Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498): Fashioning of a prophet and a new Jerusalem in late fifteenth-century Florence

Ann Christiansen Remp

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Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498):
Fashioning of a Prophet and a New Jerusalem in Late Fifteenth-Century Florence

by
Ann Christiansen Remp

Thesis
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Thesis Committee:
Ronald Delph, PhD, Chair
Philip Schmitz, PhD
Mark Whitters, PhD

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Abstract

Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498) was a Dominican mendicant of the fifteenth century who fashioned himself as a prophet. Although there were many prophets in Italy, this study argued that Savonarola primarily emulated the biblical prophets of the Old Testament. Analysis of Savonarola’s discourse was based on electronic or print translations of his sermons and other writings. War, violence, corruption of the Church, and changing forms of government led to a fear among Florentine that drove them to seek prophets. The study followed Savonarola’s early preaching, call to prophesy, self-representation as a prophet, and the height of his acceptance as a prophet followed by his decline in power and execution. Savonarola maintained his lifelong commitment to Christian reform as emanating most essentially from the individual, not the structure or doctrine of the church. Savonarola carried out his mission as a prophet by striving to create Florence as a “new Jerusalem.”
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Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. . . The tempter approached and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command that these stones to become loaves of bread. . . . If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down . . .” Then the devil took him up to a very high mountain, and showed him all of the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence, and he said to him, “All these I shall give you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me.”

The tempter challenged Jesus to confirm his identity with miracles. Nearly a millennium and a half later, in a vision, Fra Girolamo Savonarola would meet “mankind’s Tempter” in a vision he recounted in the Compendium of Revelations. In August 1495, at the height of his prophetic and political influence, Savonarola wrote of this vision: He and his companions had journeyed to the Gates of Heaven where he sought audience with the Virgin Mary for a message to deliver on the Feast of the Annunciation. A hermit, aged and bearded, joined the company. “By the revelation of the Holy Spirit,” he said, “I have at this moment understood the fruit of your preaching and your good intention toward God and the salvation of souls. At the same time, however, it was revealed to me that you have been led into error.”

This study examines why Savonarola became the prophet of Florence and why many accepted him as a prophet of God, while other powerful opponents did not. This chapter, Chapter 1, presents the problem as a general question. Five questions then frame this study of Savonarola’s career path as a prophet: Chapter 2 asks, Why did the cities and society in general, particularly Rome, Florence, and Ferrara and their territories, create the conditions for the rise of prophets? Chapter 3 asks, Why did Savonarola’s piety, morality, and education set him on the
path to becoming a prophet from an early age? Chapter 4 asks, Who were the models that Savonarola chose to emulate in becoming a prophet and why? Chapter 5 asks, Why was Savonarola able to convince people from varied classes to accept him as a prophet? Chapter 6 asks, Why was opposed Savonarola and, ultimately, in the face of charges of heresy, did he seek his martyrdom? Chapter 7 presents the summary and conclusions of the study. The study analyzes the Savonarola’s career path as an interaction of social context and personal self-representation.

**Relationship to Earlier Research**

Earlier historians have examined Savonarola’s prophetic status, and this study is built on their work as well as more recent work on Savonarola’s personal piety. In particular Donald Weinstein and Bernard McGinn characterized Savonarola as a prophet in different ways. Weinstein, the historian who brought renewed attention to Savonarolan scholarship, asked in his 1957 dissertation, “Was he a millenarian, a Joachimite or was he in the more orthodox tradition?” Weinstein addressed this question that had “long begged for an answer” in the context of the evolving and competing thinking in Florence of the late fifteenth century. He concluded that

> [u]nder the influence of Florentine political events and in response to the changes of his own position in the city, [Savonarola] moved from an unexceptionably orthodox idea of Christian penitence and regeneration to a millenarian historical scheme. The materials out of which he built his vision of a new Florence in a new age ranged from biblical and Joachimite themes to Florentine patriotic, humanist conceptions and even some from Renaissance Neoplatonism.³

To be a millenarian, or a “millenialist” in Marjorie Reeves’s words, was to follow the writings of Joachim of Fiori (c. 1135-1202) and his theory of history into at least the thirteenth

Then I saw an angel come down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the abyss and a heavy chain. He seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, which is the Devil or Satan, and tied it up for a thousand years and threw it into the abyss, which he locked over it and sealed, so that it could no longer lead the nations astray until the thousand years are completed. After this, it is to be released for a short time.\(^5\)

*Revelation* (Rev 21:1-2) prophesied a “new heaven and a new earth” and “the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride for her husband.”\(^6\)

Joachim, directly or indirectly through succeeding generations, influenced “the myth of Florence” to which Savonarola was heir: Florence as a “new Jerusalem,” Savonarola’s characterization of Charles VIII as the second Charlemagne, his own role in Florence’s peacekeeping mission to Charles, and Savonarola’s claim that God had elected the people of Florence as His own. All these convictions were built on a millenarian view of Florence, a view shared by many others at the time.\(^7\) Weinstein, however, viewed Joachimite influence as only one of many in the dynamic discourse of Savonarola’s city. Like the Old Testament prophets who contended against many gods and false prophets, Savonarola lived at a time of heresy and, some would claim, a newly pagan era, perhaps as complex and religiously pluralistic as the Old Testament prophets’ time.\(^8\) Savonarola’s claim to be a prophet developed, according to Weinstein, through an evolutionary and adaptive process.

Bernard McGinn considered Savonarola to be an apocalyptic prophet: His great creativity was his “bold transformation of Florentine civic patriotism into a new kind of apocalyptic vision. In this, as in much else, the friar takes his place as one of the most notable apocalyptic prophets of the Christian tradition.”\(^9\) In the apocalyptic genre, the prophet
“receive[d] revelations through mediation of some sort and then record[ed] them in writing.”

In the context of the Old Testament, revelation was God speaking to His elect people through the prophet, most often about their disobedience to the covenant and the punishment that would follow if the people’s behavior did not change. The prophet, in turn, appealed to God on behalf of the people for forgiveness and mercy. How God fulfilled his promises in the prophecies of the Old Testament was conditional: If the people were faithful to the covenant, they would enjoy God’s protection; if they were not faithful, they would be punished. Often the tool of God’s punishment was a foreign enemy, such as the Assyrians or the Babylonians. Savonarola spoke of his relationship to God and to the people of Florence in these terms and portrayed threats of war and invasion of Florence as punishments for the sins of Florence.

Other historians have presented research on prophets and prophecy of twelfth through fifteenth centuries that must also be considered. Christian humanists of the latter half of the fifteenth century, for example, became interested in Neoplatonism and its model for prophets and prophecy. Savonarola would have understood Neoplatonism, at least through his interaction with Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, two of the leading Christian humanists, in Italy. Neoplatonism initially emerged in the third century and re-emerged in the 1470s and 1480s as ancient Greek manuscripts arrived in Florence after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Other recent studies of prophets of the twelfth through fourteenth centuries pursued other traditions of apocalypticism and multiple sources for divine revelation. The study of twelfth-century Hildegard of Bingen’s prophecy, for example, demonstrated that multiple views of apocalypticism existed as alternatives to the expectation of a single apocalyptic period which led to the imminent end of time. Hildegard followed a visionary tradition of revelation and her
prophecies have been characterized as reformist apocalypticism.\textsuperscript{13} In the search for the characteristics of Savonarola as a prophet, these additional perspectives are relevant.

The question of this study approaches the question of what kind of prophet Savonarola was by examining how he represented himself and Florence to his audiences. The conclusion compares the findings of this study to earlier views on Savonarola as a prophet.

\textbf{Thesis of the Study}

Each question argues a particular thesis. First, the social and political conditions of the cities, as well as their mythologies, bred corruption, uncertainty, fear of violence, and economic injustice that revealed flaws in leadership and unmet social and religious needs. This led to the rise of prophets. Second, Savonarola’s scholastic, biblical, humanist, and Dominican education fostered a passion for both civic and ecclesiastical reform and the creation of a moral society. Thus Savonarola voiced from an early age the need for reform, a message that he continued to propound as he undertook his Dominican preaching. Third, the cities of his time were, to Savonarola, analogous to the sinful cities of the Old Testament, especially Jerusalem. This Dominican friar, steeped in traditions of Scripture, preaching, pastoral care, and independence from civil and papal authority, looked to the Old Testament prophets for models to emulate. In the biblical Jerusalem, Savonarola found a model for Florence to become a new Jerusalem, an earthly kingdom to parallel the heavenly city. Fourth, Savonarola’s self-fashioning as an Old Testament prophet through his preaching, prophecies, and passionate calls for reform led the people to his accept him. In his preaching from the pulpit and his texts, Savonarola met the unmet social and spiritual needs of many who became his followers. Finally, the papal assault on Savonarola’s authority and subsequent loss of popular support as prophet led to his arrest as a
heretic and his execution, but Savonarola sought martyrdom as a sacrifice in the fashion of Scripture.

