at times an “inverted” significance: in Mark 16:9, one finds reference to Mary Magdalene, out of whom Christ had cast seven devils. As Meyer and Suntrup write, “Die Sieben ist Zahl der Gesamtheit (*universitas*) und—in malam partem—Zahl der Sünde (sieben Hauptünden).”<sup>17</sup> Consequently the numbers six and seven—and the letters F and G—possess multivalent, often polarized implications.

Consider for instance the nexus of alliteration encircling line 66 in passus XX, beginning with the line “And a fals fend Antecrist over alle folke regnede.” The ensuing lines read:

And that were mylde men and holye, that no meschief dradden,  
 Defyed alle falsnesse and folk that it usede;  
 And what kyng that hem conforted, knowynge h[ir] gile,  
 They cursed, and hir conseil—were it clerk or lewed.  
 Antecrist hadde thus soone hundredes at his baner,  
 And Pride bar it bare boldely aboute,

With a lord that lyveth afer likyng of body,  
 That cam ayein Conscience, that kepere was and gyour  
 Over kynde Cristene and Cardynale Vertues. (XX.65-73)

"Fals fend," "folk," "defyed," "falseness," all reiterate the 666 pattern—but there is yet more going on here. Line 65 contains a repetition of three M's—and M, as we will shortly see, is a letter possessed of a most peculiar symbolism. Suffice it here to say that the M's in this case signal the holy men who, in the midst of the Antecrist's reign, defy that rule. Line 69—"Antecrist hadde thus soone hundredes at his baner"—with its paired H's, the value of which together is 16, sets the stage for the following line, in which we read that Pride, beginning with the 16th letter, "bar it bare boldly about." B, the second letter, is almost always affiliated with duality, hence duplicity, and this is no doubt the implicit symbolism of these repeated B's, which are not necessary for sense.<sup>18</sup> This symbolism is reinforced by the next line, referring as it does to the "lord that lyveth afer likyng of body," which with its repeated L's partakes again of the Zodiacal symbolism of twelve, and attachment to the physical realm.

It is not insignificant that this selection ends with the "Cristene and Cardynale vertues," the virtues being traditionally seven.<sup>19</sup> The poem here focusses on the cosmological battle between the Anti-Christ and the "mylde men and holye," but this struggle is reflected in the life of every believer. Indeed, one of the poem's greatest strengths is the way it conjoins the individual moral effort and the cosmological. In this passage the letter C—the third letter—is repeated four times, in "conforted," "cursed," "conseil," and "clerk"; and again four times, in "cam," "Conscience," "Cristene," and "Cardynale." Here, then, we have  $4+3=7$ , which is precisely the number of the moral and theological virtues; and the second to the last line ends with "gyour," G being the seventh letter of the alphabet.

This brings us, naturally enough, to the symbolism of the G-alliteration in *Piers Plowman*, and particularly to that symbolism as it appears in the last lines of various passus. But first we should note the curious last line of the prologue: "Al this I seigh slepyng, and sevene sythes more." (Prol. 231) Most modern translations render this along the lines that "all this I saw asleep, and much more beside,"<sup>20</sup>

which eliminates the S alliteration, as well as the number seven. Why would the poet say that he saw "sevene sythes more?" I will answer this question in detail in the section devoted to prophecies; for now it is sufficient to note the number seven is traditionally linked throughout Christianity with the seven days of the week, the seven days of creation, the seven planets, and consequently with the "completion" of the cosmos. G, the seventh letter, plays a predominant role in the ends of three passus: passus VI, passus XVIII, and passus XX. By examining the ways in which G is repeated in these lines, we find an entry point into the heart of that symbolism.

The first—and most significant—of these end-constellations is that concluding passus VI, not least significant because it concludes one of the most famous and most perplexing of the "riddle prophecies" in *Piers Plowman*, but additionally so because it falls at precisely the passage from the sixth to the seventh passus. What is more, we noted earlier the significance of passus VII.133, with its use of 33; it is therefore not surprising to find that the triple G alliteration concluding the prophecy of passus VI is found in line 330. It is useful to note that the prophecy is of "flodes" and "foule wedres," of "fruytes" that "shal faille," of "famyn" "Er fyve yer be fulfilled" (VI.323-24). The culminating lines are "And Dawe the Dykere deye for hunger— / But God of his goodnesse graunte us a trewe" (VI.329-30).

The constellation of F's, with their connection to 666, underscore the catastrophic here, the reign of the Anti-Christ which ends the sixth age, and marks entry into the seventh, the consummation so to speak of this world-cycle.<sup>21</sup> One has the Saturnian reign, with the correlate "derthe" as justice, accompanying famine, foul weather and so forth—all followed by the triple G—God granting his "trewe," which is to say, God's grace bringing about the restoration which is the second coming of Christ.

This same pattern—of triple F's, or 666, followed by triple G's—appears in passus XVIII, but this time (as one would expect in the mediate reference) the triple G's are not an expectation of God's grace, but the prevention of the shades, of evil—to wit: "And it afereth the fend—for swich is the myghte, / May no grisly goost glide there it [the cros] shadweth!" (XVIII.433-34). This corresponds with the themes of the poem as a whole—for the reign of the Anti-Christ is

still to come, in passus XX, and hence the Christian can only trust in the protection of the holy Cross. Only with the conclusion of history, of the world-cycle is one freed from the sphere of evil, and then only if one is truly religious, and is granted the Grace of God.

Hence the final line of the poem—line 7277—is: “And siththe he gradde after Grace, til I gan awake” (XX.387). There are many awakenings and sleepings in the poem, but this is the final one, and thus is given exceptional power—indeed, it is the awakening into the unspoken, which is the Eternal. In other words, the pattern which we have noted throughout holds here as well—the poem figuratively moves from Alpha (“God of his goodness”), to an intermediate point, in which the trying takes place (“May no grisly goost glide there it shadweth”), to the Omega, in which there is a return to the Divine by means of Grace. This corresponds to the descent and ascension of Christ, who was above, descending to Earth and even into Hell, from thence rising to sit on the right hand of God the Father. The life of the believer corresponds to this movement, and so too do pivotal alliterative patterns in *Piers Plowman*.

