

## Tempering Apocalyptic Ideals: Hobbes and Pretenders to God's Kingdom

Throughout his writings, Thomas Hobbes makes clear his disdain for apocalyptic prophecy, especially when used to further rebellion. His early work *The Elements of Law* criticizes “learned madmen” who “determine . . . the time of the world’s end.”<sup>1</sup> Later in *Behemoth*, Hobbes calls the Fifth Monarchy Men – the most explicitly apocalyptic sect of the English Civil War – “fanatics.”<sup>2</sup> In his view, they and other religious sects were among the diverse “seducers” whose agitation plunged England into civil war.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Hobbes lists the Fifth Monarchy Men as one of several sects that “sated savage Mars with much blood.”<sup>4</sup>

Quentin Skinner perhaps best sums up Hobbes’s attitude toward these sects and those who reaped political benefits from them during the English Civil War. He describes Hobbes as understanding the period between 1640 and 1660 as “an era of collective insanity.”<sup>5</sup> Though this reaction by Hobbes occurred within a specific historical context, it is recognizable to anyone who has ever been skeptical of apocalyptic claims. The notion that the English Civil War signaled the imminent arrival of Christ’s kingdom on earth, as some of his contemporaries claimed, struck Hobbes as sheer madness.

Beyond its far-fetched claims, what troubles Hobbes about apocalyptic thought is its potential to spur continuous political upheaval. Apocalyptic thought anticipates nothing short of perfection – a divine kingdom breaking

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 1.10.9.

<sup>2</sup> Hobbes, *Behemoth, or The Long Parliament*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), 136.

<sup>3</sup> Hobbes, *Behemoth*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Hobbes, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ed. and trans. Patricia Springborg, Patricia Stablein, and Paul Wilson (Paris: Honoré Champion 2008), lines 1557–62.

<sup>5</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 436.

into the present to wipe away corruption. Political movements motivated by such utopian goals have difficulty living up to them, and almost invariably end in disappointment. Even if new rulers come to power, they like their predecessors fall short of achieving the perfection promised. The failure to realize utopia breeds an endless cycle of dissatisfaction, disruption, and instability that plagues politics.

Hobbes is keenly aware of the destabilizing effects that utopian visions – like those found in apocalyptic thought – can have on politics. To counter this danger, he opts against the most straightforward option: making the case to abandon the pursuit of apocalyptic ideals altogether. Sensitive to the power that apocalyptic ideals have in politics, he co-opts them instead – most notably, the concept of the kingdom of God from Christian eschatology.

This strategy is on display in *Leviathan*, where Hobbes singles out subversive interpretations of the kingdom of God as “the greatest, and main abuse of Scripture.”<sup>6</sup> Religious sects claim to represent God’s kingdom, and in turn believe that this status gives them authority over civil matters. This interpretation of the kingdom of God creates continual conflict with the civil sovereign. Hobbes responds by dedicating numerous passages in *Leviathan* to reinterpreting the doctrine of the kingdom of God so that it is safe for politics. He arrives at an interpretation that denies, at present, all claims to represent God’s kingdom made by prophets and sects challenging the sovereign’s authority. For now, the kingdom of God can only take one form – what Hobbes calls the natural kingdom of God. Importantly, the Leviathan state is a manifestation of the natural kingdom of God, where God rules through principles of reason rather than his prophetic word. By identifying God’s kingdom with the Leviathan state, Hobbes transforms a Christian doctrine used to justify rebellion into one that bolsters the sovereign’s authority.

So apocalyptic ideals have a place in Hobbes’s political philosophy, but only after he tempers their utopian hopes. Hobbes advises those looking for God’s kingdom to stop chasing after utopia and instead look for it in the civil commonwealth already before them. Far from perfect, commonwealths sometimes command idolatry and kill the innocent. Hobbes frankly admits these shortcomings. To equate God’s perfect kingdom with such imperfection strikes some as deeply unsatisfying and even downright blasphemous. But wary of attempts to achieve perfection in politics, Hobbes sees value in an ideal emptied of its utopian content. When outlining his vision for politics, he concedes that “life shall never be without Inconveniences.”<sup>7</sup> Efforts to

<sup>6</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Noel Malcolm (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), XLIV: 960.

<sup>7</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XX: 320.

eliminate *all* inconveniences end up leading to far greater ones: political upheaval when perfect rulers and institutions never come, followed by dissolution of the commonwealth and the perilous existence found outside of it. Worried about these dangers, Hobbes uses the concept of the kingdom of God to defend the Leviathan state and all its imperfections, as well as discredit the utopian aspirations of the prophets and revolutionaries of his day.

#### THE APOCALYPTIC CONTEXT IN WHICH HOBBS WROTE

The widespread nature of apocalyptic thought in seventeenth-century England is well documented.<sup>8</sup> What stands out about apocalyptic thought in this context is the extent to which it motivated those in political power. There is a tendency to characterize apocalyptic belief as primarily taking hold among the outcasts and marginalized in society.<sup>9</sup> Yet in seventeenth-century England, apocalyptic hopes captured the imagination of soldiers, scholars, members of Parliament, and even kings.<sup>10</sup>

Many in England began to see their king as a “godly prince” divinely chosen to defeat the Antichrist, understood as the papacy. James I embraced this role

<sup>8</sup> See Bryan Ball, *A Great Expectation: Eschatological Thought in English Protestantism to 1660* (Leiden: Brill, 1975); Andrew Bradstock, “Millenarianism in the Reformation and the English Revolution,” in *Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco*, ed. Stephen Hunt (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 77–87; B. S. Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men: A Study in Seventeenth-Century English Millenarianism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972); B. S. Capp, “The Political Dimension of Apocalyptic Thought,” in *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*, ed. C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 93–125; Paul Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon: English Apocalyptic Visions from the Reformation to the Eve of the Civil War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); Katharine Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain, 1530–1645* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Crawford Gribben, *The Puritan Millennium: Literature & Theology, 1550–1682* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000); Christopher Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991); William Lamont, *Godly Rule: Politics and Religion, 1603–60* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1969); Richard Popkin, “Seventeenth-Century Millenarianism,” in *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*, ed. Malcolm Bull (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 112–34; Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965); Arthur Williamson, *Apocalypse Then: Prophecy and the Making of the Modern World* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), 135–66; and John Wilson, *The Pulpit in Parliament: Puritanism during the English Civil Wars, 1640–1648* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969).

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> Capp, “The Political Dimension of Apocalyptic Thought,” 109–18.

to a certain extent, writing in 1609 that he had established from Revelation that the pope was the Antichrist. James ultimately would disappoint Puritan hopes of destroying the Antichrist, as would his successor Charles I. In fact, under Charles there was growing concern that the Church of England was the Antichrist.<sup>11</sup> The monarchy's transformation from God's instrument for furthering his kingdom into the Antichrist shows how quickly political allegiances influenced by apocalyptic belief could shift.

Scholarly study of Revelation and Christ's return helped legitimize and spur interest in apocalyptic thought. Joseph Mede, a Cambridge theologian, in 1627 published *Clavis Apocalyptica*, one of the most influential apocalyptic works at the time. As one of the "learned madmen" (to use Hobbes's words) advancing apocalyptic prophecies, Mede provided an intellectual framework to interpret contemporary events. Like James, he understood the papacy as the Antichrist and believed it was destined to fall. A member of Parliament translated *Clavis Apocalyptica* into English in 1643, and its publication received official government approval.<sup>12</sup>

When pastors in the 1640s came before Parliament to preach, apocalyptic themes often were prominent in their sermons.<sup>13</sup> For many clergy, the upheaval of the civil war was clear evidence that they were living in the end times foretold by Revelation. Thomas Goodwin notes in his 1646 sermon before Parliament that "as the *shorter time* Satan hath, the more is his *rage*; so the shorter time Christ hath, and the nearer he is to the possession of his Kingdome."<sup>14</sup> He cites Revelation 17:14 – "*These [kingdoms] shall make war with the Lambe, and the Lambe shall overcome them*" – to emphasize that "it is certaine, we are in the last times of these kingdoms."<sup>15</sup> In John Maynard's sermon before Parliament, he argues that England is living in the time of the seventh trumpet discussed in Revelation 11:15, when "[t]he kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever."<sup>16</sup> Another minister, Henry Wilkinson, uses vivid apocalyptic imagery to describe the task facing members of Parliament:

[S]ince your businesse lies professedly against the *Apocalypticall beast*, and all his complices; you must expect that the *militia* of Hell and the trayned bands of Satan, (*i.e.*) those that have received the mark of the beast, shall be put into a posture of warre, furnished with all their traines of Artillery, and the whole

<sup>11</sup> Capp, "The Political Dimension of Apocalyptic Thought," 102–9.

