

MESSIANIC VISIONS IN THE SPANISH MONARCHY, 1516-1598

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Messianic visions form an integral part of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam because all three faiths ascribe a crucial role to a messiah (in Islam, to a *Mahdi* or “rightly guided one”): a savior or redeemer sent by God both to establish a new order characterized by justice for all and (often) to herald the end of the world. At certain times, messianic visions have become particularly prevalent; and in the sixteenth century they burgeoned simultaneously in all three faiths, directly involved sovereign rulers, and powerfully influenced international relations.¹

My name is Shah Isma’il. I am God’s mystery . . .
I am the living Jesus, son of Mary,
I am the Alexander of my contemporaries.

The Perfect Guide has arrived. Faith has been brought to all . . .
A man has become a manifestation of the truth. Prostrate thyself!
Pander not to Satan! Adam has put on new clothes. God has come.²

Shah Isma’il, founder of the Safavid dynasty of Iran and author of these verses, was just one of many Muslims who claimed to be the “Mahdi” (the “rightly guided one,” the Islamic equivalent of the Messiah) during the tenth century of the Muslim era, which coincided with the age of Charles V and Philip II.

Visitors noted that Isma’il’s entourage called him “neither king nor prince, but saint and prophet”; and the success of his religious propaganda soon alarmed other Muslims, particularly his western neighbor the Ottoman Sultan Selim. In 1514 the two rulers clashed in battle, and after his victory Selim began to use similar messianic terms such as “Shadow of God on earth” and *Sahib-kiran*, or “World Conqueror” (Subrahmanyam 55-71; Fleischer, “Mahdi, Messiah” 35).³ Selim’s son and heir Suleiman likewise used the title *Sahib-kiran* and in 1532 began to wear a special tiara with four crowns, symbolizing the rule of the last world emperor. He also encouraged histories and prophecies that compared him with his namesake Solomon and with Alexander the Great (Fleischer, “Mahdi, Messiah” 53).⁴

The Jewish communities of medieval Spain and Portugal also looked for a messiah, and their expulsion from the peninsula during the 1490s heightened speculation that his appearance was imminent—both among those who retained their faith and fled, and among those who converted to Christianity and remained. Thus Isaac Abravanel, who composed three messianic treatises in exile in Italy, argued that redemption would occur between 1503 and 1573; while Solomon Molcho, a Portuguese convert to Christianity who returned to Judaism and recircumcised himself, believed he had a messianic mission and went to Regensburg in 1532 to meet the Habsburg emperor, Charles V. Molcho obtained a two-hour audience, during which he displayed the banner, shield, and sword that he proposed to use when he led the Jews against Sultan Suleiman, then advancing into Hungary. He failed to convince Charles, however, who imprisoned him, took him back to Italy in a cage, and had him burnt at the stake (Lenowitz 120-23; Idel).⁵

By then, Charles too had become the focus of messianic views. Burgundian court tradition included accession pageants that displayed the ruler as the Messiah and the city he “entered” as Jerusalem. During Charles’s ceremonial entry into Bruges in 1515, the first scene, which resembled the birth of Christ, showed three angels presenting Charles with a crown, a coat of arms, and the keys of the city, just as the three Wise Men had brought gifts to the Christ child. Subsequent tableaux equated Bruges with Jerusalem, displayed the prince’s descent from David, and culminated in a massive display that showed Charles as Christ, and his mother (Juana of Castile) as the Virgin Mary ascending into heaven. The images so impressed Charles that he asked to see the whole show again the next day (Anglo 12; Kipling; Blockman and Donckers; Martin).⁶

The following year, Charles became King of Spain. Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, Charles’s grandparents, had acquired from the Pope the title *Los Reyes Católicos* and their chroniclers hailed their deeds as fulfillment of ancient prophecies and claimed that God guided their every step, provided miracles for them, and protected them from harm. They also saw Ferdinand as a “New David” who would emulate the deeds of the Old Testament kings. Charles inherited all this messianic imagery too, as well as the titles “Catholic king” and “king of Jerusalem” (Cepeda Adán; Christian; Milhou; Bilinkoff; Nieto Soria). His election as Holy Roman Emperor in 1519 produced another round of apocalyptic propaganda. Some examples were visual, such as a representation of Charles as one of the three Wise Men prepared in the 1520s for the retable of the royal chapel in the cathedral of Granada done by the Flemish sculptor Philippe de Bigarny (Marín Cruzado).⁷ Prophecies also abounded. One sent by the Pope

predicted that the young prince

Sojuzgará los anglicos, inspanos, aragocos, gallos y alangobardes. Roma con Florencia destruirá y a fuego quemará; y alcançará doblada corona; y después passará la mar con grande ejército, y entrará en Morería, e rey de los Griegos se llamará . . . No será quien lo pueda resistir porque el braço del senyor será con él y quasi posesiera el universal senyorio de la tierra. Et echas [e]stas cosas, sancto será llamado. (AMZ 7775)⁸