This pattern is also reiterated in the form of the letter M, in which one sees in the center the descent of the Son, on either side the Father and the Holy Spirit; the letter M is in Christianity profoundly sacred, both as a sign of the Virgin Mary, and as denoting one thousand in Roman numerals, signalling therefore the Millennium.<sup>22</sup> It is affiliated also with the Magna Mater, and with the Waters, Waters traditionally symbolising plenipotentiality, or in the language of René Guénon, the “compossibilities” of existence.<sup>23</sup> This may be seen in Christian terms in Genesis 1.2: “the Spirit of God moved upon the Face of the waters” prior to Creation, prior even to Light.

There is an extremely interesting, complex and subtle symbolism in the way the letter M appears in *Piers Plowman*, for it does not appear with the regularity of, say, the S's or the F's. But it does appear in absolutely pivotal places. If for instance, we take the traditional connotations of S as “spiritus Sanctus,” and M as connected with the Waters, then in examining the prologue, we find that the S's of the first line hover over the M's of the fifth line: “in a somer seson whan softe was the sonne,” hovers over “Ac on a May morwenynge on Malvern hilles,” this corresponding precisely to the way that the S's



of the Spiritus Deus in Genesis hover over the Mare below. But why the fifth line: why not the first and second? The riddle becomes clearer when we recognise the connection of the number five and the pentangle to the Virgin Mary, underscored for medieval numerologists and exegetes by the fact that Maria, and Virgo are both five letters.<sup>24</sup> And this connection was recognised by Dante pilgrim, also, who in his *Paradiso* sees DILIGITE JUSTICIAM QUI JUDICATIS TERRAM displayed in the heaven of Jupiter:

Then in the M of the fifth word arrayed.  
 They halted, so that Jove was made to seem  
 Silver with patterning of gold inlaid.  
 And I saw other lights descending gleam  
 On the M's top and come there to a stand,  
 Hymning, I think, the Good that draweth them.  
 (XVIII.93-100)

The M which is emphasized concludes the fifth word, and indeed becomes the central image of the Canto, so that the Eagles together form that M upon which appears a Lily, and from which the meaning of Justice is expounded.<sup>25</sup> The symbolism of M, then, like that of S and F (the latter for instance could be False or Faith), is simultaneously manifold: it stands at once for the Mercy of God, connoted here by the Lily, and for the Judgement day, for Compassion and for Rigour,<sup>26</sup> as also for Maria and for Millennium. These connections are woven throughout *Piers Plowman*, as when in passus IV, "Reson" is made to say "by the Rode! I shal no ruthe [mercy] have / While Mede have the maistre in this moot-hall" (IV.134-35). As the passus continues, the struggle is clearly between "Reson" and "Mekenesse" on the one hand, and Mede, on the other. Mede is the anti-type of Maria, the woman in scarlet and gold, the whore of Babylon and the symbol of earthly desires. This conflict is provisionally resolved when "the mooste peple in the halle and manye of the grete / And leten Mekenesse a maister and Mede a mansed [cursed] shrew" (IV.160).

Hence the Kyng "modiliche [wrathfully] upon Mede with myght" "loked," "And gan wexe wrothe with Lawe, for Mede almoost hadde shent [destroyed] it" (IV.173-74). Thematically, this connects precisely with the apocatastatic Restoration represented both in the Revelation of St. John and in the final passus of *Piers Plowman*; both consist in

the simultaneous manifestation of Divine Mercy and Divine Rigour, or "Mekenesse" and "Lawe," in the Last Judgement, Mercy being granted to the meek, the guilty being punished by Divine Justice. And these connections are brought home in the final lines of passus IV, when the King calls upon "seinte Marie my Lady," She being the exact antithesis of the excesses which Lady Mede represents, and which must be counterbalanced, so to speak, at the end of time. This "balance" between these two figures, both turning on the M, is to be found in line 179, when the King says: "Mede shal noght maynprise yow, by the Marie of hevене!" The line begins with the reference to Mede, counterbalanced by the Marie at its end, and between the two is the word "maynprise," meaning "stand surety for." Without stressing this too much, we might note that the form of the line corresponds to the figure of the M, recurring to the "descent of Christ" mentioned earlier—for it is Christ who "stands surety for" all mankind by virtue of his incarnation, and so between the two Ladies stands the word "maynprise," as Christ in Revelation descends into the midst of the seven candlesticks, which are the seven churches, to judge the quick and the dead.<sup>27</sup>

Likewise, in passus XVIII, in the vision of the harrowing of Hell, one finds the R and the M correlated once again, when we see the words *resurreccio mortuorum*, and near it the following lines:

Ac my rightwisnesse and right shal rulen al helle,  
 And mercy al mankynde bifore me in hevene.  
 For I were an unkynde kyng but I my kyn helpe—  
 (XVIII.397-99)

The *resurreccio mortuorum* is in truth at the center of *Piers Plowman*: as Christ in the End of Time will call all men into judgement, showing his own "kyn" mercy, so too must each individual man call his own life into judgement through Conscience. The return to the Divine Order runs throughout the poem; it lies at the center of the attacks upon the false friars, and of the prophecies, as well as of the tale of Lady Mede and of the discussions of the Anti-Christ. The poem, in other words, simultaneously looks toward the Second Coming, and toward the reformation of the individual here and now.<sup>28</sup>

And how, concludes Conscience in the last passus, is man to reform himself, to return to the Divine Order? After being attacked by a "mansed preest" of the "march of Irlonde," who counts Conscience no "moore" than "drinking a draughte of good ale!" and who attacks Conscience in a band of "sixty" from that country, shooting "many a sheef of othes, and brode hoked arwes—Goddess herte and hise nayles—" (XX. 221-26) (the numerical symbolism of sixes and four-and-twenty being directly from Revelation)<sup>29</sup>—in other words, after the attack of Evil itself, reflecting the reign of the Anti-Christ at the end of time—Conscience gathers the "monkes and moniales and alle men of religion," to speak of the Divine Order of Number.

