THEOCRACY IN MASSACHUSETTS

Reformation and Separation in Early Puritan New England

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FOREWORD

Dr. Avihu Zakai of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem completed this important work as a doctoral dissertation at The Johns Hopkins University in the early 1980s. The first scholar to show the crucial role of the works of the English Puritan thinker, Thomas Brightman, in the intellectual construction of Puritan New England, Dr. Zakai, in this work, helped to reshape understanding of the nature of the Puritan experiment in America. In contrast to previous scholars, he showed how the reliance of American Puritan leaders, both secular and clerical, upon the religious ideas of Brightman turned their experiment in a millenial direction. Few earlier scholars had recognized, and none had stressed, this significant dimension of the Puritan experiment. Although other scholars, including Dr. Zakai in other works, have explored some of these themes during the decade since the dissertation was written, this work, retitled Theocracy in Massachusetts: Reformation and Separation in Early Puritan New England remains an extremely valuable, if controversal, work that challenges existing historiographical conventions and contributes significantly to the reassessment of the Puritans' errand into the American wilderness. To put his work in the context of more recent historiography, Dr. Zakai has added a new introduction that is itself an important commentary on Puritan studies over the past decade.

Jack P. Greene
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FOREWORD

In *Theocracy in Massachusetts*, Avihu Zakai makes a daring and essential contribution to Puritan studies in England and America. He restores to us the radicalism that the seventeenth century saw - and often resented mightily - in those God-obsessed men and women. He retrieves for us the very rage for purity that earned them their unmistakably pejorative name. And in so doing, he stands against the best of an older scholarship and most of his own contemporaries in the field.

In defining orthodoxy in Massachusetts, Perry Miller established an orthodoxy of his own, an interpretive orthodoxy that declared the American Puritans people of the center, people who insisted upon the presence of evil but did not seek to separate themselves from evil, people neither complacent nor fanatic, people who sought to hold to the middle ground against extremists of every sort. Miller's notion of the Puritans as non-separating congregationalists has held essential sway ever since.

Avihu Zakai rejects Miller's domestication of the Puritans' intransigent zealotry on several significant scores. He insists that the American Puritans were separatists, not non-separatists. So far from seeking to live in the world and come to some accommodation with its sinfulness, they sought to dissociate themselves from all that defiled God's grand plan and they migrated to the New World exactly in order to do so. He maintains unflinchingly that the American Puritans were apocalyptic and millennial, not moderate and "sensible." So far from living in the psychic world we do, they expected the end of days imminently, and they expected to play the central role in that divine drama.

Where Miller wrote in an era when the Puritans stood in strong disrepute and sought to make them more palatable to American audiences, Zakai writes in the wake of Miller's immense influence and can be more candid. He can acknowledge, as Miller was loath to do, their unabashed theocratic ambitions and their avowedly revolutionary project. Indeed, no
one has elaborated the abounding radicalism of the American Puritan mission in the wilderness as imaginatively and expensively as Zakai has.

If the exposition of that strand of Puritan thought is his triumph, it is also his failing. He sets himself against Miller's conservative exposition, but he never really reckons with the materials that Miller drew upon to warrant such conservatism. He admires but disagrees with other leading interpretations, but he never quite explains why their emphasis on the past rather than on the millennial future, on England rather than on America, and on politics rather than eschatology can be discounted as he does. He acknowledges the importance of the massive outpouring of social histories of early New England, but he makes no effort to integrate his account with theirs.

Nonetheless, his account is invaluable. If he does not achieve the grander synthesis we might need, he makes clear that any such synthesis must be more encompassing than we have heretofore supposed. If he does not take Puritan orthodoxy sufficiently into the balance, he makes plain that others who have written about the American Puritans have not taken their fiercely militant radicalism into consideration either. Future scholars will have to wrestle with Zakai and with the challenge of the argument that he adduces here as he has wrestled, conscientiously and mightily, with the softer, more muffled and "reasonable" Puritanism of his predecessors.

