(Re)forming the Future: Prophecy as a Means of Reform in Jan van Boendale’s “Boec vander Wraken”¹

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Introduction

Medieval Christian thinking was heavily influenced by the perception of earthly history as being linear and finite.² Judgment Day, the ultimate end of history, the day when Christ will return to judge the living and the dead, was both hoped for and feared. The ambivalent feelings towards Judgment Day were caused by the fact that on the one hand history would find its fulfilment and the arrival, as Christ had promised, of “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1), on the other hand it was prophesied that disastrous events would precede Judgment Day and Christ himself would be a stern judge of whom all creatures of the earth and even the angels would be afraid.³ The already ambivalent feelings towards the End were amplified by the conviction of medieval people that they were living in the last age of history.⁴

¹ This article is based on the paper with the title “Making the Future a Better Place: Prophecy as a Means of Reform in Jan van Boendale’s “Boec vander Wraken” I presented at the workshop “Forming the Future when Time is Running Short”, IKGF Erlangen, 16.04.2013, and my PhD-research that was
⁴ Unless stated differently is the following short introduction into medieval apocalyptic thinking and prophecy based on Bernard MCGINN, Visions of the End: Apocalyptic traditions in the Middle Ages, with a new preface and expanded bibliography (= Records of Civilization, Sources and Studies, 96), New York 1998 (orig. 1979), p. 1–36, and Richard LANDES, Lest the Millennium be fulfilled: Apocalyptic Expectations and the Pattern of Western Chronography 100–800 CE, in: The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages (= Mediaevalia Lovaniensia, series 1, studia 15), edd.Werner Verbeke, Daniel Verhelst, Andries Welkenhuysen, Leuven 1988, p. 137–211. The
world (the “cosmic week theme”) had become popular through the works of the church father Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A. D.). Although Augustine had opposed attempts to determine the concrete date of the End, he had taken over the older theories of the ages of the world and described history as being divided into six ages in this world that would last around six thousand years and a seventh age which runs parallel to the six ages and that will become after Judgment Day a permanent, eternal resting state. Therefore, the sixth age of the world – which had started with the birth of Christ – was in the popular imagination expected to last not much longer than thousand years and consequently world history was thought to be close to its end. However, the consciousness of living in the last age of history seems not have led to a permanent state of apocalyptic excitement and fear of the End in the majority of people. Judgment Day was clearly the point of reference for medieval Christians to think about this life to secure a state of grace in the next life, but this does not necessarily imply that they were permanently in fear of its proximity.

Even though strongly opposed by the Church, from time to time apocalyptic speculations made waves, that means that the consciousness of living in the last age shifted to a belief that the last age was about to end, the date of the coming of Antichrist was near, and that contemporary events were already part of the last events. As the Middle Ages progressed, more and more authors seemed to have viewed their time in the light of the Last Days, even though they would not explicitly write that they considered their time as actually being the Last Days, thus adhering to the biblical warnings that the knowledge about the date of the End belongs solely to God and writing in an non-apocalyptic mode.

Especially the reception of the works of the prophet Joachim of Fiore († 1202) seems to have triggered a general increased apocalyptical awareness. Many new end-time prophecies were written, often in his name, and increasingly prophetical writings were used as tools to analyse contemporary historical circumstances and crises. Whereas ‘prophecy’ strictly speaking does not imply knowledge about the future, but refers to divinely inspired knowledge in general, in the Christian tradition it became quite strongly connected with the notion of a “reformative activity” that seeks to “correct a present situation in the light of [...] a glorious future”. This technique of speaking about a reform in the present in terms of the future, I will illustrate in the following using the case of the Middle Dutch translation of the

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literature on this topic is vast, a first orientation is offered by the bibliographies in the before mentioned studies, as well as by Last Things, edd. Bynum, Freedman (cf. note 3).

5 Compare Augustine, De civitate Dei, ch. 18–22.

6 The seminal study is Marjorie Ethel REEVES, The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages, Oxford 1969.

7 Cited after MCGINN, Visions (cf. note 4), p. 4.
Visio fratris Johannis as transmitted in the Boec vander Wraken by Jan van Boendale. I will argue that Jan van Boendale employs this prophecy to underline his general call for reform to gain the grace of God in this world. He thus makes use of the reformative potential of prophecy, i.e. the potential of prophecy to influence individual and/or collective behaviour by presenting and interpreting the present in the light of the eschatological future. Once the present behaviour is changed, it can influence the future, either by postponing the arrival of Judgment Day and thus providing a future in this world or by securing the individual’s salvation in the next world.