Says Conscience to the worthy Sires:

". . . yow shal no thyng lakke,  
 With that ye leve logik and lerneth to loveye.  
 For love lafte thei lordshipe, bothe lond and scole—  
 Frere Fraunceys and Domynyk—for love to be holye.  
 And if ye coveite cure, Kynde wol yow telle  
 That in mesure God made alle manere thynges,  
 And set it at a certein and at a siker nombre,  
 And nempnede hem names newe and noumbrede the sterres:  
*Qui numerat multitudinem stellarum et omnibus eis &c.*

. . .  
 Monkes and moniales and alle men of religion—  
 Hir ordre and hir reule wole to han a certein noumbre;  
 Of lewed and of lered the lawe wole and asketh  
 A certein for a certein—save oonliche of freres!

. . .  
 Hevene hath evene noumbre, and helle is without noumbre;  
 Forthi I would witterly that ye were in the registre  
 And youre noumbre under notarie synge, and neither mo ne lasse!"  
 (XX.249-56; 264-67; 270-72)

"Hevene hath even noumbre, and helle is withoute noumbre"—here we find the medieval Christian understanding of the cosmos conjoined by number as sign of God's love, a cosmological understanding that is carried to the middle ages by Boethius, and can be traced back into the Pythagorean sources. Hence in Book 2 of the *Consolation of Philosophy* we read that

Love binds together people joined by a sacred bond; love binds sacred marriages by chaste affections; love makes the laws which join true friends.

O how happy the human race would be, if that love which rules the heavens ruled also your souls.<sup>30</sup>

This is indeed the object of traditional number theory: the return to the world of harmony, the world governed, like heaven itself, by "noubre." It is here that we find the connection between Greek and medieval Christian cosmology. Much had fallen away, with the passage of time, but the essence of Pythagorean number-theory still persisted in *Piers Plowman*, with its recognition that numbers have a moral quality, that order is divine, disorder infernal.<sup>31</sup> That there is a direct connection here with the Greek cosmology is clear from the following lines of the poem:

Envye herde this and heet freres go to scole  
 And lerne logyk and lawe—and ek contemplacion—  
 And preche men of Plato, and preve it by Seneca  
 That alle thynges under hevene oughte to ben in comune.  
 (XX.273-76)

This is a complex passage, as the next line attests:

He lyeth, as I leve, that to the lewed so precheth;  
 For God made to men a lawe and Moyses it taughte—  
*Non concupisces rem proximi tui.* (XX.277-79)

Are we to take this as a complete condemnation of the doctrine of "nombres" just preceding? Is this a rejection of Platonic and Pythagorean understanding in favor of the Judaeo-Christian? I do not think such an interpretation is necessary; the line reads, after all, that he lyeth who "to the lewed so precheth." In other words, there is here a division between the "exoteric" and the "esoteric," between the understanding of those schooled in "contemplacion," and the understanding of the "lewed," or uninitiate in the cosmological mysteries of number meaning. Those who are not initiates use the truth to their own ends, bringing about the disorder of the end-times; but the doctrines themselves remain true, endorsed by Augustine, Boethius, and other authorities. Evil arises not from the number-doctrines in themselves, those being endorsed by Conscience, but from their falsification by Envye, correlate to which is the

falsification of the high doctrine that men ought to have all things in common (XX.276) by those who would "maken hym murie with oother menne goodes" (XX.289).

Here we have a kind of mirror-reversal: in the Golden Age men have all things in common, and there is no envy, whereas now, under the guise of that earlier high doctrine, one sees the triumph of envy under the very mantle of those who pay lip service to the holy truth. The holy truth of "nombres" is contradistinguished, then, from its infernal inversion by the "freres" and "fals folk," who take from people by perverting its truths. In the Golden Age, it is true, men have all things in common, but this is no longer the Golden Age, and those who take under the guise of religion signify the precise antithesis of the Golden Age, the end of history rather than its beginning.

This connection between numbers and history is implicit in the works of Augustine, some of which read like a veritable Platonic text, as when in *De libero arbitrio* we find:

If you look at something mutable, you cannot grasp it either with the bodily sense or the consideration of the mind, unless it possesses some numerical form. If this form is removed, the mutable dissolves into nothing; do not, then, doubt that there is some eternal and immutable Form which prevents mutable objects from being destroyed and allows them to complete their temporal course, as it were, by measured movements in a distinct variety of forms.<sup>32</sup>

As Langland put it: "Hevene hath even nambre, and hell hath no nambre." In Christian eschatology these two correspond to the paradisaical state at the inception of the world-cycle,<sup>33</sup> and to the numberless infernal state which marks the end of the world-cycle—as is written in Revelation 20:8:

And [Satan] shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea.

This eschatological connection between numbers and history lies at the center of *Piers Plowman*, and so at the center of the prophecies which it contains. As we have seen, the symbolism of the numbers and letters is multivalent. Yet virtually all of the alliterative gematria

in the poem reinforces the poem's fundamental theme: that each of us takes our place in the moral and cosmological struggle between virtue and vice, between good and evil. The poem exhorts us to wake up, and central to that awakening are the cosmological meanings hidden in gematria, alliteration, and the prophecies. But to see how this is so we must turn to the prophecies themselves.

## II. The Prophecies of *Piers Plowman*

There are in *Piers Plowman* three major prophecies, and each of these has borne little scholarly scrutiny; even a work which had as its thesis that Langland was very much influenced by the Joachimite apocalypticism prevalent in the fourteenth century, offered only a footnote on the prophecies.<sup>34</sup> And at least one dissertation has been devoted to the opinion that Langland employed the prophecies as a mere satirical device, an assertion for which there is virtually no textual support.<sup>35</sup> It is my own argument, in any case, that the prophecies are crucial to understanding the poem as a whole, and that the prophecies reflect a cosmological gnosis analogous to that of Dante, one permeated by Christian number symbolism.

The first of the prophecies appears in the third passus—though there are of course enigmatic passages before that<sup>36</sup>—after the appearance of Lady Mede and her welcome into the court of the King, and after Conscience reminds the King that "there are two manere of medes, my lord, by youre leve," (III.231) the first of these being "That oon God of his grace graunteth in his blisse," the other being the "mede mesurelees, that maistres desireth," that which "to mayntene mysdoers mede thei take" (III.246-47). In brief: the prophecy is preceded by a reminder of the infinite Mercy of God in his blisse, and also of the incalculable Wrath of God, both being affiliated with the triple M, the Wrath being linked also with the "mesurelees," the numberless chaos which marks Hell itself, and the reign of quantity which is the demonic. The double symbolism of the M, sign both of Maria and of Mede, signifies also the two poles of history, the first being She of Divine purity, hence of the Golden Age in Greek terms,

the second being the "Whore of Babylon,"<sup>37</sup> signifying the end of the Iron Age, to use the Greek term, and pointing toward the Apocalypse in Christian terms.