Any definition of “messianic” that includes Jews and Muslims alongside Christians might seem too flexible; but it seems striking that all three religions produced at much the same time leaders whose self-imagining shared several striking common denominators:

- First, all claimed to fulfill prophecies—often the same or related prophecies, such as those associated with the book of Daniel—predicting change, upheaval and world conquest.
- Second, all featured in a “founding” or “refounding” myth: Isma’il founded a new dynasty; Selim, Suleiman, and Charles transformed the size of the states they inherited.
- Third, all presumed that the end of the world was imminent, for the appearance of the Messiah would herald the end of time.
- Fourth, all believed they could both discern God’s purpose for the world and pursue appropriate policies to achieve it.⁹
- Finally, at a more practical level, all sought to emulate Solomon; all drew upon the same or related prophecies (such as the Book of Daniel or the visions associated with Daniel); and all placed great emphasis on possession of Jerusalem.

Thanks in part to these shared concepts, the various visions readily crossed cultural boundaries as each leader took careful note of claims advanced by others, and tried to surpass them. Thus the remarkable four-tiara crown made for Suleiman in 1532 was a direct response to the papal coronation of Charles two years before (Necipoglu, Fleischer “Mahdi, Messiah”).

Messianic imperialism—in the sixteenth century as in other eras—seldom lasts long, however. Although it gains strength when it runs in harmony with other considerations—dynastic, economic, religious—it proves difficult to sustain when Time perversely refuses to stop, or when the designated world conqueror fails to achieve his goals. Thus Isma’il’s defeat by Selim in 1514 led to considerable moderation in the messianic claims made on his behalf; and although Suleiman and Charles won great victories in the 1520s, leading to ever more extrava-

gant claims, they both faltered in the 1540s. Suleiman thereupon dropped his favoured title of *Sahib-kiran* (“the world conqueror”) while once it became clear that Charles V was not destined to fulfill all the imperialist prophecies, Habsburg supporters began to target his son and heir Philip.

The Messianic enthusiasm that surrounded Philip II displayed four of the same characteristics as the visions of the previous generation—the fulfillment of prophecies; the creation of a founding myth; an apocalyptic eschatology; and, of course, that hotline to heaven—but also two differences. First, the visions lasted far longer. In 1598, a chaplain sent to collect testimony from those who had been present at the king’s death predicted that “podemos contar a Su Magestad por un santo” (Fray Antonio Cervera de la Torre, qtd. in Vargas Hidalgo 399). In 1610, Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco included among his *Emblemas morales* three that mentioned the late king. One ran:

El gran Felipe de Austria, que segundo
Fue de su nombre, y en valor primero,
Señor, Rey y Monarca deste mundo.
Un sabio Salomon, David Guerrero,
Venciendo las tinieblas del profundo
Con la fama del triunfo verdadero.
El imperio de tierra y mar despide,
Por la corona, que del cielo pide.

Another “emblema” showed a picture of Philip seated in majesty, and noted that “En quanto es possible, el rey / procura asemejarse a dios”.¹⁰ And indeed, by then Fray Julián de San Agustín, a Franciscan hailed by many as a saint, had experienced a vision in which the clouds suddenly lit up like day enabling him to see the soul of King Philip ascend from Purgatory into heaven. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo later commemorated this revelation in a canvas for a Franciscan convent in Seville (Angulo Íñiguez 1961, 1972).¹¹

Many works of art produced in his own lifetime portrayed Philip in direct communion with God. Some, like Pompeo Leone’s larger-than-life-size sculpture beside the High Altar in the Escorial, showed him at prayer. In Sophonisba Anguisciola’s famous portrait, the king holds his rosary, as if the painter had surprised him at his devotions. Titian’s *Gloria* and El Greco’s *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* showed him interceding for the dead. In El Greco’s *Dream of Philip II* he kneels confidently to await his fate on the day of judgment. In Titian’s *Offering of Philip II* he makes an ostentatious sacrifice to God. Other artists portrayed him as one of the Three Kings, or in direct communion with Christ: in a Netherlands engraving of 1585, Jesus directly confers the

insignia of power on Philip, while Pope Sixtus malevolently looks on.

