Printing and Prophecy

Green, Jonathan

Published by University of Michigan Press

Green, Jonathan.
Printing and Prophecy: Prognostication and Media Change 1450-1550.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/11317

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=321537
As works that emphasized their foundation on scientific principles and that were intended to explain the workings of the world for a broad audience, practicas reflected anxieties over the shifting foundations of knowledge in early modern Germany. While astrology was always controversial, what appears today as pure superstition once enjoyed nearly universal acceptance of some of its basic principles, even by its detractors. In response to critics, astrologers could appeal to generally acknowledged facts, as Johannes Schöner did in 1537: planets quite clearly affected events on earth, he argued, as everyone can see in the ocean’s tides and in the fatal effect of moonlight on horses if it shines on their wounds. The discoveries of Nicolas Copernicus had barely begun to affect popular astrological booklets by 1550, but other epistemological crises, arising in no small part from the invention of printing itself, made themselves felt much earlier.

Detractors of astrological prognostication often made the accusation that it lacked coherent logical principles, as Otto Brunfels argued in his *Everlasting Almanac / German and Christian Practica* of 1526. The pseudonymous Faithful Eckhart lodged the same charge in a contrapractica for 1533. This led to a sharp reply from Johannes Schöner in his practica for 1534, calling the pseudonymous critic an ignorant abuser of scripture in the
same manner as the Anabaptist enthusiasts. A related accusation was that astrology owed whatever predictive power it possessed to necromancy. Whether Johannes Virdung in 1537, Nikolaus Prueckner in 1538, or Anton Brelochs in 1548, a practica author responded to the charge of necromancy by pointing to the facts in the sky as described in the first chapter of his practica. In the eyes of its proponents, astrology was a matter of principle and observation.

Rivalries between astrologers frequently took the form of back-and-forth accusations that the other’s practicas lacked a scientific basis. Recrimination as a part of astrological booklets appeared already in Middelburg’s practica for 1481, which begins by attacking discrepancies in the calculations of his colleague Julianus de Blanchis and ends by answering math problems with which Middelburg had baited other Italian astrologers in his practica of the previous year. The practica of Johannes Barbus for 1483 fired back a critique directed against the work of a “certain very clever and malicious Paul” for doing great injury to the art of astrology, while Middelburg responded with his own refutation of Barbus’s attack the next year.

The controversy among German astrologers over an expected deluge for 1524 unleashed a series of acrimonious disputes that lasted into the 1530s. In 1521, Alexander Seitz had published a booklet on the conjunction and on lights in the sky, probably auroras, seen in 1520 above Vienna. In his booklet, Seitz acclaimed Virdung for correctly predicting the deaths of Phillip of Burgundy and Maximilian I (although whether Virdung had actually done so is quite another matter; the same prediction was also attributed to Tannstetter). Carion’s tract on the conjunctions published in 1521 mocked the extremity of Seitz’s predictions (referring to otherwise unknown broadsides, but describing wheels and animals quite similar to those in the woodcut on the title page of Seitz’s tract), stating that Seitz’s prognostication lacked all basis and foundation. Carion speculated that Seitz, as a surgeon out of his depth in the art of astrology, had “rummaged around in the Alphonsine tables or in the works of other men learned in this art” rather than performing his own calculations. Although barely past the age of twenty, Carion disparaged knowledge gained from books rather than won through training and experience.

Virdung published his tract on the lights above Vienna, which he described as precursors of the ominous conjunction of 1524, but in a tone of caution rather than with Seitz’s unrestrained alarm. Virdung refrained from pointing to a specific year for the appearance of the disasters heralded by the
lights in the sky, as he did not witness them himself. While Georg Tannstetter did not mention Virdung by name in his anticatastrophic *Libellus consolatorius* of 1523, he did attack predictions of flooding in 1524 as “fictions of a printer or vagabond” rather than the work of a “learned righteous man,” for “a wise man does not write of signs and wonders that he has not seen, not to mention his glaring and juvenile mistakes in the preface.” After Virdung’s publication of his popular prognostication on the conjunction of 1524 that included dire predictions for the years 1524–63, the controversy gained an international dimension when Cornelis Schepper published a lengthy treatise with Virdung as one of its primary targets. As might be expected, Virdung, in the dedicatory epistle to his practica for 1525, saw his own predictions as confirmed, rejecting Schepper’s accusations as baseless.

While Tannstetter’s contribution to the controversy had been meant to calm widespread concern about the planetary conjunction, it generated no small amount of professional enmity. Johannes Stöffler, whose 1499 almanac had first brought the attention of the conjunctions to a broader public, felt himself attacked by Tannstetter’s booklet and therefore countered it with his own *Expurgatio* directed at Tannstetter, who is named in the title. Tannstetter responded to his critics in his practica for 1524, stating that its publication would disprove the rumor that Tannstetter was going to renounce his *Libellus consolatorius*. Tannstetter also rejected the accusation that he was unable to produce practicas until he had read the work of others, to which he responded by asking readers to compare the scientific foundation of his practicas with those of other astrologers; and he blamed the delayed publication of his practicas on the “unspeakable greed” of the printers, who lazily reprinted his practicas, even, at times, with false and fantastic titles. Here again, Tannstetter makes reliance on the work of others a hallmark of astrological incompetence, and printers bear some of the blame.

