

*Cotton Mather  
and Jonathan Edwards  
on the Number of the Beast*

*Eighteenth-Century Speculation  
about the Antichrist*

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'Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundred and threescore and six.' Revelation 13:18.

NEXT unto the Knowledge of Christ and him crucified, there is no Knowledge more necessary for the Church of God, then the Knowledge of Antichrist and him revealed.<sup>1</sup> So wrote Francis Potter (1594-1678), rector of the parish at Kilmington, England, in a treatise published during the decade of the English Civil War relating to the apocalyptic beast in the book of Revelation. Issues of theology, ecclesiology, liturgy, and politics divided Englishmen at that time, but on the questions of the importance of the Antichrist and the necessity of determining his identity, most English Protestants concurred with

<sup>1</sup>Francis Potter, *An Interpretation of the Number 666. Wherein, not onely the Manner, how this Number ought to be Interpreted, is clearely proved and Demonstrated: but it is also shewed, yt this Number is an exquisite and perfect Character, truly, exactly, and essentially describing that State of Government, to wch all other notes of Antichrist doe agree. With all Knowne objections solidly, and fully answered, yt canbe materially made against it* (Oxford, Leonard Lichfield, 1642), "To the Reader," p. viii. Hereafter cited as *Interpretation*. The copy used for this research is located in the Lilly Library at Indiana University.

Potter's judgment. Fascination with speculation about the Antichrist was a characteristic mark of English Protestantism for several generations prior to the Civil War and remained so for more than a century afterward. Recent scholarly efforts to chart fundamental shifts in the pattern of interest in the Antichrist are not always convincing; these attempts do not overshadow the essential continuities of perspective which remained in the Anglo-American tradition.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, this essay, which is an examination and comparison of the reception of Francis Potter's work, *An Interpretation of the Number 666*, by two prominent colonial divines in America, namely, Cotton Mather (1663-1728) and Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), underscores the continuities in the English tradition of speculation about the Antichrist.

Among English Protestants in colonial America, the identification of the beast was an issue of religious and cultural significance. The figure of the Antichrist functioned as an important theological foil. Real or imagined hostility from an antichristian foe and his allies triggered both defensive and offensive responses. Theological armaments were strengthened to repel the attacks of the opposition, and in turn polemical strikes were launched repeatedly against the battlements of the enemy. Thus the spirit and temper of the English struggles were transplanted into the American scene. In the veins of Anglo-American Protestants ran a deep commitment to the struggle against the Antichrist, a compelling fascination with the contest against the beast spoken of in Revelation 13:18.<sup>3</sup> It made little difference whether the beast was equated with

<sup>2</sup>For example, see Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966); Christopher Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1971); and Paul Misner, 'Newman and the Tradition concerning the Papal Antichrist,' *Church History*, XL (Sept., 1973), 377-395. Bernard Capp, 'The Millennium and Eschatology in England,' *Past & Present*, No. 57 (Nov., 1972), 156-162, contains a capsule statement on part of the ongoing debate concerning these and related issues.

<sup>3</sup>See Robert Middlekauff, *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals 1596-1728* (New York, 1971), ch. 2, 'The Antichrist,' pp. 20-34.

the pope and papacy—a time-honored suggestion among Protestant commentators—or with some other historical or contemporary figure: the preoccupation remained, and speculation about the Antichrist abounded.

The circumstances of colonial America during the first half of the eighteenth century reinforced the importance of the identification of the Antichrist and the beast. When the imperial struggles among the European nations broke into open conflict again at the beginning of the century, religious leaders in the colonies refurbished traditional interpretations of the beast and thereby fueled new fears. The colonists continued the earlier English practice of conceptualizing imperial struggles as religious contests by linking the French and Spanish powers with the forces of the beast.<sup>4</sup> They explained the hostilities by resurrecting polemical devices used in earlier struggles. In former generations speculations about the Antichrist had been encouraged by John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, championed by the Marian exiles, confirmed seemingly by the plots against Elizabeth and the Stuart flirtations with Catholicism, and epitomized in the minds of most Englishmen by the abortive Gunpowder Plot, the symbol of what all Protestants feared true.<sup>5</sup> These speculations experienced a wave of new interest in eighteenth-century America.

It is important, therefore, to examine the consistency of the colonial perspective upon the Antichrist because such an analysis provides an index for measuring intellectual and social change in the eighteenth century. The tradition of speculation about the beast was part of a deep-seated religious pattern among the English. During the first half of the eighteenth century, the hand of the past lay heavy upon Americans even when the New Learning and scientific perspectives of the En-

<sup>4</sup>For an account of the impact of the struggles in the American colonies, see Douglas Edward Leach, *Arms for Empire: A Military History of the British Colonies in North America, 1607-1763* (New York, 1973), especially chapters 4-7.

<sup>5</sup>See John Miller, *Popery and Politics in England 1660-1688* (Cambridge, Eng., 1973), ch. 4, 'The Development of the Anti-Catholic Tradition,' pp. 67-90.

lightenment began to touch some of the colonists. This analysis of the views of Mather and Edwards has the advantage of revealing the pace of intellectual and cultural change at the time. Those who agree with Alan Heimert that the great intellectual divide of the eighteenth century in America was the period of the Great Awakening during the 1740s have special reason to observe closely the tradition of speculation about the Antichrist lest they underestimate the staying power of old ideas and the skepticism which greeted the new.<sup>6</sup> The judgments of Mather and Edwards upon the work of Potter provide a test case for observing one important commitment of many Americans in the generations preceding the revolutionary era.