In arguing this career path for Savonarola, it must be recognized that Savonarola was not the only prophet speaking to the Florentine, Tuscan, and Roman people. Nor was Savonarola the only individual fashioning an image of himself. Monarchs, Popes, and members of powerful families were employing the same rhetorical approaches and media to influence how their people perceived them. The art commissioned by those in high positions as well as those who sought to rise to positions of eminence like the condittieri, or military commanders of the period, created images of their leaders in manners similar to those of the greater lords. The evils of society—drunkenness, sexual violence, and even war itself—were transformed in their meaning and significance by art. Savonarola used his music, processions, and almost theatrical delivery of sermons to build his image, while leaders of cities and the papacy used art, jewelry and gems, clothing and courts to maintain their images. Self representations of preacher, pope, and civic leader were delivered to a public thirsty for salvation and entertainment.

This was also a period with a tradition of prophets who emerged in various places with various agendas. Growing concern for their salvation led people to a greater practice of personal piety, and many found their needs unmet by the clergy. Many among lay and clerical communities called for reform. These populations sought out preachers for many reasons, religious and otherwise. They knew Scripture, if not through reading, then through the liturgical cycles of sermons and rituals that filled the calendar of the city. They were pilgrims in search of paths to salvation in a tenuous world. They were people caught between the armies of emerging secular monarchs, princes and condittieri expanding their territories, and popes who fought to increase and secure papal lands. Into this society, Girolamo Savonarola was born in 1452 and
lived a scant 46 years until his martyrdom in 1498. He served as a prophet for the final eight years of his life, but his path to prophecy began at the knee of his beloved grandfather as he learned Scripture.

**Historiography**

Savonarola preached his sermons and wrote prayers, poems and other texts in the vernacular as well as Latin. As Savonarola grew in stature as a preacher and as a self-proclaimed prophet, the wide dissemination of his message was facilitated by printing press technology. Florence was a major center for works on prophecy before 1500. According to Ottavia Niccoli, printers, in their eagerness for commercial opportunities, often omitted or changed information to increase the appeal of the text. The same item might be printed with a change in the title to promote sales. Checking for accuracy or completeness was not part of the standard for publishing at that time.16

Because Savonarola had no control over texts claiming to be based on his sermons, the printed word generated opportunities for his enemies in Florence and elsewhere in Italy to distort or pervert his statements. At the same time, the printed word also permitted Savonarola to correct errors and misunderstandings and to disseminate his preaching to those not present in Florence. Today, much, though not all, of this printed material has been located by scholars and some has become available for study through recent compilations and translations. Thus, the translated words of Savonarola himself in his role as a prophet provide a rich source for examination in this study. Why and how Savonarola fashioned himself as a prophet and gained acceptance by Florentines and others beyond the city can be examined through Savonarola’s own words, supported by studies of the contexts for his preaching.
Savonarolan historiography of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries has not been included here because other historians (e.g., Donald Weinstein, \(^{17}\) Roberto Ridolfi, \(^{18}\) more recently John Edward Allard, \(^{19}\) Donald Surrency, \(^{20}\) and others) have already discussed biographies, texts of sermons, and other studies of Savonarola. Interest in Savonarola in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century has been demonstrated by a number of authors (for example, William Clark, Emma H. Adams, William Henry Crawford, and Ralph Roeder). Except for Randolph’s *Spiritual and Ascetic Letters of Savonarola*, however, these books were not based on primary documents and, thus, have had limited roles in later studies.\(^{21}\)

Pasquale Villari produced a two-volume biography of Savonarola that discussed Savonarolan histories of early and mid-nineteenth century. Written in Italian in the late nineteenth century, the English translation of this biography was not available until mid-twentieth century.\(^{22}\) Villari explained that the period of the anti-religious sentiment accompanying the French Revolution had passed, allowing attention once again to religious scholarship. In addition to discussing studies by German and French historians of the early nineteenth century, Villari also identified valuable source materials collected by the Florentine Dominican Vicenzo Marchese from the convent of San Marco, Savonarola’s convent in the 1490s. Although Villari found each of the studies he reviewed to be flawed, he credited the authors for using Savonarola’s writings as the basis for discussion. Villari’s research included a biography written by a contemporary of Savonarola, identified as Pacifico Burlamachi. This author is also referred to as Pseudo-Burlamachi, or Anonymous, and has continued to be cited as a primary source in current studies. For example, Dennis Scott Surrency’s 2003 study of Savonarola’s creation of sacred space in Florence made extensive references to Pseudo-Burlamachi, illustrating the significance of this re-discovered anonymous source.\(^{23}\)
The early twentieth century did not produce a serious contribution to Savonarolan studies in English translation until mid-century. Then in 1952, Ridolfi published *The Life of Girolamo Savonarola*, and in 1959 Cecil Grayson translated it into English. Ridolfi was a descendant of Giovambattista Ridolfi. With Valori and Soderini, Giovambattista was “practically the leader and standard bearer of the [Savonarolan] faction.” His descendant Roberto had access to archives of Savonarola’s materials that earlier biographers did not have. New research was begun by scholars based on the vernacular and Latin sources uncovered by Ridolfi. Weinstein’s groundbreaking dissertation in 1957 and his later history, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance*, spurred new research on Savonarola that has continued into the twenty-first century. As a young scholar, Weinstein was part of a growing interest group working in medieval and Renaissance prophecy. He was the beneficiary of the work and assistance of such scholars as Professors Hans Baron, Eugenio Garin, Marjorie Reeves, and Roberto Ridolfi.

The translation of Savonarola’s sermons, letters, and treatises has been remarkable as well. As indicated, Ridolfi uncovered many of Savonarola’s texts, edited them, and published his biography of Savonarola in 1952. Other scholars, starting with Ridolfi’s collection, compiled and issued annual collections of Savonarola’s documents. From 1952 to 1984, more than twenty volumes of Savonarola’s writings, sermons, treatises and other texts had been published under various editors as the *Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Girolamo Savonarola*. These were both Latin and vernacular texts, but the lack of translations limited research by English-speaking scholars.

As these source materials appeared, scholars began translating them into English. For example, the *Compendium of Revelations* in the 1974 volume was translated into English within
five years by Bernard McGinn. Savonarola’s “Prison Meditations” was translated by John Patrick Donnelly. The national editions were the source of Savonarola’s poems, pastoral works (e.g., “Guide to Righteous Living” and “The Book on the Life of the Widow”) and other texts that Konrad Eisenbichler translated. Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro’s monumental work of translation made many more sermons, treatises, and letters accessible in English. These examples illustrate how recently many of these sources have become available to English-speaking scholars. John Edward Allard, in his 1997 study, explained the challenges of dating passages, determining authorship, and sequencing various sermon texts.

Girolamo Savonarola has continued to be the subject of historical study. Within the last two decades, a number of publications have appeared, such as Lauro Martines’s Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for the Soul of Renaissance Florence, Weinstein’s second major work on Savonarola, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet, and Paul Strathern’s Death in Florence: The Medici, Savonarola, and the Battle for the Soul of the Renaissance City. There are others that this study makes use of as well.

Much of Savonarolan study has focused on the political aspect of his ministry and his relationship to the great figures of his day. However, more recent studies have analyzed other dimensions of his life and work. Patrick Macy studied Savonarola’s “Bonfire” songs. Donald Scott Surrency examined the connection between Savonrola’s public ritual and preaching and the practice of mental prayer. His preaching of mental prayer was of concern because mental prayer did not require the mediation of a priest or monk to access God and, by implication, this newfound independence would, it was feared, diminish obedience to civil authority. Allison R. Nelson translated the letter of a Savonarolan follower to a Dominican nun, containing a spiritual meditation on Christ’s passion and Mary’s suffering. In addition to providing insight into
monastic life of women and their devotions, this study discussed the “cura monialium, or male spiritual care of female religious.” David Fear analyzed the Compendium of Revelations for insight into Savonarola’s blending of medieval and modern thought. Allard, analyzing the rhetoric of the Aggeo sermons of Advent 1494, studied religious imagination in Savonarola’s later preaching. The current study is part of this continued interest in Savonarola’s ministry and role as prophet.

In addition to direct studies of Savonarola, current historical research has developed supporting research very helpful to an understanding Savonarola in his time period. Medieval sermon studies, medieval liturgy, studies of Dominicans and Dominican traditions provide context for the Savonarolan sermons that exist. Histories and mythologies of Rome, Jerusalem and Babylon provided contexts for the fifteenth-century cities of Florence and Rome.

**Analysis of Discourse and Context: Theory and Methodology**

The Savonarolan texts to be examined in this study include his sermons and other texts from his adult life (c. 1472-1498). This approach is consistent with several types of historical research. To the extent that it focuses on the unique person of Savonarola, it is microhistory. It is also religious and cultural history because it examines the behaviors and interpretations of Savonarolan and Old Testament peoples and themes in relationship to conditions of Savonarola’s Florence and papal Rome. The study follows social history in its methodology, and specifically discourse analysis, to discover the interaction of social context with self-representation. Although some reference to political events is made, this study is not political, for it does not examine Savonarola’s political achievements or the political causes and effects of his actions.