<sup>12</sup> Capp, "The Political Dimension of Apocalyptic Thought," 108, 111.

<sup>13</sup> Wilson, *The Pulpit in Parliament*, 197–235.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Goodwin, *The Great Interest of States & Kingdomes* (London, 1646), 46.

<sup>15</sup> Goodwin, *The Great Interest of States & Kingdomes*, 47.

<sup>16</sup> John Maynard, *A Shadow of the Victory of Christ* (London: F. Neile, 1646), 10.

Magazine of Satan, to put in execution their black *Commission*, which breathes forth nothing but blood, and slaughter, and ruine of our persons and our Religion.<sup>17</sup>

According to this view, Parliament's work had eschatological significance because it furthered God's plan for the end times. As these sermons highlight, the 1640s was a time when clergy and political leaders alike embraced an apocalyptic vision to interpret their world and the turmoil within it.

Apocalyptic ideas reached the height of their political influence during the English Civil War with the rise of the Fifth Monarchy Men. This movement began in the late 1640s, shortly before the publication of *Leviathan*. In his later work *Behemoth*, Hobbes describes the Fifth Monarchy Men as a sect whose central tenet was "that there ought none to be sovereign but King Jesus, nor any to govern under him but the saints."<sup>18</sup> The movement took its name from Daniel 7, which outlines four different monarchies that rise and fall before a final *fifth* monarchy establishes its everlasting rule over all. The Fifth Monarchy Men viewed events of their day through the lens of cataclysmic apocalyptic thought. That is, they interpreted the upheaval of the English Civil War as evidence that God was intervening to wipe away corruption and set up Christ's perfect kingdom on earth, where his saints would rule.

So according to the Fifth Monarchy Men, the chaos surrounding Charles I's downfall was no reason to fear. It rather served as a sign that the fifth monarchy, Christ's kingdom, was near. This view comes out in a Fifth Monarchist petition from 1649: "[T]he great design of God in the falls and overthrows of worldly powers, that have opposed the kingdom of His Son, is . . . to lift up Him on high, far above all principality, and powers, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named in this world, that He may be PRINCE of the kings of the earth."<sup>19</sup>

William Aspinwall's *Brief Description of the Fifth Monarchy*, though published in 1653 after *Leviathan*, provides insight into this movement that emerged while Hobbes wrote his masterpiece.<sup>20</sup> Aspinwall celebrates the execution of Charles – "a fierce & arrogant Tyrant & persecuter of the Saints"<sup>21</sup> – as the fulfillment of the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and

<sup>17</sup> Henry Wilkinson, *Babylons Ruine, Jerusalems Rising* (London, 1643), introductory letter.

<sup>18</sup> Hobbes, *Behemoth*, 182.

<sup>19</sup> Fifth Monarchist Petitioners, "King Jesus," in *The English Civil War and Revolution: A Sourcebook*, ed. Keith Lindley (New York: Routledge, 1998), 175.

<sup>20</sup> Hobbes likely began writing *Leviathan* in mid-1649. See Noel Malcolm, *Leviathan: Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1–12.

<sup>21</sup> William Aspinwall, *A Brief Description of the Fifth Monarchy Men* (London: M. Simmons, 1653), 1.

a sign that the fifth monarchy would soon rise.<sup>22</sup> Whereas it horrified Hobbes that the English people executed their own king, the Fifth Monarchy Men saw the event as reason to believe that God's kingdom was near (see Figure 4.1).

Though the Fifth Monarchy Men's views struck Hobbes and others as bizarre, this sect exerted no small influence over politics during the early 1650s. Disgusted by the Rump Parliament's perceived inability to realize apocalyptic hopes, Major-General Thomas Harrison led the Fifth Monarchy Men in pressuring Oliver Cromwell to dissolve the Rump and establish in its place what became known as the Barebones Parliament. Eventually Cromwell would dissolve Barebones to set up the Protectorate, at which point the Fifth Monarchy Men's influence declined.<sup>23</sup> Their sway lasted for only a short time, yet they demonstrated apocalyptic thought's power to impact politics.

Hobbes clearly took notice of the apocalyptic beliefs that pervaded religious and political life during the civil war period. As Kinch Hoekstra notes, "[A]fter 1640 it became obvious that the learned madness of eschatology was not an

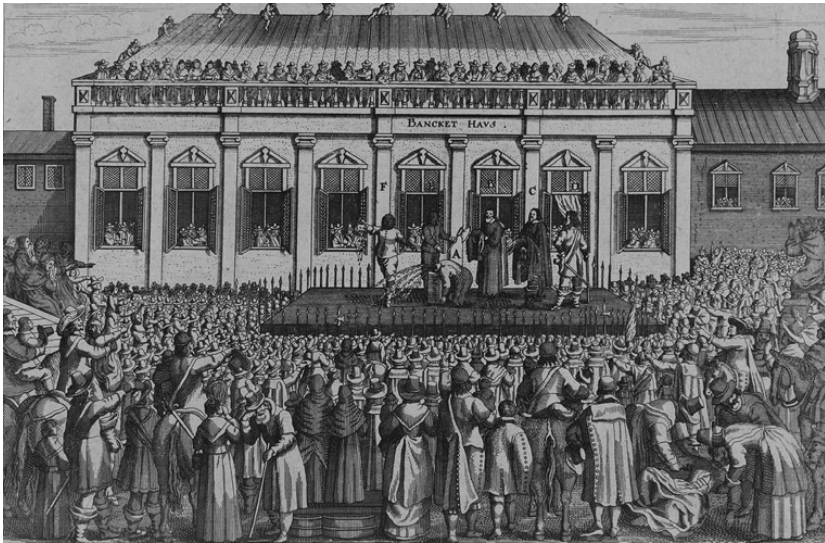


FIGURE 4.1 Execution of King Charles I  
Etching by an unknown artist from 1649<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Aspinwall, *A Brief Description of the Fifth Monarchy Men*, 14.

<sup>23</sup> Capp, "The Political Dimension of Apocalyptic Thought," 114–16.

<sup>24</sup> This image is reprinted with permission of the National Portrait Gallery and available at the following link: [www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw35443/The-execution-of-King-Charles-I](http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw35443/The-execution-of-King-Charles-I).

easily dismissed fringe phenomenon. Together, these reasons explain why Hobbes strove to discredit eschatological excess from the commonly accepted basis of scripture.”<sup>25</sup> One finds throughout Hobbes’s works enduring concerns over the misinterpretation of Christian eschatology and its ramifications for politics. In *The Elements of Law*, he expresses disdain for “madmen” who try to predict the world’s end.<sup>26</sup> Then in *Leviathan* he warns against subversive understandings of a key concept from Christian eschatology – the kingdom of God – and condemns “Authors . . . of this Darknesse in Religion” for encouraging political strife.<sup>27</sup> Concerns over the abuse of Christian eschatology persist in Hobbes’s posthumously published works, evident in his criticism of the Fifth Monarchy Men in *Behemoth* and *Historia Ecclesiastica*.<sup>28</sup> Confronted with the disruptive effects of apocalyptic thought on English politics, Hobbes repeatedly returns to the subject, determined to neutralize its dangers.