Francis Potter published *An Interpretation of the Number 666* at a moment of cultural crisis and at a time of intense interest in apocalyptic, when scores of works related to the book of Revelation were circulating among the English populace.<sup>7</sup> The brightest lights in the galaxy of commentators included Thomas Brightman and Joseph Mede.<sup>8</sup> Potter's reflections, by comparison, never achieved equivalent stature in the minds of his contemporaries nor in the evaluations of later historians. Nevertheless, his interpretation of the mysterious number of the beast cited in Revelation 13:18 caught the attention and imagination of several, including Mede. In a prefatory letter to the *Interpretation*, Joseph Mede expressed the opinion that Potter's essay was 'the happiest that ever yet

<sup>6</sup>For the most succinct statement of Heimert's thesis, see the Introduction in his *Religion and the American Mind*, pp. 1-24.

<sup>7</sup>Bernard Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men: A Study in Seventeenth-century English Millenarianism* (Totowa, N.J., 1972), pp. 36-37, 46-49. For further illustration, see Peter Toon, ed., *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Eschatology 1600 to 1660* (Cambridge, Eng., 1970), and Joy B. Gilsdorf, 'The Puritan Apocalypse: New England Eschatology in the Seventeenth Century' (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1964).

<sup>8</sup>The principal work of Brightman (1562-1607), *Apocalypsis apocalypseos*, appeared first in Frankfort in 1609 and subsequently went through several editions and translations. The leading commentary of Mede (1586-1638), *Clavis Apocalyptica* (Cambridge, 1627), followed a similar path including translation as *The Key of the Revelation* (London, 1643). On their significance, see John F. Wilson, *Pulpit in Parliament: Puritanism during the English Civil Wars, 1640-1648* (Princeton, 1969), pp. 214 ff.

came into the world; and such as cannot be read (save of those that perhaps will not believe it) without much admiration.' Although Mede acknowledged his own skepticism about numerical speculation—a common view in an age deluged by bizarre apocalyptic writings—he confessed of Potter's work that 'by the time I had done it left me possest with as much admiration as I came to it with prejudice.'<sup>9</sup> William Twisse, a leader of the Westminster Assembly, was of one mind with Mede, citing with approval the opinion that the interpretation was 'the greatest mystery that hath been discovered since the beginning of the world.'<sup>10</sup> Even men of much different outlook found themselves attracted. Samuel Pepys, secretary to the admiralty, recorded the following judgment in November 1666. 'Read an hour, to make an end of Potter's Discourse on the Number 666, which I like all along, but his close is most excellent; and, whether it be right or wrong, is mighty ingenious.'<sup>11</sup> William Tong, one of a group of dissenting clergymen who completed the last volume of Matthew Henry's commentary on the New Testament after Henry died, offered the following judgment: 'The most admired dissertation on this intricate subject is that of Dr. Potter, where the curious may find sufficient entertainment.'<sup>12</sup>

Numerical speculation, a bane to many biblical commentators but the delight and entertainment of others, formed the backbone of Potter's work. He stood consciously in a long line of Christian exegetes who 'have used the like, and far more obscure interpretations than this, of divers other numbers mentioned in the Scriptures.'<sup>13</sup> In the preface of his *Interpretation*, Potter challenged his readers not to falter in the face of

<sup>9</sup> Potter, *Interpretation*, prefatory note by Mede.

<sup>10</sup> Mede, *Key of the Revelation*, preface, p. vii.

<sup>11</sup> Henry B. Wheatley, ed., *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 8 vols. (London, 1924), VI, 55.

<sup>12</sup> *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Old Tappan, N.J., 1970), VI, 1164.

<sup>13</sup> Potter, *Interpretation*, 'To the Reader,' p. vi.

such speculations simply because they were untested or without precedent, for those ideas 'now old, were once new, and have had their several oppositions.'<sup>14</sup> He asked only that wise and learned men examine and test what he offered.

One of the 'wise and learned' who read Potter's reflections nearly fifty years later was Cotton Mather. In the 'Biblia Americana,' a massive biblical commentary in manuscript which remained unpublished, Mather singled out Potter's *Interpretation* as worthy of special note.<sup>15</sup> Commenting on Revelation 13:18, Mather asked: 'Q. Why is the *Number of the Beast*, here determined, *Six hundred Sixty Six!*' In response to his own question he sketched the views of three exegetes including Potter. Mather also rendered a general judgment about past efforts to lay bare the secrets of the number 666. 'A. There have been almost as many ways of proceeding used by Interpreters, to come at ye mystery; and Some of them that have not been without much profanity in them. I shall blott none of my paper with them. I shall single out only Two or Three, all of which do appear highly probable, and are so consisting & concurring with Each other, that probably they may be all intended.'<sup>16</sup> Reservations aside, Mather then pro-

<sup>14</sup>Potter, *Interpretation*, p. vii. Potter's interest in apocalyptic began as early as his theological training at Trinity College, Oxford, from which he received the Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1625. See Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, eds., *The Dictionary of National Biography*, 22 vols. (London, 1949-1950), XVI, 214-215. Potter receives passing mention in Hill, *Antichrist*, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup>The 'Biblia Americana,' six manuscript volumes, is owned by the Massachusetts Historical Society. The Society has kindly permitted quotation of the excerpts contained in this essay. The manuscripts are important, untapped resources which document Mather's interest in biblical studies. On Mather himself, see the biographical study of Barrett Wendell first published in 1891, *Cotton Mather: The Puritan Priest* (New York, 1969); the recently compiled *Selected Letters of Cotton Mather*, Kenneth Silverman, ed., (Baton Rouge, La., 1971), with its full commentary; and the recent study of Middlekauff, *The Mathers*. Middlekauff's is the best work available and gives attention to Mather's biblical interests.