The primary documents for this study are limited to the English translations of Savonarola’s documents, Old Testament books, and other Christian texts. A number of
potentially useful sources either do not exist or have not yet been translated into English. Savonarola’s early sermons from 1491 apparently do not exist, for example, and are known only through Savonarola’s later description of them or through historians’ examination of journals and chronicles of the period. Savonarolan documents include a few texts and letters from the 1470s and 1480s before he began his public work and texts created between 1490 and 1498, during his second tenure at San Marco in Florence. Altogether, the documents are a selection of sermons and summaries or fragments of sermons, with some treatises, letters, poems, and tracts on moral guidance. As the historiography has documented, there are ample Savonarolan documents available in English to support the analysis. Scripture and commentaries offer rich sources of material for understanding Savonarola’s literary world.42

**Methodology**

It is not feasible to make a direct pairing of the text of a sermon to Scripture by using the title of the sermon cycle, such as “Exodus,” which is the same title for the sermon as for the book of the Bible. Further, a book from Scripture, such as the book of Haggai, is referred to by the Latin Aggeus for the sermon by Savonarola and by translators.43 The position/number of the sermon in the liturgical cycle has little bearing on the chapter or verse of Scripture. There may also be no direct or obvious relationship of the sermon to the title or number. For example, on Savonarola’s sermon, “Aggeus VII,” Allison Brown observed that Savonarola did not address the book of Haggai directly until late in this cycle of twenty-three sermons and, therefore, the message of Haggai was not the primary emphasis of the earlier sermons in the cycle.44 The reason for these apparent incongruities was that sermon themes were dictated by a number of considerations. It may well be that Savonarola had some contemporary matter that required a delay in preaching on a particular biblical book. Or it may be that he decided to continue a
theme from the previous sermon. In spite of the difficulties of establishing a one-on-one correspondence between a particular book of Scripture and a specific sermon, Scripture offers a rich source of material for understanding Savonarola’s literary world and that of his audience. This is particularly true for Savonarola’s understanding of the biblical prophets and prophecy.

The sermons themselves usually conformed to the Catholic liturgical calendar as followed in the fifteenth century. The liturgical calendar was reproduced in the *Divine Office*, the breviary that every member of the secular or religious clergy followed throughout the year for prayers and rituals. The calendar was organized by seasons, starting with Advent, then Christmastide, Lent, Eastertide through the Ascensions of Christ and Mary, and finally ordinary time when special feasts for saints were celebrated. The preacher determined the particular book of the Bible that was to be emphasized in the sermons, and generally tried to give attention to the whole Bible every few years. In this way, a shared understanding of Scripture was developed in the community.

Having the liturgical season and the selection of biblical book established, the actual preaching might relate to a contemporary event. In the case of Savonarola’s “Aggeus” cycle, the contemporary event was a crisis, the invasion of Tuscany by Charles VIII of France in 1494. This was a time of both internal and external threats to Florence. Allard’s analysis of the “Aggeus” sermon cycle illustrated the complex relationship between liturgical season, biblical context, and contemporary events. Before advent of 1494, Savonarola had preached on Noah’s ark and the flood. This was appropriate to flight of Florence’s leader Piero de’ Medici from the city and the “deluge of soldiers” that the impending invasion of Florence by Charles VIII threatened. The advent season called for a new sermon cycle and a different biblical text, but Savonarola was not quite finished with Noah and the ark. The crisis in Florence had not yet been
resolved. Savonarola’s sermons of the new cycle continued to deal with the vacuum created by loss of leadership in the city. Allard explained that the early part of the 23-sermon cycle continued the “Noah’s Ark” theme from the previous cycle, then developed sermons on the Psalms, and only in the final sermons turned to the rebuilding of the temple from the book of Haggai. This was a bridge to Savonarola’s sermons on the building of Florence as a “new Jerusalem.”

Hence the Savonarola and other preachers maintained the flexibility to address contemporary events or other matters in sermons ostensibly on specific books of Scripture. In addition, the preacher made decisions about how much to include directly from Scripture based on the assessment of the listeners’ shared knowledge. From a perspective of “shared context,” Savonarola had little need to provide the details of the flood and God’s intervention to his audience, for they knew the story.

In her study of performance indicators in medieval sermons, Valerie Berardini focused on the behaviors by which preachers ensured that their audiences attended to the sermons without confusing the preacher with other theatrical performers, such as actors or histriones, jongleurs, and buffoons. All public actors created themselves, then and now, as characters, often quite different from their real selves. Skilled medieval and Renaissance preachers might create themselves as well known personages, a common listener, a “stand-in” for a saint or even Christ, or other persona. The manuals, the artes praedicandi, were developed to improve preaching and increase attention to the sermon. These manuals also cautioned the preacher against becoming too theatrical. Preachers might, at times, step outside the sermon to address listeners directly in their own voices. Scribes occasionally noted such performance indicators, opening the
behavior of preachers to an analysis of self-fashioning. Documentation of preaching performance is sporadic, however, and only sometimes available.

Because Savonarola’s texts are plentiful, discourse analysis provides a number of approaches by which to study Savonarola. Brian Jeffrey Maxson’s network analysis of humanist leaders through the circulation of letters suggests that methodologies employing units of paired persons or events can be useful. Discourse analyses also frequently examine themes, metaphors, images, and other language elements. Studies of apocalyptic discourse and war discourse provide examples of this type of methodology. However, the theory of Teun A. van Dijk, *Social Discourse and Context Analysis*, provides a framework by which to examine texts as interactions between/among other speakers and listeners/responders and the “self” in the discourse. It also solves other problems of tying Savonarola’s sermons to their scriptural and social contexts. Thus it has been selected as the primary framework for this study.

Van Dijk maintained that there is text: the speaking and writing that signifies referents. There is also context: who is speaking, who is listening, and their roles relative to one another. He argued that any discourse was based on a “context model” and that his theory was useful in expanding the components of the discourse from the immediate speaker/listener pair to a larger pool of social contexts. These “context models” referred to “the interface between society, situation, and discourse.” An analysis could extend across temporal periods, for example, if a context model were constructed to include figures or conditions from periods other than the contemporary period. This might occur if a preacher called upon a shared context of current listeners with biblical events or texts.

Van Dijk further argued that the “Self” was “the central category of context models.” Regardless of other participants and the identities constructed for them, “context models are
crucially egocentric.” The “Self” governs the relationships “between Me (whether Speaker, Recipient or another participant role) and the other participants.” The “Self” also determines how “here,” the action, required knowledge, and goals are characterized. This supports an analysis focused primarily on Savonarola’s texts, rather than on texts about Savonarola by others. Yet the texts identified as Savonarolan frequently the work of recorders or followers who took notes during sermons. Like the prophets of the biblical books constructed by the Deuteronomic historians who authored them, the texts of Savonarola provide a representation that is a constructed but valid representation, given his corrections. The biblical prophets probably never saw how their writers presented them.

An analysis of a passage from Savonarola’s final sermon before his execution on May 23, 1498, illustrates the use of van Dijk’s context model in this study. The scribe Ser Violenza had “collected” the text of the sermon as he listened:

So, my citizens, you must lay down your life, your wealth, and everything else for the sake of this truth and be ready, like good Christians, to die for love of Christ. Women and children, you must be ready, when necessary, to die for the truth and for love of Christ. My brothers, I want us to lay down even our lives for this truth. My Lord, I turn to you: you died for the truth, and I am happy to die for truth: I offer myself in sacrifice to you: here I am; I am happy to die for you, and I pray fervently that I might never die for any other reason but to defend your truth, so that it be the salvation of your chosen ones and of this people. I pray you.

Savonarola’s rhetorical repetition of “lay down your life” immediately established a shared context with the audience of Christ’s sacrifice, but there is more. Savonarola had not preached since April 1497. He had been excommunicated by Pope Alexander VI and forbidden to preach. The various factions supporting, opposing, and lukewarm (the “tepedis”) to Savonarola were represented to varying extents on the governing council and Signoria. The makeup of these groups on the council changed at frequent intervals; so at various times,
favorable councils had encouraged Savonarola to preach. All of this would have been known by those who, although forbidden to listen to his sermons, attended this sermon. This is one example of a shared socio-cultural context by the listeners and the preacher.

The plea for his own execution was delivered to the whole audience, but particularly those who had the authority to make such a decision. It echoed Christ’s sacrifice: A lamb led to the slaughter, laying down his life for his people. Savonarola did not quote any of the gospels in his sermon; it was unnecessary, for this, too, was a shared context with his listeners. Savonarola echoed the themes of the Old Testament prophets in praying to God for the “salvation of your chosen ones and of this people.” Savonarola was an intermediary in this sermon: He instructed the people on their role to defend truth, dying if necessary; he intervened on their behalf with God and emulated Christ, offering himself for his people. Implied in the text is the infidelity that failure to defend truth would constitute, and the obedience that readiness to defend truth would represent.