Georg Tannstetter’s *Libellus consolatorius* had cited the generous assistance of Andreas Perlach (1490–1551), a fellow Austrian astronomer, and Perlach came to the defense of his teacher in an appendix to Tannstetter’s final practica for 1525. Perlach engaged in a lengthy and detailed critique of Stöffler’s planetary ephemerides but professed respect for the aged and asked his readers to judge carefully whether it was Perlach, in his youthfulness, or Stöffler, of such renown in mathematics, who had more hideously been led astray by fantasies. Perlach concluded with a more direct threat, informing Stöffler that if he continued his provocations, Per-
Perlach's next public dispute followed in 1529, when he attacked the dire predictions for Austria in Carion's *Interpretation and Revelation*. In a replay of the flood panic of 1524, Perlach's intent and method were those of his master Tannstetter: to allay the concerns of the common people by attacking the astrological basis of the predictions. Then, in 1530, Perlach published a prognostication based on eclipses of the prior year rejoined to ephemerides for 1531. Carion jabbed at Perlach's work in the extended version of his *Interpretation and Revelation*, which appeared in 1531: “Master Fixfax in Vienna, Andreas Perlach, gave me an awful fright when he said that eclipses mean nothing bad, but he cannot deduce when they will reveal their meaning. . . . I am entirely convinced the almanac of Stöffler and Pflaum will pop up from behind his work. There are many dimwits who make almanacs and other things, but when the ephemerides reach their end, as is happening now in 1531, they will last as long as butter in the hot sun.” Perlach responded in the same year with a five-page attack on Carion in the preface to a comet tract. Ironically, Perlach accused Carion of insulting Stöffler, cast doubt on Carion’s ability to read Latin, and sent the accusation of copying out of Stöffler’s almanac back at Carion. Perlach additionally accused Carion of dabbling in diabolical arts, as Carion’s predictions had no foundation in astrology but nevertheless came to pass: “It seems entirely to me that he has taken his prognostication from the books of *Magistri Pelagi heremite in regno maioricarum* on the conjuring of spirits.” Perlach claimed to have seen with his own eyes such a book that had been copied in Berlin (where Carion was active) and brought to Austria.

That scholars and academics regarded Carion as the greatest astrologer of their time (which, to the modern observer, seems a likely source of Perlach’s jealousy) is, for Perlach, a symptom of the universities’ decline. Carion responded to Perlach’s charges in his German practica for 1533 and in greater detail in his Latin practica for the same year, rejecting all accusations but adopting a more temperate tone, apparently in hopes of settling the conflict.

The charges and allegations made at and between astrologers reflect two complementary concerns. There was, first of all, disagreement about the basis and logic of astrological argument, resulting in accusations that an astrologer was using the principles of the art incorrectly or that the astrologer lacked principles altogether. The second type of accusation was that an as-
trologer was abusing the availability of astronomical data in printed ephemerides. Tannstetter and Carion shared a disdain for practicas written by amateurs, especially by printers. These controversies represent crises of knowledge aggravated or even caused by the invention of print, as the foundations on which prognostications could be based had multiplied and become available to a much broader set of users. At the turn of the century, Sebastian Brant had sensed the loss in status and control over information that print imposed on intellectuals who were still trying to establish their position with respect to nobility and clergy. For Nikolaus Prueckner, the multiplication of practicas was a consequence of destabilized orders of knowledge: if not for the disdain and decay of the natural arts, Prueckner wrote in the preface to his comet tract of 1532, then “not everyone with unwashed hands would rummage about in, and spew their poison on, and write and talk off the top of their heads about things in which they had never learned so much as a single letter, as many practica authors do in our time.”

The epistemological crisis of print in the sphere of astrology had its origins in the 1480s, when Erhard Ratdolt began publishing astrological treatises and astronomical reference works, first in Venice and then, from 1486 onward, in Augsburg. While Ratdolt seems to have enjoyed substantial commercial success with these works, competitors rarely challenged him by reprinting them or comparable works. Ratdolt’s editions of astronomical treatises used large formats, much larger than the slight quartos commonly used for practicas, and could extend to several hundred leaves, which required the investment of significant amounts of paper and ink. They were also technically demanding works, often including extensive tables or detailed illustrations for a professional audience, requiring considerable technical expertise to produce and a distribution network that reached widespread European intellectual circles to market profitably. Ratdolt’s innovations in print techniques, including the first printing of mathematical formulas, appear to have secured him a considerable market advantage and created significant barriers for his competitors for the better part of a decade. After beginning the early 1480s with reprints of earlier editions, Ratdolt achieved a near monopoly during that decade for many astronomical and astrological works, including for twelve standard works whose first printed editions (and, for eight of them, only incunable editions) were published by Ratdolt, including Albumasar’s *De magnis coniunctionibus*, Ptolemy’s *Quadripartitum*, and the *Liber in iudiciis astrorum* of Haly Aben-
ragel (Albohazen). Ratdolt’s continued printing of these astronomical works over the decade from 1481 to 1492, despite their often complex layout and illustration, suggests that he was able to produce and profitably distribute even works that appeared in a single edition. The vast majority of books printed in the fifteenth century have disappeared, with the median number of surviving copies around four and with an arithmetic mean around fourteen. In comparison, thirteen of the Ratdolt editions are found today in over one hundred copies that are spread across Europe. Erhard Ratdolt recognized the potential of the professional market for Latin treatises on astronomy and astrology, and he dominated it throughout Europe for over ten years. While the astronomical reference works and astrological treatises printed by Ratdolt were intended for scholarly and professional use, they lowered the barriers to prognostication from specialized academic training to nothing more than book ownership, with eventual profound effect on the field of astrology. Christoph Statmion wrote in the preface to his practica for 1544, “Almost every idiot and uneducated person attempts to make a calendar these days....If the ephemerides—that is the books that contain the course of the heavens for several future years—were not so common, the greater part of those who consider themselves great astronomers would have to die among the idiots and not attempt to make practicas.”