<sup>16</sup>Mather, 'Biblia Americana,' Rev. 13:18. No regular pagination exists in the manuscripts. The canonical references are the devices used for citation.

ceeded to spell out three schemes of interpretation, giving the largest amount of attention to Potter's ideas.

The Revelation, Mather noted, speaks of 666 as 'the number of a man.' Therefore the significance of the number may be calculated in the normal way that men reckon such affairs: 'ye Best Flights in ye *Art of Arithmetick* must be used in it.'<sup>17</sup> The mystery will unlock to apocalyptic calculation; such speculative arithmetic, according to Mather, is consistent with the divine design of revelation. In this vein of thought, Mather described in detail Potter's effort to unlock the secret.

The key to Potter's apocalyptic calculations was the principle '*oppositorum eadem est ratio.*'<sup>18</sup> Potter had deciphered the meaning of the number 666, to his own satisfaction, by pointing out its opposition to a similar number, its 'anti-numerus, 144.' Taking his hermeneutical clues from the scriptural treatment of the number 144 and its square root 12, Potter based his interpretation of 666 on the premise that both the number of the heavenly Jerusalem (144) and the number of the beast (666) are to be explained in a similar fashion. 'And as 12 is the *Square Root* of 144, So if we find ye *papacy* run all upon a *Number* that is ye *Square Root* of 666, we need not be at a Loss where to find the *Beast*, which the Holy Spirit has Described unto us.'<sup>19</sup>

In the case of the number of the heavenly Jerusalem, Potter noted, the Holy Spirit completed the calculations himself, leaving nothing to the skill of men. 'Whole Chapters are full of this.' The same clarity, unfortunately, does not exist for the identity of Antichrist. The Holy Spirit, as Mather recorded in his evaluation of Potter, 'only tells us ye *Number* of ye *Beast*, and bids us be at ye pains to *Count* it, & Search out ye *Square Root* of it.' Such calculations are necessarily difficult and potentially clouded by uncertainties. 'When ye *New Jerusalem*

<sup>17</sup> Mather, 'Biblia Americana,' Rev. 13:18.

<sup>18</sup> Potter, *Interpretation*, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Mather, 'Biblia Americana,' Rev. 13:18.

arrives, every thing will of itself be made plain unto us.'<sup>20</sup> But before that time, interpreters may proceed with those clues provided by God in the Scriptures.

Mather found Potter's apocalyptic scheme a plausible solution to the mystery. So he noted in the 'Biblia Americana' that as 12, the square root of 144, is the 'sacred number' of Christ's true church and 'bears a Sway in all that belongs to ye N. Jerusalem: So 25, which is the *Square Root* of 666, is a Sacred Number in the Antichristian church. It is found every where; All turns upon it.'<sup>21</sup>

Potter had devoted the largest portion of the *Interpretation* to a detailed treatment of the evidence linking the number 25 with antichristian Rome. Finding the evidence persuasive, Mather summarized much of it in his commentary. He was taken with the frequency of the occurrence of the number 25 in antichristian history. According to tradition, for example, the city of Rome had 25 gates and 25 churches within the city. Mather cited the opinions of several Roman historians that 'Rome had, at first, only 25 Cardinals, 25 parishes, and 25 Curates.'<sup>22</sup> He also noted in the commentary additional information from Potter that St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome had 25 altars, the greatest of which had a cross on it reaching 25 spans high, and the altar itself was 25 feet on each side. 'Before ye church there are 25 Gates and one of them is not opened but every 25 years.' All of the altars had the number 25 on them 'in that the *Five wounds* of Christ's, are graven upon them in *Five* Several places.'<sup>23</sup> Potter found further support for associating the number 25 with the Roman Catholic Church in the age of the Council of Trent. That convocation of the western church began with 25 bishops, continued for 25 sessions, and

<sup>20</sup> Mather, 'Biblia Americana,' Rev. 13:18.

<sup>21</sup> Mather, 'Biblia Americana,' Rev. 13:18. Mather was aware of the fraction: 'Because 25 multiplied by itself makes, 625. to which a Fraction of 41 being added, there arises ye Number of 666.'

<sup>22</sup> Mather, 'Biblia Americana,' Rev. 13:18.

<sup>23</sup> Mather, 'Biblia Americana,' Rev. 13:18.



was concluded by the signatures of 25 archbishops. Trent produced a theological formula consisting of 25 articles of faith.<sup>24</sup> Mather agreed with Potter's judgment that the occurrence of this numerical pattern was a significant, if not divinely ordained, clue for identifying the Antichrist.