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I am particularly indebted to my advisor, Jack P. Greene, who has not only welcomed me most graciously into the stimulating intellectual milieu that characterizes the Department of History at Johns Hopkins University, but has also offered constant encouragement in support of my conviction that risk taking was essential to the success of this project. It will also be clear to any student of American colonial history that Professor Greene's understanding of America's relationship with the mother country has provided the necessary conceptual frame for my study. It has also been my great fortune to work closely with J.G.A. Pocock, whose subtle gifts as both teacher and writer have had an immense influence on my perception of the historian's task as interpreter of events in past time. Without his close yet gentle criticism, I am afraid that what follows would have been less readable than it is now. From the very beginning, Mack Walker has been generous with insights gleaned from his enormous knowledge of early modern history; Timothy L. Smith's expertise in American religious history has proven invaluable in my quest to decipher the often obscure world of New England Puritanism. I am also indebted to Professor Louis P. Galambos and a.J.R. Russell-Wood for their efforts to secure financial aid despite its scarcity. Professor Galambos, in particular, has come to my support in a time of great hardship. My mentor, Yehoshua Arieli, "The Father of American Studies" in Israel, has not only been a source of support and knowledge, but by his example, has been a constant reminder that the intellectual in modern times must not ignore his moral obligations. Needless to say, the members of Professor Greene's seminar in the history of Anglo-American colonization, though too often forced to endure lengthy chapters, were unfailing in their efforts to strengthen my arguments through sharp but constructive criticism. Finally my thanks to Marcia for her typing and considerable efforts to underwrite this work.
INTRODUCTION

Ever since Perry Miller wrote his brilliant and influential essay, "Errand into the Wilderness" (1952), historians have debated how best to describe the remarkable Puritan exodus to New England. Very rarely indeed does history present us with examples to equal the Puritan migration to America; such bold determination and uncompromising zeal to depart from a home country, to cross a mighty ocean, and finally to establish a close-knit society in the wilderness of America. The remarkable Puritan achievement in creating such a highly organized Christian commonwealth in the New World stood in rigid contrast to the important historical events taking place in the Old World where the Thirty Years' War was raging over the whole continent of Europe, and great upheavals and transformations were unfolding in England and Scotland, first with the Bishops' Wars and later with the Puritan Revolution.

Yet, it is not only within these great historical occurrences that the extraordinary success of the Puritan migration ought to be understood. It should also be seen, and more importantly, in light of the entire course of the Puritan movement in England; its continuous unsuccessful effort to win over the soul of the English people, its traumatic failure to establish its premises during the Puritan Revolution, and its eventual total collapse with the Restoration of the house of Stuart. After almost a century of a fierce struggle over the faith of the English people, Puritanism as an important historical movement eventually broke down completely, leaving only a small, yet thriving and most successful stronghold upon the shore of New England.

Yet precisely what was the Puritans ultimate errand in the settlement of Massachusetts? This remains the most perennial question in Puritan
Indeed, no other issue has created so much heat and controversy as that of the Puritan’s ultimate mission in the Wilderness of America. The reason for this is clear enough. For in the answer to this issue lies indeed the whole meaning of the Puritan migration to, and the whole significance of the Puritan experience in, America.

Perry Miller’s interpretation of the Puritan errand was based essentially upon the role he assigned to Puritanism in American history. Ultimately, as a cultural historian in the broadest sense, Miller was interested in the “narrative of the movement of European culture into the vacant wilderness of America.” And believing that an interpretation of the American past ought to begin with explanation of those “traditions” that “have gone into the making of the American mind,” Miller viewed the Puritans as the first principal transmitters and diffusers of European culture and ideas into America. Consequently, in his attempt to prove the establishment of “orthodoxy” — rather than radicalism — in Massachusetts, Miller was determined to refute any claim about the radicalism embodied in the Puritan errand to America. Yet, despite this reservation, every student of Puritanism in America would certainly concur that with the publication of “Errand into the Wilderness,” Perry Miller inaugurated the most lively debate in Puritan historiography.

The impressive growth of social-history studies during the 1960s and 1970s has shifted attention from the debate over the Puritan errand into a wide-scale exploration of the various life-conditions that existed in the Puritan colonies in America. Yet the ability of social-history studies to illuminate the varieties of life experience in Puritan New England has rather raised again the pressing need to reformulate a unified ideological framework concerning the ultimate mission of the Puritan migration. For only within a well-defined and coherent ideological context can the rich findings of social history be meaningfully interpreted. And since the works of social historians never intended to provide the clue to the Puritan errand, this task once again was left in the hands of intellectual historians. Consequently, the decade of the 1980s saw a return in Puritan historiography to the debate over the Puritan errand, and some historians indeed have tended to dismiss it altogether.