A second difference between the messianic visions surrounding Philip and his father is that far more of the former involved the king directly. Philip himself never doubted that he enjoyed a special relationship with Heaven. Like the Three Kings, at Christmas he donated gilded chalices containing gold, frankincense, and myrrh; and he repeatedly referred to himself as “padre y pastor” of his people (father and shepherd, “pastor” with the double meaning of priest). He reassured dispirited ministers with the extraordinary statement: “Spero en Dios . . . que os dara mucha salud y vida, pues se empleara en su servicio y en el mío, *que es lo mismo*” (emphasis mine) (BPUG 30/73v).¹²

Like his medieval forbears, he frequently acted as *rex et sacerdos*, king and priest. He threatened to attend the Council of Trent in person: “Si pudiera ser, y el estado de nuestros negocios diera a ella el lugar, asistiéramos personalmente en el dicho concilio.” After its closure, Philip claimed the same right as his Visigothic predecessors to preside over the Spanish provincial councils convened to put the Tridentine decrees into effect. In the event, he decided that, here too, “no es necesaria nuestra asistencia personal en ese concilio [porque] con [un comisario] se puede conseguir el mismo efecto, además de que nuestras muchas y grandes ocupaciones lo impiden.” All of the comisarios were laymen and Philip showered each of them with detailed instructions on how to run the *concilios provinciales*, including orders to change what he did not like (“Desea Su Magestad que el tiempo de . . . residencia [episcopal] se alargase más de lo contenido en el concilio de Trento”). In this way, in the graphic phrase of Don Francisco de Toledo, future *pacificador del Perú* and Philip’s *comisario* to the provincial synod of the archdiocese of Toledo, “hiceponer el concilio de Trento en romance” (Fernández Collado 458-61, 463).

Although as his reign progressed the king became less assertive in ecclesiastical affairs, he continued to feature in numerous messianic prophecies. Thus in 1592, when the king and his son visited the English College in Valladolid, selected students delivered speeches to him based on verses from Psalm 72. At the outset, the college rector pointed out that “[This] Psalme, though it were written properlie and peculiarly of Christ himself, yet by secundarie application and some similitude, it maie also very aptelie be accommodated to this Most Christian King [Philip II] and his son, that are so principall ministers of Christ, and do imitate so manifestlie his kinglie vertues, which in this Psalme are expressed.” Ten scholars then recited a verse in turn and applied it to the policies followed by Philip towards England’s Catholics, demonstrating “how all this prophesied of Christ our Saviour maie also in good sense and reason be verified in the acts of your royall

majestie" (Persons 25, 40-43, 47).¹³

Philip likewise featured in founding myths, as his father had done. The iconography of his ceremonial entry into Lisbon as king of Portugal in 1581 included one triumphal arch that showed Janus surrendering the keys of his temple "as if to the lord of the world, who holds it securely under his rule," while another bore the legend "The world, which was divided between your great-grandfather King Ferdinand the Catholic and your grandfather King Manuel of Portugal, is now linked into one, since you are lord of everything in the East and West." A medal struck in 1583 made the same point more concisely: it showed the king's head with the inscription PHILIPP II HISP ET NOVI ORBIS REX (Philip II, king of Spain and the New World) on one side; and on the other, around a terrestrial globe, the uncompromising legend NON SUFFICIT ORBIS (The world is not enough) (Checa Cremades, *Felipe II* 271-72, 486; Parker, *Grand Strategy* 5).¹⁴

Finally—like most sixteenth-century Christians—the king firmly believed that the world was about to end. For example, late in 1574, Philip informed his private secretary, Mateo Vázquez that "oy estoy de muy ruin humor para nada." His army in the Netherlands had mutinied; the Turks had taken Tunis: "Voy temiendo mucho el negocio de que depende el remedio de todo—si [remedio] le puede ya aver, que en verdad creo que no; y que vaya todo muy al cabo—y ¡ojalá lo fuese yo, por no ver lo que temo!" He continued plaintively "[me pasan] los mayores trabajos y cuydados que creo que ha pasado hombre después que el mundo es mundo." But then the king opened some more letters and his morale collapsed: "Como ví los principios dellos, no ví más . . . Sino fuere antes el fin del mundo, que creo que anda muy cerca de ser, y ojalá fuese el de *todo* el mundo y no el de la cristiandad" (ABZ 144/34).¹⁵

This apocalyptic mind-set made Philip II both unrealistic in his strategic plans and inflexible whenever his subordinates complained about their feasibility. Worse, instead of devising contingency plans, he relied on divine intervention to remedy any shortcomings. So when his fortunes received an unexpected boost he would assure his ministers that "Dios lo ha hecho," whereas news of a setback led him to call on God to provide a miracle. In 1574, as bad news poured across his desk, Philip exclaimed to the long-suffering Mateo Vázquez: "cierto si no es haziendo dios mylagros, lo que no merecen nuestros pecados, no es posible sostenernos ya no digo años sino meses." Further reverses only reinforced his impatience for a miracle: "Dios nos ayude en todo, que yo os digo que es tanto menester que aun parece que se *ha de ser* servido con hazer milagro, porque sin él yo lo veo todo en los peores termynos que puede ser" (emphasis mine) (ABZ 166/92, 100,

144/36).