The Middle Dutch Visio fratris Johannis

The Middle Dutch version of the Visio fratris Johannis discussed in this article is contained in chapter nine to ten of the Boec vander Wraken (The book of punishment), written around 1346–1350/1 by Jan van Boendale († ca. 1350/1). The Middle Dutch author Jan van Boendale worked at least from 1314 as the main secretary of the city of Antwerp and had probably received a clerical education with a focus on law. Jan van Boendale was also entrusted with other legal, political, and diplomatic tasks, for example he appears in the city

records of 1336 as official plaintiff of Antwerp. This biographical fact could explain his self-assumed role as literary plaintiff and his highly legal terminology concerning the Last Judgment.\textsuperscript{11} Although some of his works are dedicated to the count of Brabant or to one of the count’s most important advisors, his works are aimed at a much broader audience. It has been argued that he wrote with laypeople in general in mind, or more specifically, the members of the higher levels of the medieval society, nobility and rich town people alike.\textsuperscript{12}

The Boec vander Wraken is probably Jan van Boendale’s last and also his most pessimistic work. It is divided into three bigger sections (boeken) that are subdivided into smaller chapters (capitels) and in which different historical topics are discussed in a rather loose order.\textsuperscript{13} Past, present, and future events are given equal scope and are understood as pointing to contemporary decay, explaining it, or presenting strategies to cope with it. Whereas in other works, like for example in Jans Teesteye, Jan van Boendale shows a nuanced view on his own time and the approaching end-time, he warns in the Boec vander Wraken repeatedly that the contemporary decay indicates the End.\textsuperscript{14} Bleak as Jan van Boendale’s view on the future might appear, the apocalyptic allusions in the Boec vander Wraken are rather orthodox and cautious, as I have argued already elsewhere.\textsuperscript{15} The Boec vander Wraken contains no explicit statements about the proximity of the End and no end-time calculations. Jan van Boendale is not a self-declared end-time prophet, but uses the eschatological-prophetical discourse to denounce contemporary grievances and to reflect on


\textsuperscript{12} His texts are neither aimed solely at the nobles to whom they are dedicated, nor are they specifically written for burghers. They contain elements from both worlds, which were more closely connected in medieval reality than older research accounted for. The most important opposition for Jan van Boendale is the opposition between lay people and clergy, not between court and town. Compare Dirk KINABLE, Facetten van Boendale: Literair-historische verkenningen van ‘Jans Teesteye’ en de ‘Lekenspiegel’ (= Leidse opstellen, 31), Leiden 1997, pp. 68–73.

\textsuperscript{13} The ‘Boec vander Wraken’ is cited after the edition: Nederlandsche gedichten uit de veertiende eeuw van Jan van Boendale, Hein van Aken en anderen, ed. Ferdinand Augustijn Snellaert, Brussel 1869, as available in the DBNL (http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/boen001boec03_01/, last access 04.12.2013). Of interest is also the translation into modern Dutch by Wim VAN ANROOIJ, Boek van de Wraak Gods (= Griffioen), Amsterdam 1994.

\textsuperscript{14} For a long time the pessimistic and apocalyptic note of the Boec vander Wraken and its rather chaotic style of composition have been closely connected to the author’s biography. It was claimed that Jan van Boendale must have been very old, disillusioned, and confused because of his age. Compare for example MAK, ‘Boec vander wraken’ (cf. note 9), pp. 15, 24–27, and VAN ANROOIJ, Boek (cf. note 13), pp. 130–132.

the necessary reforms. I will first introduce the Middle Dutch *Visio fratris Johannis* before discussing this strategy in more detail.

Jan van Boendale claims to have found a prophecy in ‘a little book’ (*boecsken*, III, 9, v. 724) where it is ascribed to a certain ‘Brother John’ (*Brueder Jan*, III, 9, v. 728). When this Brother John is reciting the Psalm *Deus, venerunt gentes* (‘God the heathen are come into thine inheritance’, Ps 79:1) in the early morning of Ascension Day 1291, he is reminded of the fall of Acre (Mai 1291), the last crusading city in the Holy Land, to the Saracens.\(^{16}\) Overwhelmed by emotions, he begs God’s mercy for humanity. At this moment a further anonymous bishop appears to Brother John who starts comforting him by advising him to not be afraid and to not lament the fall of Acre too much, because it was God’s rightful punishment for the sins of the crusaders. In fact, it was only the first outburst of God’s wrath that is awaiting all Christians. The bishop prophesies that because of the moral lapses of the Roman curia and the simony of pope Nicholas III (†1280, pope 1277–1280), huge parts of Europe will be afflicted by riots and civil commotions. A heathen king of the Tartars will attack Europe, but will finally be defeated by a Christian prince and his German and French helpers.\(^{17}\) After the tyranny of the king of the Tartars, the reputation of all religious men will sink very low. No one will obey the pope anymore and the cardinals will be taken hostage and robbed of their properties. Even worse, the lay princes and laypeople together will turn against all religious men and take their goods away (*Princen ende tfolc met allen / Selen sere jeghen hen vallen // Ende selen hem totten rebben / Al nemen dat si hebben*, Princes and laypeople will turn against them, that is the religious men, forcefully and take away everything they have, III, 10, vs. 1030–1033).\(^{18}\) The clergy will not dare to show their tonsures in public anymore (*En sal cume cleric / dat wet // Sijn crune toonen dorren*, Then you must know, no member of the clergy will dare to show his tonsure, III, 10, vs. 1039–1040). Then the laypeople will also revolt against their princes (*Tfolc sal hem ooc heffen mede / Ieghen die princen te menegher stede*, In many places will the laypeople revolt against their princes, III, 10, vs. 1042–1043).