#### THE DANGER OF LOOKING FOR GOD’S KINGDOM

Christian eschatology takes diverse forms, yet one feature is universal to almost all of them: faith that the kingdom of God will be realized. History, according to the Christian view, is moving inexorably toward its ultimate goal – God’s perfect kingdom. Hobbes does not deny the coming of God’s kingdom, but has grave worries about churches and sects claiming to represent this kingdom *now*. In fact, of all the theological doctrines that Hobbes finds fault with in *Leviathan*, he singles out misinterpretations of the kingdom of God as the most dangerous. “The greatest, and main abuse of Scripture,” he writes, “and to which almost all the rest are either consequent, or subservient, is the wresting of it, to prove that the Kingdome of God, mentioned so often in the Scripture, is the present Church, or multitude of Christian men now living, or that being dead, are to rise again at the last day.”<sup>29</sup> As believers anticipate God’s kingdom, they often look for some form of it in the present. For Hobbes, such speculation takes a subversive turn when it equates God’s current kingdom with any entity distinct from the civil sovereign.

A letter from 1662 provides further evidence that this worry was at the forefront of Hobbes’s mind when he wrote *Leviathan*. After the Civil War

<sup>25</sup> Kinch Hoekstra, “Disarming the Prophets: Thomas Hobbes and Predictive Power,” *Rivista di storia della filosofia*, 59, no. 1 (2004): 107.

<sup>26</sup> Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*, I.10.9.

<sup>27</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLVII: 1106.

<sup>28</sup> Hobbes, *Behemoth*, 136; and *Historia Ecclesiastica*, lines 1557–62.

<sup>29</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLIV: 960.



had ended and the monarchy had been restored, Hobbes explained to England's new king his motivations for writing *Leviathan*. His letter assures Charles II that, despite the controversy sparked by the theological views expressed in the book, his motives for writing it were blameless:

It was written in a time when the pretence to Christ's kingdom was made use of for the most horrid actions that can be imagined; and it was in just indignation of that, that I desired to see the bottom of that doctrine of the kingdom of Christ, which divers ministers then preached for a pretence to their rebellion: which may reasonably extenuate, though not excuse the writing of it.<sup>30</sup>

So Hobbes understood *Leviathan* as an attempt to correct subversive understandings of the kingdom of God. Today, that motivation for Hobbes's masterpiece is often overlooked. With *Leviathan*, he hoped to wrest the kingdom of God away from those using it as a pretext for "the most horrid actions that can be imagined," and show that this doctrine – when properly understood – never justifies rebellion.

Who in Hobbes's view were distorting the doctrine of the kingdom of God to encourage rebellion? *Leviathan* identifies the primary culprits as "the Romane, and the Presbyterian Clergy."<sup>31</sup> For Hobbes, belief that the church represents God's kingdom began with the Catholic Church, before then spreading to the Presbyterians and other Protestant sects. Since Catholic theology is the root source of this error, Hobbes gives special attention to addressing it, evident from his extensive critique of this and other Catholic doctrines in Chapter 42 of *Leviathan*.

It is easy to see why Hobbes has such problems with the Catholic view of God's kingdom. In Catholic thought, the pope is understood as the head of Christ's spiritual kingdom on earth. From this belief stems the concept of the pope's "indirect power" (*potestas indirecta*), which refers to his authority to intervene in temporal matters when they have ramifications for Christ's spiritual kingdom.

This idea is most closely associated with the Catholic theologian Robert Bellarmine, whom Hobbes directly addresses and critiques in *Leviathan*.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Hobbes, *Seven Philosophical Problems*, in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, vol. 7, ed. William Molesworth (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1845), 5.

<sup>31</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLVII: 1106.

<sup>32</sup> Part of this critique includes singling out the problems with Bellarmine's conception of the kingdom of God. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLIV: 976. For more on Hobbes's engagement with Bellarmine, see Patricia Springborg, "Thomas Hobbes and Cardinal Bellarmine: *Leviathan* and 'The Ghost of the Roman Empire,'" *History of Political Thought* 16, no. 4 (1995): 503–31.



Though Bellarmine denies that the pope has supreme temporal authority, attributing that instead to civil sovereigns, he does argue that the pope's responsibility to safeguard souls as the head of Christ's kingdom sometimes requires intervention in politics. Christ's spiritual kingdom takes precedence over any civil kingdom, especially since it offers eternal life, the supreme end that all individuals should strive for. So if civil sovereigns lead souls astray by, say, commanding heretical practices, the pope has the authority to depose them in the interest of protecting Christ's spiritual kingdom. Bellarmine's understanding of the kingdom of God leads him to the view that "the temporal authority of the princes is subject and subordinate to the spiritual authority of the Popes."<sup>33</sup> This claim challenges the authority of civil sovereigns, and for Hobbes poses grave dangers to political life.

Unfortunately from Hobbes's perspective, Catholic beliefs about the kingdom of God made their way into Protestant thought, particularly Presbyterian theology. The Presbyterians prided themselves on rejecting "popish" practices and doctrines. But with regard to the kingdom of God, Hobbes notes, they conveniently chose to hold on to Catholic doctrine: "[I]n those places where the Presbytery took that Office, though many other Doctrines of the Church of Rome were forbidden to be taught; yet this Doctrine, that the Kingdome of Christ is already come, and that it began at the Resurrection of our Savior, was still retained."<sup>34</sup> This doctrine provided a basis for claiming spiritual authority, which in turn led to claims of political authority.

As a case in point, during the English Civil War Presbyterians played a lead role in calling the Westminster Assembly in defiance of Charles I. This move was part of an effort to reform the Church of England, abolish episcopacy, and bring it in line with their model of church government.<sup>35</sup> Notably, the Westminster Confession that came out of this assembly of clergy explicitly identifies the church as "the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>36</sup> To ensure Christ's kingdom on earth, the Presbyterians intervened in politics and asserted their authority over religious matters. In this way, Hobbes warns,

<sup>33</sup> Robert Bellarmine, *On the Temporal Power of the Pope. Against William Barclay*, in *On Temporal and Spiritual Authority*, ed. and trans. Stefania Tutino (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2012), 161. See also Stefania Tutino, *Empire of Souls: Robert Bellarmine and the Christian Commonwealth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9–47.

<sup>34</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLVII: 1106.

<sup>35</sup> For more on the Westminster Assembly, see Robert Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord: Politics and Religion in the Westminster Assembly and the "Grand Debate"* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985).

<sup>36</sup> Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, in *Creeeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, vol. 2, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 25.2.

Presbyterians embraced an understanding of God's kingdom that fostered rebellion and political upheaval during the civil war.<sup>37</sup>

Subversive understandings of God's kingdom eventually found their way into apocalyptic sects like the Fifth Monarchy Men, which only exacerbated the turmoil plaguing England. Hobbes sees the Fifth Monarchy Men as partly a consequence of Presbyterian theology, calling them a "brood of their [the Presbyterians'] own hatching."<sup>38</sup> Not content with Presbyterian attempts at religious and political reform, other sects took more extreme positions. The Fifth Monarchy Men also believed that they represented the kingdom of God, with the twist that "Christ's kingdom was at this time to begin upon earth."<sup>39</sup> Belief in the imminent arrival of Christ's literal kingdom on earth helped justify what for Hobbes was the greatest crime of the English Civil War, executing the king. For the Fifth Monarchy Men, such action was necessary to eliminate a corrupt ruler and make way for God's kingdom.

In short, the civil war period made clear to Hobbes the explosive and disruptive effects of claiming to represent God's kingdom. As he emphasizes in *Leviathan*, "points of doctrine concerning the Kingdome of God, have so great influence on the Kingdome of Man" that they must be determined "by them, that under God have the Sovereign Power."<sup>40</sup> The civil sovereign needs to exercise tight control over this doctrine because of the immense power associated with claiming to represent God's kingdom – namely, the power to block or grant access to a kingdom that promises eternal life. According to Hobbes, Christ placed the keys of his kingdom in the hands of his "Supreme Pastors" – namely, "Christian Civill Sovereignes."<sup>41</sup> So in this vision for Christian commonwealths, civil sovereigns have ultimate say over the doctrine of the kingdom of God, as they are God's appointed officials for overseeing this kingdom.