The two poles of the Divine—Mercy and Rigour—correspond to the beginning and to the end of historical cycles in terms of phenomenal manifestation. Rigour, or the Wrath of God, is associated in the Judaeo-Christian tradition with the Prophets: traditionally, the Prophet recalls God's straying flock back into the fold, in order that destruction not be visited upon them by virtue of their own error. In many respects, of course, this is precisely the function of *Piers Plowman* itself: the poem is a Christian call to return to the essential saving truth of Christianity, and an attack on the falsification of the Church by the unscrupulous. Hence it is not surprising that the first of the three major prophecies is prefaced by the Old Testament story of the "vengeance" that "fel on Saul and on his children" (III.260). Indeed, this tale is so profoundly one of God's Wrath that it repels the modern mind: it is that of "Agag of Amalec," who with "al his peple after,/ sholden deye for a dede that doon hadde hire elders" (III.263-64). Says Samuel, the prophet of God:

God hymself hoteth thee,  
To be buxom at his biddynge, his wil to fulfille.  
Weend to Amalec with thyn oost, and what thou fyndest there—sle it:  
Burnes and beestes—bren hem to dethe!  
Widwes and wyves, wommen and children,  
Moebles and unmoebles and al thou myght fynde—  
Bren it, bere it noght away, be it never so riche;  
For mede ne for monee, loke thou destruye it! (III.264-71)

Conscience goes on to say that all this Saul did—but he left behind cattle for his people to use in sacrifice, and for this "God hated hym for evere and alle his heires after" (III.279). And then in a coy passage Conscience observes that the messenger is often slain, blamed for ill news, so "the *culorum* of this cas kepe I noght to shewe." This is of course quite ironic, for the conclusion of this passus is nothing less than a bringing home of that Biblical prophecy to the contemporary religious and historical scene. That is: mankind is reminded that "er this fortune falle, fynde men shul the worste," (III.325) the triple F's

here reminding us that we are still in the sixth age (666) and that before the Millennium must there be much tribulation.

But in this first prophecy, the focus is essentially upon the Millennium; there is but this one line relating to God's Wrath, and even this is prefaced by an extended prophecy of that time when "Kynges court and commune court, consistorie and chapitle— / Al shal be but oon court, and oon b[ur]n be justice." No man shall "bere wepene," and "what smyth that any smytheth be smyte therwith to dethe!" (III.320-24). The Biblical verses quoted here attest to this vision being of the Golden Age: Isaiah 2:4 ("Nation shall not lift up sword against nation" and "they shall turn their swords into ploughshares") is traditionally so interpreted.<sup>38</sup>

It is of course true that the Judaeo-Christian eschatology, particularly as seen in the Revelation of St. John, does not at first seem as though it allows for a cyclical view of history, as existed in the Greek understanding. But as William Anderson writes, whereas certain of the Church Fathers held to a linear view of history passing from creation to Second Coming, split by the Incarnation so to speak, Dante "restored and reunited with their view the cyclical ideas of the classical writers, through the image of *Astraea redux* and the promise of the renewal of the world through the return of the Golden Age."<sup>39</sup> Though William Langland almost certainly was not as learned as Dante, he shared with him a more cyclical view of history, one drawing upon the Biblical prophecies of Isaiah and the Millennium of St. John's Revelation. The turning point of this next age, the passage from the sixth to the seventh age, is to be marked "by six sonnes, and a ship, and half a shef of arwes" (III.326), this line directly following that of the triple F's quoted above, and being itself followed by the prophecy of the "turne" of the Jews.

There has been some speculation regarding these lines, especially in the notes to the various editions; Schmidt for instance, along with Bennet, Skeat and Bradley, has observed that this passage is parallel to Habakkuk 3:11, in which the prophet, speaking of God's Wrath against the wicked and of the "trampling of the nations," says "The sun and moon stood still in their habitation, at the light of thine arrows as they sped, at the flash of thy glittering spear." It is difficult to say whether there is a direct correlation between the two passages,



especially given that Langland included no interspersed quotation from Habakkuk, but certainly the perspective both in this prophecy and in that of the Old Testament are closely related.

It would I think be more appropriate to look in the Revelation of St. John for the implications of the prophecies, particularly of this one. In Revelation we find numerous suggestions that the present age is the sixth, and that the seventh is the culmination of the present cycle, as in 17:10: "And there are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come; and when he cometh, he must continue a short space." Then too there are the seven angels of the seven wraths of God, with their seven vials (15:1 ff.); and the beast with seven heads; and the utterances of the seven thunders (13:1 ff.), in particular the lines: "But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets" (10:10).

It is not necessary to connect the "six sonnes" here with the "six ages" of Joachim of Fiore, for both have as their source the understanding (widespread in medieval Christianity, as Schmidt notes) that we are now in the sixth age, and the seventh marks the conclusion of this world-cycle, drawn from Revelation. But it is of interest that Joachim made very much of this shift, both in his complex *Liber figurarum*, and in his *Expositio in Apocalypsim*, though it is not clear whether Joachim's works were familiar to Langland, as they were to St. Thomas Aquinas and Dante.<sup>40</sup> In any case Joachim has always been on the boundary of orthodoxy, whereas the same framework is also taken up by the very orthodox Austin friar Agostino Trionfo, who in his commentary upon the Apocalypse speaks after Joachim of the seven *tempora* of the Church, going on to say "In sexta de antichristo et membris eius. In septima de dampnacione impiorum et remuneracione iustorum."<sup>41</sup> Given the wide dispersion of this understanding, as well as of the Joachimite and other works dealing with cosmology and temporal cycles during this time, as well as their common basis in Revelation, it is not unreasonable to think the six sonnes of Langland's prophecy refer to the passage from the sixth age to the *remuneracione iustorum*, and to the *dampnacione impiorum*.<sup>42</sup>