In this passage, Savonarola also joined himself to his listeners as he told them they must also be ready to lay down their lives for the truth. Some in the audience may have recalled Christ’s arrest and trial before Pilate; some may have begun to move themselves across a temporal barrier to link themselves to those who witnessed Christ’s condemnation. There is no information on Berardini’s performance indicators, such as changes in voice or gestures that Savonarola may have used to emphasize his very last public words from the pulpit of the cathedral. A modern reader has to imagine Savonarola raising his eyes and hands heavenward as he prayed or possibly extending his arms in imitation of Christ crucified, with the notes of a diarist or scribe suggesting that Savonarola might have made such gestures. M. B. Pranger argued, based on the theory of Erich Auerbach, that preachers created *figura*, that is a preaching
persona through which they brought the audience with them into the sermon to “see” or make real those other characters about whom they preached.\textsuperscript{56}

With the term “discourse” understood to refer to “text and talk” both as produced by a speaker or writer and received/processed by the listener or reader dynamically and subject to updates as relevant context information became available, van Dijk argued that “contexts” were “mental models.” These were not “linear sequences of propositions” but representations of reality, constructed through individual and community experiences, linked to the participants in a discourse.\textsuperscript{57} An “event” occurred as participants discussed what they perceived to be happening, in the context of their earlier interpretations and those of others participating in the dialogue. “In this way,” van Dijk argued, “context models bec[a]me the crucial interface between [‘personally unique and subjective’] mental models of events” pulled from the memory of earlier events and community discourse about such events.\textsuperscript{58}

Throughout this study, this discourse methodology has been used to interpret Savonarola’s texts and support arguments on the development of Savonarola’s career as a prophet and his acceptance by the people. The sermons and other texts provided Savonarola’s “self” in relationship to his listeners; secondary sources provided social contexts for the content of his texts.

\textbf{Organization of Thesis}

The chapters of the thesis examine the reasons that Savonarola became a prophet and was accepted as one by significant groups in Florence and beyond. Chapter 2 argues that Ferrara, Rome and Florence created the conditions for the rise of Savonarola. The chapter examines the social and political conditions of the cities that had developed from the increasing wealth of the merchant economy, the troubled paths taken by the papacy, the challenges that humanism
brought to long standing religious traditions, and the increasing threat of war between and among the city states of Italy and emerging monarchies. This chapter examines the corruption of leaders that Savonarola witnessed and the rising demand for civil and Church reform by laity and ecclesiastics alike. The discussion relates the mythologies and Scriptural roles of Florence and Rome to Savonarola’s self-representation as a prophet.

Chapter 3 examines Savonarola’s piety, morality, and education for evidence of steps toward his prophetic career. The chapter argues that the sources of his early condemnation of corruption in the cities and his conviction of the need for reform were shaped by his childhood education on Scripture within the family. The discussion traces his more formal schooling in the Scholastic traditions, the subjects that formed the curricula for most schools and tutors, and his education in humanist philosophy and classical literature. The chapter examines his decision to pursue the Dominican order and their Scholasticism. The chapter argues that, in his Dominican studies, Savonarola would become deeply committed to the pastoral care of those over whom he was given charge. He would internalize the Dominican traditions, practices, and theology of his predecessors in creating the moral society through commitment to the common good.

Chapter 4 analyzes how Savonarola became a successful preacher, after early failure in Florence. The chapter examines the practices of notable preachers who were contemporaries and predecessors who served as models. The chapter also discussed Savonarola’s conviction that he had received a divine call to preach the need to reform. The chapter demonstrates how Savonarola forged a unique message in the fashion of the biblical prophets: the sinfulness of the Church and the city of Florence; the impending punishment by God for disobedience to his law; and the need for reform, especially for reform of the Church from within. The chapter documents Savonarola’s intense practice in preaching this message in northern Italian
communities. The chapter argues that he viewed his mission of reform in terms of the Old Testament prophets. When he was recalled to Florence in 1490, he arrived ready to preach repentance and reform in Florence.

Chapter 5 examines why many people of varied backgrounds accepted Savonarola as a prophet and how he was able to accomplish this acceptance. The chapter argues that, at a time when interest in and needs for the rise of a prophet were high, the content of Savonarola’s prophecies met the people’s expectations of the prophetic message. It further argues the rise in lay piety and disenchantment with the clergy correlated with increased demands for reform. The role of miracles in this acceptance and the shared social contexts of the Bible and mythologies of the city are discussed. The major argument advanced, however, to support why Savonarola was the prophet Florence, rather than some other preacher of the time, is that the people accepted his preaching from the pulpit, his rhetoric of self-representation as a prophet, his miracles, and his genuine concern with the people’s salvation as consistent with what a true prophet would be like.

Chapter 6 examines why Savonarola eventually lost his standing as a prophet and the role of the papal assault on Savonarola’s status as a prophet. His condemnation for heresy led directly to his execution by civil authorities. However, the chapter argues that Savonarola continued his self-representation as a prophet, by offering his martyrdom as contrition for his sins and his execution as evidence of God’s response to his prayer. Savonarola and many of his followers regarded his death, then, as God’s choice, rather than mere civil compliance with execution.

Chapter 7, the conclusion, returns to discourse analysis and summarizes the characteristics of Savonarola’s self representation to argue that it is fair to conclude that he modeled himself on biblical prophets. The conclusion summarizes the key findings from each
chapter: the historical and social background of the cities and countryside of northern Italy, Savonarola’s education and the scholastic and humanistic traditions imparted to him, the influence of his preparation as a Dominican, his early and later experiences as a preacher and his call to preach reform, and finally, his years as the prophet of Florence.
Endnotes


3 Donald Weinstein, Prophecy and Humanism in Late Fifteenth Century Florence: A Study in the Relations between Savonarola and the Florentine Humanists (Dissertation) (Ames: State University of Iowa, 1957), 131, 194-5.


8 Kocku von Stuckrad, Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2014), Chapter 2: 25-42. Von Struckrad argued that the medieval/Renaissance period did not follow a single Christian tradition, but was a diverse mix of neo-Platonic, hermetic, Kabbalistic, Christian, Islamic, Judaic discourse often with little uniformity within any one of these strands.


11 Abraham J. Heschel, The Prophets (New York: Harper Perennial/Modern Classics, 1962), 619-25. This is a simplistic statement about a relationship that has been profoundly characterized by Abraham Heschel as a mutual sharing of persons. See Heschel, “Conclusion,” 618-625.


26 Weinstein, *Prophecy and Humanism* (1957), ii-iii.


37 Surrency, 103-4.

38 Allison R. Nelson, _The Florentine Friar and his Female Followers: Savonarola and the cura monilium_ (Master’s Thesis) (Omaha: University of Nebraska, 2009), 3-4.


40 Allard (1997).

41 The political texts are relevant because Florence was to be the “new Jerusalem”; for Savonarola the governance of the city was directly tied to fulfilling his role as a prophet and he made no distinctions between political and religious goals. Religious goals were always the highest priority.

42 The most frequently cited source is _New American Bible_, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, rev. ed. (2010), as included in the _New Collegeville Bible Commentary_, Daniel Durkheim (Series Editor), (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, various dates/volumes). The commentaries provide clarifications and interpretations of scriptural passages.

43 The prophet referred to here is, in the Bible, known as Haggai, as is the biblical book. However, Savonarola’s sermons used the Latin “Aggeus” for Haggai. In this study, “Aggeus” followed by a number refers to a sermon and its position in the cycle, and Haggai refers to the prophet or the book of the Bible.

44 Allison Brown, “Introduction,” in Girolamo Savonarola, _Selected Writings_, xxv.

45 Allard, 50-54.

46 Valerie Berardini, “Discovering Performance Indicators in Late Medieval Sermons,” _Medieval Sermon Studies 54_ (1), 76.
Berardini, 81-84.

Brian Jeffrey Maxson, *The Humanist World of Renaissance Florence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Although there are some similarities with discourse analysis, Maxson did not characterize his methodology in this way. His is a network analysis. Had the information necessary for the analysis been consistently available, this methodology would have proven useful to this study.


Van Dijk, 2.

Van Dijk, 72.

Van Dijk, 181

Van Dijk, 76-77.


Van Dijk, 57-58.

Van Dijk, 59.
CHAPTER 2:

PROPHECY AND THE CONDITIONS OF

SOCIETY AND CITIES OF QUATTROCENTO ITALY (1425-1500)

Not a single righteous man is left; it behoves (sic.) us to learn from
babes and women of low estate, for in these only doth there yet linger
any shadow of innocence. The good are oppressed, and the people of
Italy become like unto the Egyptians who held God’s people in
bondage. But already famine, flood, pestilence, and many other signs
betoken future ills, and herald the wrath of God. Divide, O Lord,
divide once again the waters of the Red Sea, and let the impious perish
in the flood of Thy Wrath.¹

The perception that the hand of the divine was directly responsible for the hardships and
trials that befell humanity in fifteenth century Italy was reflected in this writing by Girolamo
Savonarola. At age 22 or 23, Savonarola wrote these lines in a treatise, entitled De Contemptu
Mundi, for his father. He had left the document behind in 1475 as he departed for the Dominican
monastery of San Domenico in Bologna, Italy. Drawing upon Old Testament images in his own
prophecies, Savonarola reflected the fifteenth-century fear and uncertainty of people who
believed that natural, political, and other disasters were divine punishments for sin.

This chapter seeks to locate and explain Savonarola’s prophecies in two ways. First, by
exploring the vibrant prophetic tradition that thrived in Savonarola’s Quattrocento Italy,
Savonarola’s prophecies are shown to belong to his own time. Secondly, examining the
immediate political society and religious context in Italy supported Savonarola’s belief that harsh
punishment from God was on its way. These two elements combined to lead Savonarola to
become a prophet.
The turbulence of the period was the context that drew audiences to prophetic discourse. Among the more important conditions were increasing warfare in Italy and the troubled paths taken by the papacy, ecclesiastics, and clergy of the Church. War between the city-states brought armies into direct contact with urban and rural populations, but within cities, factional violence was endemic. The changing role of the papacy that had recently returned to Rome from an absence of more than a century, along with its corruption and its failure to provide moral leadership to the clergy were contributors to heightened anxiety. Conflict was the internal and external cause and effect of a society whose institutions and leadership were in transition and incapable of alleviating that fear. New prophecies predicted new futures, and older prophecies were resurrected to fit new conditions. Marjorie Reeves observed, “Prophecies seem[ed] to be indestructible.” Establishing a connection between conditions of life of the cities and countryside and the rise of prophecy at this time is the task of this chapter.