If, though, a church opposed to the sovereign comes to represent the kingdom of God, political allegiances can shift and throw a commonwealth into turmoil. Once the church is perceived as God's kingdom, it acquires a power exceeding any power possessed by the civil authority, since it becomes in the people's eyes the body that determines entrance into God's kingdom. Consequently, people fear the church more than the civil authority – a disastrous development in Hobbes's view. He writes: "[M]en that are once

<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Hobbes blames "Presbyterian ministers" for the "incitement" of the civil war. See Hobbes, *Behemoth*, 95.

<sup>38</sup> Hobbes, *Behemoth*, 136.

<sup>39</sup> Hobbes, *Behemoth*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXVIII: 708.

<sup>41</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLII: 872.

possessed of an opinion, that their obedience to the Sovereign Power, will be more hurtfull to them, than their disobedience, will disobey the Laws, and thereby overthrow the Common-wealth, and introduce confusion, and Civill war.”<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, for Hobbes, claims about representing God’s kingdom are attempts by ministers to exercise “Sovereign Power over the People.”<sup>43</sup>

Not surprisingly, Hobbes directs harsh language against those who pervert Christian teaching in an effort to augment their power, calling them a “Kingdome of Darknesse” and “*Confederacy of Deceivers*.” These enemies of peace advance “*dark, and erroneous Doctrines*” so as to “*obtain dominion over men in this present world*.”<sup>44</sup> What results is confusion among the people regarding their political obligations. Misinterpretations of the kingdom of God have just this effect, says Hobbes: “[T]his Errour, that the present Church is Christs Kingdome . . . causeth so great a Darknesse in mens understanding, that they see not who it is to whom they have engaged their obedience.”<sup>45</sup> By sowing such confusion, this teaching erodes the sovereign’s authority and poses grave risks to the commonwealth.

Subversive teachings concerning the kingdom of God create perceived conflicts between God’s commands and the civil sovereign’s. For Hobbes, such conflicts are the “most frequent praetext of Sedition, and Civill Warre, in Christian Common-wealths.”<sup>46</sup> Challenges to sovereign authority can plunge society into the horrors of war, while undermining efforts to establish peace well into the future. For whenever sovereignty dissolves due to an act of rebellion, it becomes more difficult for subsequent sovereigns to hold on to their authority and exercise it effectively. If a faction gains sovereignty through rebellion, cautions Hobbes, “others are taught to gain the same in like manner.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, rebellion encourages further rebellion and perpetual instability. Hobbes thus sees grave dangers in challenging the sovereign’s religious authority, which is why he singles out understandings of God’s kingdom for criticism. Use of this doctrine to challenge the sovereign’s authority opens up a Pandora’s box, resulting in a continuous cycle of regimes rising to and falling from power.

This account of continuous instability is reminiscent of the English Civil War, a period when religion played a prominent role in bringing down the king and various manifestations of Parliament. No one coming to power could

<sup>42</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLII: 850.

<sup>43</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLVII: 1106.

<sup>44</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLIV: 956.

<sup>45</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLIV: 960.

<sup>46</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLIII: 928.

<sup>47</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XV: 224.

fulfill apocalyptic hopes. Such disappointment quickly transformed rulers from servants chosen by God into agents of the Antichrist.<sup>48</sup> Religiously motivated attacks against the sovereign released a cannibalizing force adept at destruction, but ill-suited to establish anything of permanence. Hobbes brings attention to this aspect of the civil war in *Behemoth*: “[F]rom the beginning of the rebellion, the method of ambition was constantly this: first to destroy, and then to consider what they should set up.”<sup>49</sup> The leaders of the rebellion acted like “fools which pull down anything which does them good, before they have set up something better in its place.”<sup>50</sup> The havoc they inflicted fell far short of achieving perfection, and instead brought long-lasting harm to the commonwealth.

So in many ways, the English Civil War embodied the dangers of looking for God's perfect kingdom. Fervent religious hopes never ushered in this kingdom, but rather weakened existing political institutions. As new sovereigns came to power, they failed to meet the lofty expectations preceding them, which bred dissatisfaction as a result. Writing in the midst of these failed expectations, Hobbes understood all too well the close connection between apocalyptic hope and political instability.

#### DISCREDITING DIVINE REVELATION

In response to the problems that stem from misinterpreting the doctrine of the kingdom of God, Hobbes offers a two-part solution: (1) discredit the legitimacy of those who claim to represent God's kingdom and (2) offer his own interpretation of the kingdom of God as an alternative. This section focuses on the first part of Hobbes's solution, while the following section focuses on its second part.

Throughout his political writings and especially *Leviathan*, Hobbes radically severs the link between God and humanity in the present time. This move has the effect of “disarming the prophets,” as Hoekstra puts it.<sup>51</sup> Hobbes casts so much doubt on divine revelation in the present that he leaves no room for purported revelation to guide politics. It is important to remember that he took aim at prophecy's authority at a time when *apocalyptic* prophecy in particular was widespread and leaving its mark on English politics. When Hobbes sought to discredit the prophets of his day, the target of his attacks clearly included

<sup>48</sup> See Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England*.

<sup>49</sup> Hobbes, *Behemoth*, 192.

<sup>50</sup> Hobbes, *Behemoth*, 155.

<sup>51</sup> Hoekstra, “Disarming the Prophets.”

those madmen boldly proclaiming the world's end and using such claims to acquire political power.

In his case against such imposters, Hobbes avoids denying that God *can* communicate directly to his servants, since that would contradict much of scripture. For instance, Hobbes describes Moses as a prophet "in the sense of speaking from God to the People."<sup>52</sup> Moses had a unique relationship with God, in which God directly communicated to him commands for the Israelites.<sup>53</sup> But God's practice of speaking with Moses stands out as a rare exception because it took place at a time when God ruled directly over his people through a chosen representative. Today, Hobbes stresses, it is impossible to decipher true from false prophecy, and therefore we should not expect God to convey his commands through means plagued by such uncertainty.

Hobbes's view that we no longer can distinguish true from false prophecy ultimately rests on his claim that, in the present, God no longer empowers individuals to perform miracles. Referencing Deuteronomy 13:1–5, Hobbes says that scripture sets forth two requirements to establish someone as a true prophet: performance of miracles and only teaching religious doctrines that are established by God and avoid encouraging revolt against the sovereign. Neither condition by itself is sufficient to show that a prophecy is from God. Miracles are insufficient since false prophets can perform them, like the Egyptian sorcerers described in Exodus 7 and 8. Likewise, someone who teaches the established religion but fails to perform miracles provides no credible evidence for their prophecy, since we cannot be expected to trust prophetic predictions that lie far in the future and cannot be verified now.<sup>54</sup> After establishing these points, Hobbes asserts that "Miracles now cease," which allows him to conclude: "we have no sign left, whereby to acknowledge the pretended Revelations, or Inspirations of any private man; nor obligation to give ear to any Doctrine, farther than it is conformable to the Holy Scriptures." In a world without miracles, we lack grounds for believing prophetic claims. Hobbes assures his readers that this aspect of the current world is no reason for concern, since scripture provides all the revelation necessary to guide Christians in their "duty both to God and man."<sup>55</sup>

This argument establishes for Hobbes that individuals have no obligation to accept revelation merely on the grounds that someone claims to be divinely inspired. Hobbes is skeptical of purported prophecy, which is clear from his

<sup>52</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXVI: 658.

<sup>53</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXII: 582.

<sup>54</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXII: 582–84.

<sup>55</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXII: 584.

dismissive comment that the best prophet is simply the “best guesser.”<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, Hobbes avoids characterizing all present revelation as *necessarily* false. His point is more modest: prophecy in the present is possible – nothing could prevent God from communicating directly to someone now if he chooses – but it is impossible to verify its validity. Given this uncertainty, an authority is needed to determine which revelations and religious doctrines are true and which are false. For Hobbes, a Christian sovereign makes these determinations and is the only one deserving of the title “Gods Prophet.”<sup>57</sup> If Hobbes were to claim that *no* prophecy in the present could be valid, he would deprive the sovereign of its authority to determine which religious doctrines, including purported revelation, are true – a conclusion he wishes to avoid.