With the important transformations taking place in Puritan studies in the last decades, however, Puritan historiography seems to have lost some of the wider historical context offered by Miller concerning the Puritan errand into New England. For despite the many revisions needed in Perry Miller’s work, he nevertheless captured marvelously an essential dimension of the Puritan mission in the wilderness of America as a crucial revelatory, prophetic, and redemptive event in the drama of human salvation, when he wrote that for the Puritans New England was the culmination of the Reformation, the climax of world history, the ultimate revelation through events of the objective toward which the whole human activity had been tending from the beginning of time.

This wider historical context of salvation history should not be overlooked, because without a full comprehension of the Puritan sense of time and view of history a crucial dimension of the Puritan migration to, and experience in, New England cannot be possibly understood.

Theocracy in Massachusetts argues that serious consideration of the apocalyptic, eschatological, and millennial dimension in the Puritan migration to New England would explain the Puritan holy experiment in America as a more radical and revolutionary social, political, and ecclesiastical system created by more radical Puritans than has been previously suggested. For when examined seriously, the eschatology and apocalypse of the Puritan migration was based upon the ultimate rejection of, and total separation from, corrupted history and degenerating human traditions in England and the old world in general. Ultimately, the presence of a powerful eschatological and millennial impulse in the Puritan migration obligates us to reconsider as a whole the Puritan errand into the wilderness of America. For theirs was a radical quest after a theocratic universe, ruled directly and immediately by God’s divine Providence, in which every sphere of human life should be reconstructed upon the sacred word of God.
And in their advocacy of a theocratic government, Puritans sought nothing less than the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God. Consequently, with the restoration of God to the center of a theocratic universe, Puritan apocalypse established a deep eschatological gulf separation the Old World from the New in the course of providential history, and their pursuit of the millennium acknowledged Christ, and only Christ, as a ruler over his saints in both church and state alike. Seen in this context, evidently, the Puritan mission was more radical and revolutionary in its character than has previously been argued. The Puritan errand in fact was nothing less than a daring attempt to realize in Massachusetts the most radical exercise in holiness - the reconstruction of every dimensions of human life upon a covenanted relationship with God.

The work of an historian is always based upon the achievements of past generations. This is especially true of Puritan studies in England and New England, where the important works of William Haller and Perry Miller obligate later historians to look seriously into the life of the mind of the Puritans in order to appreciate the meaning Puritans gave to their actions. For indeed there exists no other way fully to understand the Puritans and their role upon the stage of history than to take into serious consideration their ideological premises, their religious persuasions as well as their vision of time and sense of history. An initial premise of this study is, therefore, that serious examination of the ideological context and universe of thought is needed to understand men's action. For this reason, it is the historian's duty not only to ask what happened during the course of history, but also why, on the basis of what premises, people made choices.

The reader has already noted that I have intentionally chosen the title "Theocracy in Massachusetts" in order to point up my differences with Perry Miller's concept of "orthodoxy" in Massachusetts, and in order to illuminate more fully the radical thrust behind the Puritan migration and the revolutionary character of the holy experiment in Massachusetts. It is well known that Perry Miller explained the Puritan errand in terms of the transfer of "orthodox" Puritan culture to America. It should be recognized, however, that the most prominent historian of Puritanism in American history was very suspicious of the presence, let alone the prominence, of eschatological visions and millennial expectations in the Puritan mind, and therefore attached little, if any, significance to the apocalyptic mode of historical thought in the foundation of New England. Yet, by ignoring the overwhelming evidence in Puritan writings that the pursuit of the millennium was an essential feature of the Puritan mind, and that discussion concerning prophecy about the Second Coming of Christ was widespread, Miller omitted a crucial dimension of the origins of the Puritan migration and the premises of the holy experiment in the wilderness. Perry Miller's interpretation of the Puritan errand, therefore, was based essentially upon a highly conservative view - the transfer of an "orthodox" Puritan culture to America by "orthodox" Puritans.