This interpretation is underscored by the next image—that of the ship, which Schmidt, following Bradley, associates with the Church,

drawing upon the etymological connection between *nave* and *navis*.<sup>43</sup> Connected with this is the image of the Ark of Noah which continued through the Flood and its destruction; that is, the true Church will pass through the tribulation of the "end of the age," and its members are the "saved" who "seed" the Golden Age.<sup>44</sup> The ark, the ship and the grail all represent the transmission of the Holy Truth over the Waters of manifestation.<sup>45</sup>

There are traditionally twenty-four arrows in a sheaf, so that half a sheaf means twelve, the number of signs necessary for the Zodiacal Great Year to take place, and hence for a single time-cycle. The six *sonnes*, then, refer to the time of tribulation, the ship to the passage through it, and the twelve arrows to the wholeness which is the aim of that passage, twelve being the predominant number of the City of New Jerusalem in the Revelation of St. John, a number conjunct with the twelve apostles and with the twelve gates of the city. The prophecy as a whole then refers to the Apocalypse, as is supported both within the lines themselves, and by interconnections within the poem as a whole.

The prophecy is prefaced, for instance, by line 318, which asserts that "after the dede that is doon oon doom shal rewarde," this allusion to the Last Judgement itself being prefaced by the references to the Millennium. Then too, the only other reference in the poem to "arwes" is in *passus* XX.226, in conjunction with the Anti-Christ. The dual symbolism of the M's—on the one pole *Mede*, on the other *Maria*—is again here evident: one has the "myddel of the moone [that] shal make the Jewes torne," and additionally "For Makometh [Muhammed] and Mede myshappe shul that tyme; / For *Melius est bonum nomen quam divicie multe*" (III.326-30).

However, the positive significance of the M's is underscored by five M's in the three-hundred thirtieth line, where we find reference to the "*bonum nomen*," which in the context must be Christ. Surely it is not coincidence that this reference appears in the third *passus*, three hundred thirtieth line, the first number connected with the Trinity, the second with the life of Christ. All the same, we are left with questions as to the "myddel of the moone"—to what does this mysterious phrase refer? Bloomfield, in his notes, recalls that in antiquity the moon was linked with judgement; and though we cannot

be certain how learned Langland was, it is interesting at least to recall that Plutarch, himself privy to at least some of the Egyptian Mysteries, said that the moon was the sphere of judgement for the soul, and to note that the medieval scholastic tradition linked the *lex luna* with the reign of the Anti-Christ.<sup>46</sup> Above all, however, the moon symbolizes cyclical change—precisely what the conversion of the Jews entails.

This symbolism of the moon is reflected in that last line of Conscience in this passus: "The soule that the soude taketh by so muche is bounde" (III.353). That is: to the degree that one accepts payment from Mede, to that degree is one bound, and must pay "to the last penny," "a ful teneful text to him that taketh mede" (III.349). Hence it is Conscience reminds Mede, in the concluding section of this passus, that she is quoting only half a text, for she had not "the leef . . . torned" (III.347). Had she done so, she would have seen the text in full, the turning of the text (and of the moon) here paralleling the "torne" of the Jewes at the end of time: that is, just as Mede, and after her the reign of the Anti-Christ, represent a view of this world without reference to the next, so too her quoting of scripture speaks only half the truth. And when the leaf is turned—the leaf of history as well—we shall find, whatever the apparent triumph of evil, that "Truthe that text made" (III.343). Thus are we exhorted *Quod bonum est tenete*: hold fast to truth. For Judgement day is none other than rectification, the return to Divine Order.

This is also the theme of the second prophecy, that to be found at the end of passus VI, lines 320 ff. This prophecy is exactly ten lines long, and ends at line 330—the number of Christ multiplied by ten—with an alliteration of triple G's, which is to say, 777: "But if God of his goodnesse graunte us a trewe." The prophecy begins with three W's and four H's—"Ac I warne yow werkmen—wynneth whil ye mowe / For Hunger hiderward hasteth hym faste!" H is the eighth letter, W the twenty-third, eight being traditionally affiliated with the sphere of the moon beyond the other seven spheres; twenty-three being one beyond twenty-two, a profoundly sacred number in Qabalism, a meaning taken over into Christianity by St. Augustine and others.<sup>47</sup> Both of these, then, correspond to excess, which thematically corresponds with the poem at this point: "wastours" shall be chastened by "Hunger," who "shal awake [thorough] water" (VI.322), the waters

being traditionally associated with the sublunary realm and with ignorance, a privation of Knowledge just as Hunger is symbolically a privation of spiritual nourishment in the "final days."

The prophecy has been interpreted here as suggesting that the "flodes" and "famyn" shall take place within five years; but the diction implies rather that after Hunger "shal awake," then ere "fyve yer be fulfilled swich famyn shal aryse: / Thorugh flodes and thorough foule wedres, fruytes shal faille—" (VI.322-24). We note here, not incidentally, that we have again the constellation of F's which in the poem tend to denote the Anti-Christ, F being connected with 666 by gematria.

But let us turn to the prophecy itself:

And so seith Saturne, and sent yow to warne:  
 Whan ye se the [son]ne amys, and two monkes heddes,  
 And a mayde have the maistrie, and multiplie by eighte,  
 Thanne shal deeth withdrawe and derthe be justice.  
 And Dawe the Dykere deye for hunger—  
 But if God of his goodnesse graunte us a trewe. (VI.325-30)

Five years after Hunger shal awake, then come the signs—famine and flode—sent by Saturn, Saturn being traditionally affiliated with the Golden Age, and with the shift from the Iron Age to the Golden Age. Like virtually all traditional symbolism, Saturn's is possessed of a dual aspect: just as in the Golden Age he is the most beneficent of planets, likewise in the later Iron Age he is the most malefic. And there is here a very striking parallel with Vergil's Fourth Eclogue, which though termed the "messianic" eclogue, and taken by Christian exegetes to be a reference to Christ, focusses on the shift from the Iron age to the new and Golden Age.