After having heard all this, Brother John asks the bishop fearfully whether it is God’s will to destroy Christianity. The bishop assures him that this time of crisis will be short and

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\(^{16}\) In the Middle Dutch ‘Visio fratris Johannis’ (III, 9, v. 764) the Latin incipit of the psalm is cited, but left without translation. Compare the Latin original as edited by Samantha KELLY, The ‘Visio fratris Johannis’: Prophecy and politics in late-thirteenth-century Italy, in: Florensia 8–9 (1994–1995), pp. 7–42, appendix p. 36, line 7, where she indicates in note 3 that in the medieval Latin Bible this Psalm was counted as Psalm 78:1.

\(^{17}\) The Christian prince is accompanied by German and French *princes* in the Latin version, in the Middle Dutch version the rank of the princes is diminished to *helpers*.

\(^{18}\) All English translations of citations of Jan van Boendale’s works in this article are my own.
that it will be followed by a restoration of the public order by the Germans and the French. During this short earthly millennium the Church will blossom anew and the clergy will return to a truly Christian religious way of life. This time of peace will be brought to an end by the coming of Antichrist who will bring even worse chaos and greater punishment to the Christians. The bishop concludes his account with a list of popes that will precede Antichrist’s appearance and the prediction that these events will commence from the year 1300 onwards.

The Visio fratris Johannis is one of the smaller prophecies of the thirteenth century that started circulating after the fall of Acre. The Visio fratris Johannis in particular has attracted the attention of scholars on account of the fact that a medieval German version of this prophecy enjoyed widespread popularity under the name Auffahrtabend-prophecy. Some of the German versions were falsely ascribed to Hildegard of Bingen or the Emperor Sigismund. The Middle Dutch version of the Visio fratris Johannis is remarkable because of two reasons. It is not only a very early reception witness and precedes the German reception of the prophecy around 30 years, it is also a much less canonical choice than popular prophecies such as the Tiburtine Sibyl or the Revelation of Pseudo-Methodius which feature alongside the Visio fratris Johannis in the Boec vander Wraken. Unlike the multiple German versions of the Auffahrtabend-prophecy has the Middle Dutch translation not circulated

In the Latin version it is prophesied that two kings from France and Germany will defeat the infidels and reform the Church, in the Middle Dutch version the kings have disappeared, only French and Germans are mentioned generally. It has been argued that the kings ‘disappear’ because Jan van Boendale didn’t want to promote a French king as a Last-World-Emperor-like figure, compare Peter C. Van der Eerden, Eschatology in the ‘Boec van der Wraken’, in: Use, edd. Verbeke, Verhelst, Welkenhuysen (cf. note 4), pp. 425–440, here p. 437. In my opinion this doesn’t explain the removal of the German king as well. Maybe Jan van Boendale wanted to show the lay people to act independently from their rulers and express his wish for more sovereignty of the people.

Compare Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, The Auffahrtabend prophecy and Henry of Langenstein: German adaption and transmission of the ,Visio fratriis Johannis,’ in: Viator 40 (2009), pp. 355–386. Only in 1932 the first version of the anonymous Latin source was detected in the Vatican library, compare Emil Donkel, Visio seu prophetia fratriis Johannis: Eine süditalienische Prophezeiung aus dem Anfang des 14. Jahrhunderts, in: Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte 40 (1932), pp. 361–379. Samantha Kelly has only quite recently researched thoroughly the transmission history of the Latin prophecy. This enabled her to indicate its probable time of origin and author. She has also edited in this article a long and a short version of the ‘Visio fratriis Johannis’, which circulated independently during the Middle Ages and provided a list of manuscripts. The Middle Dutch ‘Visio fratriis Johannis’ is based on the longer version, compare Kelly, ‘Visio fratriis Johannis’ (cf. note 16), p. 13.