ARGUMENT AND SOCIAL FUNCTION
OF THE PRACTICA TEÜTSCH

Prognostic booklets are sometimes considered to have provided their readers with knowledge of the future (albeit in vague terms, while carefully skirting political and religious controversy, particularly concerning God’s free will, and hedging their bets with respect to actual events in the upcoming year). Yet the pseudoscience of astrology is entirely incapable of making any meaningful statement about the future. Despite the impossibility of their alleged purpose, practicas remained popular well into the seventeenth century. If practicas could not provide knowledge of the future, what explains the perennial demand for them? The answer is that practicas responded to readers’ desires for knowledge of the future not by satisfying it but by giving readers ways to think about and things to do with their hopes and fears. If practicas could not actually say anything about the future, they could still channel readers’ anxieties in a socially useful fashion. William Bouwsma has identified early modernity as a period shaped by a pervasive
anxiety that was rooted in changing social conditions, which in turn undermined medieval conceptual categories. The function of practicas in early modern German society was not only the stabilization of order by evoking cosmic orderliness. Practicas also confronted readers with the possibility of disruption and invited them to restore order by conforming to their place within existing hierarchies. What mattered was not the particular set of ruling planets (about which different astrologers might offer varying opinions in the same year) or even predictions of fortune or misfortune for a particular group or activity (in which a printer’s carelessness might lead to opposite predictions in different editions of a single practica). Rather, the practicas evangelized an orderliness in human affairs that persisted beyond the rise or fall of a particular class in a given year. Practicas promoted stability by instrumentalizing fear.

Observers from the early 1480s onward regularly accused the practicas of promoting and instilling fear, by only predicting disaster and never good fortune. In 1523, Middelburg, like Stößler, emerged from retirement to write a tract against the popular predictions of an approaching deluge, which was reprinted in Augsburg in both Latin and German translation. Middelburg found little good to say of his former colleagues, complaining that they “never proclaim anything good for us, first the deluge, then war and pestilence, then famine, then uproar in cities, and other similar evils. Although such does not come to pass, for they fail quite obviously, yet the fearful anticipation torments us. Therefore there is nothing better than not desiring to know future things.” The pseudonymous Faithful Eckhart attacked the promotion of fear in his criticism of practicas: “It seems foolish to me that we should be so fearful when there is nothing to fear or be terrified of the things that the practicas show us.” Johannes Rasch also noted the predisposition to dire predictions. But Johannes Vögelin, author of practicas for the years 1531–35 as well as a comet tract, argued that dire predictions better suited the times in which he wrote: “Although many authors of annual prognostications reasonably and prudently console the people, and cast out the fear of dangers, those who frankly point out the perils and evil omens of the heavens seem more fitting to this present age, at least in my opinion, even if they sometimes magnify those things.” A less bitter medicine, wrote Vögelin, would not be as effective.

The purpose of this fear was to bring about social stability through the alignment of the reader’s desires, in the form of prayer, with the political and religious hierarchies. As Coote observes concerning English political
prophecies, the audience must support their rulers if they are to receive the promised reward and avoid threatened consequences.\textsuperscript{27} The preface to Virdung’s multiyear practica on the conjunction of 1524 stated its purpose as enabling people to prevent “such misfortune and wailing,” for all of the disasters Virdung predicts “might be prevented by the power and kindness of God, if we repent of our great sins and obtain his grace that such evil not be imposed on us, as happened to the people of Niniveh who repented and were preserved by the Lord. . . . If that however does not happen, then it is to be feared that all these things that are shown in this prognostication and many greater and more terrible things will wash over us.”\textsuperscript{28} Virdung concluded, on a similar note, with hope that the effects of the conjunction might be moderated and, thus, that “a great part of the sorrow that has been poured into our hearts by the reading of this prognostication would be taken from us. . . . Therefore let us call on God Almighty . . . that he might turn aside the evil influence of this conjunction.”\textsuperscript{29} Johannes Seger affirmed in his practica for 1512 that the failure of a prediction lay not in the art or the practitioner but in God’s rewarding people according to their merits.\textsuperscript{30} Carion’s first annual prognostication in his \textit{Interpretation and Revelation} states that if the predictions are fulfilled, then one sees a great secret of nature; if not, then one sees how God can make things better or worse according to the sin or repentance of the people.\textsuperscript{31} From the earliest appearance of practicas in print, the astrologer-authors insist that they are not predicting exactly what will come to pass but, rather, merely observing tendencies and influences mediated by the stars. Rather than insisting on the accuracy of their predictions of future calamity, astrologers express the hope that their predictions of disaster will fail. “May God grant that I am always wrong when I predict sorrow,” Johann Carion wrote in his practica for 1533.\textsuperscript{32} It is the rare practica that does not explicitly note that God rules all things and that the stars may influence earthly affairs but that the events they foretell are not inevitable. The wise and pious reader may prepare and pray that God will avert the worst, while foolish and sinful readers are enjoined to heed the practica’s warning.

