

INTRODUCTION: PRINTING AND PROPHECY

The prophet is, first and foremost, a media phenomenon. Whether in biblical narrative or medieval history, what defines a prophet is not the prediction of future events but the communicative claims made by the prophet and accepted by his or her audience. While prophecy often includes foretelling the future and sometimes is reduced to prognostication, prophecy involves, above all, the claim, made by the prophet and understood by his or her followers, to be the middle participant in a two-part conversation. In the first part, the prophet faces upward, to God or angels or some other privileged source. In the second, the prophet faces outward, in order to transmit the divine communication to a secular recipient, a close circle of disciples, or the entire public. Revelations, according to sociologist of religion Rodney Stark, are “communications believed to come from a divine being,” or, in the definition of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, “communication of some truth by God to a rational creature through means which are beyond the ordinary course of nature.” A prophet in the Old Testament was “not merely, as the word commonly implies, a man enlightened by God to foretell events; he was the interpreter and supernaturally enlightened herald sent by Yahweh to communicate His will and designs to Israel.”¹

Consider, for example, the representation of prophetic communication from an early thirteenth-century book of hours. A single vignette tells both parts of the story. On the left, the prophet Samuel receives the divine in-

junction from a God who is half concealed, half emergent in the heavens: “Tell Saul that he will no longer be king” (see 1 Samuel 15:22–26).² On the right side of the frame, Samuel has switched directions in order to deliver this message to Saul and his attendants. In the first dialogue, God holds a scroll representing the message he gives to Samuel. In the second dialogue, Samuel holds the same scroll and transmits its message to Saul. The prophet was a medium in the literal sense: one did not hear the prophet speak; one heard God speaking through the prophet, animating the prophet’s tongue. The sixteenth century and the Reformation do not change this basic understanding. Martin Luther wrote in the preface to his translation of the Old Testament prophets, “Reading or hearing the prophets is certainly nothing else but reading and hearing how God warns and comforts.”³

Although claims to divine revelation were often met with skepticism, the understanding of how prophetic communication worked was broadly accepted in European society throughout the medieval and early modern periods, and the fundamental innovations in communication and media, from the birth of the codex to the introduction of parchment and paper to the invention of the printing press, all took place in a milieu whose foundational assumptions included the possibility of prophetic communication.⁴ From the perspective of the present, Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of printing with movable type is primarily a technological innovation that occupies a well-defined position with respect to prior and later technologies of textual reproduction. Gutenberg’s contemporaries in the fifteenth century, however, praised the printing press as no mere technical advance but a revolutionary innovation, even a gift from God. Concerning the history of technology, Ivan Illich has observed, “Instead of confirming the theory that tasks become possible when the tools to perform them become available, or the other which says that tools are created when tasks come to be socially desirable, . . . an eminently suitable and complex artificial device already available within a society will be turned into a tool for the performance of a task only at that historic moment when this task acquires symbolic significance.”⁵ The same observation might apply to the printing press: the demand for texts had been growing for many decades before Gutenberg provided a solution in the 1450s, and yet his actual technological innovations seem to represent only slight advances over the tools European society already possessed.⁶ Following Illich, we might ask, what symbolic

significance did Gutenberg or his contemporaries recognize in the combination of texts and type?

Brian Stock has observed that the “changes in attitudes, perceptions, and thinking that literacy brought about are best observed in religion, the dimension of culture most accessible to the majority of people.”⁷ Prophecy is a form of religious communication that seems especially promising for a media-historical study of the first century of printing. Roger Chartier and other scholars of the cultural history of books have raised fundamental questions about reading and writing from the Middle Ages to the present. Following that strand of scholarship, we might ask, what consequences does it have when an author claims to be merely a conduit for revealed wisdom? As the premises of modern book communication and intellectual property were being worked out, what was the contribution of a communicative model based on a prophetic dialogue that was only half visible to the reader? How was the figure of the prophet constructed in print, and how were readers’ reactions to prophecy channeled and guided? As a study of a media phenomenon, the precise message of the various prophetic works, often involving stock figures and a conventional set of disasters, is less important than how each work established its communicative framework. The principal aim of this study is to investigate how printed books communicated in the first century of their existence.