This remarkable prophecy in the ‘Boec van der Wraken’ has been first identified as reception of the ‘Visio fratriis Johanni’s in VAN DER EERDEN, Eschatology (cf. note 19), esp. p. 428. Before Brother John had been identified by MAK, ‘Boec vander wraken’ (cf. note 9), p. 23, note 45 as the Brabant court poet Jan van Heelu. It is not known how Jan van Boendale obtained this prophecy. Not many copies of the long Latin versions are preserved and none of the manuscripts that contain a long Latin version seems to stem from the medieval Low Countries, the earliest known manuscript copy of the long version stems from the early fourteenth century (Stadtbibliothek Nürnberg Cent. IV, 32), compare the list of manuscripts in Kelly, ‘Visio fratriis Johannis’ (cf. note 16).
widely outside the *Boec vander Wraken*. There are good reasons for ascribing the Middle Dutch translation of the *Visio fratris Johannis* to Jan van Boendale himself as no other similar Middle Dutch translation has surfaced yet, he also translated and reworked the *Tiburtine Sibyl* and the *Revelation of Pseudo-Methodius* himself, and because he mentions as his source a little book that was written in Latin.

That brings us to the origins of the prophecy: When and where was the original Latin prophecy written and who was Brother John? Based on the textual evidence of the earliest known redactions of the *Visio fratris Johannis*, for example the reference to non-Italian regions as *transmontani* and its general Italian-centred point of view, Kelly has argued convincingly that this prophecy probably originates in the immediate environs of Rome. Concerning the dating of the prophecy, Kelly has argued that first of all it cannot have been written before 18 August 1291 when the fall of Acre became known in the Latin West. The prophecy was probably also not written exactly on Ascension Day 1292, which is given in some redactions as date of the vision. Based on allusions to historical events and persons in the prophecy, Kelly narrows its date of origin to no later than July 1292. That means – unlike suggested by Donckel –, that the list of future popes at the end of *Visio fratris Johannis* is ‘real’ prophecy and not prophecy *ex-eventu* (i.e. containing recognisable historical events that have already happened).

Sometimes the *Vision fratris Johannis* is referred to in research as *Prophecy of Pseudo-John of Parma* because some redactions are ascribed to John of Parma († 1289), Minister General of the Franciscan order from 1247–1257. In any case John of Parma can be excluded as the author of the original Latin prophecy, because he died before the fall of Acre. Kelly argues convincingly that the author of the *Visio fratris Johannis* was also not one of John of Parma’s Franciscan Spiritual followers, and that he was not part of any religious establishment and must have lived as an eremite outside of Rome. Kelly’s main argument is the absence of allusions to Joachite theory, like the division of the history of the world into seven periods or the bestowing of a special role to a religious order. Unlike many Franciscan

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23 Until now only one Middle Dutch version has surfaced in the only copy of the ‘Boec vander Wraken’ (Oxford, Ms. Marshall 29). Connections with the German ‘Auffahrtabend’-prophecy are rather unlikely, at least none were indicated by KOLPACOFF DEAN, Auffahrtabend prophecy (cf. note 20), who has researched the German transmission and is aware of the Middle Dutch version. But there are similar topics in other Middle Dutch prophecies in the works of Jan van Boendale himself (‘Jans Teesteye’, vs. 3678–3695) and in the works of other Brabant authors like Lodewijk van Velthem († ca. 1327) – here based on a Pseudo-Hildegard of Bingen prophecy – and Jan van Leeuwen (†1378) – source yet unidentified – as already remarked by KINABLE, Facetten (cf. note 12), p. 196, note 178.

24 Up to now there are no doubts that Jan van Boendale translated the ‘Visio fratris Johannis’ himself to include it into the ‘Boek vander Wraken’. Compare especially the literature mentioned in note 22.

writers, the author shows much concern for the future of the Church and Christian society as a whole, not only for a single order. His distance from the religious establishment is also shown by the fact that the renewal of the Church is not initiated by a religious person, but by a lay prince.

**Contextualisation**

The *Visio fratris Johannis* prophesied that the tumultuous events it describes will take place soon. When Jan van Boendale decided to include this prophecy into the *Boec vander Wraken* already more than half of a century had passed without the prophecy coming true. Jan van Boendale neither identifies any of the prophesied events in his time nor does he adapt or update the prophecy for a better fit. All the signs are that he must have had other reasons to include this prophecy in the *Boec vander Wraken* than its apocalyptic significance. In the following I will argue that the damnation of avarice and the prophecy’s general anti-curial sentiment made this rather Rome-orientated prophecy significant for Jan van Boendale and his audience, the elite of the Brabant city of Antwerp.