In the 'Biblia Americana' Mather also anticipated the complaints of those who were more skeptical toward apocalyptic calculations and numerical coincidences. Why, some demand, did the Holy Spirit not make 625 the number of the beast? The square root of 666 involves a fraction, for 25 multiplied by itself is 625. Mather, by way of contrast with Potter, encountered little difficulty with the fraction; for him the fraction functioned so that God might also 'give us the *Number of his Name*; that so by a Further delineation He might the better point out ye *Beast* unto us.'<sup>25</sup> The fraction provided Mather an occasion to join the views of Potter with those of other Christian commentators, some of whom Potter had specifically rejected. Mather, unlike Potter, was not bothered by multiple interpretations which tended to conflict with one another. 'It agrees admirably with ye meaning of, *The Number of ye Name of ye Idol*, to find That ye *Letters* in ye *Name* of ye *Beast*, contain and produce ye *Number* now before us.'<sup>26</sup> Here his reference is to the ancient form of notation by which letters of the alphabet stood for numerical equivalents. According to an early Christian equation, the numerical equivalents of the Hebrew and Greek names for Rome, respectively, רומייה and λατρευος, add up to the number of the beast. This explanation was in use within Christianity as early as the time of the church father Irenaeus in the second century.<sup>27</sup> Later com-

<sup>24</sup> Potter, *Interpretation*, pp. 119 ff.

<sup>25</sup> Mather, 'Biblia Americana,' Rev. 13:18. For Potter's reflections on the fraction, see *Interpretation*, pp. 63-73.

<sup>26</sup> Mather, 'Biblia Americana,' Rev. 13:18.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Irenaeus Against Heresies in The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8 vols. (Buffalo, N.Y., 1885-1886), I, 559. On the mystical interpretation of numerical equivalents in the alphabet and on the general background of Jewish biblical interpretation, see Frederick W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (Grand

mentators substituted the Roman Catholic Church for imperial Rome.<sup>28</sup>

Mather acknowledged that still other equations might unlock the apocalyptic secrets. Disagreement about different methods of interpretation, in his judgment, was not sufficient grounds to lay aside valuable, Spirit-directed means of apocalyptic calculation.

It is true, the meer hitt of ye *Number* in the *Letters* of this *Name*, is not Enough to Demonstrate that ye Pope is *Anti-Christ*. For *Bellarmino* found ye Same *Number*, in the Name  $\Sigma\alpha\xi\omicron\nu\epsilon\iota\omicron\varsigma$ . *Genebradus* pretends to find it in  $\text{Μαομετις}$ . And ye Attempts of Some others, have been as Foolish and profane, as that Idle Fellowes, who made a mightly Discovery, that there were 666 words, in ye *Solemn League & Covenant*. But Such an Hitt as oes [i.e. these], falling in with Such a notable Coincidence of so many other things, ought not to be despised.<sup>29</sup>

The entry on Revelation 13:18 in the 'Biblia Americana' supports the principle of complementary interpretation. Mather followed the summary of Potter's arguments, in turn, with a summary of the calculations and ideas of two others, Thomas Beverley (fl. 1670-1701), a dissenting divine in England, and

Rapids, Mich., 1961), pp. 47-107, especially pp. 98-100. Mather cited the following calculations.

$\lambda$	—	30	$\eta$	—	200
$\alpha$	—	1	$\iota$	—	6
$\tau$	—	300	$\delta$	—	40
$\epsilon$	—	5	$\nu$	—	10
$\iota$	—	10	$\nu$	—	10
$\nu$	—	50	$\pi$	—	400
$\omicron$	—	70			666
$\varsigma$	—	200			
		666			

'Biblia Americana,' Rev. 13:18.

<sup>28</sup> For example, see the marginal comments in the Geneva Bible, *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison, Wis., 1969), Rev. 13:18.

<sup>29</sup> Mather, 'Biblia Americana,' Rev. 13:18. Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), a leading Roman Catholic theologian and opponent of the new Protestant movement, identified the beast as  $\Sigma\alpha\xi\omicron\nu\epsilon\iota\omicron\varsigma$ , 'one who came from Saxony,' an obvious reference to Martin Luther. Gilbert Générard, Archbishop of Aix and a biblical scholar active in the sixteenth century, found the beast in  $\text{Μαομετις}$ , or Mahomet. The Solemn League and Covenant was an agreement made in 1643 between the Scots and the English parliament, a pact with both political and religious dimensions.

Nicholas Noyes (1647-1717), minister of the church at Salem, Massachusetts.<sup>30</sup> He saw no ultimate conflict among the different interpretations. Each of the commentators seized upon an insight 'which may be no less acceptable.' Edification was obtainable from all of the exegetes who joined in the quest to identify the antichristian beast.

Jonathan Edwards, another learned divine in America, also read Potter's treatise. The juxtaposition of views held by Mather and Edwards provides an occasion to check the consistency of the American perspective upon the Antichrist during the first half of the eighteenth century. In his study of religion in the eighteenth century, Alan Heimert has argued that after the Great Awakening of the 1740s a fundamental change took place in the attitude of Americans toward Catholicism, the papacy, and the role of the Antichrist. Heimert speaks of anti-Catholicism being gradually 'exorcised from the evangelical mind as inconsistent with the dynamic and the meaning of the American revival.'<sup>31</sup> As a related development, he suggests by implication that the interest in apocalyptic calculation declined among evangelicals, the passage of the eighteenth century having produced a surfeit of such speculation. Cultural supports no longer buttressed this form of religious discourse. According to Heimert, the evangelical vision of the future did not turn on a massive confrontation between the forces of Christ and the forces of Antichrist. Evangelical successes had eroded the foundations of the antichristian cause; the church will conquer, therefore, by means of the gospel instead of the sword. Theological, mathematical, and historical grounds no longer supported the mentality of antagonism and beleaguer-

<sup>30</sup>On Beverley, see Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation*, 4 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1946-1954), II, 581-586. Mather's excerpts focus upon Beverley's association of the year 25 with the rise of Antichrist. Noyes maintained that the 'man of sin' reached full maturity in the papacy of Gregory VII beginning in 1073; the end of the beast's life will be 666 years later. Mather did not identify the sources used from either man.