Rather than providing astrologers an escape clause or an evasive acknowledgment that predicting human events from the course of the stars is impossible, the instruction to pray is a central component in the rhetorical function of the practicas. The prognostic booklets confront their readers with oncoming disasters and invite them to aid in the turning aside of those disasters through prayer. If even an unbelieving heathen like Ptolemy could recognize that the wise man rules over the stars, Andreas Perlach noted,
“how much more might a godly Christian rule the stars and their influence with his prayer to God?” The function of promoting social order and obedience can be seen in the agreement of both astrologers and their critics on this point. The pseudonymous Faithful Eckhart calls on his readers not only to reject astrology but also to avoid disaster through obedience: “If we obey, then no misfortune will come upon us, but if not, then God has these following plagues to utterly consume us.” Lutheran authors of contrapracticas such as Heinrich Kettenbach were as committed to preserving social order as the practica authors themselves. The function of practicas and contrapracticas alike was not to tell readers what the future held but to bring about the orderly alignment of the reader’s will with the cosmic and social order. What Jan-Dirk Müller observes about the prognostic broadsides of Sebastian Brant is broadly true of practicas and other early modern prognostic and prophetic texts: they invite readers to “carry out that which God has written in nature, or what the leaders of Christendom have decided: they explicitly ask for joining in, for imitation, or for obedience.”

THE FLOOD PANIC OF 1524: CLARIFYING THE CONTROVERSY

An acute moment of crisis arose in the years leading up to February 1524, when planetary conjunctions in the sign of Pisces were interpreted as omens of a world-ending deluge, which led to numerous printed tracts about the controversial prediction. While great conjunctions of Saturn and Jupiter recur every twenty years, Johannes Stöffler and Jakob Pflaum’s 1499 planetary ephemerides had already drawn attention to the great conjunction of 1524 as one of twenty greater and lesser conjunctions that would occur that year, sixteen of them in “watery signs.” Although their almanac covered the years 1499–1531, including another great conjunction in 1504, Stöffler and Pflaum made particular mention only of the conjunctions of 1524 amid what is otherwise many pages of tabular data. While they did not mention flooding, they did remark that the conjunctions undoubtedly signified “change, variation, and alteration” in all places to a degree that neither the aged nor historians had ever seen, and they concluded by citing the apocalyptic chapter 21 of Luke, “Therefore lift up your heads, ye Christian men.” By 1519, the announcement of numerous conjunctions had mutated in popular imagination into the prediction of a calamitous flood—by some accounts, a deluge to rival or even surpass that of Noah.
The predictions led to everything from panic and contrition to carnivalesque mocking (as shown for Italy by the work of Ottavia Niccoli and for the German language area by Dirk Mentgen) and to numerous printed works addressing the controversy over the conjunctions—above all, prognostic tracts of various kinds. These booklets have been closely studied for nearly a century, and they remain the primary body of evidence for widespread public concern. Gustav Hellmann identified nearly 135 printed tracts addressing the controversy, while later scholars have expanded the list to over 160 booklets printed throughout Europe. For the flood pamphlets as occasional tracts concerning a specific event, annual practicas provide the background rhetoric of astrological argument for a popular audience.

Gerd Mentgen confirmed the earlier view of Gustav Hellmann and Lynn Thorndike that the public debate in print began only in 1519 with the publication of works by Albert Pigghe and Agostino Nifo, contrary to Zambelli’s view that the panic was slowly and gradually set in motion from the early 1500s onward. The works of Pigghe and Nifo both argued against the prediction of a second deluge, which Nifo described as a widely held opinion that had arisen from Stöffler and Pflaum. In Nifo’s account, popular imagination was the only intermediary between Stöffler and Pflaum’s planetary ephemerides and the current excitement.

If the beginning of the controversy needs clarification, so does its end, for the focus on February 1524 is too narrow. While popular opinion may have expected a deluge at a specific time, the astrological pamphlets did not typically make predictions for a specific day, month, or year, during which they must either be fulfilled or disproved. Prognostications for twenty or forty years based on a single conjunction were written by Paul of Middelburg for 1484, Leonhard Reynmann for 1504, and Johannes Virdung for 1504 and 1524. Practica authors also regarded long-past conjunctions as still effective. Wenzel Faber’s practica for 1498 refers back to the great conjunction of 1484 in its analysis of the heavens. While some astrologers may have seen February 1524 as a time of particular peril, the absence of rains or flooding during any single day or month would have done little or nothing to damage an astrologer’s reputation. Talkenberger calls Albrecht Dürer’s dream vision of a world-ending deluge in 1525 evidence of the flood predictions’ lasting influence, but Dürer’s experience also suggests that the passage of February 1524 without a deluge had no effect on the credibility of the predictions. Mentgen notes that the diverse European climate meant that some areas did experience heavy rains and record flooding. Even if
fulfillment in early 1524 were essential, some astrologers could point to timely and literal (if local) confirmation of the feared prediction.\textsuperscript{42}