A very important topic of the Middle Dutch *Visio fratris Johannis* is avarice. The damnation of avarice forms the link between the Middle Dutch *Visio fratris Johannis* and the two preceding chapters in the *Boec vander Wraken*, which are dedicated to the unfavourable consequences of avarice for the Romans during the First Punic War (264–241 B.C.). The reader is warned that avarice negatively affects the well-being and functioning of a city (*Die ghierich was ende fel / En beleyde noyt stat wel; / Want sine ghiericheit, nu ende echt, / Doet verkeren der stat recht*, Those who are greedy and evil will never be good rulers of a city, because avarice disturbs the laws of a city, III, 8, vs. 704–707). One might say that here Jan van Boendale’s perspective is typical for a responsible municipal official and a good citizen of Antwerp who sees the dangers of avarice for the health and wealth of his beloved city.²⁶

In the short moralisation that precedes the prophecy the great sinfulness of the Christians in the Holy Land and their dishonouring of the truce with the Saracens are given as reasons for the fall of Acre, the second reason seems to be an addition by Jan van Boendale. Avarice was definitely considered by their contemporaries as one of the gravest sins of the Christians in the Holy Land. Especially the inhabitants of Acre were accused in contemporary

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²⁶ Boendale’s view is however not unique. Already for example the theologian John of Salisbury († 1180) considered avarice as the chief vice, especially when perceived in those who hold a public office, compare Lester K. LITTLE, Pride goes before Avarice: Social Changes and the Vices in Latin Christendom, in: The American Historical Review 76 (1971), pp. 16–49, here p. 20.
writings of indulging in wealth and acting selfishly in order to preserve their goods and this selfishness was probably one of the reasons that led to the breaking of the truce and the eventual fall of Acre, which was then one of the best-fortified cities of the world.\textsuperscript{27}

In the main body of the prophecy the avarice of the curia and the pope is given as principal reason for the upcoming wrath of God. The simony in the highest ranks of the Church – the curia and its head, pope Nicholas III, is described as the worst manifestation of greed, because it destroys the fundamentals of Christian society from within. The author exclaims that simony, the selling of positions in the hierarchy of the church by greedy churchmen, is the most profound sin, because they are actually selling Christ’s blood: \textit{Ja, die gheestelike goede, / Die God cocht met sinen bloede, / Die vercopen si om ghelt voort}, They sell the spiritual goods for money, that Christ paid for with his blood, III, 10, vs. 1006–1008.

Even worse, although it is mainly provoked by the sinfulness of the curia and the pope, all Christians will have to suffer dearly from God’s wrath. At the climax of the tribulations the laypeople will first turn against the clergy and then against the lay princes (III, 10, vs. 1030–1049). This sequence of events is a clear warning that the corruption of the pope and the curia by avarice will lead to a complete breakdown of the general order of society.\textsuperscript{28}

Jan van Boendale not only criticizes the avarice of the Christians in the Holy Land and of the pope and the curia, but also relates the historical lessons to the individual salvation of his readers in order to trigger a moral reform of his audience. Therefore, at the end of the prophecy, where in the Latin version Brother John prays quite generally for God’s mercy, Jan van Boendale has added a first-person moralisation in which he prays to God to spare Christianity from fornication and avarice and strongly admonishes his readers to avoid especially the sin of avarice.\textsuperscript{29} Jan van Boendale considers avarice as the root of evil and supports his argument by citing the ubiquitous Apostle Paul: \textit{Want die goede Paulus seyt: Ghierecheyt is wortel alre quaetheyt}, Because the good man Paul said: Avarice is the root of

\textsuperscript{27} This is for example reported in Joseph Francois MICHAUD, History of the Crusades, translated from the French by William Robson, vol. 3, New York 1853, pp. 71–72. Unfortunately, no direct references to contemporary sources are given in this study.

\textsuperscript{28} That the criticism is specifically aimed at the curia is made even more clear in the Middle Dutch prophecy by the inclusion of religious men as the prophecy’s envisaged audience, in contrast to the high ranking Church officials, who are held responsible for the future evil (III, 10, V. 952-960).

\textsuperscript{29} Other differences with the Latin original include for example the change of the fictive date of the prophecy and the setting – the eremite Brother John becomes a monk – the latter is mentioned in KELLY, ‘Visio fratri Johannis’ (cf. note 16), p. 13, more differences are discussed in more detail in WUTTKE, Eschatologie (cf. note 1), pp. 405–412. An indication that this prophecy is not primarily concerned with politics (at least not specific German politics) is in my opinion that Jan van Boendale did not up-date the Last Emperor motif of the Latin prophecy. Also the main focus of the description of the rather short millennium is on the reformed state of the Church that will last until the appearance of the Antichrist.
all evil, III, 10, v. 1166–1167. He wants his readers to understand that avarice is the chief vice, because it endangers the salvation of every individual Christian and the functioning of institutions, like municipalities or the Church. With the previous prophecy he indeed illustrated very well the destructive forces of avarice: first it corrupts the individual, then the institution, and then Christianity as a whole. The final moralisation makes clear that Jan van Boendale perceived the Visio fratris Johannis in first case as an effective warning against avarice. He is positioning himself self-confidently in the contemporary discourse on the vices.