Recently, several excellent studies have appeared which have altered enormously our understanding of Puritanism in America. Theodore Bozeman's impressive work, To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism, is one of the most important studies of Puritanism to appear since Perry Miller's The New England Mind. Yet because Bozeman tends to emphasize the past in the Puritan sense of time, he underplays the role of millennial expectations in the Puritan mind. The millenarian impulse in Puritanism, however, sprang from roots reaching deep into the rise of Protestant historiography during the Reformation and the creation of a coherent apocalyptic tradition in England during the 16th century. My study attempts to show how central was the pursuit of the millennium in the Puritan migration and how crucially it informed the holy experiment in America.

Another fascinating study is Andrew Delbanco's The Puritan Ordeal. The reader will recognize, however, that I have not accepted Delbanco's thesis that England, and not New England, constituted the "wilderness" for the Puritans. For to accept Delbanco's thesis is to lose an essential dimension of the Puritan existential condition in America - the eschatologically oriented conception of the
wilderness, and the Puritans’ vivid sense of the Exile in the Wilderness of America. Finally, Stephen Foster’s *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570-1700*, is the most ambitious and successful attempt to place Puritan New England in the wider context of English Puritanism. The reader will clearly see in my work, however, that because I attach more importance to Puritan eschatology and millennialism, I consider the Puritan holy experiment in America as a more radical and a revolutionary system created by more radical Puritans than Foster would have us believe.

With all the great achievements of Puritan historiography in recent years, so far considerably less attention has been given to the ideological origins of the holy experiment in Massachusetts. Yet in order to understand the errand into the wilderness of America, several essential dimensions in the Puritan mind ought to be fully explored - the Puritan apocalyptic interpretation of history, eschatology, and the millennium. Puritan historiography traditionally describes the Puritan efforts to establish the true system of church-government, or Congregationalism, and only little attempt has been made to explore the extent to which those efforts were crucially informed by powerful eschatological visions and millennial expectations. But the Puritans apocalyptic mode of historical thought and pursuit of the millennium were both crucial animating forces in the Puritan migration to America and played a significant role in shaping the holy experiment in Massachusetts.

Puritans were ever confident about the ultimate significance of their migration to Massachusetts within the confines of the sacred history of the church upon earth, and they never relinquished their belief about the prophetic, redemptive, and revelatory significance of their presence in America within the unfolding drama of human salvation and redemption. Behind them lay the vast territory of the history of the church upon the stage of the world and the fate of God’s chosen people within the vicissitudes of time. Hence, Puritans justified their migration to New England in the wider historical context of sacred, providential history. They based it upon "the role of Christ to his Apostles and Saints, and the practise of Gods Saints in all ages...to fly into the Wilderness from the face of the Dragon." Such an apocalyptic imagination was inextricably intertwined in the Puritan mind with eschatological visions concerning New England’s singular role within the boundaries of salvation history now reaching its final culmination. "How wonderful is the lorde in mercye," wrote one Puritan in England in 1629, "that hath reysed this newe plantation" of Massachusetts Bay colony, "for so comfortable a refuge, for all suche whom he hath exempted owte of the generall devastation, which [England’s] Synnes have so much deserved."

Apocalyptic and eschatological visions constituted in fact the ideological context of the Puritan migration to, and presence in, New England. Situated, as it were, in the middle of eschatological and apocalyptic occurrences, the Puritan migration was considered by its participants as a great prophetic, revelatory, and redemptive event in the all time drama of the history of salvation. Since Puritans defined their errand into the wilderness in such highly eschatological and apocalyptic terms, we may therefore rightly speak of the "eschatology" of the Puritan migration (or Puritan New England’s singular role in the final stage of salvation history), and of the "apocalypse" of the Puritan migration (or the prophetic, redemptive, and revelatory significance of Puritan New England in the mystery of human salvation and redemption). A third important concept informed the Puritans’ sense of their errand - the pursuit of the millennium, or the quest after the millennial rule of Christ and his saints upon earth. For Puritans were truly confident that "the downfall of Antichrist is at hand, and then the Kingdom[s] of the Earth shall become the Kingdom of our Lord Christ." Consequently, they further claimed, "we chose not the place for the Land, but for the government, that our Lord Christ might raigne over us, both in Churches and Common-wealth."