There is an intriguing similarity between the prophet’s claims and the press’s functioning. The prophet receives from one and broadcasts to many, usually through some form of oral preaching, because that is the essence of the calling. “For you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you,” God tells Jeremiah, and he then puts his words into the prophet’s mouth by touching divine hand to human tongue (Jeremiah 1:7–9, NRSV). Printers also could boast of exclusive access, perhaps to a unique manuscript that had never been printed and eventually to legal privilege as a precursor to modern copyright. Printing and prophecy are both strategies of textual reproduction: each copy of a printed book is intended to be identical to all others and as valid as the original, while receivers of the prophetic word hear not the voice of the prophet but the voice of God. In a tradition reaching at least from Isidore of Seville to the fifteenth-century compilation of the revelations of Birgitta of Sweden, readers of the prophetic word become immediate hearers of it, with the same responsibility to distribute the revelation to others as if God himself

had spoken it to them directly. The prophet's audience, like the readers of printed texts, accepts a second-generation copy as equivalent to the original. Reading the written word is also similar to hearing a prophet's preaching in that readers perceive only the second half of the communication: the moment of inspiration, like the act of writing, remains hidden, and the reader can only reconstruct either of them from their textual residue. Although preaching is usually considered an oral medium, the sermon functioned by the Middle Ages as an oral means for the distribution of written texts.⁸ The press also promoted distribution to a broad audience: given the significant initial investment in skilled labor, specialized equipment, and costly materials, the economics of print made addressing a large audience necessary. Thus in all acts of communication, in the reception, reproduction, and distribution of texts, the printing press has prophetic analogs. When the Oppenheim printer Jakob Köbel (1462–1533) wrote that he was “bringing to print and sending out into all the world” his edition of a sibylline collection in order to make comprehensible “the prophets’ and Sibyls’ proclamation and foretelling of the future miracles of Almighty God . . . for all prophets and prognosticators were accustomed to speak obscurely and revealed future things through hidden sayings and parables,” he claimed the same kind of authority as an interpreter and clarifier of prophetic obscurity that John of Rupescissa had claimed in the fourteenth century.⁹

The communicative structure of prophecy is reflected in the early modern history of the newspaper as a medium and, as Jan-Dirk Müller emphasizes, has implications for all forms of public communication since the invention of print.¹⁰ Michael Giesecke notes that the “information that Christendom found worthy of lasting storage in a scriptographic medium is the result of proclamation and revelation.”¹¹ Yet differences remain: oral preaching accomplishes the communication of one to many under conditions of immediate personal presence, and European manuscript culture retained many of the assumptions of immediacy and acquaintance, even if in the form of a fictionalized authorial presence. The audience of printed works is dispersed and anonymous, however. Oral and manuscript communication are primarily a matter of transmitting ideas from one person to another, while books, for their printers, are primarily wares for sale.

If early printing had apparent similarities to prophecy, depictions of prophets, in turn, emphasized the association of prophecy with textual production and typographic publication, particularly in the monumental col-

lections of Birgitta's revelations that appeared in Latin and German between 1478 and 1521.¹² In the first Latin edition of Birgitta's *Revelations*, printed by Bartholomaeus Ghotan in 1492, a series of full-page and smaller woodcut illustrations associates the saint's reception of revelation with the creation of the printed book. Between preliminary material attesting Birgitta's canonical status and the prologue to the *Revelations*, a sequence of three pages composed of woodcut and typographic panels illustrates the saint's function in book production. In the first panel, Christ and Mary emanate divine communication whose content appears in columns of typographic text on either side. Mediating between heaven and earth, the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, focuses and transmits these emanations to Birgitta. At the same time, the saint also receives communication from the book before which she kneels. In the next two pages, the placement and function of the divine actors remain the same, but Birgitta is displaced to the left, while various clerical scribes take the corresponding position on the right. The divine emanations from the Holy Spirit thus appear to bless Birgitta, her scribes, and the communication between them. The scribes, in turn, have access to three sources, including divine inspiration, the saint's words, and the book blessed by her presence.