Initially, the king's apocalyptic aspirations targetted Muslims. In 1534, aged seven, he already knew by heart a ballad, *La Jura de Santa Gadea*, about the exploits of El Cid, rebuking an importunate courtier in the words of Alfonso VI:

Mucho me aprietas Rodrigo;
Rodrigo mal me has tratado.
Mas hoy me tomas la jura,
Cras me besarás la mano.

In 1541, when the prince was fourteen, his teacher bought him an Arab grammar and the following year a Koran, and they began to study together Arabic and Hebrew (Alonso Acero and Gonzalo Sánchez-Molero 119, 121-23).¹⁶ In 1543, now regent of Spain, Philip acquired numerous books about the Turks: their history, their possessions, their military organization, and how to defeat them. A medal designed for the prince in 1548 showed a sun, with the name Philip, and the motto *Donec auferatur Luna*, "until the moon disappears" ("hasta que quite las lunas de los turcos y alarabes, y otras naciones que traen por blasones la luna")(BNM Ms. 5938/441).

Philip's acquisition of the "crown matrimonial" of England in 1554 changed this focus dramatically. Shortly afterwards, Cardinal Reginald Pole delivered a speech to Philip and Mary, surrounded by the peers and commons, that noted that:

Thoughe [David] were a manne elected of God, yet, for that he was contaminate[d] with bloode and war, [he] coulde not builde the temple of Jerusalem, but left the finishynge thereof to Salamon . . . So may it be thoughte, that the appeasing of controversies of religion in Christianity is not appoynted to this emperour, but rather to his sonne, who shal perforce the buildyng that his father hath begun. (Nichols 158)¹⁷

In 1557, he commissioned a magnificent stained glass window, full of such symbolism, for the church of St John at Gouda in Holland. In the upper section, Solomon prays at the dedication of his Temple, and the voice of God responds "I have heard your prayer, and if you walk in my sight as your father did, I shall perpetuate your royal throne for ever." In the central section, Christ presides at the Last Supper and speaks with his disciple Philip, whose hand rests protectively on the shoulder of his namesake as, beside Queen Mary Tudor, he kneels in adoration (Groot).¹⁸

When Mary died in 1558, Philip ceased to be king of England and Mary's half-sister Elizabeth soon showed unmistakable signs of Protestantism. Initially, he considered marrying Elizabeth "para ver si ésta estorba a esa señora los propósitos que lleva en la religión . . . y por servicio de dios." But, the king informed his ambassador to England in a holograph letter, he awaited her response with zero enthusiasm: "[me siento] como un hombre sentenciado, esperando lo que a de ser dél [y] tan contento seré de lo uno como de lo otro [i.e. yes or no] . . . Sino fuera por dios, creed que yo no viniera en esto. Nada me hará ni hiziera hazer esto sino ver claro que se gana este reyno para su servicio y religión" (ACM).

Elizabeth naturally rejected her graceless suitor and, after some time, Philip looked to God for a different solution to the "English problem." In 1571, having decided to launch an invasion "[para] matar o prender a la Isabel" —at this point he did not even recognize her regal title—and to place Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, at liberty and in possession of the English throne, he ordered the Duke of Alba to carry out the venture. He conceded that

no se puede negar que en este negocio ocurran muchas y grandes dificultades, y que errándose se incurría en no pequeños inconvenientes . . . [pero] no embargante todo esto, deseo yo tanto el efecto deste tratado, y he entrado en una tal confianza de Dios nuestro Señor, á cuyo servicio esto se endereza, sin tener yo otro fin particular, que lo guiará y encaminará; y tengo por tan precisas delante de Dios las obligaciones que para esto yo tengo, que estoy muy determinado y resuelto de proceder y asistir á esta causa, haciéndose de mi parte todo lo que en el mundo me fuere posible para la promover y ayudar. (BMO 1. 57-59)

When Alba responded scornfully, rather like an academic, grant-review panel, that the project was undertheorized, underfunded, and unrealistic, the king responded with an even stronger dose of spiritual blackmail.

Aunque la prudencia humana nos represente muchos inconvenientes y dificultades y nos ponga delante mundanos temores, la sabiduría cristiana y la confianza que en la causa de Dios, con razón, havemos de tener, las allana y nos anima y esfuerça para pasar por todo. Y cierto no podríamos dexar de quedar con gran escrúpulo en nuestro ánimo y con gran lástima, si por faltar yo a aquella Reyna [Mary Stuart] y a aquellos católicos, o por mejor dezir a la religión, ellos padesciesen y ella se perdiese... [Yo] deseo tan de veras el efecto de este negocio, y estoy así tocado en el alma dél, y he entrado en una confianza tal, que Dios nuestro Señor lo ha

de guiar como causa suya, que no me puedo disuadir ni aquietar de lo contrario. (BMO 1. 59-64)¹⁹