While the planetary conjunctions of 1524 could be observed throughout Europe, the flood of booklets was a phenomenon that manifested itself in widely varying forms in different parts of Europe and that is best explained by local conditions. Germany and Italy saw many editions, while other parts of Europe saw few or no printed tracts. In Hellman's tabulation of editions, Germany leads all other lands, with Italy close behind and Spain a distant third. There is a further linguistic divide. While the Italian astronomers were primarily printed in the Latin of learned discourse, editions in the German language area were predominantly in the vernacular.\textsuperscript{43} Relatively few foreign astrologers were translated into German or reprinted in Germany, and their works differ in form and content from most German contributions.\textsuperscript{44} For this reason, the flood controversy needs to be considered within particular national contexts. While there were certainly points of contact between Germany and Italy, the printed responses to the controversy were so different that a print historical treatment must respect linguistic borders.\textsuperscript{45}

A contemporary observer, the Spaniard Pedro Cirvelo, broadly distinguished the tenor of Italian astrologers from their German and Spanish colleagues. The German and Spanish astrologers were predicting severe rains and terrible flooding, according to Cirvelo, while the Italians declared that fair weather was in store. In Cirvelo's opinion, the German astrologers were the more experienced and more correct, although they exaggerated their predictions of disaster. Cirvelo rejected as the most mistaken of all a third view, namely, that the eclipse of 1523 would have a far greater effect than the conjunction of 1524. Cirvelo identified this view alternately with Nifo and Pigghe, and Tannstetter, who cited Nifo and Pigghe as his sources, also promoted eclipses as a far more reliable basis of prognostication.\textsuperscript{46}

Writing in 1588, Johann Rasch identified Nifo and Tannstetter as opponents of Stößler, Seitz, and Virdung, yet the division into proponents and opponents of the flood prediction is not at all as clear as one might expect, despite several efforts at classification.\textsuperscript{47} Cirvelo is just one example of how difficult it is to neatly distinguish pro from contra. He believed that the conjunction would bring barely a tenth as much water as the alarmists were predicting, and he spoke out against panicked overreaction, but he also rejected the reassurances of the pacifists and the failure to prepare for future difficulties. Barnes proposes a tripartite division between humanist court
astrologers, urban amateurs (including physicians), and evangelical religious writers, in which Tannstetter, Stöffler, and Virdung are all made members of the humanist contingent.\textsuperscript{48} Zambelli proposes a different three-way division between the “comforters who are loyal to the Emperor and papacy, the magisterial Evangelicals, and the radical Reformers.”\textsuperscript{49} In Talkenberger’s extensive and detailed study of the standpoints of German contributions to the flood debate, it is difficult to find a truly calamitous deluge proposed among the alarmists, rather than merely flooding as one of many possible disasters and changes associated with the conjunction.\textsuperscript{50} Among the pacifists opposed to the flood prediction, it is difficult to find any who do not warn of troubles of other kinds. The clearest warning of an impending deluge came from Alexander Seitz, but he remained a lone voice in the wilderness. Most authors took a position similar to Johann Carion, who mocked Seitz and rejected the prediction of a catastrophic flood, but who also warned that the conjunctions would bring the worst flooding in centuries (with particular danger for valleys and coastal regions), along with violence, disorder, and other disasters.\textsuperscript{51} While Virdung more strongly affirmed the threat of a deluge as one of several calamities, Talkenberger regards Virdung as sharing with Nifo an “ambivalent rhetoric that vacillates between threat and consolation.”\textsuperscript{52} Tannstetter was the most prominent of the pacifists, but he also warned of God’s punishments for rebellion against authorities. Only his Viennese colleague Aegidius Camillus was adamant that the coming year would bring not a flood but good fortune and fair weather. While there are sharp disagreements about the relative influence of conjunctions and eclipses or of the authority of Arabic and Greek astronomers, the vast majority of tracts from all authors warned of disasters but not world-ending catastrophe and promoted obedience and repentance as ways to avert the worst troubles.

\textbf{Broadening the Context}

The numerous booklets addressing the predicted deluge are merely one part of an outpouring of pamphlets of all kinds in the decade following the year 1517 that has been described in the work of Hans-Joachim Köhler.\textsuperscript{53} The rise in flood-related editions clearly parallels the rise in booklet printing. While publication of flood-related booklets is often considered to slow to a trickle and then cease after February 1524, this is only true if one considers flood tracts as an isolated phenomenon, instead of as one phase in a
long tradition of prophecy in print. Expanding the material under consideration will necessarily broaden the root causes of the flood controversy to include larger and more durable issues than a conjunction of the planets.