Ottavia Niccoli has argued that for fifteenth-century people, prophecies might best be understood as tying natural events to religion and religion to politics. Because towns in Italy were saturated in Christian teaching and culture, prophets had no difficulty interpreting the meaning of famine, disease, and other disasters as punishments directed by divine will for the sins of leaders and individuals. There was no concept that events were the natural outcomes of ecological or biological systems. Even celestial phenomena required intelligent agents, such as angels, to direct them. Comets, planetary conjunctions and the like were believed to have been set in motion by divine plan. Rulers and leaders, even corrupt and evil ones, could be the agents of divine retribution and reformation, however unwilling and unlikely. The evidence of societal crisis was found in continual conflict and war and the call for the reform of the Church. However, underlying the external events, political leadership employed violence to achieve ends
and spiritual corruption of religious organizations from the highest to lowest levels of the Church showed that moral leadership was of little concern to the papacy. The different ways that Italian, and particularly Florentine, society and leaders, responded to these crises form the basis of this chapter and echo throughout the study of Savonarola’s prophetic career.

The chapter begins first by exploring the origins and understandings of the prophecies that circulated throughout the peninsula and Latin Christianity in the fifteenth century, for these were a common ground that linked the fifteenth-century present to the past and permitted a prophetic discourse between preacher and audience to occur. The prophecies are then examined for the modifications made to fit the conditions of the mid- to late-fifteenth century. Notably, the prophecies emphasized political events and leaders, but they were tied to religious belief. This discussion follows Amos Edelheit’s argument that politics and religion were not separate activities, but part of a single view of society. The failure of religious values to be expressed in political leadership produced a profound crisis during this period. This, in turn, led to a heightened demand for religious reform. The biblical prophets had, as spokespersons for God, challenged rulers to provide good government. They were a model for the convergence of political and religious functions. In the fifteenth century, however, disagreement on the manner of religious reform itself led to divergent and conflicting religious movements. Savonarola, who met the Old Testament prophets when he was a child, internalized the role of the prophet as God’s tool for reform and renovation.

The chapter also introduces the hinterland and the three cities that had great impact on Savonarola: the countryside of Tuscany and the Romagna where Savonarola carried out his mendicant preaching; Ferrara, the place of his birth and education; Rome, the head of Latin Christianity from which Savonarola initially sought moral reform; and Florence, the site of his
early preaching and prophetic career. These locations were rife with violence and religious trauma. The discussion of the countryside focuses on the prevalence of war and the resulting conditions for the people who lived in the hinterlands of the cities. The examination of Ferrara, the city of Savonarola’s birth, will focus on the imperial-papal factions, mercenary armies, symbolic warfare of the courts, and the role of the non-noble population in governance. The discussion of Rome, the center of Latin Christianity, examines the efforts of the papacy to assert territorial control over Rome and the Papal States and to finance military actions and administration of a global Church. This chapter outlines the consequences of a worldly papacy that had little regard for the pastoral duties of the Church. Finally, turning to Florence, the site of Savonarola’s prophetic mission, we will explore the lay response to Church failure.

**Origins and Understandings of Quattrocento Prophecy**

Historians have argued that prophets arose in periods when societies experienced heightened turbulence: “[W]hen societies or groups [were] under pressure of great change, the imagination [fed] again on crisis images from the past.”\(^7\) These crisis images applied not only to ancient prophecies, such as the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews to Babylon, but also created a readiness to accept, as well as to seek out, new prophecy. Mythology and Biblical teaching had for centuries rendered ancient cities as vivid, imagined places, no less real than the physical locations to which they were affixed, whether in scriptural or late medieval/Renaissance references.

The crusading efforts to wrest Jerusalem from Muslim control had by twelfth century generally failed, although calls for new crusades would continue for another century. With this failure to restore the historical Jerusalem to Christian control, the rise of a “new Jerusalem” as foretold in the scriptural book of *Revelation* became a focus for late medieval prophecy:
One of the seven angels who held the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come here. I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ He took me to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It gleamed with the splendor of God.  

The “new Jerusalem” was no longer a historical city in Judea, but another city whose identity became subject to prophecy.

The twelfth through fifteenth centuries in Italy and Europe in general witnessed the revitalization of interest in prophecies in various forms and traditions. These older prophecies were most often political, concerned with the destinies of leaders and cities and their interactions with God or the gods. The texts were found in collections from the early medieval period, such as the prophecies of Merlin. Other collections originally of ancient pagan origins, such as the Oracles of the Sibyls, contained remnants of early Christian prophecies believed to be revealed by God. The Judeo-Christian tradition of an end to earthly time based on the book of Revelation from the New Testament existed alongside venerable, non-canonical oracles.

Christians believed that the Apocalypse, the period that Revelation concerned, consisted of a single period of time, generally a thousand years, between the first and second coming of the Son of God. During this millennium, God would punish the transgressions of his chosen people but, pending their penance, he would also restore their relationship with Him. Finally earthly time would end and a heavenly city would appear. Yet in the twelfth through fifteenth centuries, this notion of a single apocalyptic period was changing. Some late medieval prophets began to conceive of multiple cycles of warning and restoration that would precede the arrival of an Antichrist and eventually bring an end to earthly time in some unknown future.

Two twelfth-century prophets in particular, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202), generated a vigorous revival of interest in apocalyptic prophecy.
The earlier prophet, Hildegard of Bingen, focused on the reform of a corrupt clergy and thereby established a preaching tradition of reformist apocalypticism. The other slightly later twelfth-century apocalyptic thinker was Joachim of Fiore who interpreted the thousand years of *Revelation* as periods of earthly, but sacred, history. His history of prophetic time would affect Christian thinking for the next several centuries.

By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the prediction of an exact date for the end of time, though frequently sought in the medieval period, was considered heresy by the Church and punishable as such. Except for the notion of several, repeating apocalyptic cycles, the model for Judeo-Christian prophecies of medieval time continued to reflect that of the early Christian period: transgression of the covenant with God by His chosen people, God’s warning by a prophet of imminent punishment, and the option for restoration of right relations with God through penance or reform. This was the model that Savonarola would follow in the fifteenth century.

Some medieval prophecies focused on a heavenly city, but other prophets considered the “new Jerusalem” to be an earthly city. More than one Italian city, specifically Rome and Florence, became candidates for this designation. By the late fifteenth century, Rome as a new Jerusalem offered a treasure trove of indulgences by which to alleviate the people’s anxiety over dying and the penance owed for their sins. Savonarola’s concern for Florence, on the other hand, was the creation and governance of a new earthly Jerusalem. The origin myths of both Rome and Florence tied these cities back to the founding of Rome by Aeneas. Rome’s greatness as the head of empire was supplemented by its position in the Catholic Church. Florence’s tie to Rome was by appropriation of the myth of Rome because it had been an outpost of the Roman
army. More of Florence’s early history has been uncovered through archeological digs, along with some Roman ruins, showing that:

the provincial town which arose on the north bank of the Arno, despite its name, Florentia, ‘the flourishing town’, was neither in the days of the Roman Republic nor in those of the Empire a large or exceptionally important place. . . . Yet in this small place, its streets neatly laid out at right angles to each other in the customary Roman way, there were, as in other towns of the Empire, baths and temples, a theatre, a Capitol and a Forum which occupied part of the present Piazza della Repubblica. . . . [A] leading churchman . . . had come to the town in 393 as an exile from Milan . . . [and] dedicated a small church . . . to San Lorenzo.13

Florence’s tie to Rome and its heritage was secure, although marked by other history after Rome’s fall.

Medieval prophecies concerned the destinies of kings, popes, and other leaders or figures central to the stability or volatility of the environment that people experienced. Different characters appeared in these traditions, such as the Antichrist, the Angelic Pope, the Last Emperor, the Second Charlemagne, and others.14 There were differing emphases in prophecy. Some focused on the means by which the divine message was communicated. For example, some were visionary because the prophet both received and communicated the divine message through visions or images. Or a tradition might reflect a particular message delivered by divine revelation. “Reformist apocalypticism,” a designation created by Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, was the explicitly prophetic visions and prophecies of a group of medieval writers who . . . spoke out against injustice and abuse, and envisioned reform. Such writers most often focused their indignation upon the clergy: as the spiritual leaven of all men, a faltering clergy imperiled the entire community; and thus the concentration of these prophetic writers on clerical chastisement and reform can be understood as a more central concern than at first it might seem.15

A late medieval prophet might model his own preaching and prophecy on attributes of a biblical prophet, or he might take on other attributes as appropriate to other conditions of the place or time, as did the sixteenth-century neo-Platonic prophet, Dominican Giordano Bruno.16 Thus a
relevant question in this study is whether a particular prophet selected a particular model to emulate.