Although this plan came to nothing, the king's enthusiasm for godly causes abroad, and his passionate "cult of the miracle" to achieve them, persisted unabated. In the 1580s, when England returned to the top of his priorities, his plans depended on the same apocalyptic vision. When, the commander of the Great Armada complained about the danger of leading his ships against England in mid-winter, the king replied serenely: "Bien se ve que es harto aventurar navegar con gran armada de invierno, y más por aquel canal y sin tener puerto cierto. Mas . . . el tiempo, Dios (cuya es la causa) se hará de esperar que le dará bueno de Su mano." Nine months later, after a storm had damaged some Armada vessels, driven others into Corunna, and scattered the rest, the king reassured his dispirited commander, the Duke of Medina Sidonia:

Que a ser ésta una guerra injusta, pudiera tomarse esta tormenta por señal de la voluntad de Nuestro Señor para desistir de su offensa; mas siendo tan justa como es, no se deve creer que la ha de desamparar, sino de favorecer mejor que se puede dessear . . . Yo tengo ofrecido a Dios este servicio . . . Alentáos, pues, a lo que os toca." (AGS *Estado* 165/2-3; Herrera Oria 2. 210-14)²⁰

The Armada's catastrophic failure temporarily punctured the king's euphoria. When he first learned the scale of the disaster, in November 1588, Philip confided to his secretary:

Yo os prometo que si no se vencen [estas dificultades] y se da forma en lo que tanto es menester, que muy presto nos habremos de ver en cosa que no queríamos ser nacidos. Yo a lo menos por no verla. Y si Dios no haze milagro (que así espero en Él) que antes que esto sea, me ha de llevar para sí, como yo se lo pido, por no ver tanta mala ventura y desdicha. Y esto sea para vos sólo. Y plega a Dios que yo me engañe, mas creo que no hago, sino que havemos de ver más presto de lo que nadie piensa lo que es tanto de temer, si Dios no vuelve por su causa. Y esto bien se ha visto en lo que ha sucedido, que no lo haze que debe ser por nuestros pecados. (ABZ 145/76)

But this "noche oscura" did not last long. A few days later, when his council of state sent *consultas* recommending that the war against Elizabeth should nevertheless go on, Philip's apocalyptic vision returned undiminished.

He holgado mucho de ver y entender todo lo que se dice en estos papeles, que es muy conforme a lo que se podía esperar de los que lo dicen, y a la intinción con que yo me moví desde el principio a la Jornada por servicio de Nuestro Señor y defensa de su causa y beneficio destes Reynos . . . Y pues el consejo tiene tan entendida esta my intinción, tomé a cargo el dar gran priesa a todo lo que para executarla es menester y acordarme todas las cosas necesarias para ello. Yo nunca faltaré por my parte a boluer por la causa de Dios y bien destes Reynos en quanto me fuere posible. (AGS *Estado* 2851)

A year later, Philip authorized his lieutenant in the Netherlands to march on Paris, “si para . . . ayudar a los cathólicos para que prevalezcan, viéredes que será menester entrar en Francia fuerzas más abiertamente” (AGS 2219/197); thus involving Spain in yet another war. Although hostilities ended in 1598, shortly before his death, war with England continued until 1604 and with the Dutch until 1609. None of these conflicts brought gains to Spain: rather, in the case of France and England they restored the *status quo ante* while, in the case of the Dutch, they made sweeping concessions.

Why, then, did the king’s apocalyptic vision survive undimmed until the end of his reign—and even beyond since, as we shall see, his successors followed much the same strategies? Why did failure seem to reinforce rather than reduce the king’s messianic imperialism?

Four reasons stand out. First, attention thus far has focused mostly on some spectacular failures; but the reign also contained many stunning successes. For example, to counterbalance the failure of the plot against Elizabeth in 1571, Philip could set the victory of Lepanto, which seemed to end the Turkish threat, and the massacre of St Bartholomew, which appeared to deal Protestantism in France a terminal blow. Throughout the reign, Spanish power expanded overseas: in New Spain; in “Tierra Firma”; in the Philippines. From the king’s perspective, these successes, and above all the annexation of Portugal and its overseas empire, creating the first empire in history on which the sun never set, more than made up for the losses in Flanders.

When the king’s spirits nevertheless flagged, his ministers reminded him of earlier successes. Thus in 1574, at a particularly low point, Mateo Vázquez (the king’s chaplain as well as his personal secretary) consoled his master:

Dios, que lo puede todo, con lo que hemos visto que siempre mira a Vuestra Magestad, y en las mayores necesidades con mayores demostraciones—lo de San Quentín, lo de la mar contra el enemigo común [=Lepanto], y lo de Granada, todo sucedió muy bien . . . Son señales que prometten grande sperança en todo. Y pues Vuestra Magestad defiende la causa de Dios, Él defenderá, como siempre lo

ha hecho, lo que toca a Vuestra Magestad. (IVDJ 51/31)

A second support for Philip's apocalyptic outlook stemmed from the fact that most of those who advised him shared it. Don Francés de Álava, Spanish ambassador in France, protested that "Si yo ha de ser instrumento para que las cosas humanas se prefieren a las divinas, antes Dios me saque de este mundo" (P. and J. Rodríguez 97). Naturally, the king's numerous clerical officials expressed similar views. Juan de Ovando, priest, inquisitor, and president of the council of the Indies, perhaps put it best. When asked whether appointment as president of the council of Finance might fatigue him, Ovando responded: "Ésta se podra vencer con mi trabajo y salud, que yo tengo sacrificado al servicio de vuestra magestad, por serlo también de dios" (IVDJ 24/38).