Both the creation of books and their distribution are divinely sanctioned. Later in the *Revelations*, the same divine figures inspire the scene of Birgitta's presentation of a book to a bishop. The text accompanying the image describes revelation as a process analogous to publication in which production, distribution, and reading are all potentially prophetic.

I am like a carpenter who cuts wood and carries it into the house, and makes a fine carving from it and decorates it with appendages and colors. When his friends saw that the image might be decorated with even finer colors, they also painted the carving with their colors. Thus in the forest of my godhood I, God, felled the words that I placed in your heart. But my friends gathered them into books according to the grace that was given them and adorned and decorated them. You should convey all the books of the revelation of these my words to my bishop the hermit so that they now might be agreeable to many tongues.¹³

The same association of prophecy and book creation is forcefully expressed in a number of full-page woodcuts. Following the prologue and before the first book of revelations, a woodcut depicts Birgitta as the mediator of revelation from Christ and Mary in heaven above to a tripartite medieval soci-

ety, composed of secular rulers and ecclesiastical leaders to either side and kneeling men and women representing lower stations below. Birgitta is situated in the middle of the three groups, with her fingers crossing the image boundary into the typographic text below. The printed words are not Birgitta's but Christ's, spoken through her (see figure 6, in chapter 3). Later in the *Revelations*, the illustration of the section entitled "The Book of the Heavenly Emperor to the Kings" shows God enthroned on a rainbow, holding a sword and, in his left hand, a book. Below, the archangel Michael, armed with a sword and flanked by the sword of divine justice, contends with the devil, who is armed with a hooked staff. On the lowest level, the jaws of hell and a pit of flames consume unrepentant sinners. In the middle of the scene, Birgitta sits and bestows a book from either hand to a group of kneeling rulers on each side. The three books in the woodcut, the one held by God and the pair being extended by the saint, form a triad, with Birgitta as the mediator of God's word to political rulers. But Birgitta has assumed an additional role in this woodcut that is not made explicit in the text: she is not merely the transmitter, like a manuscript copyist, but also the broadcaster, multiplier, and distributor, like the operator of a printing press (see figure 1). Another woodcut at the introduction of the Birgittine monastic rule gives Birgitta the same functions. She presents a book containing her rule to religious women to the left and to kneeling monks on the right.

The focus on prophecy as a phenomenon of communication and on its interaction with the medium of print explains some of what may seem glaring omissions in this book. Because this study is primarily concerned with publications for broad audiences, it will spend relatively little time on the theoretical treatises of university personnel and other members of the intellectual elite (as opposed to the very public disputes that rival scholars carried out in print). The print medium cannot exist without a mass audience, and so the key to the communicative function of print will here be sought not in what leading figures wrote but in what many people read. The focus on the print medium will likewise shift attention away from those who presented themselves as preachers of the prophetic word. An entire book could be written about Hieronymus Savonarola alone as a media phenomenon, and Savonarola was by no means the only prophetic voice in Europe before the Protestant Reformation, but what one finds more often north of the Alps are anonymous tracts that report the appearance of an unnamed prophet in France or Italy, in which a living prophet has been transformed into a literary trope. The Reformation was an occasion of par-



Fig. 1. Birgitta as mediator, multiplier, and distributor of books. (Courtesy of Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München.)

ticular controversy involving prophecy and astrology, but this study is also not primarily concerned with sectarian polemic. Both Luther and his followers, as well as his opponents, enlisted prophetic texts in their conflicts, but the traditions they draw on are older than the Reformation, and these traditions continue, often little changed, for many decades after. Exploring the role of prophetic communication at the center of early modern society also might excuse omission of the radical wing of the Reformation. Although prophecy achieved a preeminent role among various Anabaptist sects, these groups were forced to or beyond the boundaries of German society, and their visionary writers remained marginal in the history of printed prophecies. Those who claimed the prophetic mantle, like Melchior Hoffman, or who adopted the visionary's voice, like Ursula Jost, were too controversial to be allowed success in print. None of Hoffman's or Jost's prophetic works appeared in more than a few editions, in contrast to the dozens of editions warranted by popular interest in some other prophecies. When Hoffman's prophetic works were bound together in a single volume with other prognostic tracts, it was Hoffman's earnest prophesying that was excised from the book, rather than the predictions of contemporary astrologers.¹⁴ While medieval prophetic figures whose works were printed in numerous editions, such as Birgitta, will play a prominent role in the discussion here, prophets who never found their way into print will be largely ignored. A living prophet proves to be a very different phenomenon from prophecy in print.