<sup>31</sup>Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, p. 87.

ment. Edwards, the archetypical evangelical of the eighteenth century and the leading spokesman for the revivalistic camp, supposedly led this change in attitude. In line with Heimert's hypothesis, by 1750 the evangelicals no longer used the theme of opposition between Christ and the Antichrist as the starting point for interpreting the situation of the church in the world or the mystery of the number of the beast.<sup>32</sup>

Cotton Mather, as shown above, displayed no disinterest in the hostility motif nor such tolerance toward the Catholic Church or the Antichrist; he had been pleased to discover the speculations of Potter by which he could strengthen his opposition to the papacy as well as to its religious and political policies. If Heimert's analysis is correct, Mather and Edwards should have disagreed sharply in their respective evaluations of Potter's work. In actual fact they did not. Therefore this comparison of their responses to Potter suggests some qualification is needed of the larger thesis that the Great Awakening had sweeping effects upon all existing religious and cultural patterns. Perhaps the prevailing attitude of anti-Catholicism changed little in the first half of the eighteenth century.

Edwards's evaluation of the *Interpretation* of Potter is obtained by piecing together several judgments rendered at different times in his private writings. Some time prior to 1748 he became familiar with the work of Potter.<sup>33</sup> In October of that year Edwards wrote a letter to William McCulloch, minister of the parish in Cambuslang, Scotland, which in-

<sup>32</sup>For example, see Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, pp. 84-94. Heimert pointed especially to the scorn directed toward apocalyptic calculations by Joseph Bellamy, Edwards's close friend. See p. 87.

<sup>33</sup>On Edwards, see the standard biographical studies of Sereno E. Dwight, ed., *The Works of President Edwards with a Memoir of His Life*, 10 vols. (New York, 1829-1830), I; Ola E. Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards 1703-1758* (New York, 1940), and Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York, 1949). The best presentations of his religious thought are Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (Garden City, N.Y., 1966), and the introductions to the volumes in the Yale Edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, Conn., 1957-). There is no notice of Potter in Edwards's 'Catalogue' (MS, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven), his own private notebook of bibliography.

cluded a discussion of Potter's ideas. McCulloch was a successful revivalist in Scotland and a prominent spokesman for the evangelical cause. Edwards began to correspond with him after the revivals of the 1740s had catapulted both men into the international religious limelight.<sup>34</sup>

In the letter to McCulloch, Edwards followed Mather by also offering a general judgment about the number and relative success of earlier attempts to unlock the mystery of the number 666. He was drawn to the efforts, delighting in the study of the ruminations of earlier commentators. A streak of hermeneutical caution, however, if not outright skepticism, colored his evaluation of the collective success of their ventures. Impressed as he was by one or another explanation, he was committed theologically to the position that the mystery of the number of the beast would remain until God himself saw fit to unlock it. As he wrote, 'But after all, I have ever suspected that the thing chiefly aimed at by the Holy Spirit, was never yet found out, and that the discovery is reserved for later times.'<sup>35</sup> Here Edwards was echoing the general reluctance of many Christian commentators throughout the centuries to offer final or absolute solutions to these nagging riddles. Rarely, however, did these same commentators rest content with their own cautions; more frequently, after paying lip service to the difficulty of interpretation, they moved forward with abandon with their own schemes. Edwards was no exception to this pattern: his reluctance to speculate alternated with an eagerness to try his hand at deciphering the meaning of the number.

But Edwards's caution implied more. He was committed to the principle that the meaning of the prophecies of Scripture will not be known with certainty until they have been accom-

<sup>34</sup>For an account of McCulloch's role in the revivals, see Arthur Fawcett, *The Cambuslang Revival: The Scottish Evangelical Revival of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1971). Dwight's biography of Edwards contains many examples from the correspondence with the Scottish evangelicals. See Dwight, ed., *Works*, I.

<sup>35</sup>Dwight, ed., *Works*, I, 264.

plished. The data of history are the only full and acceptable solutions to prophetic puzzles. The intention of the Bible, said Edwards, remains inviolate. The Scriptures, for example, call upon the elect to be content without full disclosure about the precise time of the fall of Antichrist; so in this matter of the meaning of the number 666, the Bible is plain and 'does, in effect, require us to rest satisfied in ignorance till *the time of the end* comes.'<sup>36</sup>

Yet Edwards did not offer this reprimand in a 'dogmatical' fashion to those who made firm predictions or attempted to unlock the deepest of mysteries. Dogmatism was out of place, he counseled McCulloch, in the interpretation of prophecies. Edwards adopted his position partly for reasons of public modesty, claiming that he had done only 'small reading' on the matter of prophecies. He said that he did not want to counter the opinions of 'those who have had so much more opportunity to be well acquainted with things of this nature.'<sup>37</sup> Disagreement in these exegetical matters, however, was no barrier to fellowship and union in other more important affairs. 'If we do not exactly agree in our thoughts about these things [e.g., the interpretation of prophecies], yet in our prayers for the accomplishment of these glorious events in God's time, and for God's gracious presence with us, and his assistance in endeavours to promote his kingdom and interests, in the mean time, we may be entirely agreed and united.'<sup>38</sup>

Edwards noted that man is limited in what he may know of God's mysteries. For example, he expressed the judgment that 'There is a certain Sphere in which God hath placed Man cer-

<sup>36</sup>Dwight, ed., *Works*, I, 264. Compare the opinion of Mather identified above in note 20.