Hobbes's case against the legitimacy of revelation, at least when it lacks the civil sovereign's approval, applies equally to the doctrine of the kingdom of God. Whenever a sect claims to embody the kingdom of God, it purports to have a unique covenant with God. Such a covenant, says Hobbes, “is impossible, but by Mediation of such as God speaketh to, either by Revelation supernaturall, or by his Lieutenants that govern under him.”<sup>58</sup> In other words, covenants with God only come via direct communication with him. Though in the past God communicated with Abraham and established a covenant with the Jewish people, Hobbes emphasizes that now it is impossible to verify anyone's claims that God spoke to them. As a result, any claims about representing God's kingdom on the basis of a divine covenant are necessarily beyond verification.

During the civil war period, some did appeal to a purported covenant with God to justify defying the civil sovereign. A key event in the lead-up to the war was the National Covenant of 1638 signed by the Scottish Covenanters. These Presbyterians joined the covenant to declare their opposition to religious practices introduced in Scotland by the Anglican Archbishop William Laud and backed by Charles I. They grounded their opposition in the belief that the Church of Scotland had a covenant with God, and the obligations of this covenant required them to oppose religious practices in conflict with the true church.<sup>59</sup> Beyond just rejecting this idea, Hobbes attacks it as a ruse for wresting authority away from the civil sovereign. He writes: “[S]ome men

<sup>56</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, III: 44.

<sup>57</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXVI: 680.

<sup>58</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XIV: 210.

<sup>59</sup> For more on the religious and political thought of the Scottish Covenanters, see Ian Smart, “The Political Ideas of the Scottish Covenanters. 1638–88,” *History of Political Thought* 1, no. 2 (1980): 167–93.

have pretended for their disobedience to their Sovereign, a new Covenant, made, not with men, but with God . . . . [T]his pretence of Covenant with God, is so evident a lye, even in the pretenders own consciences, that it is not onely an act of an unjust, but also of a vile, and unmanly disposition.”<sup>60</sup> For Hobbes, there is nothing redeeming in the motivations of those challenging the sovereign on the grounds that they have a special covenant with God.

Hobbes further undermines such claims by relegating all manifestations of God’s kingdom founded on a pact or covenant to the distant past or end of time. In his view, the kingdom of God takes two forms:

- (1) the prophetic kingdom of God or kingdom of God by pact, covenant, or agreement (terms he uses interchangeably)
- (2) the natural kingdom of God or kingdom of God by nature (also terms he uses interchangeably)<sup>61</sup>

Hobbes believes that only the natural kingdom of God exists today. In this form of God’s kingdom, the law of nature – accessible to all through reason – governs God’s subjects. In contrast, God communicates law much differently in his prophetic kingdom. Here God uses his prophetic word to establish a covenant with a chosen people and communicate his laws to them. Unlike the natural kingdom of God, which exists today, the prophetic kingdom of God existed only once in history according to Hobbes – the nation of Israel until it elected Saul as king.<sup>62</sup> Besides ancient Israel, the only other prophetic kingdom of God lies in the future and will be realized upon Christ’s return.<sup>63</sup> By limiting the prophetic kingdom of God to these two instances, Hobbes adopts an understanding of sacred history that rejects any current claims to represent God’s kingdom that appeal to a revealed covenant.

In line with Hobbes’s materialism, both the historic and future prophetic kingdoms of God are earthly kingdoms. For “the Nation of the Jews,” writes Hobbes, the kingdom of God “properly meant a Common-wealth, instituted . . . for their Civill Government . . . which properly was a Kingdome, wherein God was King, and the High priest was to be (after the death of Moses) his sole Viceroy, or Lieutenant.”<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Christ’s

<sup>60</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XVIII: 266.

<sup>61</sup> Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. and trans. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), XV–XVII; and *Leviathan*, XXXI: 556, 572, XXXV: 634–36, XLI: 764.

<sup>62</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXI: 556, XXXV: 644.

<sup>63</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXV: 634–44.

<sup>64</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXV: 640.



kingdom “is a reall, not a metaphoricall Kingdome.”<sup>65</sup> Citing Revelation’s account of the new Jerusalem descending from heaven to earth, Hobbes argues that “the Paradise of God, at the coming again of Christ, should come down to Gods people from Heaven” rather than “they goe up to it from Earth.”<sup>66</sup> That Christ’s kingdom is still to come strikes Hobbes as obvious, and he points to language from the Lord’s Prayer – “*Thy Kingdome come*” – to back up this view.<sup>67</sup>

Hobbes admits that interpreting the kingdom of God as a literal earthly kingdom existing at two distinct points in time goes against how many understand it. Clergy often interpret the kingdom of God as existing “in the Highest Heaven” and never as an actual monarchy where God has sovereign power over his subjects “acquired by their own consent, which is the proper signification of Kingdome.”<sup>68</sup> According to Hobbes, many opt for a metaphorical understanding of God’s kingdom instead of his because the latter gives Christian kings too much power over “Ecclesiasticall Government.”<sup>69</sup>

Hobbes’s interpretation of the kingdom of God grants kings so much power because of the role they play in its current manifestation. For Hobbes, there is no prophetic kingdom of God at present. But despite being cut off from this kingdom, people still can join the *natural* kingdom of God. Here the principles of reason dictate that the civil sovereign has absolute authority, including over religion. By denying the possibility of God’s prophetic kingdom and identifying his natural kingdom as the only option now, Hobbes advances a view that leaves little room to challenge the sovereign’s authority in religious matters, as the next section explains.

## THE LEVIATHAN AS GOD’S KINGDOM

Discussion of the natural kingdom of God comes at a significant juncture in *Leviathan* – the final chapter of Part II. The argument in *Leviathan* moves in a systematic fashion: Part I outlines the nature of man and principles of reason; Part II draws on Part I to set forth the principles to govern the ideal commonwealth; Part III applies these principles to Christian commonwealths; and Part IV examines perverse understandings of Christian commonwealths. Within this schema, Chapter 31, “Of the Kingdome of God by Nature,” represents the culmination of Parts I and II. If individuals follow the dictates of reason as

<sup>65</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXV: 642.

<sup>66</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXVIII: 702.

<sup>67</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXV: 642.

<sup>68</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXV: 634.

<sup>69</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXV: 642.

outlined by Hobbes, without reliance on divine revelation, they will cede authority to a sovereign and enter a manifestation of the natural kingdom of God – the Leviathan state.

In making this argument, Hobbes refashions the concept of the kingdom of God so that it is no longer a source of political disruption. By giving a prominent place in his political philosophy to the concept of the kingdom of God, Hobbes directly draws on Christian eschatology. But while maintaining a connection to this tradition, his concept of the natural kingdom of God also departs from it in important ways.

First off, Hobbes chooses a term – the kingdom of God by nature – that never appears in scripture and was not in wide use. Though rare, the term does appear prior to Hobbes in Catholic thought. The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* from 1566 uses the term, and Bellarmine also uses it when discussing the teachings of the Catechism.<sup>70</sup> These Catholic texts outline a threefold understanding of God's kingdom: the kingdom of nature, the kingdom of grace, and the kingdom of glory.<sup>71</sup> Hobbes likely was familiar with this typology since he read Bellarmine, evident from his extensive critique of him in Chapter 42 of *Leviathan*. But in Hobbes's hands, the natural kingdom of God ends up looking much different from the Catholic understanding of it.<sup>72</sup>

According to the Catholic view, the kingdom of nature refers to God's rule over all creation.<sup>73</sup> Hobbes explicitly rejects this view when describing the natural kingdom of God in *Leviathan*:

[T]o call this Power of God, which extendeth it selfe not onely to Man, but also to Beasts, and Plants, and Bodies inanimate, by the name of Kingdome, is but a metaphoricall use of the word. For he onely is properly said to Raigne, that governs his Subjects, by his Word, and by promise of Rewards to those that obey it, and by threatning them with Punishment that obey it not. Subjects therefore in the Kingdome of God, are not Bodies Inanimate, nor creatures Irrationall; because they understand no Precepts as his.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, trans. John McHugh and Charles Callan (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, 1934), 522–23; Bellarmine, *Disputationes de controversiis Christianae fidei*, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 6, ed. Justinus Fèvre (Paris: Vivès, 1873), 402; and Bellarmine, *Dichiarazione piu copiosa della dottrina cristiana*, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 12, ed. Justinus Fèvre (Paris: Vivès, 1874), 298.