In the past millennialism has posed a serious problem in Puritan historiography, especially in regard to "orthodox" Puritans in both England and New England. For it seemed hard to reconcile the activities and thought of the radical lunatic fringe of religious fanatics during the Puritan Revolution with those
of "orthodox" Puritans. Yet, when closely examined and properly understood, millennialism should not be associated exclusively with the radical and revolutionary plans of religious enthusiasts during the Puritan Revolution. After all, Puritans envisioned for many years the millennium as a feasible, earthly historical phenomenon taking place within time and history. The differences between "orthodox" and radical Puritans in both England and New England were not about the ultimate quest to realize this sacred prophetic revelation, which all agreed upon, but only upon the means to achieve it. For according to "orthodox" Puritans, millennialism meant "not that he [Christ] shall come personally to reign upon Earth (as some vainly imagine) but his powerful Presence and Glorious brightness of his Gospel...shall not only spiritually cause the Churches of Christ to grow beyond number" all over the world, "but also the whole civil Government of people upon Earth shall become his, so that there shall not be any to move the hand, nor dog his tongue against his chosen."

This is the essence of the Puritan pursuit of the millennium, namely, the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God through the millennial rule of Christ and his saints. In this context, indeed, as important dimension of the Puritan migration to New England was not only the quest to establish congregational churches of visible saints where Christ would rule directly over his saints, but also the creation of a unique system of social and political government, or theocracy as Puritans defined it, in which Christ would rule immediately over his people in the state.

The impressive growth of Puritan studies in recent years, however, should not hinder us from seeing as well that there are still several common assumptions regarding the Puritan migration to, and experience in, Massachusetts, which require revision and correction. These common assumptions concern the causes of the Puritan migration, the characterization of American Puritans as "non-separatist congregationalists," the nature of Puritan "orthodoxy" in Massachusetts, and most especially the meaning of the Puritan holy experiment, or theocracy, in the wilderness of America.

For many years the Puritan migration has been considered in the context of what may be called "the language of persecution and suffering," namely, that Puritans were terribly and unjustly persecuted by king and bishops in England and therefore forced to emigrate to the remote corner of the world. Less attention, however, was given to the Puritan experience in England in the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century, and to the result of long-term trends in English society whereby Puritanism increasingly revealed itself not only as an ecclesiastical power but as a strong, and indeed revolutionary, social and political force able to disturb and divide communities by its radical and uncompromising plea to reconstruct every dimensions of human life upon the sacred word of God. The actual world, therefore, out of which the great Puritan migration to New England came was a world of conflict and strife in local communities, parishes, churches, villages, and towns, in which Puritans struggled for religious as well as social reform against fellow members of their own local societies.

Ultimately, what determined the migration of thousands of Puritans to America? It was the gradual diminishing of the prospects for reform at the local and national level, and the interaction between the godly and "ungodly" or "profane" people, as Puritans termed those who opposed their vision of godly life. Emigration emerged as a possible solution for those radical Puritans for whom the only alternative was life among the "profane." After all, Puritans carried with them not only theological doctrine but also and most importantly the framework for a godly Christian society. And when the attempt to create such a holy, godly society in England failed under Queen Elizabeth and the first Stuart kings, some of the radical, rather than orthodox, Puritans turned their eyes to New England, deeming it the ideal place to make their vision a reality.

Ever since Perry Miller coined the term "non-separatist congregationalism" and boldly advanced the notion that Massachusetts Puritans were not separatist, few historians have endeavoured to explore seriously this contention. Yet, as Puritans' actions and proclamations demonstrate, and as England authorities and
the majority of English Puritans came immediately to recognize, Bay Puritans zealously separated themselves from the Church of England. Not only did Bay Puritans refuse to use the traditional rites and ceremonies of the Church of England in the holy congregations in America, but they also radically transformed the old customs existing in the Church of England regarding the prerequisites for membership in the church by claiming that only "visible saints," or those persons who could prove the experiences of saving grace in their souls, should be admitted to the holy fellowship of the churches in New England. Evidently, this radical restriction of the gates of the "kingdom of Heaven," this revolutionary reconstruction of the holy fellowship of the church as based only on visible saints, had led not only the authorities in England, but most importantly the majority of English Puritans during the 1630s and 1640s strongly to denounce the Bay Puritans as a people who did explicitly separate from the Church of England.