Considering the prophetic tone and eschatological material found in many flood tracts, such as Carion’s discussion of the Antichrist’s advent, contemporary prophetic tracts that use prognostication to engage with social changes must be considered part of the same event, even if they do not mention flooding. The anonymous Prophecy to Gigebaldus, for example, foretells a broad range of destruction for the years 1522–24, including strife between social classes, moral decay, Turkish invasion, and peasant rebellion.54 The two woodcut representations of Mars and the Sun on the title page suggest a conscious imitation of astrological booklets. While the oncoming disasters did not include flooding, the thematic similarity suggests that the edition of Gigebaldus belongs to the same larger phenomenon as the flood tracts. The anonymous Prophecy and Secret of Old Hidden Writings is another brief compilation of various prophecies, most of them for the years 1524 and earlier, although it also reproduces all of Stößler and Pflaum’s note for the year 1524 in addition to prophesying a deluge for that year. Another prophetic booklet that clearly belongs to the same event is the tract attributed to Pflaum himself. In 1522 and six more times by 1534, Pflaum’s name appeared on a prophetic tract supposedly first printed in 1500 but referring primarily to the years from 1520 onward.55 The booklet contains an unorganized mishmash of politicized end-time tropes drawn from pseudo-Methodius and other sources, including victorious German emperors, false emperors and popes, the Last Emperor and Angelic Pope, and the advent of the Antichrist. While the booklet does not predict a flood for 1524, its first edition of ca. 1522 and its emphasis on the same religious and political crises—not to mention the alleged author—suggest that it, too, belongs among the printed works that responded to the same crisis.

Broadening the scope from the strictly astrological to include the booklet of “Jakob Pflaum” and similar prophetic tracts would also bring within consideration the Alofresant material, for example, with its several editions of 1519–20 and later.56 According to the Alofresant tract, the author was a Turkish astrologer of Rhodes and cousin or nephew of the sultan’s own court astrologer who was baptized a Christian at the age of one hundred. Alofresant’s prophecy foresaw the fortunes of four descendants of John II, duke of Burgundy, with the most glorious future predicted for Charles, the fourth descendant of John, who was elected German king as Charles V in
1519, the year of the earliest Alofresant editions. Halbronn sees the origin of the Alofresant tract as political propaganda in the costly campaign for election between Charles and Francis I of France around the year 1517. An other wave of publication followed when Charles was crowned as Holy Roman Emperor in 1530. Likewise, a prophecy attributed to a Theodericus, Franciscan friar and bishop in 1420 (in either “Zug” or “Zeng” in Croatia or Granada, depending on the edition), saw six editions (out of eleven total) in 1520–23. These were preceded by a 1503 broadside and a 1512 booklet and followed by editions as late as 1542, but the editions of 1520 belong to the body of prognostic booklets for which the German reading public had an interest as the flood panic was getting under way.

Kurze suggested that the absence of flooding in 1524 motivated the replacement of flood-related prognostications with a resurgence of interest in prophetic compilations—above all, the *Prognosticatio* of Johannes Lichtenberger. But an edition of the *Prognosticatio* printed by Wolfgang Stöckel in Leipzig in 1521 (and unknown to Kurze) indicates that renewed interest in Lichtenberger arose simultaneously to the flood controversy rather than subsequent to it. Stöckel’s edition of Grünpeck’s *Speculum* the following year indicates that his printing of prophetic works met with some success. Certainly the *Extract of Various Prophecies* from Lichtenberger and Grünpeck was popular both before and after 1524, and an edition of ca. 1523, which illustrates the title page with a woodcut of Venus and Saturn surrounding the sign of Pisces while rain descends onto a flooded landscape where people float among inundated houses and cities, suggests that it preserved its relevance during the flood debate.

Talkenberger sees practicas after 1524 avoiding engagement with endtime themes, in contrast to the flood tracts—a divorce of Mercury and eschatology. Yet overt reference to apocalyptic themes continued with similar frequency after 1524 to the years before 1519. The practica for 1547 of Mads Hack, for example, proclaimed that the time Christ had warned of, when signs would appear in the heavens foretelling his advent, was then at hand. Edition histories provide a different perspective on where popular interests lay after 1524, and here one finds Carion’s astrological *Interpretation and Revelation* joined to the *Extract of Various Prophecies*, Lichtenberger joined to Virdung in the *Great Practica*, the appearance in 1525 of Virdung’s “Antichrist” practica, and several editions in the 1540s of Salomon von Roermond’s more overtly apocalyptic prognostications. The neat separation of astrology and prophecy cannot be sustained, either be-
fore or after 1524. Flood booklets and prophetic works need to be seen as different aspects of the same phenomenon during these years, even where a deluge is not specifically mentioned.