The basis for the medieval discussion of the vices was the Bible, where on the one hand avarice was singled out as the most important sin (1 Tim 6:10), on the other hand pride (Eccl. 10:13). From early Christianity onwards two opposing traditions had developed, that either gave pride or avarice the main role. In early Christianity pride had dominated the discourse, but from the eleventh century onwards avarice gained importance, probably because of the growing importance of the towns and the values of burghers. But avarice posed not only a threat to the burghers. From the late eleventh century onwards simony, too, especially the selling of ecclesiastical office, and the greed of the members of the curia and the pope, were condemned in writings both for clerics and laypeople. A third strand of condemnations of avarice singled out the Jews as the greediest and most vile merchants and usurers.

Although this prophecy can be considered as a general warning against greed, it is striking that the dominating theme in the body of the prophecy is the avarice of the pope and the papal court and the denunciation of Nicholas III as the pope with whom the decay of the Church started. Jan van Boendale was not the only late medieval writer who was dismayed at the avarice at the papal court. For example, in the Divina Comedia (ca. 1307–1321) his contemporary Dante Alighieri († 1321) describes avarice as one of the gravest sins that corrupt Florence, the greedy are punished in the 4th circle of Hell, and avarice is shown as widespread amongst the clergy, high church officials, and especially amongst cardinals and popes (compare Inferno, Canto 7 and 19).

The other grave sins are pride and envy (compare Inferno, Canto 6).
after having been succeeded by popes, who were infamous for simony and avarice, too, Nicholas III was still considered as exemplary for simoniacal practices at the papal court.\(^{34}\)

Besides the moralistic value of the prophecy, I would argue that also its political undertone, especially the anti-curial, almost anti-hierarchical, sentiment of the *Visio fratris Johannis*, had made it relevant to Jan van Boendale and his audience. It is difficult to say whether the historical events in the prophecy, the simoniacal practices at the court of Nicholas III and the references to the political tensions in Italy more than fifty years ago, made sense to Jan van Boendale’s audience, although it must be assumed that they made at least some sense to Jan van Boendale who was also an accomplished historiographer.\(^{35}\) But he could expect that the general anti-curial sentiment of the prophecy would strike a chord with his audience, because the esteem of the papacy had sunk significantly in the German Empire after the Holy See had moved to Avignon in 1309.\(^{36}\) The two main points of critique were the strong ties between the Avignon papacy and the French royal dynasty and the increased attempts of the papacy to influence the election of the Holy Roman Emperor. The long-lasting diplomatic and military struggles between Louis IV († 1347, byname Louis the Bavarian, Holy Roman emperor from 1328) and the papacy led to a general anti-curial discourse in Germany around the 1330s.\(^{37}\)

The general anti-curial sentiment in the German Empire is well-illustrated by the reaction of the Strasbourg chronicler Fritsche Closener († before 1396) to the political writing

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\(^{34}\) Of course, Jan van Boendale takes this motif from the Latin ‘Visio fratris Johannis’ that like the ‘Divina Comedia’ was written much earlier, when the memory of Nicholas’ III papacy was still fresh. But Boendale also does not exchange this pope with one of his successors. Because Boendale had not updated or reworked the list of popes at the end of the prophecy, no concrete reference to the motif of the Angelic Pope or Benedict XI (Pope from 1303–1304) on whom these expectations had centred can be found.

\(^{35}\) He wrote several historiographical works, the most voluminous being the ‘Brabantsche Yeesten’. A preliminary scan did not lead to any other references to Nicholas III in Jan van Boendale’s oeuvre. That is no surprise because to my knowledge this pope was not very relevant for the history of Brabant.

\(^{36}\) Antwerp belonged until 1357 to the Duchy of Brabant, from then on it belonged to the Countship of Flanders. Although Antwerp was an integral part of the Duchy of Brabant and one of its seven leading cities, remained its inhabitants proud of Antwerp’s special tie with the Holy Roman Emperor. Jan van Boendale himself differentiated between those parts of Brabant that truly belong to the Duke of Brabant and those areas where in fact still the Holy German Emperor was the supreme feudal lord. Compare VAN ANROOIJ, Datering (cf. note 9), p. 51 and Raymond VAN UYTVEN, Het Antwerpen van Jan van Boendale, in: Antwerpen, edd. van Anrooij et al (cf. note 9), pp. 17–29, 160–161, esp. p. 24.