The primary focus on the German-speaking regions is partially justified by the need to begin with Gutenberg in Mainz and by the similarly advanced state of German bibliographical indexing for both the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In addition, the history of prophetic and prognostic works in print largely follows national boundaries and can best be explained by regional concerns that were not identical in Italy, the Low Countries, or elsewhere in Europe. While there were editions of non-German authors by German printers, their numbers are very limited, especially from the late fifteenth century onward. Ottavia Niccoli's studies of prophecy in Italy from 1500 to 1530 find some fifty broadside and small quarto editions, usually in verse and using materials of poor quality, with a notable decline in popularity after 1530.¹⁵ This suggests a much different situation compared to the German-speaking regions, where a much larger number of prophetic tracts were produced by the largest and most capable printers, almost never consisting entirely of verse and showing no sign of lessening in popularity. Even

pan-European events in the history of early modern printing, such as the booklets that addressed the prediction of flooding for 1524, display a particularly German articulation; a study of events on a continental scale must be built on studies of particular regions. Therefore such worthy topics as British editions of German astrologers and the reception of German prophetic compilations in Italy will be mentioned only in passing.

Although some fifteenth-century prophetic works enjoyed an active reception for centuries, with new editions well into the modern era, I will let the curtain fall, not entirely arbitrarily, in the year 1550. The even century since Gutenberg's invention provides more than enough material, and it illustrates the essential continuity of prophetic works in print, while the following period has been ably treated in the works of Robin Barnes and others. The middle of the sixteenth century also marks the appearance of a new kind of prophetic anthology that begins to canonize not only texts but also prior printed editions. A century after Gutenberg, printed books became capable of acquiring the authenticity of antiquity.

Something that cannot be bracketed out is astrology. While the inspired prophet and the learned astrologer may seem to make communicative claims of a different order, prophecy and prognostication prove to be too closely intertwined in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to be entirely separated from each other, and many contemporaries perceived the two as complementary rather than contradictory.¹⁶ Despite recurring complaints that science had no ally in the predictions of medieval prophets and that faith had no friend in heathen astrology, there were more than a few practitioners of both prognostic modes, and astrological and prophetic authorities were frequently called on by scholars in either field to legitimize works in the other field. The ties between astrology and prophecy also involve not only how texts were written but also how books were created and used. Those who printed, purchased, and read books were among the most stubborn defenders of the idea that prophecy and astrology belonged together.

In the first century of printing, the double-sided model of prophetic communication implies an act of reception at each part in the chain of communication: the prophet, the prophet's audience, the printers, and the printers' readers were all productive recipients of the text. To investigate the ways that books communicated, we need to consider not only the transmission of text from author to reader but also the multiple ways in which many people participated in the production and use of books. Readers perceived woodcuts even before they engaged with the typographic texts, but most

authors were not artists, and illustration was usually determined by the publisher. Consequently, a significant element in the reception of any author was almost always outside of his or her control. This is equally true of titles, chapter divisions, colophons, and other typographic elements that guide a text's reception, what Gérard Genette has termed "paratexts" or, following Genette's original French title, "thresholds" by which readers access the enclosed text.

The study of language and literature will provide some methods of textual analysis, but the dialogic creation of meaning also involves nonlinguistic, culturally determined patterns of thought. What readers read and printers produce is not an abstract text but an assembly of materials that all contribute to the book's significance. The physical composition of a book and its presentation of material through word and image affected readers' understanding, which makes necessary the examination of early modern editions not only for the texts they contain but also for how the text was presented. Books have economic value, and printers and their customers negotiate books' meaning through their decisions concerning what works to print, how to market them, and whether to buy them, even though these interactions take place long after the author has completed his or her contribution. The bare facts of bibliography, including edition history and the size and layout of a book's pages, were the result of interactions in the early modern book economy and, as such, were an integral part of how books communicated. Textual interpretation should be productively informed by bibliographic data and an understanding of the economic context.