**Rethinking 1524**

The anticipation followed by the absence of calamitous flooding in 1524 has often been treated as a failed prophecy from the seventeenth century onward. Yet the absence of a deluge in 1524 did not hinder public confidence in the validity of astrology, nor were the conjunctions of February 1524 discredited as a basis for prognostication. Both proponents and opponents of the prediction argued at first that events had vindicated their positions, but the marketplace and the court of public opinion reached their own judgments over the next several years. Leonhard Reynmann’s prophetic judgment on the conjunctions (citing, among others, the well-known constellation of “Sibilla, Birgitta, Cirillus, Abbot Joachim, Methodius, Lulhardus, and Merlin”) was reprinted almost unaltered in 1526. The preface referred to the conjunctions of the preceding year rather than the upcoming year, and a triple sun replaced the sign of Pisces in the title woodcut, but otherwise the work was little changed. Grünpeck’s final tract, the brief *Prognosticum*, foresaw that many lands would be tormented by misfortune and disaster as the astronomical events “which occurred on February 19, 1524, exert their significance.” Grünpeck reached back to older tropes found in the “Toledo Letter” and similar astrologically themed prophecies in his prediction of flooding and other disasters, final victory of the Christians over their enemies, and the conjunction in 1540 of all seven planets in the sign of Pisces, concluding that then “all hidden judgments of God will be revealed until all prophecies are fulfilled that I have drawn in part from natural causes and in part from divine revelations.” Despite grossly contradicting the actual course of the heavens in 1540 (Czerny thought it “impossible to read anything more lacking in intelligence” than this booklet), Grünpeck’s last work was immediately printed nine times in six different cities. Even among practicing astrologers, the conjunction of 1524 did not fall into disrepute. “What shall I say about the conjunction in the year 1524?” wrote Nikolaus Prueckner in the preface to his prognostication for 1538–45. “I think it has clearly shown its effect in almost every land and still has not come to an end.” Johannes Schöner’s practica for 1537 regards the conjunction of 1524 as still having a dominant effect. Writing in 1568 and later,
Theodor Graminaeus used the conjunctions of 1524 to mark the beginning of the crisis-plagued present age.69 Rather than losing credibility after 1524, astrologers who had warned of impending disaster enjoyed continued popularity. While Alexander Seitz published no further prognostications after 1521, his astromedical tract on bloodletting, including propitious days and times, went through five editions between 1527 and 1530. Virdung’s career as an author of printed astrological tracts, already in its fourth decade, continued unhindered after 1524, with the appearance of annual practicas for each year until 1538.70 His multiyear prognostication on the conjunction of 1524, even illustrated with woodcuts that emphasized flooding, enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in the 1540s, when it was reprinted nine times in combination with Lichtenberger’s Prognosticatio or Carion’s “Hidden Prophecy.” Carion’s own judgment of the conjunctions, which disavowed a second deluge but foresaw localized flooding and other disasters, also led to a highly successful career in print, as his Interpretation and Revelation became the most frequently reprinted astrological tract of the second quarter of the sixteenth century following its publication in 1526. Even after their deaths in the late 1530s, the prognostic writings of both Virdung and Carion were reprinted into the late 1540s. After the almanac of Johannes Stößler had been used as the source for so many alarming predictions, Stößler brought forth a new astronomical almanac for thirty years in 1531.

Georg Tannstetter, the most prominent and widely published among the pacifists, did not enjoy such good fortune. Although he had published prognostic tracts annually since 1504, his Latin practica for 1525 was his last, and no later work of popular astrology by him is known.71 It seems, instead, that it was the skeptic Tannstetter who lost credibility after 1524, rather than his alarmist competitors. Tannstetter’s complaint in 1523 that his practicas appeared later than others because of printers’ greed is but another way of saying that printers regarded Tannstetter’s original work as less marketable than reprints of practicas from other authors. After 1524, his standing with the public does not appear to have recovered. Where had Tannstetter gone wrong?

The flood tracts often have much more to say about unrest and social change than they do about flooding. Virdung’s multiyear prognostication threatens that “unimportant people of vulgar ancestry will rise up against the monarchs and mighty rulers and attempt to drive them from their rule and woefully persecute them.”72 Leonhard Reynmann foresaw a similar al-
liance between peasants and commoners so grasping and avaricious that “little difference will be seen between the rich and the poor.” He argued that nothing would prevail against the change of all things until the clergy and nobility united against the third estate and gave them their due reward. Carion’s tract predicted that the nobility would be oppressed and that a man of low birth would rise up as leader of the common people and attack the higher clergy. He closed with the injunction to both laity and clergy to fall on their knees and ask that God might be merciful. Sebastian Ransmar also saw the conjunctions of 1524 as omens of change in all estates, and he called on his readers to devote themselves to God’s will and pray that the divine will be done on earth. The greatest anxiety of the authors appears focused less on flooding than on the “change, variation, and alteration” in all things that Stöffler and Pflaum had predicted already in 1499.

If we understand the deluge of 1524 as a stand-in for a host of societal and epistemological anxieties, it becomes clear why Tannstetter lost credibility while Virdung and Carion went on to greater fame and publishing success. The flood panic and its consequences should be seen less as a prognostication and its fulfillment (or failure) than as the expression of widespread anxieties about society. To his credit, Tannstetter did recognize the crisis of the moment. He opened his consolatory tract by situating the panic he perceived in the context of internal and external threats to the existing order. With Turks invading, Christianity split against itself and Christian kingdoms at war with one another, and the death of Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I in 1519, the fear of impending flood, according to Tannstetter, was leading to disruption as formulated by Nifo and repeated by others: people were selling their property, avoiding marriage or other alliances, putting off taking holy orders, and becoming slack in their labors. But despite Tannstetter’s recognition of the broader context, his dismissal of catastrophic predictions proved shortsighted. Whatever the weather was like in February 1524 in the various regions of Europe, the second half of the 1520s proved to be a period where the institutions of European society were severely battered, with the Protestant Reformation taking hold in German cities, peasant rebellions flaring up across southern and eastern Germany in 1525, the Turkish victory at Mohacs in 1526 and siege of Vienna in 1529, and the 1527 sack of Rome by soldiers of the Holy Roman Emperor. Readers in 1530 of Virdung’s alarming judgment of the conjunctions of 1524 could—and did—look back at recent events as confirmation of Virdung’s predictions, as marginal annotations in one copy attest. In view of these future
developments, affirming the perils of the current and coming years would have better suited the second half of the decade. Aegidius Camillus, the most optimistic of prognosticators, had mocked the prediction of a flood in his practica for 1524: “I am entirely ignorant from what motions or causes many believe that a deluge or even great changes are in store for this year, and would gladly learn from where and by what art they have it, perhaps from the Gospels or from revelations of the Holy Ghost. For such cannot be attested with certainty by any art of the stars.”