Defensor Pacis, written by Marsilius of Padua († c. 1342), in which the supremacy of the Emperor is defended and the sinfulness of the papacy rebuked.38

“In den ziten wart daz buch gemaht, daz do heißet <Defensor pacis>. Daz bewiset mit redlichen sprüchen der heiligen geschrift, daz ein bobest under eine keiser sol sin und daz er kein weltlich herschaft sol han. Es bewiset ouch des bobestes und der cardinal grit (Gierigkeit, Habgier, Geiz) und ire hofart und ire simonie, die sū gewonlich tribent und sich des beschonen mit falsc hen glosen.“

(In these times a book was made with the title 'Defensor Pacis' [Defender of the Peace]. It proofs with veracious quotes from the Holy Bible that the Pope should be subordinated to the Emperor and hold no secular power. It also proofs the avarice of the pope and the cardinals, their pride, and their simony, that they are used to and that they try to defend with false tongues.)39

Fritsche Closener criticises in this passage the avarice, pride, and simony of the papal court to promote the rights of the Holy Roman Emperor. Although the anti-curial sentiment of this passage is similar to the sentiment expressed in the middle part of the Middle Dutch Visio fratris Johannis, it does not prove that Jan van Boendale had read the Defensor Pacis which was written only a few years before the Boec vander Wraken, because it was already present in the older Latin source. However, some changes in the Middle Dutch Visio fratris Johannis indicate that Jan van Boendale utilized this prophecy in the contemporary anti-curial discourse.40 He has not only added to his source that sacred rites administered by excommunicated clerics have no value, but also that the pope, the cardinals, and the whole curia will be excommunicated because of their simony (III, 9, vs. 862–887).41 It has been even suggested by Wim van Anrooij that the denial of pope Clement VI on 13th April 1346 to resolve the excommunication of Louis IV the Bavarian had been the stimulus for Jan van Boendale to write the Boec vander Wraken.42 Other passages in the Boec vander Wraken and

38 The ‘Defensor Pacis’ was written 1324 at Paris for Louis IV. It was one of the most influential political writings of its time. It argues for a for its time revolutionary form of sovereignty of the people, defies the supremacy of the pope and subordinates the Church to the state. The ‘Defensor Pacis’ inspired Louis IV to his coronation as Holy Roman Empire in Rome (1328) and to his decision to install an antipope in the same year, compare RUPPRICH, Literatur (cf. note 37), pp. 377–378.
40 Compare: Phyllis Barzillay ROBERTS, Prophecy, Hagiography and St Thomas of Canterbury, in: Medieval Futures: Attitudes to the Future in the Middle Ages, edd. John A. Burrows, Ian P. Wei, Woodbridge 2000, pp. 67–82, here p. 79: “The struggle for religious and political supremacy in England took place on many levels, not only least of all in the realm of magic and prophecy.”
41 Already VAN DER EERDEN, Eschatology (cf. note 19), p. 435 has noticed the stronger anti-curial note of this passage in the Middle Dutch ‘Visio fratris Johannis’ compared to its source and remarked on the radical view of Jan van Boendale concerning the invalidity of the sacred rites of excommunicated clerics.
42 The relation between the pope and the German Emperor is a reoccurring topic in the ‘Boec vander Wraken’ (esp. I, 4-7), as noted in VAN ANROOIJ, Datering (cf. note 9), p. 49, and Wim VAN ANROOIJ,
his other works clearly show that Jan van Boendale took sides with the Emperor, although his opinions are less radical than those of Marsilius of Padua in the *Defensor Pacis*.^43^ There are strong indications that the Middle Dutch *Visio fratris Johannis* is aimed mainly against the papacy and not against France that is otherwise often rebuked by Jan van Boendale. On the one hand we the appearance of French *and* German helpers of the Christian king who defeats the infidel king of the Tartars and on the other hand the united French *and* German forces at the end of the prophecy who re-establish the general order before the earthly millennium. It is essential to note that Jan van Boendale could have easily updated the prophecy in these points. It is possible that this rather strange cooperation between the French and Germans for a medieval vernacular prophecy from the German/Middle Dutch language area is not very significant, because the focus of the prophecy is clearly on the papacy. It could however also be seen as “an interestingly moderate stance on joint secular intervention in a time of crisis”.^44^

**Conclusions**

The Middle Dutch *Visio fratris Johannis* in the *Boec vander Wraken* is not an apocalyptical prophecy. Jan van Boendale does not cross the borders of orthodoxy and leaves open how near the End is. He only writes quite vaguely: *Maer hoer, ic wille di ghewaghen / Van vreseliken daghen, / Die comen selen herde saen / Ja, die nu al in sijn ghegaen*, Listen, I will tell you about the terrible days that will start soon, or have already begun, III, 9, v. 805–808. Significantly, the dating of the prophesied events is less specific than in the Latin source. Compare: *Et hec evenient annis transactis MCCC, et tuo tempore incipient*, And this shall happen after 1300, and in your days it shall begin, with:^45^

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Ende dese dinc sal ghescien al
Na datmen Gods jaer scriven sal
Dusent .iiij. hondert;
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^43^ Whereas Marsilius of Padua argues strongly for supremacy of the Emperor, Jan van Boendale is more moderate and argues for equality between the two powers, compare VAN ANROOI, Recht (cf. note 42), p. 159. More general on the lasting tensions between the papacy and the Holy Roman Emperors compare HEIKE JOHANNA MIERAU, Kaiser und Papst im Mittelalter, Köln 2010.