American Puritans in fact made the stand of separation unmistakably explicit in their proclamations. For as regarding the concept of a national church, such as the Church of England, the implications of the establishment of congregational churches in Massachusetts were indeed revolutionary. For according to the premises of the Congregationalism as a system of church-government, each particular congregation - over which stood no ecclesiastical power - held the "Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven." As John Cotton declared, "in the Old Testament indeed we read of a national church...but we read of no such national church...in the New Testament." Or as Richard Mather wrote, "In the Old Testament the church of the Jewes was a national church, but in the New Test[ament] a nation or a country is not spoken of as one church, but there is mention of many churches in one nation or one country." Consequently, the whole Puritan migration to New England became, according to John Cotton's exegesis of the Book of Revelation, a deliverance "from this Monster...[and] from the remnant of the Image of this Beast, from all Diocesan and national Churches." Evidently, then, the establishment of Congregationalism in America staged a most radical ecclesiastical revolution.

It is equally safe to say that so far little attempt has been made to explore the nature and meaning of theocracy in Massachusetts. In their radical quest after a theocratic universe, the Puritans believed that they must keep their covenants with God in the ecclesiastical as well as the civil realm; this conviction required that only "visible saints," or those who proved their covenant relationship with God, become members of the congregational church, and that civil authority should be confined exclusively to the godly. Religious reformation, then, went hand in hand with social and political reformation in the Puritan colony in Massachusetts. And while the pursuit of the reformation led in the religious sphere to the policy of admitting only "visible saints" into the communion of the church, the very same radical drive for reformation led, in the social and political realm, to the establishment of theocratic government - a political system that entrusted authority only to those in the Puritan colony who belonged to the "gathered churches." Thus, political society, no less than the holy fellowship of the church, was confined in the Puritan commonwealth in America only to those capable of preserving the covenant. The exclusiveness of church fellowship led directly to the exclusiveness of the political system. This was indeed the essence of the Puritan holy experiment in the wilderness, or of theocracy in Massachusetts.

Yet one can only fully grasp the tremendous revolutionary, social, and political consequences of theocracy in Massachusetts in light of the Puritans' radical pursuit of a theocratic universe in which every sphere of human life should be reconstructed upon the sacred word of God. For in their advocacy of a theocratic government which explicitly acknowledged Christ, and only Christ, as a ruler over his saints, the Bay Puritans were laying the foundation for a profound change in traditional English political and social obligations; no one, neither bishop nor king, could stand between God and his people. In this sense, theocracy indeed signified the republic of the saints, in which only God was the accepted ruler over his chosen people. Furthermore, theocratic government entailed not only a denial of the divine rights of king and bishops, but also a refusal to acknowledge that any right based on the privilege of property, heredity,
and wealth determined eligibility to participate in the political life of the holy experiment in Massachusetts. In as much as the political realm was held to be the exclusive domain of the saints by virtue of their covenanted relationship with God both in church and state, the sole prerequisites for membership in the body politic were sainthood, holiness, and saving grace. Religious obligations, thus, were transformed into political obligations, and the exclusiveness of the holy fellowship of the church led directly to the exclusiveness of the political system.

Theocracy in Massachusetts attempts to explore the eschatological and millennial dimension in the Puritan mind, and to show that out of a unique apocalyptic interpretation of history Puritans were not only able to justify their migration to America with sacred, providential history, but also able to define the meaning of their holy experiment in the course of salvation history. Only by acknowledging the essential radicalism embodied in the eschatology and apocalypse of the Puritan migration, can one grasp the ultimate goal and significance of the Puritan errand into the wilderness of America. For not only did Puritans believe in the imminence of the millennium; they also deemed themselves active actors in the providential drama of all time - the battle between Christ and Antichrist which would precede the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God. As the Puritan emigrants themselves perceived it, their errand into the wilderness was not simply a utopian search after religious reformation, a flight from corrupted history and degenerating human traditions; it was rather a confrontation within time and history, an earthly stand against the power of Satan and Antichrist.

NOTES - INTRODUCTION