<sup>71</sup> Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, 522–25.

<sup>72</sup> For more on the intellectual history of Hobbes's concept of the natural kingdom of God, see my article, "The Natural Kingdom of God in Hobbes's Political Thought," *History of European Ideas* 45, no. 3 (2019): 436–53.

<sup>73</sup> Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, 522.

<sup>74</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXI: 554.

For Hobbes, the natural kingdom of God does not refer to his reign over all creation – the dominant view at the time – but rather to his reign over human beings who understand his commands, as well as the rewards and punishments tied to them.

Hobbes calls this form of God's kingdom the *natural* kingdom of God because of the type of law governing it. God rules subjects in his natural kingdom through the “naturall Dictates of Right Reason,” by which Hobbes means the law of nature.<sup>75</sup> That feature distinguishes God's natural kingdom from his prophetic kingdom, where he instead communicates law in the form of prophecy. Such divine revelation is unnecessary in the natural kingdom of God, since individuals should be able to comprehend the law of nature through reason alone.<sup>76</sup>

Hobbes worries, though, that self-interested interpretations of the law of nature cause confusion over its meaning and render it “of all Laws the most obscure.”<sup>77</sup> Such confusion poses a threat to the natural kingdom of God, especially given the importance Hobbes places on commands' being “manifestly made known” in order to count as laws. Otherwise, he writes, “they are no Lawes: For to the nature of Lawes belongeth a sufficient and clear Promulgation, such as may take away the excuse of Ignorance.”<sup>78</sup> If uncertainty plagues the law of nature, the natural kingdom of God rests on shaky ground and is potentially in jeopardy.

What is needed, says Hobbes, is someone to clearly interpret the law of nature and ensure its status as law. In *De Cive's* chapter on the natural kingdom of God, he points to the civil sovereign as the one chosen by God to carry out this role:

[T]he *interpretation of natural laws*, both *sacred* and *secular*, where God reigns through nature alone, depends on the authority of the commonwealth, i.e. of the man or council which has been granted sovereign power in the commonwealth; and whatever God commands, he commands through its voice. And, conversely, whatever commonwealths command both about the manner of worshipping God and about secular matters, is commanded by God.<sup>79</sup>

This passage makes clear the critical function that the civil commonwealth serves in the natural kingdom of God. It is the entity responsible for

<sup>75</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXI: 556.

<sup>76</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXVII: 454.

<sup>77</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXVI: 430.

<sup>78</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXI: 556.

<sup>79</sup> Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, XV.17.

communicating to individuals God's law in his natural kingdom. When most people come in contact with the natural kingdom of God, it is through their civil commonwealth. So for Hobbes, the Leviathan state is a manifestation of God's kingdom – specifically, the natural kingdom of God.<sup>80</sup>

Since the laws governing this kingdom are based on reason rather than divine revelation, it is not necessarily a Christian kingdom. As Hobbes explains in the opening to Part III of *Leviathan*, when turning to the principles of a Christian Commonwealth, God's word never contradicts reason but aspects of it are "above Reason."<sup>81</sup> Since reason does not conflict with Christian beliefs, the natural kingdom of God can take the form of a Christian commonwealth, but that is not guaranteed. Many Christian beliefs, including the one most fundamental for Hobbes – "*Jesus is the Christ*"<sup>82</sup> – come from a source beyond reason: revelation preserved by the Christian tradition. Hobbes dedicates Part III to explaining how to interpret revelation recorded in scripture when determining the responsibilities of Christian sovereigns and subjects. For most of Hobbes's readers, the only commonwealth imaginable is a Christian commonwealth, and for that reason he singles it out for analysis. But despite Hobbes's focus on Christian commonwealths, he sees reason as insufficient to establish the doctrines of Christianity, and therefore the principles of reason do not lead inevitably to a Christian commonwealth.

The dictates of reason do exclude, in Hobbes's view, atheists as potential subjects in the natural kingdom of God. Hobbes sees belief in God as grounded in reason, since it explains "a First, and an Eternall cause of all things."<sup>83</sup> In the natural kingdom of God, individuals recognize God's

<sup>80</sup> Some argue that, for Hobbes, the natural kingdom of God exists and its law (i.e., natural law) obligates prior to the establishment of a civil commonwealth. See Howard Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: His Theory of Obligation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957); A. P. Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes on Religion and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Michael Byron, *Submission and Subjection in Leviathan: Good Subjects in the Hobbesian Commonwealth* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Others reject this view. See Gregory Kavka, *Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Perez Zagorin, *Hobbes and the Law of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); and John Deigh, "Political Obligation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hobbes*, ed. Al Martinich and Kinch Hoekstra (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 293–314. Here I avoid taking a position in that debate. Even if we assume that Hobbes's natural kingdom of God exists before a commonwealth, that view is compatible with my interpretation of Hobbes: the Leviathan state – where it exists – is the present manifestation of God's kingdom. For Hobbes, the Leviathan state functions as the entity that communicates law and directs worship in the natural kingdom of God, and thus helps to more fully realize it.

<sup>81</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXII: 576.

<sup>82</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLIII: 948.

<sup>83</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XII: 166.

authority and honor him due to his “*Irresistible Power*.”<sup>84</sup> It is in line with reason to fear God and submit to him given his omnipotence – opposing him is futile. Atheists are enemies of the natural kingdom of God because they fail to acknowledge God’s power.<sup>85</sup> There are limits, then, to how much Hobbes departs from the biblical concept of the kingdom of God. Though Christian faith is not a requirement in the natural kingdom of God, belief in God is.

Yet what ultimately stands out about Hobbes’s natural kingdom of God is how it diverges from traditional understandings of God’s kingdom. When opening *Leviathan’s* chapter on the natural kingdom of God, Hobbes frames it as a guide to navigating one’s obligations to obey both the civil and divine law. By properly understanding these obligations and their relation to each other, individuals can “avoyd both these Rocks” of either offending God through “too much civill obedience” or transgressing “the commandements of the Common-wealth” through “feare of offending God.”<sup>86</sup> Hobbes proceeds to present a description of the natural kingdom of God in which obeying God almost never requires disobeying the sovereign and the civil law. In fact, he references Acts 5:29 – “*It is better to obey God than man*” – to point out that this precept “hath place in the kingdome of God by Pact, and not by Nature.”<sup>87</sup> In the natural kingdom of God, subjects obey God by obeying the civil sovereign, the authoritative interpreter of God’s natural law. That authority extends to matters of worship. Since a commonwealth is to worship God as “one Person,” according to Hobbes, public worship in the natural kingdom of God is to be uniform and determined by the sovereign.<sup>88</sup> The sovereign can command non-Christian forms of worship – after all, reason does not require the natural kingdom of God to be Christian – and subjects would have an obligation to participate in such worship.

Hobbes emphasizes this point when addressing how Christians should respond to civil authorities who command subjects to confess doctrines contrary to Christianity. Such outward professions of faith should not cause concern, reassures Hobbes, “because Beleef, and Unbeleef never follow mens Commands. Faith is a gift of God, which Man can neither give, nor take away by promise of rewards, or menaces of torture.” Regardless of the command or threat, the sovereign cannot rob individuals of their internal beliefs. Hobbes backs up his point by citing the Old Testament story of Naaman, whom God

<sup>84</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXI: 558.

<sup>85</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXI: 554–56.

<sup>86</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXI: 554.

<sup>87</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXI: 572.