The next year, Camillus saw himself vindicated and wrote that the predictions of disaster had come to nothing. But at the end of the decade, Camillus recognized that wrenching changes such as Stöfle and Pflaum had predicted had indeed come to pass, and he could only protest the limits of his art: “But in our times there are such significant and notable changes in all places and in all things, as everyone sees before their eyes. It is very difficult to discover and show the causes of all of them from the noble art of astrology.”

Not only was Tannstetter’s prediction mistaken, but his argument was doomed to failure. His insistence that the significance of astronomical phenomena for “lands, cities, and people... does not belong in public but, rather, is to be discussed on a higher level” reinforced the perceived exclusivity of the alarmist tracts that he was arguing so vehemently against. Tannstetter and others dismissed the flood prediction by attacking its theoretical foundations in the theory of conjunctions and arguing that the “fantasies of Albumasar and his followers” should be rejected while the “rigorous doctrine of Ptolemy” should be promoted. But the problem was, at heart, not a fear of flooding but anxiety over institutions and systems of knowledge that had grown unstable. Albumasar had been one of the authorities cited by astrologers in the prefaces of their practicas from the beginning, and so Tannstetter’s attack on one of the foundations of early modern astrology only further destabilized knowledge about the cosmos. Rather than restoring certainty, confronting readers with competing theoretical foundations only heightened anxiety.

But the astrological booklets that affirmed the threat represented by the conjunctions of 1524 were also unsuited to preserving order. In the face of the threats to European society, astrological practicas and occasional booklets were printed in great numbers in order to aid stability in their usual manner, by confronting readers with the specter of disaster and calling for unity to avoid it, but practicas and similar booklets were an entirely unsuitable tool with which to treat an outbreak of anxiety. The fundamental prob-
lem in the deluge controversy of 1524 was that astrologers were trying to fight fear with fear, a strategy that was doomed to only worsen the situation. Fear of disorder can be invoked to solidify political order, but it is no antidote to itself.

This is why the controversy over the flood predictions was a crisis of print. The almanac of planetary ephemerides that led to charges of incompetence between Carion and Perlach and to complaints about practicas authored by untrained and ignorant printers also provided the seed of the flood panic. Stößler and Pflaum’s note about the conjunctions of 1524 had appeared in a reference work meant for their professional colleagues, but the broadening of access to information via print changed the educational requirements of astrologers and provided a much broader audience with access to the tools of prognostication. Tannstetter’s arguments against the conjunction theory represented a similar problem. For the first time, a broad reading public was being exposed to the kinds of competing narratives that scholars had long dealt with, but the public did not have the scholarly training and tools to make sense of them. What prompted the flood tract of “Johannes Gereon” (a pseudonym for the Benedictine monk Veit Bild) was the “diversity and discord” that he observed; his own contribution, of course, merely increased the cacophony. The printing press sowed “prophetic confusion.”

Understanding the flood panic as an expression of societal anxieties also leads to the reversal of cause and effect between prognostication and its consequences. While Warburg cites the “literature for the masses that caused the flood panic of 1524,” Hammerstein writes of the “horrifying impact of the predictions conveyed by means of pamphlets,” and Müller cites the anticipation of flooding in 1524 as an example of mass hysteria caused by unfavorable interpretations. Zambelli notes how the observation of conjunctions began to “occasion widespread collective fear.” But a dire prediction, even in conjunction with an astronomical event, is not a sufficient explanation for panic. Alarming prophecies are a constant of medieval and early modern astrology, so their mere existence cannot be seen as the cause for any particular panic. Rather than a unique feature of 1524, dire predictions were a common response to conjunctions, and flooding belonged to the standard repertoire of eschatological and astrological disaster. Severe flooding is already invoked as one of the end-time cataclysms in the Sibyl’s Prophecy, where it is a consequence of sin as rebellion against God. Already in 1474, Johannes von Lübeck’s Prognostication on the Advent of the
Antichrist and the Messiah of the Jews connected the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter to a “flood of fire.” Wenzel Faber’s practicas for 1492, 1495, and 1496 predicted flooding, and the title pages of these practicas feature title woodcuts as alarming in their depictions of deluge as those appearing in the flood tracts prior to 1524. Leonhard Reynmann’s prognostication for the conjunction of 1504 foresaw rains and flooding as a consequence. Yet all of these predictions, even when accompanied by conjunctions and other astronomical events, did not lead to an equivalent reaction in daily life or in print. Just as prophecies do not cause rebellion, as Keith Thomas recognized, the prediction of a flood did not cause panic. Rather, anxiety about destabilized institutions and systems of knowledge became tangible in the form of a deluge. Panic, by creating a receptive market for dire astrological forecasts, led to predictions.