<sup>37</sup>Dwight, ed., *Works*, I, 263-264. Edwards's modesty was part of his announced professional strategy. See pp. 67-74, 702-703.

<sup>38</sup>Dwight, ed., *Works*, I, 264. For a full discussion of the relationship between the interpretation of prophecies, especially that of the fall of the Antichrist, and united prayer for Christ's kingdom, see Edwards's *Humble Attempt*, Dwight, ed., *Works*, III, 437-547.

tain Limits by which his Attainments in the World & the Degree of his Oly [i.e. worldly] Happiness is circumscribed Which Limits men have come to in Time Past and 'tis a vain Imagination for any to expect to exceed these Limits. . . . Man in his first transgression was ambitious of getting above his Limits of being as as [sic] God & this disposition is common among men but He that is mightier then Man, hath Set his Limits & tis in vain to contend with Him.'<sup>39</sup> Within such restrictions, Edwards acknowledged, men have managed to discover important truths revealed to mankind through the mysteries of Scripture. There is, therefore, nothing condemnable about the efforts of men to solve the most elusive riddles given by God in the Bible. The number 666 was such a mystery, to his way of thinking.

Edwards disliked some interpretations of the number, however, and he did not hesitate to voice his objections. As a case in point, he showed little enthusiasm for McCulloch's suggestion that the number 666 contained in code form the French and Latin names for the contemporary king of France, even though he acknowledged that the Spirit of God 'has sometimes his eye on several things in which he knows they will be fulfilled. . . .' Despite the possibility of multiple interpretations, Edwards was not persuaded by McCulloch's reference to the French king. 'I can hardly think that this individual King of France or any other particular Prince in Europe, is what is chiefly intended by the Beast, so largely described in the 13th Chapter of Revelation, whose number is said to be six hundred and sixty-six.'<sup>40</sup> The significance accorded the mystery of the number in Scripture, Edwards argued, was not paralleled by a corresponding importance in the proposed solution to the mystery: the current ruler of France has not occupied so pres-

<sup>39</sup> Edwards, 'Blank Bible' (MS, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven), p. 414. Yale University has kindly permitted me to quote this excerpt and others in this essay. The 'Blank Bible,' 900 pages of manuscript commentary interleaved with a Bible, was one of Edwards's principal collection points for his exegetical reflections.

<sup>40</sup> Dwight, ed., *Works*, I, 263.

tigious a position in the divine economy as the image of the beast does in the Bible. The criterion of equivalent weight must be used to distinguish significant suggestions worthy of serious consideration from those ideas which could not have been in the mind of the divine author of the prophecies.

These grounds did not lead Edwards to dismiss Potter's conjectures as unworthy of further consideration. On the contrary, as he suggested to McCulloch, he was attracted by the interpretive possibilities of Potter's speculations. He offered this evaluation: 'Of all the conjectures concerning the number of the Beast, that I have lit on in my small reading, that of Mr. Potter's seems to me the most *ingenious*, who supposes the true meaning is to be found by extracting the root of the number.'<sup>41</sup> Edwards's description of Potter's ideas as 'ingenious' does not necessarily mean that he regarded them as correct, but his response does reveal an admiration for Potter's efforts. Edwards had tried his own hand at deciphering the apocalyptic secrets of the book of Revelation, and he was no stranger to the efforts of others in the Christian tradition who had tried to do the same.<sup>42</sup> Like Potter, Mather, and others, he knew firsthand the difficulties facing such an enterprise. God had contrived these riddles, he thought, in order to test the faithful and to produce in them a proper stance of awe. Edwards did not condemn Potter for trying to unlock the mysteries because he shared the same curiosity and interest. He may even have felt a twinge of regret that he himself had not been the one to formulate this delightfully fascinating apocalyptic scheme.

In the years after 1748, Edwards remained interested in the

<sup>41</sup>Dwight, ed., *Works*, I, 263-264.

<sup>42</sup>Striking evidence of Edwards's preoccupation with the apocalyptic tradition is his unpublished 'Notes on the Apocalypse' (MS, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven), devoted exclusively to such matters. See my essay 'A Notebook on the Apocalypse by Jonathan Edwards,' *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., XXIX (Oct., 1972), 623-634. I am preparing a critical edition of the 'Notes on the Apocalypse' for the Yale Edition of Edwards's *Works*. His 'Catalogue' also documents his ongoing interest.