Vergil's prophecy begins:

Now is come the last age of the Cumaean prophecy: the great cycle of periods is born anew. Now returns the Maid, returns the reign of Saturn: now from high heaven a new generation appears. Yet do thou at that boy's birth, in whom the iron race shall begin to cease, and the golden to arise over all the world, holy Lucina, be gracious; now thine own Apollo reigns.<sup>48</sup>

It is not necessary I think to make a conclusive link between Vergil and Langland; rather, one need only note that the two passages are

governed by the same two figures—Saturn and the Maid—and that whereas Vergil's prophecy explicitly points to the birth of a boy-Apollo figure, Langland's only allusion to Christ is in the line numbers, the prophecy ending at VI.330.<sup>49</sup> Regardless of whether Langland was drawing upon the symbolism of antiquity directly or indirectly, it has here parallel functions, pointing toward the shift from one age to another.

It has been suggested that the "mayde [who has] the maistrie," and the mysterious "and multiplie by eighte," refers to some alchemical symbolism—but alchemical symbolism is not directly appropriate here.<sup>50</sup> Rather we should look first to the most obvious clues, and to those things which we already have discussed. In other words: the line in question contains a repetition of three M's, the symbolism of which we focussed on earlier, noting the way in which the M's within the poem alternated between "Maria" as salvific power, and "Mede" as destructive power. Given the tenor of this prophecy, however, the latter implications weigh more heavily here, and this is amply supported by the connections one can make with medieval prophetic cosmology, and with the traditional numbering of the planets, as well as with the Revelation of St. John.

We noted earlier the prophetic cosmology most generally associated with Joachim of Fiore—particularly that which focusses upon the seven "etates" of the world, and the shift into the "eighth"—as well as the manifold links between *Piers Plowman* and the Revelation of St. John. The "mayde" who has "maistrie" could be taken as referring to the Virgin Mary, in which case the "multiplie by eighte" would refer to the eighth "etas" which follows the final battle against the Anti-Christ, and the Second Coming. It is for this reason in fact that Joachim's *Expositio in Apocalypsım* is divided into eight parts, the eighth *etas* being the *fructificatio* of the third *status*, and the *clarificatio* of the seventh *etas*, being "an era of contemplation, rest and peace, and as such it belongs to the Holy Spirit."<sup>51</sup> But Joachimite cosmology is not essential for this symbolism to be understood: as Hugh of St. Victor noted, the number eight is an instance of *secundum modum porrectionis*, eight beyond seven signalling eternity beyond the mutable realm.<sup>52</sup> And this is, given the Creation account in Genesis, a quite natural symbolism.

Yet there is another aspect to the symbolism of eight and of the mayde, to which we alluded earlier: that is, the number eight is also traditionally affiliated with the eighth sphere, that of the moon, and consequently with the *lex lunae*, the reign of the Anti-Christ. Plato writes in the *Republic*, when discussing the "spindle" of necessity, with its various spheres: "Now the whole spindle has the same motion; but, as the one revolves in one direction, the seven inner circles move slowly in the other, and of these the swiftest is the eighth."<sup>53</sup> The eighth, that of the moon, is pierced by the spindle in its center, and significantly, it is said, the souls who are in the meadow, or intermediate realm, tarry there for "seven days," and on the eighth "are obliged to proceed on their journey."<sup>54</sup> This links the sublunary realm with mortality, a corroboration of Cicero's observation in the Dream of Scipio, transmitted to medieval Europe through Macrobius' *Commentary*, that "Below the moon nothing is divine, with the exception of the souls bestowed upon the human race by the benevolence of the Gods."<sup>55</sup>

Plato, in the *Republic*, observes that the moon is the "fastest" of the spheres, and this too corroborates the connection between the moon and the end of a time-cycle: this connection has been examined in Rene Guenon's pivotal study, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*.<sup>56</sup> As Frithjof Schuon has pointed out, time traditionally is seen to resemble an hourglass, the grains of which fall all the faster, the nearer the glass is to empty.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, just as the moon is but a reflection of the sun, so too the Church during the "final days" is but an inverted reflection of the true Church, just as the Anti-Christ is an inverted reflection of Christ.

Given these implications, we can see why it is that some versions of the poem read "Whan ye se the [mon]ne amys, and two monkes heddes," and others read "Whan ye se the [son]ne amys, and two monkes heddes." The first version resonates with the other M's in the line; the second provides a balance: two S's and two M's. In either case, the line implies not a lunar or solar eclipse, as one commentator has suggested but a disjunction in which the "normal" order of the sun and moon is reversed, so that the moon rules; given this cosmological interpretation, either the sun or the moon being amys would be an accurate assessment. The "moon ruling" here refers to

the *lex lunae* mentioned earlier, drawn from Roger Bacon's attribution of the Anti-Christ's rule to the sphere of the moon.

As to the "two monkes heddes," there are several ways one could interpret this, but all devolve from the traditional negative implications of the duality: two is the primordial split, the division signifying the Fall, affiliated with the Knowledge of Good and of Evil. Interestingly, Joachim of Fiore was long credited with predicting "two orders" of monks, later taken by literalist commentators to mean the Franciscans and the Dominicans; but partisan claims aside, Joachim's non-literal work was as usual being bent to literal uses. Originally, his "two orders" were the active and the contemplative; and he had in mind particularly the Revelation of St. John, 11:3-8: "And I will give power unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred and three score days." Moreover, "these have the power to shut heaven, that it rain not in the days of their prophecy . . . and to smite the earth with all plagues, as often as they will." Given the tenor of the prophecy in *Piers Plowman*, it is again logical to gloss the poem with the Revelation of St. John, regardless of whether Joachim's prophecy lies behind Langland's work.<sup>58</sup>

The last three lines of the prophecy also require a gloss, that being Revelation 6:8: "And I looked, and behold a pale horse and his name that sat on him was Death . . . . And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth." For "thanne shal deeth withdrawe, and derthe be justice." As to the next line: "And Dawe the Dykere deye for hunger—," this corresponds to a passage in the Prologue to *Piers Plowman*, to wit:

Ac I biheeld into the eest an heigh to the sonne,  
 I seigh a tour on a toft trieliche ymaked,  
 A deep dale bynethe, a dongeon therinne,  
 With depe diches and derke and dredfulle of sighte.  
 A fair feld ful of folk fond I ther bitwene. (Prologue 13-17)

In this passage we see an analogical cosmology not unlike that of Dante in the *Commedia*: one sees the Divine Sun, the "tour" on a "toft," and below that the "deep dale" with "depe diches and derke and dredfulle of sighte." Significantly, the vision is to the East, symbolic

of Christ's resurrection; one sees here hell, then the "fair feld ful of folk" which is this world, and beyond that the hill and tower which rise toward the Divine Sun. In it we can see at once the progression of history, of a given time-cycle from the "tour" nigh onto the sun, to the "fair feld ful of folk," to the "depe diches of hell;" but as the axial symbolism of the tower might indicate, the power of Christ penetrates through the "derke" of hell itself, this is underscored also in the harrowing of hell appearing in passus XVIII.