Savonarola’s rise to prophetic status in the late fifteenth century was not unusual, nor was such a phenomenon unexpected in Italy. Many prophets operated in the cities and countryside in this period. For example, just prior to the date that Savonarola began his prophetic mission in Florence (c 1490), Giovanni Mercurio da Correggio represented himself as a prophet in Italy and France. He was a mendicant who travelled with his wife and five children. Modern scholarship has indicated that Mercurio visited Florence, Cesena, Lucca, Bologna, and Rome, the latter city several times. He preached before Pope Sixtus IV (1471-84), other members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and “a huge mass of people” on Palm Sunday, April 11, 1484. Mercurio was later “rebuked by Christian scholars” for his neo-Platonic preaching in Rome and Bologna and imprisoned in both cities.17

Mercurio da Correggio also appeared in Ferrara, where in 1486, he visited the court of Ercole I of the House of Este.18 The Italian Jew, Abraham Farissol (1452-c 1528), who was a scribe, cantor, educator, and author, wrote of Mercurio’s preaching at the duke’s court:

I myself saw in my time and in my town a man who was a great celebrity at the time, who used to go and preach and exhort in most of the gentile regions, and would exalt himself . . . by his wisdom . . . until he almost imagined his utterances to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, prophesying and interpreting the Torah. He called himself, Son of God, Mercurius Trismegistus, Enoch and Methuselah . . . . Their scholars, however, answered him sharply, as for instance in Rome, where he was cast into prison in my presence, as also in Bologna.19

Mercurio da Correggio was regarded as a charlatan, but his knowledge of Mercurius, or Hermes, Trismegistus came from contemporary sources. Mercurio’s follower, Ludovico Lazzarelli, had apparently provided Mercurio with a manuscript containing several of the great Florentine humanist Marsilio Ficino’s translations of Hermes’s ancient writings.20 The
authenticity of Lazzarelli’s translations cannot be assessed. However, Mercurio’s preaching made clear that the claim of the existence of an ancient Egyptian philosopher-king-theologian was known in northern Italy.21

Contemporaries believed that Hermes had lived at the time of Moses or earlier. While Augustine of Hippo (354-430 ce) contended that Hermes’ prophecies came from the devil, Ficino argued that Hermes Trismegistus was an ancient theologian, a prisci theologia, to whom God revealed special truths.22 Mercurio da Corregio, who modeled his beliefs on at least some neo-Platonic ideas and himself on Hermes Trismegistus, was probably well received at Ferrara’s court of Ercole I, a ruler with a reputation for “unusual interest in astrology, divination, and the miraculous.”23 Mercurio also entertained magical beliefs, the basis for an accusation of heresy against him. His subsequent imprisonment provided an example of the Church’s suspicion of magic and prophecy. Mercurio’s history illustrated how easily a self-proclaimed prophet might rise to the attention of people who sought political and religious security.

Select Prophecies from Medieval Manuscript Collections

Interest in the figure of Hermes Trismegistus was part of quattrocento Italian attention to a collection of ideas and figures related to prophecy and salvation history, including the Antichrist, a new heavenly city, and related beliefs. Fundamental to the context of prophecy for quattrocento Italy was the shared Judeo-Christian heritage of Scripture and its prophets: Moses and Christ, as well as Ezekiel, Daniel, Amos, and others.24 What was the understanding that the Italian people had of prophecies circulating just before and during Savonarola’s lifetime (1425-1500)? An answer may be found by considering the actual collections of prophecies circulating throughout the peninsula and much of the fifteenth-century western Christian world. In 1474,
the year before Savonarola left for San Domenico in Bologna to enter the Order of Preachers, a
group of Dominicans compiled a collection of prophecies
to strengthen men’s hearts against the menace of the Turks. It [was] based on the
famous pseudo-Methodian prophecy of the ultimate defeat of the infidel and
include[d] among its prophets Joachim, Cyril, Hildegard, Merlin, the Sibyl, and
St. Bridget. . . .

The Dominican commentary did not use oracles on the agents of the renovatio
[a period following the Antichrist of Revelation and the return of the Greek
Orthodox to Catholic Church] probably because of their reluctance to admit the
expectation of a French Second Charlemagne as victor over the Turk and their
inability to see [German emperor] Frederic III in this role. Some . . . saw [the
Second Charlemagne] as the symbol of evil; others following popular Sibylline
oracles . . . believed he would be the savior of Christendom; but our authors were
certain he was neither.25

Such compilations contained manuscripts from many sources and times. These were
physically bound together, irrespective of the variety of manuscript topics. Before mid-fifteenth
century these collections were copied by hand for generation after generation, accumulating
additions and omissions and modifying texts in other ways. These modifications were inherited
by printed texts. These collections increasingly interested both the clergy and laity.

A number of collections of prophecies compiled from eleventh century onward contained
listings somewhat similar to those in the 1474 Dominican collection, maintaining the currency of
these prophecies over time. In fourteenth-century Rome, for example, one collection contained
references to or texts of prophecies of the Cumaean and Erithraean Sibyls, the Oraculum Cyrilli,
and an exposition possibly by Joachim on Merlin’s prophecies on the popes, the Epistlae
Merlini. Another collection of the same century, but English in origin, contained prophecies of
the Sibyls, Methodius, Hildegard, Joachim’s work on prophecies attributed to Merlin about the
most recent five popes, the Antichrist and the end of the world, the Merlin prophecies on the
kings of England, and the Oraculum Cyrilli. A selection of prophets and prophecies known
widely in fifteenth-century Italy provides some insight into the prophetic content with which people were familiar at Savonarola’s time.

The *Sibylline Oracles*. Named for the sibyls, the prophetesses of Apollo, the *Sibelline Oracles* were manuscript collections of various prophecies of importance into the late fifteenth century. These ancient Roman ideas and the ancient biblical prophecies constituted the earliest prophecies considered here. The Sibyls in “fits of divine possession predicted the future.”

A number of sibyls, at least ten prophetesses of Apollo, were believed by medievalists to have dwelt at shrines throughout the ancient Mediterranean world. Some held that the Cumaean Sibyl was the daughter of Noah. The Tiburtine Sibyl, Albunea, had her shrine in the ancient Etruscan city of Tibur (today’s Tivoli). The shrine of the Erithraean Sibyl, Dodona, was in Asia Minor. The lists of prophecies attributed to the Sibyls were expanded from the ancient Roman era through the third-century Christian era. Some additions were even later:

[T]here was an older legend of a last golden age under a world emperor which had been crystallized in Byzantium and brought to the west in Sibylline oracles and prophecies attributed to Methodius. This legend proclaimed the coming of a mighty king to rescue Christendom just when tribulations were at their height. He would destroy or convert all the heathen and inaugurate an age of peace and plenty when men would eat, drink and be merry without fear or care. Finally however, this period of blessedness would be rudely shattered, the gates of the north would burst open and all the tribes shut in by Alexander sweep forth to burn and kill. The Emperor would go to Jerusalem to await the onslaught of Antichrist.

As the number of prophecies increased, the manuscripts were bound into books. According to Henk Jan de Jonge, at least eight books of prophecies were collected in the fifth or sixth century CE and this collection made up what was called the *Sibylline Oracles*. They contained material of pagan, Christian, and Hebrew origins. The prophecies were not organized in a particular structure and a wide variety of beliefs existed about the extent to which they came from a pre-Christian period. Jonge characterized the content as
predictions of political catastrophes and natural disasters that will strike various
regions of the Mediterranean. . . . predict[i]ons of political history from
Alexander to the Roman Empire. . . . prophecy of the incarnation and passion
of Christ, the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, the end of the world, the
Last Judgment, and divine vengeance on Rome . . . retrospective accounts of the
earliest history of the world: the creation, the Flood, the building and destruction
of the Tower of Babel, and the family history of the first generations on earth
from Ouranos and Gaia until the death of the Titans.29

Many prophesies of the Sibyls seemed to concern ancient revelations of a Christian
future to pagans, Hebrews, and to Christians themselves. Lactantius, an early fourth century
rhetorician and Christian convert, confirmed that the Sibyls, along with Plato, had some share of
a knowledge of God as creator. For example, the Sibyls “show . . . that the Highest Father will
send the Son of God to free the just from the hands of the wicked and destroy the unjust and their
cruel tyrants.”30 The Fathers of the Church spoke of the Sibyls as valid vehicles for revelation.
By about 1470, some believed that God had given all peoples some expectation of the coming of
his son, Jesus Christ. This fit into a belief in prisci theologiae, or ancient theologians. The belief
in ancient theologians was developed in the humanist theology of Marsilio Ficino in fifteenth-
century Florence, who referred to the Sibylline Oracles.31

There was also a connection between the sibyls and the Aeneid. The Aeneid was written
circa 29-19 BCE during the reign of the first Roman emperor Augustus. The Cumaean Sibyl had
her shrine in a cave south of the city of Rome. The poet Virgil, author of the Aeneid, gave the
sibyl’s name as “Deiphobe, daughter of Glaucus,” and she became Aeneas’s guide to finding his
father Anchises in the underworld. Aeneas followed her, “plung[ing] madly into [a] cavern’s
opening” and into the underworld where the prophecy of Rome’s future greatness was given to
him.32 The poet sought “to exalt the Empire, to provide a great national hero and a founder for
‘the race destined to hold the world beneath its rule.”33 It was the source of the mythology of
the city of Rome and its greatness. By association, Florentines adopted this prophecy of
greatness for their own city as well.