number 666. In a late entry in the 'Blank Bible,' a manuscript commentary which, like the 'Biblia Americana,' remains unpublished today, Edwards cited with approval a selection by Philip Doddridge, an eighteenth-century English evangelical, on Revelation 13:18 and the number of the beast.<sup>43</sup> 'Of all the various Interpretations given to this Text', he wrote, 'I find none that pleases me So well as that of Sir Isaac Newton, that the Words *λατεινος* and *רומייה* The Man of Latium or of Rome whose Numeral Letters taken together make 666 are here refer'd to And I Suppose this Number is mention'd to Signify, that the Appearance of that Power whose Effects were to continue 1260 Years was to happen about 666 Years after the Date of the Revelation. A.D. 96.'<sup>44</sup> Here Edwards, with Mather, turned back to one of the earliest solutions to the mystery proposed within the Christian tradition. This interpretation, he felt, did not run the same risk as McCulloch's suggestion about the King of France. The important role of the 'man of Rome' in divine history was commensurate with the significance accorded the beast in Scripture. In Edwards's judgment, the facts of history supported the association of the bishop of Rome with the figure of the beast.<sup>45</sup> Nor was it insignificant that Isaac Newton had given his support to this interpretation. Citation of respected authorities was a standard device employed in the game of apocalyptic arithmetic. Potter had felt constrained to defend his answer against the unspoken charge that it had not been espoused by earlier Christian thinkers. Mather had noted those authorities who agreed with the interpretations he detailed. This pattern was not lost upon Edwards. His own reading in the field had acquainted him with the standard literature on apocalyptic, and he took con-

<sup>43</sup> Edwards knew well Doddridge's multivolumed commentary *The Family Expositor*, 6 vols. (London, 1739-1756). The sixth volume, published posthumously, is the one from which the quotation is taken. Edwards used it steadily during the last year and a half of his life.

<sup>44</sup> Edwards, 'Blank Bible,' p. 755.

<sup>45</sup> For Edwards's discussion of the rise of the kingdom of the Antichrist and the papacy in western Christianity, see *A History of the Work of Redemption*, III, 360-363.

siderable pleasure in citing those spokesmen within the tradition who came down on the same side of debated questions.<sup>46</sup>

Edwards registered one particular reservation about Potter's scheme, a qualification related to the fraction in the square root of 666. Mather had accepted the fraction as an expedient whereby other interpretations could be added to Potter's; for Edwards it was more problematical. 'Yet one reason why Mr. Potter's conjecture does not fully satisfy me, is, the difficulty about adjusting the fractions in the root, when extracted.'<sup>47</sup> Imperfection was inconsistent with the nature of God; convoluted mathematical schemes were not worthy of the Spirit of God who had no need of an imperfect solution. Yet Edwards did not attempt any explanation of the fraction on his own.

Despite his reservation about Potter's *Interpretation*, Edwards was not uninfluenced by the volume. On several occasions he used the square root idea as a solution for problems of scriptural interpretation. For example, Edwards interpreted the reference to 'five and twenty men' in Ezekiel 8:16 with the following comment: 'which is the number of the false Idolatrous Chh as 12 is of the true being the Root of 666 the number of the Beast Rev 13. 18.'<sup>48</sup> This entry was directly derivative from Potter's construct. On other occasions, Edwards associated the number 25 with the forces in alliance against Christ, whereas 12 retained for him its association with the true Christian church. These numerical associations and others were important interpretive devices for Edwards; they fill his biblical writings.

This comparison of the evaluations of the *Interpretation* of Francis Potter by Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards provides an occasion to reflect on several historical issues of reli-

<sup>46</sup>For example, see his use of Moses Lowman, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Revelation of St. John* (London, 1737), in the *Humble Attempt*, Dwight, ed., *Works*, III, 516-540.

<sup>47</sup>Dwight, ed., *Works*, I, 264.

<sup>48</sup>Edwards, 'Blank Bible,' p. 577.

gious and cultural significance in the first half of the eighteenth century. From their different positions within the Anglo-American Protestant tradition, all three men agreed that 'the Knowledge of Antichrist and him revealed' was a matter of central importance. In particular, Mather and Edwards were fascinated with Potter's speculations because they shared his desire to arrive at a clear and unequivocal identification of the beast of the Apocalypse, even though they were uncertain such could be obtained. The figure of the beast assumed great importance for Protestants of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries because, from their viewpoint, the shadow of the beast bulked large in the pages of Scripture. As the 'Biblia Americana' and the 'Blank Bible' attest, Mather and Edwards were equally intense students of the Bible with special interests in the apocalyptic sections of Scripture. It was reasonable for them to seek the best interpretation of that classic scriptural conundrum, the meaning of the number of the beast.

For Mather and Edwards, however, the identity of the beast was never seriously in question. The mathematical calculations involved with Potter's apocalyptic reflections were not necessary for them to identify the beast because both men were thoroughly steeped in the tradition of anti-Catholicism.<sup>49</sup> Mathematical calculations functioned more as polemical stratagems than as heuristic devices. Such speculations did not produce for them new candidates to associate with the beast. The cultural supports for the traditional identification of the beast with the forces of the Roman Catholic Church, the papacy, and the pope himself remained strong throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>50</sup> Mather and Edwards used Potter's discourse as support for the obvious, as a rationalization and amplification of an established view. Neither of the divines was strongly attracted to an alternative explana-

<sup>49</sup>See Middlekauff, *The Mathers*, especially ch. 2, and my essay cited in note 42.

<sup>50</sup>For example, see Mary Augustina Ray, *American Opinion of Roman Catholicism in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1936), and John Kenyon, *The Popish Plot* (New York, 1972).

tion for the number 666. They did not need Potter's *Interpretation* to persuade them of a conviction they had probably held since childhood.