The third reason for Philip's sublime confidence arose from the fact that many if not most of his subjects also thought as he did. Take, for example, the chronicles written by the Spanish conquistadors in America. All of them invoked God with notable frequency: almost three times in every thousand words! God constantly gave them strength, courage, consolation, inspiration, aid, support, victory, and health; He delivered, preserved, rewarded, foresaw, forgave, led, saved, wished, and directed. The only words that appeared more frequently in their chronicles were "guerra," "el rey," and, of course, "oro" (Grunberg).²¹

Poets, too, exalted and sacralized the king's cause. The most famous was also one of the earliest. According to Hernando de Acuña's sonnet, "Al Rey nuestro Señor," written in the 1540s:

Ya se acerca, señor, o ya es llegada
La edad gloriosa en que promete el cielo
Una grey y un pastor solo en el suelo . . .
Y anuncia al mundo, para más consuelo,
Un monarca, un imperio y una espada.

In the 1570s, Fernando de Herrera's "Cançion por la victoria de Lepanto" drew a parallel with the drowning of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea, while his poem on the battle of Alcazarquivir equated Spanish imperial power with the kingdom of God on earth. (Herrera explained away the Christians' defeat on this occasion as God's way of punishing momentary human presumption while simultaneously providing an incentive to future triumph, just as Philip II would later reassure the dispirited Duke of Medina Sidonia). The "Octavas" of Francisco de Aldana, dedicated to the king, went far beyond such routine messianism and proposed a specific strategy to achieve Spanish hegemony in Europe:

Aqui, gran Rey, es cosa convenible
 Endereçar tus armas, no por tierra—
 Que será contrastar con lo imposible—
 Mas prevenirte con marina guerra
 Esse gran nido herético inçufrible
 Que entre Flandes y España el passo cierra.
 Anglia digo, Señor, venga a tus manos,
 Para quietud, y bien de los Christianos. (40-41)²²

These soldier-poets were not alone. In *Myth and identity in the Epic of Imperial Spain*, Elizabeth Davis notes that Alonso de Ercilla refers to Philip II some fifty times in the three parts of *La Araucana* (1569-89) and draws attention to the prominence of “messianic myths” in that work, in Juan Rufo’s *La Austriada* of 1582, and in Cristóbal de Virués’s *El Monserrate* of 1587. Indeed, she observes, the verse epic “unabashedly mobilizes discourses of imperial monarchy and myths of providential predetermination” (31, 101).

Some of Philip’s subjects nevertheless went even further and claimed that they *were* the Messiah, like Bartolomé Sánchez, a wool carder from a village in Castile whose version of the Lord’s Prayer in the 1550s began “Mi padre, que está en el cielo”; or like Fray Francisco de la Cruz in Peru who in the 1570s claimed to be the new David: pope, prophet, and king (Nalle 77). Until his incineration by the Inquisition of Lima, Fray Francisco denounced Philip as an impostor, a bastard descendant of David (Tardieu).²³ A remarkable ideological consensus linked the king with his ministers, clerics, conquistadors, poets and ordinary — or almost ordinary — subjects.

Fourth, and finally, no other European ruler *needed* a messianic vision as much as Philip II. The king had inherited territories—Spain and parts of Italy, the Americas and the Netherlands—so far flung that they were, in effect, indefensible. The acquisition of the Philippines after 1565 and of Portuguese empire in 1580-83, although remarkable successes in themselves, gravely exacerbated these problems of “strategic overstretch” (to use Paul Kennedy’s felicitous phrase). A letter written shortly after the king’s death by one of his leading diplomats offered a shrewd analysis of the strategic dilemma that faced the Monarchy:

Verdaderamente, señor, me parece que poco a poco nos vamos haziendo terreno adonde todo el mundo quiere tirar sus flechas, i Vuestra Señoría sabe que ningún imperio, por grande que aya sido, a podido sustentar largo tiempo muchas guerras juntas en diferentes partes. . . . Yo me puedo engañar, pero dudo de que con solo tratar de defendernos se pueda sustentar imperio tan derramado como el nuestro.

The *empire* on which the sun never set had thus become the *target* on which the sun never set. Only Providence, which had created and increased the global Monarchy, could defend it (IVDJ 82/444, Parker “David or Goliath?”).