*Epistle of Merlin on the Popes.* There were a number of collections reported to contain
the prophecies of Merlin compiled or authored from the early twelfth to fourteenth centuries.
Merlin was a fifth-century English seer and companion to kings. Most of these early prophecies
were compiled and written by Geoffrey of Monmouth (1100-1155) and concerned the history of
the English kings and their emergence over the time of foreign invasions. The *Prophecies of
Merlin* written sometime before 1135 and seem not to be not readily available today, perhaps
because they became part of other documents. *The Life of Merlin* (c 1150) included some of the
earlier prophecies of Merlin.34 These prophecies concerned the kings and destiny of England, as
several contemporary studies demonstrated.35

There were also prophecies about five popes that were attributed to Merlin and reportedly
circulated by Abbot Joachim of Fiori. Historian Katelyn Mesler provided new research on these
prophecies. She found that the document known as the “Epistle of Merlin on the Popes” was a
Latin translation of a Greek manuscript in the latter thirteenth century. It appeared to have
circulated as part of pseudo-Joachimite collections and further represented only one track of
papal prophecies of the thirteenth century. It had high significance because of its clear
relationship to the prophecy of the Angelic Pope. As Mesner explained,

> Whereas many thirteenth-century hopes and fears of the future were expressed
through the medium of prophetic writings, these texts mainly emphasized the
influence of the emperor and other secular rulers on the future course of history . . .
. However, the election of the hermit Peter of Murrone as Pope Celestine V in 1294
offered unprecedented hope—especially among groups of Spiritual Franciscans—
that the papacy would become the vehicle of social, moral, and spiritual reform.36

The piety of Boniface VIII who had succeeded the pious Celestine V was not well
regarded, however, giving rise to a “prophetic narrative” that
the papacy first had to be usurped by one or more wicked popes before finally being restored by a particularly virtuous one. The latter would be no ordinary pretender to the throne of Peter. For he would be elected by divine providence and crowned by an angel. Thus originated the concept of the angel pope, the *pastor angelicus*, which was to remain a powerful image of dissent and reform in the following centuries.\(^{37}\)

The manuscript, the *Epistle of Merlin on the Popes*, that was circulated with the prophecies of Joachim and pseudo-Joachite documents, was the probable basis for Merlin’s papal prophecies listed in various collections of manuscripts.\(^{38}\)

*Pseudo-Methodius*. Methodius, or the seventh century tract known as *Pseudo Methodius*, foretold a final meeting of the Antichrist with a Last World Emperor.\(^{39}\) This prophecy also predicted the ultimate defeat of the infidel.\(^{40}\) *Pseudo Methodius* was disseminated at the court of Charlemagne in the eighth century. This prophecy held that, “When evil was at its height, there would arise from slumber a ‘rex Greaecorum sive Romanorum in furore magna’ [a great king of the Greeks or Romans]. He would subdue the Ishmaelites [Muslims] and inaugurate a reign of felicity.”\(^{41}\) This “great king” was modified, as the prophecy was disseminated, into a “Last World Emperor.” A hope arose among some that this would be a German Last World Emperor, and by others that this Last Emperor would be French. The prophecy of a Last World Emperor was quickly added to an older tradition of a role for the Greek Emperor Constans.

Then in the tenth century, the Abbot Adso of Burgundy worked out the timeline for the career of Revelation’s Antichrist, also including the Last World Emperor who would battle the Antichrist. Adso’s *Libellus de ortu et tempore Antichristi* became the standard source for this medieval expectation. The poet, Benzo of Alba, an Italian bishop (d. 1089), addressed a poem to the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV (1050-1106) that prophesied his role as Last World Emperor.\(^{42}\) At the time of the first Crusade in 1095, Ekkehard of Aura wrote in his *Chronicle* of the spread of a “fabulosum confictum” concerning the expected resurrection of Charlemagne.
The prophecy of a Last World Emperor, conflated with other prophecies, was disseminated through the fifteenth century, although the exact identity of the Last World Emperor changed with political conditions. At one point, it was thought that Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III (1415-1493) might be the prophesied figure.

*The Second Charlemagne prophecy.* The origins of the “Second Charlemagne” prophecy illustrate the likely origins of a prophecy in very early medieval times and the processes of tradition and modification of prophetic sources. In Christian tradition according to the book of Revelation (or Apocalypse), a millennium, a special thousand-year period, was to start upon completion of the first thousand years after Christ’s advent, or first coming. At the end of that prophesied Millennium, the world would end and Christ would come a second time to judge all people. However, that end would not occur peacefully, for a great battle between good and evil would take place. From the centuries-old classical, but Christianized, traditions of the Sibylline Oracles, came an expectation that the world would triumph over evil through divine intervention. Eventually, this intervention was attributed to a savior figure. Still later the prophecy pitted the evil Antichrist of Revelation in a final battle with this sibylline savior figure. The evolution of prophecies introduced inconsistencies that, themselves, spurred the creation of other prophecies.

*Hildegard of Bingen.* Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), the earliest acclaimed twelfth-century prophet, was in the reformist apocalyptic tradition. She was considered radical, a “function of [the apocalyptic writers who experienced] . . . growing disillusionment with the Church.” A widely distributed letter from Hildegard to Werner of Kircheim (nd), a deacon of a society of priests, described her preaching to this group (1170-71) and illustrated her radicalism:

In [a] vision she sees the kings of the earth participating with princes in the takeover of clerical wealth, but with a difference: the kings will do so out of greed . . . , while princes will ‘wish to show themselves obedient to God . . . ’ . . . After detailing the sins of those who have neglected their priestly duties, she quotes
Psalm 2: 1, 2 (“Why have the nations raged and the people devised vain things? The kings of the earth stood up and the princes met together”) . . . . As the vision ends Hildegard, referring to herself as a “paupercula feminea forma” [that is, the shape of a little woman] (a formula which she often uses to affirm her utter helplessness as recipient [not creator] of her visions), sees an extended sword hanging in the air with one edge turned toward Heaven, the other toward earth . . . . In making this bold biblical parallel between the destruction of Jerusalem after Christ’s Passion and the imminent cutting down of the clergy, Hildegard . . . saw the coming chastisement as a momentous event in Salvation History, one equal in importance to the events which closed the Old Testament era.

Hildegard was also regarded as a visionary prophet. Prophecy came to the prophets via many channels: direct divine implantation or enlightenment of the soul, through angels, dreams, objects (such as the “burning bush”), or other means, such as visions. The book of Ezekiel illustrated the importance of visions in scriptural literature. Hildegard’s prophecies were often “seemingly unpremeditated visionary imagery.” Three centuries later, in the 1490s, Savonarola’s self characterization, sword imagery, visionary dreams, and anger with the clergy took a form similar to Hildegard’s descriptions. Savonarola focused on the corruption of the clergy to which he specifically added the pope, head of western Christianity. Hildegard’s prophecies may or may not have been models for Savonarola’s preaching style, but given that her prophecies circulated in fifteenth-century Italy it is likely that Savonarola knew of them.

Joachim of Fiore’s Liber Concordiae Novae et Veteris Testamenti. Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202) was a Calabrian monk and scholar, whose focus was on the history of the end of time as prophesied in the scriptural book of Revelation. His Liber Concordiae aligned the Old and New Testaments with historical periods, or dispensations, of the world. St. Augustine of Hippo’s map of sacred time into seven ages, to mirror the seven days of creation, had pervaded the thinking of early medieval time. Joachim, by introducing a historical timeline for this sacred history, stimulated new interest in prophecy in the twelfth century, even more than the prophecies of Hildegard of Bingen. Joachim mapped out a history of the coming of salvation,
integrating many traditions originally from ancient and pagan sources into his work. Many of these had been Christianized prior to Joachim’s time. Although Joachim did not regard himself as a prophet, others did. He and his followers stimulated a demand for prophecies through the dissemination of their writings and the collections of prophecies from ancient and medieval periods. Many of Joachim’s original prophetic works were composed in the 1180s, and many pseudo-Joachimite prophecies were authored by his followers as extensions of Joachim’s model of sacred history.

**Prophecies of Bridget of Sweden.** Saint Bridget of Sweden (1301-1373) and her visions and prophecies became the focus of Franciscan and Dominican reformers, the observants, as they attempted to recapture and observe the ideals of their founders and the rules of their orders. Bridget was the spiritual daughter of the observant preacher, Dominican Giovanni Dominici, a model for Savonarola. Dominici was instrumental in the growth of Bridget’s cult in the late fourteenth through the fifteenth centuries and the founding of monasteries and convents in Florence, Pisa, and elsewhere. 

Bridget foresaw that “holy Charles the Great . . . would extinguish the Gallican fury.” Her *Revelations*, in which she wrote of her visions, was translated and circulated in illuminated manuscripts and print form in a dozen editions between 1478 and 1525. Into her prophecies were read the Italian wars of the 1490s and early 1500s, including the Sack of Rome in 1527.