In fact, throughout Langland's depiction of the harrowing of hell, one finds exactly the same alliterative patterns: "What for feere of this ferly and of the false Jewes, / I drow me in that derknesse to *descendit ad inferna*" (XVIII.110-11). Or again, when the "maydenes" Mercy and Truthe come out of the East and look Westward, they ask one another "Of the dyn and of the derknesse and how the day rowed" (XVIII.123). And says Christ to Satan: "Thou art doctour of deeth, drynk that thow madest!" (XVIII.365). Finally:

And I am that kyng of kynges shal came swich a tyme  
 There doom to the deeth dampneth alle wikked;  
 And if lawe wole I loke on hem, it lith in my grace  
 Wheither they deye or deye noht for that thei diden ille.  
 (XVIII.385-88)

All of these lines refer to the darkness of the Inferno, and insofar as the tribulations at the end of time are the uprising of that sphere into the earthly, culminating in "doomsday" and the Last Judgement, the alliterative D's may be seen to refer at once to damnation or hell, and to the judgement upon which men will either "deye or deye noht for that thei diden ille."<sup>59</sup> "Dawe the Dykere" dying for Hunger invokes the Hunger with which the prophecy began, but here the famine is not only physical. Given the affiliations with the letter D, and with the "depe diches" which in the prologue and in passus XVIII are affiliated with Hell, we may conclude that "Dawe the Dykere" is mankind caught in the darkness that is distance from God. Thus the final line—line 330, symbolic of Christ—comes as a ray of light, with its reiterated GGG, or 777 signifying the close of the age, the fulfilment of the seven in which Christ appears again, and "God of his goodnesse graunte us a trewe."



This return to Divine Order sets the prophecies of Langland apart from some earlier prophecies, like the ones in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, specifically in the *Prophetiae Merlini*. The images found in the *Prophetiae Merlini* are very much parallel to those in the first prophecy of Langland: there we see in fact precisely those spheres disordered which are disordered in Langland's prophecy. According to Merlin:

The Virgin shall forget her maiden shame, and climb up on the back of the Sagittary. The chariot of the Moon shall disturb the Zodiac, and the Pleiades shall burst into tears and lamentation. None hereafter shall return to his wonted duty, but Ariadne shall lie hidden within the closed gateways of her sea-beaten headland . . . . With a baleful blast shall the winds do battle together, and the sound thereof shall be heard amongst the stars.<sup>60</sup>

We can see here the same symbols as appear in Langland's prophecies: there is the Virgo, connected with the Sagittary (Zodiacal sign of the Archer), hence linked with the "arwes"; there is the displacement of the moon which appears in the second prophecy as well, that implying the *lex lunae*, and separation from the Divine Sun; and finally there is the flood, the overflowing Waters with which the "tears" of the Pleiades are traditionally affiliated. But there is a pivotal difference: whereas the *Prophetiae Merlini* refer only to the conclusion of the present age, to the disorder at the end of the present time-cycle, Langland's prophecies, like Vergil's before him, refer to the appearance of a new cycle as well. Indeed, their *raison d'être*, we might say, is to point toward the Divine Restoration that is the Second Coming of Christ, and the return to Divine Order. The Merlinic prophecies are, in brief, a more limited and one might even say secular work, whereas those of Langland, being so interrelated with the Christian revelation, are of a wider, more profound scope.

And this point brings us in fact to the last of the prophecies, the third prophecy which appears in passus XIII.153 ff. This line number—153—is the number of fishes which the disciples caught in John 21:11, and is very much connected with the Greek symbolism of the fishes and the net.<sup>61</sup> The number 153 is also mentioned by St. Augustine as the sum of the numbers from one to seventeen, the number seventeen signifying the decalogue, and the seven gifts of

the Holy Spirit which enables man to realise the decalogue, hence becoming a saint. Accordingly, St. Augustine mentions 153 as the number of saints who will be resurrected at the end of time.<sup>62</sup>

It is for this last association especially that it is appropriate the prophecy begin on line 153—for the prophecy refers precisely to the beginning and end of the time-cycle, and to the transcendence of that cycle represented by sainthood. The prophecy is prefaced by the following two lines: "With half a laumpe lyne in Latyn, *Ex vi transicionis*, I bere ther, in a bou[s]te, faste ybounde Dowel" (XIII.151-52). This very passage is examined with especial care by R. E. Kaske, and it is in his essay on it that we find the following suggestion. Kaske observes that the "bou[s]te" or "box" is in thirteenth century allegory "patience," which is said to "guard the soul." In the thirteenth century *Dictionarius pauperum* compiled by Nicolas de Byard, we find the admonition that

just as robbers easily have the treasure after they have broken the chest, so the devil has the soul after he has confused a man and stolen his patience, because "the heart of a fool is like a broken vessel, no wisdom at all shall it hold."<sup>63</sup>

Patience, it is said, is the guard of the other six virtues, enclosing them like a box or an ark, and this idea of an ark, of passage is underscored by the phrase *ex vi transicionis*, (out of the power of transitivity). There is no need to reiterate here what has been said elsewhere; for a discussion of the grammatical allusions in these two lines, and in the prophecy as a whole, the reader is referred to the studies of Kaske, Skeat, Bradley and Goodridge, as well as to the notes provided in the Schmidt edition of the poem.<sup>64</sup> I should like to emphasize here the connection with the first prophecy, which spoke of the ship. This image is enhanced by the reference to "half a laumpe lyne in Latyn," the "laumpe" being an image of that which is sustained through the darkness, the "half" reminding one of the "half a shef of arwes" which followed the image of the ship in the earlier prophecy.