^44^ This was remarked by KOLPACOFF DEAN, Auffahrtabend prophecy (cf. note 20), p. 365 on the German adaption of the ‘Visio fratris Johannis’ to the ‘Auffahrtabend’-prophecy where the French play a similar role.

^45^ The Latin ‘Visio fratris Johannis’ is cited after KELLY, ‘Visio fratris Johannis’ (cf. note 16), here p. 40, my translation and emphasis.
Soe selen, wiens soes wondert,
Beghennen in *dien* jaren.
(And all of these things shall happen in the year of the Lord 1300, they shall begin in *these* years, III, 10, v. 1134–1138, my emphasis)

In the Middle Dutch *Visio fratris Johannis* there is no room for calculations of the End. That Jan van Boendale did indeed not estimate the End very near is in my view shown by his request that others may continue his book:

Ende bidde een ygheliken / die verstaen
Sal dat boecsken / ende den sin
Ende die materie diet heeft in /
Ende die hem dichents onderwint
Dat hijt voort dichte als hijt vint
Na die materie daert voer af ruert
(And I ask everybody who understands this little book, its meaning and its content, and who knows how to compose poetry, that he will continue it in the same style when he finds it, III, 17 (epilogue), vs. 2504–2509).

Jan van Boendale was not convinced that the end-time had dawned and had not given up the hope for a general reform of the Church and Christianity. His eschatology differs in this point fundamentally from the eschatology of the almost contemporary Brabant poet Lodewijk van Velthem († after 1327) who calculated that the End would come close to his own lifetime (around 1335) in the 5th Part of the *Spiegel Historiael* (1317).46 Where Lodewijk van Velthem seems to have given up all hope and collects end-time prophecies to prove the End is near, sees Jan van Boendale enough time left to call for reform.

The non-apocalyptic tone of the Middle Dutch *Visio fratris Johannis*, the fact that huge parts of it are dedicated to the present state of affairs in Christianity – the corruption of the Church –, and that neither Antichrist nor Judgment Day play a significant role, are signs that the main focus of this Middle Dutch prophecy is not on the sequence of the end-times. The additional moralisations against greed underline its focus on moral reforms in the present. The dream of the earthly millennium – so omnipresent in some medieval prophecies – is still

there, but it is not anymore the only ray of hope on the horizon, as Jan van Boendale seems to redirect the hope of his audience to the present. He does not want to paralyze the readers of this prophecy with fear of the future, but to give instructions on the required behaviour to gain the grace of God in this world. And indeed, the next chapter of the Boec van der Wraken is dedicated to the grace of God.

Jan van Boendale even seems to indicate at the end of the prophecy that moral reform in the present can help to propitiate God so that he might postpone Judgment day and thus lengthen the earthly eschatological future for mankind: Nu bidt Gode, diet al vermach / Dat Hi, mids siere grote gracien, / Ons verre van allen tribulacien, Now pray to the omnipotent Lord that he will keep us away from all tribulations with his great grace, III, 10, vs. 1145–1147. Of course, this is rather typical rhetoric for a medieval epilogue, but it receives additional meaning through the context, as if Jan van Boendale really wants to say: “Lord, keep us away from all the end-time tribulations I just have described”!

With its constructive criticism, the Visio fratris Johannis in the Boec vander Wraken is a good example for the utilisation of eschatological prophecy as means for reform as described in the introduction of my article. This prophecy is speaking of reforms required in the present to provide for the future, whether a future in this world by actually postponing Judgment Day, or for the future in the next world by providing for the individual’s salvation. It serves like the preceding Roman example an educational aim, but the eschatological frame intensifies the message. The educational note perfectly fits with the primary reception of the works of Jan van Boendale by the higher nobility and burghers of Antwerp and maybe even the Brabant Court at Brussels and their general strong educative character.

Abstract

48 It has been argued that the main reason for the inclusion of this prophecy in the ‘Boec vander Wraken’ has been to illustrate God’s vengeance, compare van der Eerden, Eschatology (cf. note 19), p. 410.
49 This technique was still working centuries later. Compare Susan Bridgen, London and the Reformation, Oxford 1989, p. 214, on the function of prophecy in London during the Reformation, where they were finally banned in 1542 as an act of treason: “Prophecies were circulating, foretelling disaster for the perpetrators of change, and giving hope of the return of the old order. Such prophecies, hallowed by age, were widely believed. Where they told of events which were imminent they were the more emotive and dangerous.”

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