Nonetheless, mathematical calculations remained an important part of apocalyptic for the two American divines. Such activity appealed to a broad range of the population in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries including Mather, Edwards, and other intellectuals. The New Learning of the Enlightenment and its scientific perspective did not shake the fascination with apocalyptic speculation. In fact, the Enlightenment seems to have strengthened the commitment of Mather and Edwards to ancient patterns of interpretation. The emerging scientific perspective brought new esteem to the experimental method of truth verification. Mathematics was closely associated with the scientific method. Mathematical calculations involving 'ye Best Flights in ye *Art of Arithmetick*' provided powerful sanctions for traditional patterns of interpretation, including the time-honored anti-Catholic view of the beast. In America the Enlightenment did not sound the death knell for apocalyptic speculation. Rather the converse seems true. The new science breathed fresh life into an old enterprise; Potter's square-root formula gained renewed appeal for commentators such as Mather and Edwards.

In their respective comments upon Potter's *Interpretation*, Mather and Edwards displayed a full awareness of the religious possibilities represented by the exegetical tradition of the beast. They were familiar with the wide range of earlier solutions offered to the mystery of 666. They understood how the figure of the beast had been used to motivate men throughout the ages. Christians in different times and places had raised the specter of the beast to stir members of their community to activity. The image of the beast feeds the spirit of opposition, contention, and hostility as it exploits the fears of those who reflect upon it. The notion of the beast has been a powerful rhetorical device for activating polemical responses to desig-

nated 'anti-Christian forces,' whatever they may be. Anglo-American Protestants of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who had inherited a disposition to polemics from the sixteenth-century Reformation and an inclination to militancy from the religious struggles in seventeenth-century England nurtured these characteristic attitudes by their continued use of the image of the beast. They depicted the imperial rivalries of the eighteenth century as an extension of the earlier and ongoing religious conflicts. Both Mather and Edwards, for example, associated the French Catholic armies which were struggling against the English for empires in the new world with the forces of the beast.<sup>51</sup> Potter's unequivocal identification of the beast with Roman Catholicism supported the basic motivational myth prevailing among the Protestant majority in colonial America. Mather and Edwards were spokesmen for that perspective. The same myth remained in force at the time of the War for Independence when religious leaders in the colonies were able to incite hostility against the English crown by linking the government with a larger 'popish plot' against colonial liberties.<sup>52</sup> The possibilities of the myth were not lost upon the Protestant leadership of the new nation at the beginning of the nineteenth century when ministers urged families to migrate westward in order to save the unsettled regions from the specter of Romanism.<sup>53</sup> The myth of the beast, therefore, became a standard part of America's religious ideology and rhetoric.

It is equally clear from their comments about the *Interpretation* that neither Mather nor Edwards examined closely the

<sup>51</sup>See Mather, *A Discourse Delivered unto some part of the Forces Engaged in the Just War of New-England Against the Northern & Eastern Indians* (Boston, 1689), and Edwards, sermon on Rev. 17:11 (MS, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven), delivered on the Fast Day, July 10, 1746, upon the expedition to Canada.

<sup>52</sup>See Carl Bridenbaugh, *Mitre and Sceptre: Transatlantic Faiths, Ideas, Personalities, and Politics 1689-1775* (New York, 1962), and my own essay, 'An Apocalyptic Rationale for the American Revolution,' *Early American Literature*, forthcoming.

<sup>53</sup>See Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* (Cincinnati, 1835).

assumptions involved with their interpretations of the mystery of the number. The presuppositions associated with the mystery of the beast were not subjected to careful scrutiny or evaluation. The identification of the beast was transmitted uncritically from generation to generation with Potter, Mather, and Edwards forming a continuum in the process of transmission. By accepting the principle of opposition explicit in the square-root interpretation, the two American divines unthinkingly subscribed to a dualistic premise about the nature of history, namely, that it must be explained in terms of opposing forces of good and evil locked in a life-and-death struggle. Religiously, the effect of this was to exalt the place and power of evil in the lives of men, a dominant theme in American Protestant theology.<sup>54</sup> In meetinghouses and revival tents alike, ministers and evangelists harangued their audiences with the vision of a world crowded with sin, filled with the lazy and the philanderer, the infidel and the intemperate, the fascist and the radical, who tempted them to ally themselves with the 'man of sin.' Each figure personifies the power and perversity of evil. Conversion, according to the preachers, means rejection of this alliance and acceptance of a pact with Christ and his church. Culturally, the result of this dualistic premise was to invest political and social conflicts with ultimate significance and to transform power struggles into crusades against the forces of the beast, a move which in secularized form has left an indelible stamp upon American experience.<sup>55</sup> In generation after generation, movements were launched against such 'evils' as declension, corruption, infidelity, slavery, liquor, immigration, Nazism, and Communism. Romanism has also been re-

<sup>54</sup>See Clyde A. Holbrook, ed., *Original Sin*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, Conn., 1970), and H. Shelton Smith, *Changing Conceptions of Original Sin: A Study in American Theology Since 1750* (New York, 1955).

<sup>55</sup>See Ray A. Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York, 1938); Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago, 1968); Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York, 1971); and Paul C. Nagel, *This Sacred Trust: American Nationality 1798-1898* (New York, 1971).

currently one of the objects of such movements. The mythology of the beast has transformed these movements into crusades, thereby providing the participants with a strong dose of motivation as well as a deep conviction about the righteousness of their cause. Thus the myth of the beast as handed on by Mather, Edwards, and others has significantly shaped America's religious and cultural heritage.

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