R. E. Kaske has pointed to the connotations of the "sign of the Saterdag" and of Wednesday in medieval Christian tradition, the implication being Charity in the first instance, Patience in the second.<sup>65</sup>

It is worthwhile to note here, though, that immediately following this third prophecy is the line "It is but a dido," quod this doctour, "a disours tale!" (XIII.172), a reference to the tale of Dido told by Virgil, alluded to also by Dante. This allusion to Greek tradition corresponds with aspects of the prophecy itself, for in Greek tradition it is as we have seen Saturn who is affiliated with the Golden age, that age which began the time-cycle, "sette first the kalender." And the Greek tradition has four ages; transposed into the form of a week, the fourth day is Wednesday, a day affiliated with Mercury as Saturday is connected with Saturn. This connection is supported by the phrasing: "al the wit of the Wodnesday of the next wike after," for Mercury is the God affiliated precisely with wit, with the written text, with writing and hence grammatical puns like "ex vi transicionis." This connection with Mercury is in accord with the references to Dowel also ["I bere ther, in a bou[s]te, fast ybound Dowel" (XIII.152)], for Dowel is the figure of those who "do as clerkes teacheth," (XIII.115) clerks teaching in accord with the orthodox written tradition.

Hence within the prophecy we have at once the Christian terminology conjunct with allusions to Greek tradition; but additionally, we can see in this final prophecy the "solution" as it were to surviving the tribulations at the "end of time," for those very tribulations mentioned in the other prophecies are here said to be overcome by those who have it with them. Writes the poet:

Ne neither hete, ne hayle, ne noon helle pouke,  
 Ne neither fuyr, ne flood, ne feere of thyn enemy  
 Tene thee any tyme, and thow take it with the:  
*Caritas nichil timet.* (XIII.161-63)

Again we have the theme of "*ex vi transicionis*": by means of this ark which is the *pacientes*, one overcomes all the destructive powers which may reign over the earth, physical and demonic and human alike, for

. . . that pure reson ne shal make thee  
 Maister of alle tho men thorough myght of this redel—  
 Nought thorough wicchecraft, but thorough wit, and thow wilt thiselve  
 Do kyng and quene and alle the comune after

Yve thee al that thei may yyve, as thee for best yemere,  
 And as thow demest wil thei do alle her dayes after:  
*Pacientes vincunt.* (XIII.166-71)

It is not witchcraft which bestows transcendence of the tribulations, but wit and "Pacience," wit being the true understanding of these "redels," Patience being the "support" or "container" of the other six virtues. With these two—true understanding, and the saintliness which is realisation of the seven virtues, all bound up in that single Virtue, Patience—one transcends the woes which characterise human life generally, the end of time especially, and for such a one the Golden Age is already present, the Millennium already here.

Thus we read:

If Pacience be oure partyng felawe and pryve with us bothe,  
 Ther nys wo in this world that we ne sholde amende,  
 And conformen kynges to pees, and alle kynnes londes—  
 Sarsens and Surre and so forth alle the Jewes—  
 Turne into the trewe feith and intil oon bileve. (XIII.206-10)

These are the words with which the first prophecy characterised the Millennium; it is with this expectation of the time when swords are beaten into ploughshares and all "londes" and "kynges" are at "pees," that the first prophecy was prefaced, and with it that this last prophecy ends. These words are addressed to every man, and for each individual who has "gan awake," as the last line in the poem has it, this time of the Millennium is already come. As this last prophecy-riddle has it, one who truly realises the nature of the "bou[s]te" cannot be harmed by earthly calamities, by fiends from hell, or by any earthly ruler, for such a one has realised the "seventh virtue," Patience, which "contains" the others, and has virtually entered that community of saints (153, said St. Augustine) who shall be resurrected at the end of time.<sup>66</sup>

It is appropriate, then, that this last prophecy is only peripherally a prophecy—by virtue of the lines 206-10 which follow it—being in truth essentially a riddle, to be solved by each for himself, just as each individual can only be saved by turning toward the salvific truth of religion, and actualising that truth in his life. Thus it is that the three

riddles—which together form a unitary prophecy of the Apocalypse, of the Millennium, and of the essential nature of salvation by which the saved *are* saved—are spoken by Conscience, by the author, and by Patience who also has the last word within the entire poem, saying that “By Crist!” he “wole bicome a pilgrym, / And walken as wide as the world lasteth.” So “send me hap and heele, til I have Piers the Plowman! / And siththe he gradde after Grace, til I gan awake” (XX.386-87).

Each individual must gradde, or cry after Grace, stirred by conscience, and only with this turning can the realisation of redemption, of salvation come about. I am not arguing here that the prophecy-riddles, with their intricate connections to Greek and Christian tradition, are essential to the understanding of all aspects of the poem; clearly they are not, since the C version includes only the first of the prophecies, the A version none. Rather, they represent the essential message of the poem: a call for each individual to turn toward the “oon” religion which is not to be found by assuming the appearance of religion, like the false fryeres, but by listening to the warnings of Conscience, by penetrating with the wit into the truth of things, and by patiently realising the seven virtues which mark one’s salvation, these together being the virtual manifestation of the Millennium which is actualised when the present time-cycle reaches its end.

The prophecies are, in other words, esoteric in nature, and their function is to reinforce the meanings of *Piers Plowman* as a whole; they do not so much depend upon gematria, or number-letter permutations, as interconnect with them, the two together making a harmonious symbolic whole. Given the implications we have here sketched—the astrological implications, the interweaving of Greek and Christian references, the relation of the prophecy-riddles to apocatastasis, or return to Divine Order—it is clear at least that the prophecy-riddles are not satiric, but correspond to larger themes within the work as a whole, and may even be regarded, since they are spoken by Conscience, by the author, and by Patience, as a distillation of the poem’s essential message: they demand that we consider eschatology, the true nature of our present world, and our own salvation. These themes may not be especially in vogue at present, but be that as it