<sup>88</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXI: 570.

pardons for bowing before an idol (2 Kings 5:17–18).<sup>89</sup> Like Naaman, Christians must be willing to publicly confess other gods if authorities demand it, while maintaining their inner faith. For Hobbes, the only exception is missionaries called to convert nonbelievers. Even in this case, missionaries should not violently oppose the ruling authority but instead accept martyrdom as a witness to Christ.<sup>90</sup>

Hobbes's transformation of the ideal of the kingdom of God thus leads to a possibility radically different than how it is described in scripture. The natural kingdom of God as outlined by Hobbes could consist of a people worshipping non-Christian gods. Christians in such a kingdom would have to hide their faith and participate in the public worship of these gods.<sup>91</sup> This scenario creates a jarring juxtaposition: the worship of false gods in the kingdom of God, or at least Hobbes's modified version of it. His attempt to downplay the sin of worshipping false gods exists in tension with the standard Christian view, which condemns worship of anything but the one true God (e.g., Exodus 20:1–6).<sup>92</sup>

The position staked out by Hobbes also stands in sharp contrast to how the ideal of the kingdom of God is imagined in Christian eschatology. The book of Revelation urges Christians to resist the worship of false gods as they await God's ideal kingdom. The arrival of this kingdom will decisively put an end to such sinful practices, replacing them with the continual, public, and exclusive worship of the Lamb.<sup>93</sup> In *Leviathan*, Hobbes does affirm the coming prophetic kingdom of God where Christ will rule on earth.<sup>94</sup> But in conjunction with this orthodox belief, Hobbes adopts the more controversial view that the precursor to the coming prophetic kingdom – or, put another way, the current embodiment of God's kingdom – is the natural kingdom of God. Hobbes's description of this kingdom makes room for the worship of non-Christian gods, a view directly at odds with the biblical ideal of God's kingdom.

<sup>89</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLII: 784.

<sup>90</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLII: 788.

<sup>91</sup> This position drew criticism from Hobbes's contemporaries. See, e.g., John Bramhall, *The Catching of Leviathan*, in *The Collected Works of John Bramhall*, vol. 4 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1844), 587.

<sup>92</sup> Hobbes does suggest that idolatry is contrary to the laws of nature, since reason tells us that God is infinite and “to attribute *Figure* to him” is to dishonor him. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXI: 564. Nonetheless, Hobbes clearly sees the law of nature's command to obey the sovereign as trumping its prohibition against idolatry.

<sup>93</sup> For more on Revelation's emphasis on the dangers of idolatry, see Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>94</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXV: 642.

Regardless of what religious practices it commands, the natural kingdom of God plays a key role in God's plan for history according to Hobbes. The natural kingdom of God manifests itself as civil commonwealths, which protect individuals until Christ returns to establish the final prophetic kingdom of God. Unlike others who call for dramatic political action to help realize Christ's kingdom, Hobbes does not believe that subjects of the natural kingdom of God can hasten the arrival of Christ's kingdom. Cataclysm will visit the earth upon Christ's return when a "Conflagration" consumes the wicked and refines the elect.<sup>95</sup> But Hobbes never indicates that God's people will war against the godless as a prelude to Christ's return. It is God alone who will bring about his kingdom on earth.<sup>96</sup>

In line with this view, Hobbes uses the phrase "quiet waiting" in *Behemoth* to describe the period before Christ's return<sup>97</sup> – an apt description for the Leviathan state given its role as the natural kingdom of God. With authority unified, the natural kingdom of God quietly safeguards individuals until Christ's return. This arrangement represents the full manifestation of God's kingdom in the present, in contrast to societies plagued by divided authority, instability, and civil war. Hobbes makes the hopeful point that the promise of peace is not delayed until Christ's prophetic kingdom arrives, but is possible now through the natural kingdom of God.

With his concept of the natural kingdom of God, Hobbes seeks to transform and rehabilitate a Christian ideal long associated with political instability. In his view, those who claim that God's kingdom will come through war and violence not only err in their prediction, but also set themselves up as enemies against God's current kingdom. In response to those anxiously expecting, predicting, and trying to realize God's kingdom, Hobbes says that it *already* exists in a real way on earth. It is standing right before them in the form of the civil commonwealth. The Leviathan is thus more than a vehicle for overcoming conflict between individuals: it takes on eschatological significance as a manifestation of God's current kingdom.

<sup>95</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLIII: 946, XLIV: 1002.

<sup>96</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLIV: 978–80. This view by Hobbes, where God alone determines the timing of his coming kingdom, goes against Wolfgang Palaver's interpretation of the Leviathan state as a secular force holding back God's kingdom. See Palaver, "Hobbes and the *Katéchon*: The Secularization of Sacrificial Christianity," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture* 2, no.1 (1995): 57–74.

<sup>97</sup> Hobbes, *Behemoth*, 58.



## IDEALISM WITHOUT PERFECTION

The ideal of the kingdom of God plays a prominent role in *Leviathan*, which raises questions about idealism's role in Hobbes's thought. The kingdom of God represents the ultimate ideal that history is moving toward. By equating the Leviathan to God's kingdom, Hobbes transports a divine ideal into the realm of human politics. Such language suggests a hope and idealism for politics that, at least on its surface, goes against the standard interpretation of Hobbes as the consummate realist.

Hobbes's idealism has captured the interest of a number of scholars.<sup>98</sup> They include Richard Tuck, who goes so far as to argue that there is a utopian element in *Leviathan*.<sup>99</sup> In his view, Hobbes sets forth a political philosophy and theology designed to free individuals from fear's paralyzing effects, and in this sense the work is utopian. Tuck is partly correct. Hobbes does cast doubt on sources of fear with destabilizing effects and seeks to ease readers' concerns at various points in *Leviathan*. For instance, the laws of nature do not require great sacrifices but are easy to observe;<sup>100</sup> people need not live in constant threat of death but can find security within the Leviathan state;<sup>101</sup> those damned will not face everlasting torment but the milder penalty of destruction;<sup>102</sup> salvation does not demand mastering theology's finer points but simply faith in Christ and obedience to the civil law;<sup>103</sup> and God rarely demands heroic acts of martyrdom but rather a quiet inner faith.<sup>104</sup> Through such principles, Hobbes aims to make the world less frightening.

It is important, though, to distinguish between how Hobbes embraces *and* rejects idealism. Often an imprecise term, idealism can mean "pursuit of an

<sup>98</sup> See Bryan Garsten, "Religion and Representation in Hobbes," in Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 519–46; and S. A. Lloyd, *Ideals as Interests in Hobbes's Leviathan: The Power of Mind over Matter* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>99</sup> Richard Tuck, "The Utopianism of *Leviathan*," in *Leviathan after 350 Years*, ed. Tom Sorrell and Luc Foisneau (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 125–38. See also Sarah Mortimer and David Scott, "*Leviathan* and the Wars of the Three Kingdoms," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 76, no. 2 (2015): 269–70; David Runciman, "What Is Realistic Political Philosophy?" *Metaphilosophy* 43, nos. 1–2 (2012): 68; and Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*, trans. Elsa Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 138.

<sup>100</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XV: 240.

<sup>101</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XIV: 200.

<sup>102</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXVIII: 716–18, XLIV: 972–74, 992–94. See also Christopher McClure, "Hell and Anxiety in Hobbes's *Leviathan*," *Review of Politics* 73, no. 1 (2011): 1–27; and *Hobbes and the Artifice of Eternity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>103</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLIII: 930.

<sup>104</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLII: 784–88.

ideal.”<sup>105</sup> When the ideal pursued is a perfect polity, idealism has a meaning synonymous with utopianism. But utopian is the wrong term for *Leviathan's* political philosophy, for it implies a level of perfection in politics that Hobbes rejects. In fact, at the end of Chapter 31 in the Latin edition, he dismisses utopian works like Plato's *Republic*, Thomas More's *Utopia*, and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, implying that it would be a mistake to associate *Leviathan* with such works.<sup>106</sup> This remark highlights Hobbes's unease with utopian thought. Its political ambitions prompt concern because the relentless striving after utopia can lead to discontentment, instability, and even rebellion, which Hobbes observed on full display during the English Civil War.

So a more plausible reading of *Leviathan* is that it reveals Hobbes's wariness toward utopian ideals that risk going unrealized and breeding dissatisfaction. Far from utopian, his idealism consists of adopting ideals that undermine political aspirations aimed at perfection. Rather than dismiss people's ideals and utopian hopes as foolish or irrelevant to politics, Hobbes recognizes their power. As Sharon Lloyd points out, Hobbes formulates his political philosophy with the conviction that, to be successful, it must take seriously people's ideals – especially religious ones – and find a place for them.<sup>107</sup> Hobbes accomplishes this goal by recognizing the ideals that motivate people, transforming them, and incorporating them into his political philosophy.