The king’s messianic vision therefore endured. Although Philip III rejected his father’s advice on almost every other subject, he pursued the same spiritual politics. At his first meeting with the council of State, he instructed his ministers to do two things: “Primera, que las materias de Estado que trataréis se ajusten con los preceptos de la ley divina”; and second, they should strive to mobilize all available resources for Spain’s wars, but always “procurando se hagan oraciones y rogativos para que entienda el mundo que no fiamos tanto en la potencia de nuestros exércitos quanto en el favor de[ll] poderoso brazo [de dios]” (González Dávila 44-45).²⁴

These views continued to command widespread popular support throughout the seventeenth century. Thus in 1671, Pedro Calderón de la Barca wrote a religious play *El santo rey don Fernando* about the thirteenth-century monarch who regained Seville from the Muslims and was later canonized. The *auto sacramental*, performed in the streets during the Corpus Christi processions, showed Spain as God’s chosen instrument to reduce the world to Christianity, and Ferdinand III as both king and priest. In one scene, the king himself lit the bonfire to burn heretics, and Calderón scattered approving references to the religious zeal of Spain’s seventeenth-century monarchs throughout the play.²⁵

Thus fortified by the approval of their subjects, rather like their French Bourbon descendants, the Spanish Habsburgs seemed to learn nothing and to forget nothing. Instead, they persevered, unshaken in their confidence that a final miracle would save them, until in 1700 the extinction of the line and the subsequent partition of the Monarchy at last solved Spain’s strategic dilemma and thus rendered a messianic vision superfluous.

Notes

¹A note on terminology is in order. Although “messiah,” from the Hebrew *mashah* (to anoint) and *mashiah* (the anointed one), appears in the Bible, recorded use of the adjective “messianic” only dates from the nineteenth century in English, French, and Italian; and from the twentieth century in Dutch, German, and Spanish. For an excellent discussion of “apocalyptic” and other terms, see the introduction to Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse*.

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²V. Minorsky, “The poetry of Shâh Isma‘il I” 1042a, 1049a. The Shah’s claims were indeed extreme. “Khidr” is the mysterious “green man” associated by Muslims with Moses, Elijah, and Alexander the Great—a sort of leprachaun of human dimensions associated with ushering in the Mahdi. Although, for Muslims, Jesus was merely a prophet and not the Son of God, since Muhammad was the “Seal of the Prophets,” Ismail’s claim to be another would outrage most other Muslims.

³Another “Messiah” of this period, Sayyid Muhammed of Jaunpur, declared himself to be the Mahdi in 900 AH and gained many followers in northwest India until his death a decade later (Subrahmanyam 67–68). I am deeply grateful to Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Cornell Fleischer for sharing their path-breaking work with me in advance of publication.

⁴See also Fleischer, “The Lawgiver as Messiah”; Flemming and Finlay.

⁵Note that Hebrew also renders the Messiah as “Ben-David” or Solomon. Although the term “messiah” is Biblical, the adjective “messianic” (in its broadest sense, relating to the belief that a saviour sent by Providence—a Messiah—will produce better times) is relatively recent. It is first recorded in English in 1834); in French and Italian in the nineteenth century; and in Dutch, German, and Spanish only in the twentieth century. “Apocalyptic” visions “looked to the future for a satisfying end to a half told story”. For an excellent discussion of this and other terms, see Bauckham, “Introduction.”

⁶I thank Edward Tabri for drawing to my attention Burgundian precedents such as the entry of Charles the Bold into Dijon in January 1474.

⁷Marín Cruzado notes three distinct representations of Charles V as one of the Three Kings (123). Checa Cremades, *Carlos V y la imagen del héroe en el Renacimiento*, provides an excellent survey of “The image of the emperor as the new Messiah.”

⁸My thanks to Bethany Aram for sharing with me this amazing document.

Meanwhile, the emperor's chief adviser composed a tract arguing that "the divine Charles" was predestined to become "ruler of the world"; see Headley, Bosbach, and the prophecy recorded in Chastel 86.

⁹The "portability" of these various messianic visions is both striking and surprising. Suleiman certainly kept his eye on the claims made on behalf of Charles—it has been convincingly argued that his four-tiara crown of 1532 was directly related to the papal coronation of the Habsburg emperor two years before—and Charles had direct (albeit brief) contact with Solomon Molcho that same year. Moreover, the visions employed several of the same concepts: all saw Alexander the Great as a prophet as well as a role model; all sought to emulate Solomon; all relied on rediscovered or hidden ancient texts and linked them with new sources of power; all placed great emphasis on possession of Jerusalem. For more on these common denominators, see Fleischer, "Mahdi, Messiah."