Compared to the expense of ink and paper and to the logistical problems of production and distribution, the financial interests of the author in an early printed edition may have amounted to a pittance, and for subsequent editions from other presses, it usually amounted to nothing at all. In the early sixteenth century, at a time when the Strasbourg printer Matthias Hupfuff had production and distribution deals worth thousands of gulden, his costs for acquiring the manuscript of an original work from a leading humanist amounted to just four gulden.¹⁷ Based on those numbers alone, we might conclude that a faithful reproduction of the author's intentions was not in fact Hupfuff's overriding concern, however much he and other printers claimed fidelity to the original text. Instead of regarding printed books as witnesses of authorial intent in various states of corruption, books are assumed here to reflect the varying interests of many different people.

As commercial wares for a potentially broad audience, early printed

books have different implications for the history of texts and the materiality of intellectual history from either manuscripts or modern works, so early editions must be cited using somewhat different conventions. For the first century of printing, books published in the German-speaking lands (hereafter referred to as “Germany” for the sake of brevity) are indexed in three partially overlapping databases with somewhat divergent goals. The Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke (GW) and Incunabula Short Title Catalogue (ISTC) both aim to list all books printed in the fifteenth century, while the Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachbereich erschienenen Drucke des 16. Jahrhunderts (VD16) lists only titles printed in Germany in the sixteenth century. Although each census is actively updated, errors and gaps in coverage remain, so that information from each must be carefully weighed. In recent years, these and other bibliographic indices of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century printing have gone online, giving scholars convenient access to a wealth of information. The existence of an entry in a database is not always a sure sign that an edition of a given work was printed in the suggested year, however, or that current scholarly consensus agrees with a database entry. Relevant works were identified from all three indices, although there are some editions that do not yet appear in any of them. At times, different editions of the same work are not recognized as such or are attributed to different authors or to no author at all (such as a 1521 edition of Johannes Lichtenberger’s *Prognosticatio* previously identified as an anonymous work). Bibliographic research over the last century has usually identified the printers of unsigned editions, although attribution remains tentative in some cases. Many prophetic works appeared both as independent tracts and as appendices to other works, so that their edition histories often include both reprinting and recombination. In the following pages, early modern printed works will be cited by referencing the author and index of either the ISTC or VD16. Full bibliographical information and, for many editions cited here, links to digital facsimiles can be found using the online versions of each, while the appendix of this book provides much briefer information. For incunabula, comparing the ISTC to the GW census is always advisable. (As of December 2010, the online locations of the databases are <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/iste/>, <http://www.gesamtkatalogderwiegendrucke.de/>, and <http://www.vd16.de/>. More restricted use will be made of Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachbereich erschienenen Drucke des 17. Jahrhunderts [VD17], the equivalent project for seventeenth-century editions, whose online location is <http://www.vd17.de/>.) Unfoliated and un-

paginated works (that is, the vast majority of all works under discussion here) will reference the signature, leaf, and side.

Many of the uncertainties that remain after consulting the indices of early printing can only be resolved by looking at the books directly, so that an essential part of the research for this project consisted of examining copies of printed prognostic and prophetic works. The cataloging of early printing, particularly for the sixteenth century, is far from complete, and undescribed editions of seemingly inconsequential booklets can still be discovered even in major research libraries, as a few hours spent thumbing through old card catalogs often found. Looking at old books forces one to confront the physical reality behind the bodiless abstractions of texts and editions. This is all the more necessary at a time when census and digitalization projects are making texts available as never before but are also making it easier to regard books only as ethereal images or numerical quantities. High-quality digital facsimiles of relevant works from the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich and the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel as well as various other libraries were an invaluable addition to this project, and additional facsimiles are constantly becoming available. Even the best digitalization projects attenuate connections between works bound together in the same volume or preserved in the same collection, however. Texts and images formed the material basis of early modern book communication not as isolated pages but as parts of a materially integral whole, and even in a high-quality digital facsimile, the function of pages with respect to the whole book is often obscured.