His concept of the natural kingdom of God reflects this strategy. Many hope for God's perfect kingdom yet differ on what form it will take and how to achieve it. Competing visions of perfection lead to conflict, which Hobbes seeks to prevent by pointing to a more modest goal – the Leviathan state, understood as a form of God's kingdom. Hobbes co-opts this biblical ideal in an effort to redirect utopian aspirations toward a more feasible vision of politics.

When describing the Leviathan state, Hobbes indicates in numerous places that his political ideal falls well short of perfection. One example comes from his explanation for choosing the term Leviathan to describe the sovereign. For Hobbes, the Old Testament beast known as leviathan symbolizes unparalleled greatness on earth, but also vulnerability. Quoting the description of the leviathan from Job 41:33, he writes, “*There is nothing . . . on earth, to be compared with him. He is made so as not to be afraid.*” Hobbes, however, adds that the leviathan “is mortall, and subject to decay, as all other Earthly creatures are.”<sup>108</sup> Though it aims for immortality, the sovereign faces

<sup>105</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>106</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXI: 574–75.

<sup>107</sup> Lloyd, *Ideals as Interests in Hobbes's Leviathan*.

<sup>108</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXVIII: 496.

numerous threats that render it mortal.<sup>109</sup> Even at his most hopeful, when suggesting that the principles of reason could make a commonwealth's constitution "everlasting," Hobbes concedes that external violence can frustrate this hope.<sup>110</sup> In politics, individuals hope to construct a commonwealth that provides lasting security, and some commonwealths do endure for long periods. But on earth, at least at this point in history, no structures prove immortal.

The Leviathan's imperfections go beyond its mortality. It also risks errors in governance, which can manifest themselves in egregious ways. Because of Hobbes's understanding of sovereignty, it is impossible for the sovereign to break the civil law. The sovereign has absolute authority over the law and cannot be bound by it. This idea comes with troubling implications for Hobbes's political philosophy. The sovereign on a whim could put an innocent subject to death, robbing them of the very thing the sovereign is entrusted to protect – their life.

Hobbes does not try to explain away this possibility but admits it as a potential consequence of his concept of sovereignty. He writes: "[N]othing the Sovereign Representative can doe to a Subject, on what pretence soever, can properly be called Injustice, or Injury; because every Subject is Author of every act the Sovereign doth . . . . [T]he same holdeth . . . in a Sovereign Prince, that putteth to death an Innocent Subject." To illustrate this point, he references the Old Testament story of Uriah, whom King David had killed in battle so as to take Uriah's beautiful wife Bathsheba as his own (2 Samuel 11). In Hobbes's view, when David killed Uriah, he committed no injury against Uriah but did commit an injury against God, since David was still God's subject.<sup>111</sup> There is no guaranteed remedy in the Leviathan state to protect innocent subjects who find themselves under threat of death from their sovereign. In *De Cive*, Hobbes brings up figures far more reviled than David – Caligula and Nero – and similarly maintains their authority to kill subjects without cause.<sup>112</sup>

That danger casts a shadow over the Leviathan and its purported promise of peace. Hobbes attempts to allay concerns about arbitrary executions by arguing that vicious sovereigns usually only target those involved in political intrigue. If subjects avoid political agitation and live a quiet life, they usually escape persecution.<sup>113</sup> That advice is somewhat ironic coming from Hobbes,

<sup>109</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXIX: 498–518.

<sup>110</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXX: 522.

<sup>111</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXI: 330.

<sup>112</sup> Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, X.7.

<sup>113</sup> Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, X.7.

given the controversy sparked by his writings and his need to cross the English Channel on multiple occasions to flee persecution.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, such assurances ring somewhat hollow in light of the Uriah example. Uriah dutifully obeyed his sovereign to the point of risking his life in battle. In return, the sovereign stole Uriah's wife and killed him. As Hobbes implicitly admits with this example, sovereigns can be petty and cruel, and sometimes there is little that obedient subjects can do to protect themselves.

Hobbes does allow subjects to resist the sovereign when their life is threatened, for they can never be obligated to willingly cede their right to life.<sup>115</sup> But this point by Hobbes hardly implies that resistance is likely to succeed. With power unified in Hobbes's ideal state, resistance has little chance of attracting others' support and succeeding.<sup>116</sup> The permission to resist when the sovereign threatens a subject's life is a logical consequence of Hobbes's political psychology, which treats self-preservation as the most fundamental motivation. But this concession should not be understood as a fail-safe mechanism to protect subjects from vicious sovereigns.

Ultimately, Hobbes permits a great deal of imperfection in his "ideal" state. He avoids whitewashing over all the Leviathan's possible problems and instead sets forth an ideal with its fair share of warts. A more perfect ideal would be unattainable, and thus would encourage instability and a political situation far worse than the occasional evils plaguing the Leviathan. Rather than striving for heaven in the political sphere, Hobbes is more interested in an ideal that keeps hell at bay. Indeed, he rejects that there is any *summum bonum* (greatest good) that individuals can obtain, and treats it as a foolish goal to chase after.<sup>117</sup> While philosophers and theologians endlessly debate the greatest good, Hobbes sees greater potential for agreement on the worst possible evil – anarchy, war, and violent death. People readily recognize this evil and its gravity, which makes it more promising as a starting point for political

<sup>114</sup> Richard Tuck, *Hobbes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 24–39.

<sup>115</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXI: 336–40.

<sup>116</sup> Hobbes recognizes one case where subjects are justified in joining together to resist the sovereign's power to execute: collaborators who all face execution and whose shared interest in self-preservation gives them reason to cooperate. Otherwise, a subject is not to interfere with punishment ordered by the sovereign, even on the innocent. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXI: 340. This point, along with Hobbes's preference for unified sovereignty with unlimited power, highlights that conditions within the Leviathan state are ill-suited for resistance. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXIX: 498–500, 506, 512. A few disagree and attribute a theory of rebellion to Hobbes. See Susanne Sreedhar, *Hobbes on Resistance: Defying the Leviathan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Peter Steinberger, "Hobbesian Resistance," *American Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 4 (2002): 856–65.

<sup>117</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XI: 150. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this passage and noting its relevance.

action.<sup>118</sup> Hobbes therefore grounds his political philosophy in identifying the state of nature's violence and insecurity as the worst possible evil that must be avoided above all else.

This mindset helps explain the enduring concern with apocalyptic thought in Hobbes's writings. He condemns such thought, with its constant pursuit of perfection, for its destabilizing effects on politics. There is no better illustration for this point than the English Civil War. Recognizing the danger and power of apocalyptic ideals, Hobbes chooses to transform the ideal of the kingdom of God and incorporate it into his political philosophy. His concept of the natural kingdom of God links the Leviathan state with the apocalyptic ideal of God's perfect kingdom.

What results is incongruence between the reality of the Leviathan and the biblical ideal it represents. Hobbes's decision to identify the Leviathan state with the kingdom of God evokes the virtues of divine governance: permanence, unassailable authority, and perfect justice. Yet what Hobbes actually offers is a far more modest political arrangement: one that does not last forever and whose justice is imperfect. Worried about the disruptive consequences of chasing after utopia, he co-opts apocalyptic ideals to instill reverence for political structures that fall well short of perfection. It is only by tempering our visions of perfection, argues Hobbes, that politics has a chance to deliver on its promise of security.

<sup>118</sup> This idea has links to an ancient one formulated by the Roman historian Sallust. He argues that fear of enemies (*metus hostilis*) unified and strengthened Rome, and that once there was no longer fear of Carthage as a common enemy to unite the people, the state fell into strife and decay. See Neal Wood, "Sallust's Theorem: A Comment on 'Fear' in Western Political Thought," *History of Political Thought* 16, no. 2 (1995): 174–89. Hobbes transforms this idea by identifying the state of nature as a more general common enemy, which always lurks and is available as a source of fear to mobilize collective action. See Ioannis Evrigenis, *Fear of Enemies and Collective Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 94–130.