¹⁰Covarrubias Orozco, *Emblemas morales*, centuria I emblema 34 and III emblema 82. A third emblem (I. 36) portrayed the "sepulcro de Filipo, Rey segundo"—the Escorial—as a miracle.

¹¹The earlier article described the painting, one of a series done in the 1640s for the cloister of San Francisco of Seville in the 1640s, but could not identify it; the second provided the text of the vision, recorded in 1603 by Fray Julián, who had over 600 miracles to his credit within three years of his death. The painting is today exhibited in the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute of Williamstown, Massachusetts. Tanner (204-05) reproduces and briefly discusses Murillo's painting, done in 1645-48.

¹²A *rex et sacerdos* link is suggested by Fernández Albaladejo (168-84), by C. Lisón (103-06), and (most forcefully) by Martínez Millán and Carlos de Morales (chaps. 6-7). The king never used the term *rex et sacerdos* but he did regularly refer to himself as "padre y pastor." For more on this subject, see Parker, *The world is not enough* 37-47.

¹³Interestingly, the College chose to omit the following verses: (v. 8) "He shall have dominion from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth" (v. 9); "They that dwell on the wilderness shall bow down before him and his enemies shall lick the dust . . ." (v. 11); "Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him."

¹⁴See more examples of imperialist imagery in Tanner (chap. 7) and Bouza (chap. 2).

¹⁵On the widespread belief among sixteenth-century Europeans that the world was about to end, see Barnes, Crouzet (chaps. 2-3) and Bauckham (chaps. 8-9).

¹⁶Alonso Acero and J. L. Gonzalo Sánchez-Molero suggest (notes 32, 36) that the "Koran" purchased may in fact have been Bernardo Pérez de Chinchón, *Libro llamado Antialcoran* (Valencia, 1532), a collection of 26 sermons attacking the Koran, a copy of which Philip certainly possessed.

¹⁷As recorded by John Elder, a Scotsman at the English Court, who claimed to have used the notes on the speech taken by a Member of Parliament who heard it. A Spanish version, written by an anonymous eye-witness, was printed in Seville later that year, in Muñoz 135.

¹⁸For another image of Philip as Solomon from this period—in a painting commissioned for the chapter of the Golden Fleece held in Ghent in 1559—see Ribot García (272-74).

¹⁹See also two further enthusiastic letters: on 30 Aug. 1571, to Alba (ARDH), and to Don Guerau de Spes (*Calendar of State Papers Spanish: Elizabeth 2*. 333-34). Pereña Vicente (70-71), offers an interesting consideration of Philip's correspondence with Alba.

²⁰For other examples of Philip's spiritual blackmail at this time, see Parker, *Grand Strategy* 106.

²¹More data may be found in Velasco 1964, 1965, 1966.

²²Written in the 1570s, and first published in 1593. Márquez Villanueva argues convincingly that Acuña's sonnet, although first published in 1591, was written between 1547 and 1550. On Herrera's "CanCIÓN," see López de Toro 233-42. Note that Philip II's chief minister, Diego de Espinosa, also called Lepanto the "victoria... la mayor después de la del Vermejo" (British Library *Additional Manuscript* 28, 704/270v-2, letters to numerous ministers abroad, 4 Dec. 1571) See also the luminous pages of Terry.

²³A full transcript of the trial is available in V. Abril Castelló and M. J. Abril Stoffels.

²⁴For further examples of this strategic vision during the seventeenth century, see Stradling 269-76 and Elliott.

²⁵I am grateful to Robert Worley who drew this work to my attention, and pointed out its relevance to my theme. For the continuing concern for spiritual goals among the political writers, see Gordon.

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_____. 145/76. Mateo Vázquez to Philip II and reply, 10 Nov. 1588.

_____. 166/92, 100. King's rescript on Hernando de Vega to Philip II, 9 and 11 Nov. 1586 (upon learning that the annual Indies fleet had arrived safely at Seville).

ACM. Archivo de la Casa Ducal de Medinaceli. Caja 7, legajo 249, nos. 11-12. Philip to Feria, 10 Jan. 1559.

AGS. Archivo General de Simancas. *Patronato Real* 21/133. Philip II's Instructions to the count of Luna, his envoy to the council [Oct. 1562], holograph addition, copy.

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AMZ. Archivo Municipal de Zaragoza. Caja 7775. Pope Leo X to Ferdinand of Aragon, 1 Nov. 1515.

- ARDH. Algemeen Rijksarchief, Den Haag. *Staten Generaal* 12548, loketkas 14B/14; to Alba, 30 Aug. 1571.
- BNM. Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid. Ms. 5938/441. Gabriel Rincón, "Divisa" for Prince Philip.
- BPUG. Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire, Geneva. Ms. Favre 30/73v, Philip II to Don Luis de Requesens, 20 Oct. 1573.
- IVDJ. Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan. 24/38. Ovando to Philip II, 16 Jan. 1574, holograph.
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