Scholars since the late nineteenth century have contributed numerous studies of late medieval and early modern prophetic figures and their works, so that there are monograph treatments for many of them and at least some scholarly literature for most. Astrologers of the same period have less often been studied in comparable depth. The most influential treatment of late medieval prophecy remains the work of Marjorie Reeves, particularly *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages*, while the works of Bernard McGinn have more recently given decisive impulse to the study of apocalypticism. For the medium of print in Germany from 1450 to 1550, however, the primary works and authors are a somewhat different set than those treated most extensively by Reeves and McGinn. The most common medieval prophecies had to be digested into new compilations, adapted to a new audience, or presented in new ways before they became printable.

Johannes Lichtenberger will be a central figure in several of the follow-

ing chapters. His *Prognosticatio* (first printed in 1488) combined both late medieval prophetic texts and contemporary astrology, and his work remained broadly influential for centuries. Lichtenberger was himself an author of one of the earliest known printed astrological prognostications, so he is a direct antecedent of the leading German astrologers of 1480–1550, including Wenzel Faber, Johannes Virdung, and Johann Carion. Lichtenberger's prophetic authorities and sources include Birgitta (via the redaction of her work by Johann Tortsch known as the *Onus mundi*, or *Burden of the World*), sibylline texts, the prophecies attributed to Methodius, Antichrist legends, and prophecies in the tradition of Joachim of Fiore, including the collection of Telesphorus and an enigmatic figure referred to as "Brother Reinhart" or by variations on that name. Many of these prophetic texts circulated independently or in various combinations with each other or with other works. In addition to works used by Lichtenberger, numerous anonymous or pseudonymous prophetic tracts were printed in the early sixteenth century, including, among many others, the prophecies of "Alofresant," "Jakob Pflaum," "Dietrich von Zeng/Theodericus Croata," "Brother Raimund" (the "Auffahrt Abend" prophecy), and "Samuel of Jerusalem." Lichtenberger's influence on prophecy in print can be found in the works of his younger contemporary Joseph Grünpeck, which appeared from 1496 to 1540, as well as in the publication programs of printers such as Jakob Köbel and Pamphilius Gengenbach. The strand of prophetic writing and publication extends from Lichtenberger through reformist-minded printers like Köbel and Gengenbach to firebrands like Johannes Copp and even to Martin Luther himself, who provided a preface for a new translation of Lichtenberger printed at Wittenberg in 1527. Lichtenberger's contemporaries and later generations alike remarked on the woodcut images in the *Prognosticatio*, and engagement with prophetic texts via images provides a second path from Lichtenberger to the Reformation. The year 1527 also saw Andreas Osiander's publication of two medieval prophetic works in the cause of Lutheran polemic, including a prophecy attributed to Hildegard of Bingen and, in cooperation with the Nuremberg poet Hans Sachs, an edition of papal prophetic images that ultimately derive from twelfth-century Byzantine oracles. The various strands of prophetic images culminate in the work of Paracelsus, who wrote commentaries on Lichtenberger's illustrations and the papal images in the 1530s and wrote, at the same time, his own enigmatic prognostication based on another series of images. Writers continued to combine astrology and prophecy after Lichtenberger, in-

cluding the astrologers Virdung and Carion (although Carion later vigorously denied doing so). Scholars since Gustav Hellmann have studied the expectation of disastrous flooding for the year 1524, in which Virdung and Carion were among the primary participants in a public controversy that led to numerous printed tracts. These tracts included *practicæ*, a type of annual prognostic booklet that had developed a highly stereotyped format by the end of the fifteenth century and continued to enjoy popularity well into the seventeenth century. The study of prophetic communication and printed books in the century after Gutenberg must include Lichtenberger, his predecessors, and his successors, including both those who raised a prophetic voice of warning and those who promised nothing more than a sober reading of the stars.

But a study of printing and prophecy must begin at the first moment of the age of print, with what is perhaps the earliest known work from the press of Johannes Gutenberg and his associates in Mainz, the fragmentary *Sibyl's Prophecy*. Like other specimens of the earliest printing, it is both primitive and forward looking, a product of an incompletely developed technology but also an expression of the potential of print that would not be fully exploited for decades to come. As with so much else about Gutenberg and his ventures, the historical context of the first edition of the *Sibyl's Prophecy* is all but undocumented, leaving us to sift through the available evidence in search of plausible explanations.