Joachim of Fiori’s prophecies in twelfth-century Italy modified the timelines for the end time, but the prophecies of a second Charlemagne, a Last World Emperor, and other figures endured and were reinforced, as in the case of Bridget of Sweden. In 1445, Jean du Bois, a counselor to the French King Charles VII (1403-1461) and father of French King Charles VIII (1470-1498), presented “counsels and predictions” to the king and his court. He demonstrated
the applicability of the Second Charlemagne prophecy to Charles based on the circumstances surrounding Charles’s winning of the crown. Jean du Bois further prophesied that the year 1451 would witness a great triumph:

   [O]n Easter Day that year, guided by the Holy Spirit, the King would gather thirteen other Christian kings in Paris. There in the sight of the kings and all the people, and angel would descend to present to the King of France a shining sword and a ruby ring. . . . Charles would march into Italy, destroy Rome and another culpable but unnamed city, and be crowned by the Angelic Pope as Emperor, not only of France but also of Germany Rome, Greece, and Jerusalem."

This Second Charlemagne prophecy was to have a significant impact on the people of Florence when, in 1494, the French King Charles VIII and his army appeared outside the city. The prophet Savonarola would seemingly work a miracle by persuading Charles not to attack the city.

  This survey of overlapping and re-envisioned prophecies and figures demonstrates how complex, pervasive, and even contradictory the beliefs about prophecy were in the period of 1425 to 1500. Prophecies circulated for several hundred years and were in evidence throughout fifteenth-century Italy, demonstrating the close relationship of belief in prophecies to expectations about political events. Donald Weinstein described this environment as the “loam” or soil in which further prophecy grew:

  [I]n late fifteenth century Florence was seeded by anonymous and pseudonymous texts and prophecies, astrological predictions, poems, letters from Toledo, Bridget of Sweden and second Charlemagne prophecies and Sibylline pronouncements that circulated and even gained a new lease on life with the introduction of the printing press."

Reinforced by the shared Christian culture of the population, the rise of prophets was not unexpected. Particularly when threatened with violence or facing egregious economic conditions and corruptions, the people sought out every notable preacher for the characteristics that they expected to find in a true prophet.
Conditions of Violence and Moral Corruption in Cities and Countryside

Many conditions—economic, social, and religious—combined to emphasize fear and uncertainty in quattrocento Italy. Exploitation of the countryside by city-states and larger cities through heavy taxation and demand for resources threatened many peasants with starvation. War was endemic in Italy, affecting the entire population, both in cities and the countryside. War meant destruction of the land, slaughter of livestock, and sometimes worse. Mercenaries on horseback, armed to kill, were sometimes on the doorstep of villages and cities, and the people’s taxes were raised to support them. When these armies were not engaged in war, they were pillaging the countryside. Crime, criminals, and their punishment provided another aspect of violence.\textsuperscript{50}

The cities were judged to be morally corrupt. At the end of the papal residence in Avignon, Pope Gregory XI in 1376 had condemned usury and sodomy in Florence, a charge that “stuck” through several centuries. Sodomy was “abominable” and afflicted many Italian cities. Notably, Gregory XI did not add other corruptions within the papacy and ecclesiastical hierarchy to his list, such as simony, nepotism, and buying and selling of indulgences, or the Church’s failure to perform its primary pastoral duties of preaching, confessing, and providing other sacraments to the people.\textsuperscript{51} In a 1420 sermon, Bernardino of Siena said that all of Italy was “so defiled that it could be considered the ‘mother’ of sodomy.”\textsuperscript{52}

The contemporary cities, countryside, and Church were the classrooms in which Savonarola learned about governance and the impact of rule on the people. From his immersion in scriptural studies as a child, Savonarola learned about the military leaders and kings of ancient Israel, but he learned about the vices and vanities of fifteenth-century courts and the church from the observations and commentary of his grandfather who spent time at the court of Ferrara and,
as he grew, from his direct witness of the public life of the cities and conduct of the courts. By his early twenties, Savonarola, as reflected in the opening passage of the chapter, found little to commend the behavior of this world and was ready to abandon it for a life of meditation and prayer. His superiors determined that Savonarola’s talents would not be hidden away, but the young man’s assessment of the world continued to dominate his thinking.

**The Countryside of Tuscany**

Italy retained the heritage of Roman organization of the territory into provinces. There was, by fifteenth century, however, no administrative function for provinces. By this time, a long history of invasions and conquests had passed and five major city-states had emerged. The “countryside” was outside the boundaries or gates of these city states. Fifteenth-century Italy was populated by hundreds of small communities. Some were nearer to the larger cities and city-states. They may have performed some administrative and military functions, such as supplying the military. There were also distant communities more independent of the cities. All these communities were susceptible to becoming the object of acquisition or exploitation and witnessed violence of various sorts.

Some communities were simply locations where a local population congregated to trade. “The quality of everyday life,” according to John Larner, “was characterized by the [population’s] strongest predilection to violence.” The Romagna, a province that contained the Papal States, had more small marketplaces than cities, but had no organized law enforcement. Breaking the law here was “not so much city crime as the overspill of rural violence, and political disorder within the towns was often merely the reflection of feuds between landowners.” Even estates headed by a noble, powerful head of a family, or papal vicar appointed by the pope had conflicts with neighboring estates. In the 1420s and 1430s the papacy
struggled to restore order to the Papal States, an order that the popes had lost during their absence from Rome for more than a century.

The communities in the countryside of Florence bore a combination of heavy taxation and depleted resources that forced many people to relocate to Florence itself. However, Florence was no respite for the impoverished country-folk, . . . as increased migration into the city caused real wages to sink and pauperism and crime to rise, deepening the antagonism between rich and poor. As early as the thirteenth century, Florentine hospitals and charitable foundations swelled with the impoverished and destitute. Even the richer members of rural society began to migrate to the city, unimpressed with the heightened tax demands upon them as a result of depopulation.\footnote{55}

The records of Florence’s tax rolls of 1427 portrayed “rural misery, instability and insecurity in the countryside close to Florence,” with many close to starvation and only charity keeping them alive. The populated land farther from the cities often fared better in resources because of the distance from the main population center even though the people there may have faced even higher taxes than in communities closer to the cities. If pressured too heavily by conditions, some peasants emigrated to the Romagna from Tuscany.\footnote{56}

Formal warfare produced much of the fear and uncertainty that the population experienced. The countryside and its communities formed the prize for successful warfare. By increasing territory, feudal nobles, papal vicars, Roman barons, and other powerful heads of families increased their power, wealth, and security. So did the rulers of the great city-states of Rome, Florence, Naples, Milan and Venice —whether dukes, princes, \textit{signore}, or popes. From 1423 to 1454, Venice and Milan were at war over the succession to Milan, involving Florence. In 1454, the city-states signed the Peace of Lodi to end this ongoing war. The treaty was largely successful until the death of its main advocate, Lorenzo de’ Medici, in 1492.
From 1482 to 1484, Venice and Ferrara warred over the salt works at Commacchio, a war that involved Forli and Imola in the Romagna and Imola’s ruler, the nephew of Sixtus IV. This war nearly bankrupted the Estensi of Ferrara. The war also affected Savonarola, resulting in his exile in Florence rather than returning him to Ferrara at the conclusion of his novitiate. His sense of being an exile made an impact on him that he reflected in his sermons. The 1494 start of the Great Italian Wars that involved France, Naples, the Papal States, and Venice, also proved critical to Savonarola’s career path. These states warred with each other over territory for the next half century (1494-1559).

In the Po valley, and elsewhere, the territories were dominated by powerful lords of castles, sometimes known as castellani, castellans. Leading figures among the most powerful clans in the first half of the fifteenth century might still aspire to become lords not just of castles but of cities. . . [The marquis of Ferrara or other powerful leaders] would not have been prepared to tolerate their realization. But the princes could not prevent these clans from retaining great influence in the cities.

Many of the most powerful nobles had their own fortified castles and militia in the countryside. They drew recruits and resources from the surrounding areas. For many men outside major cities, mercenary service offered to a powerful leader or feudal lord provided a livelihood.

Although the Peace of Lodi may have reduced war between the great city-states, the status of any ruler could be challenged by other “noble power in the countryside.” Ferrara, for example, was a prominent, but smaller city, compared to Milan, Rome, or Florence. Both an imperial fief and a papal estate, Ferrara was subject to both pope and the Holy Roman Emperor, although some feudal customs, such as oaths of fealty binding nobles to a lord by personal loyalty, had been replaced there. When Ferrara sought to expand its territory, its targets were the independent lands or cities ruled by other nobles who also held their lands as grants from Roman times, Holy Roman emperors, or as papal estates. This often required control by a larger militia,
and by the fifteenth century a system of contracts for mutual defense was common. By the 1450s, the House of Este had lost and then regained the cities over which it asserted control. The Este rulers also remained wary of papal attempts to regain control of Ferrara, and popes often hired mercenary armies to establish control over the countryside.

The system of mutual defense contracts established a patronage system by which the armies of client nobles fought for the patron. Mercenary armies were formed, paid, and led by *condottieri*, or military commanders. The contracts created an on-demand military service. Upon expiration of the contract, a new contract might be entered into, including one with a former enemy. The contracts named the clients, or “*raccomandati*,” for whom the patron accepted responsibility and defined the privileges to be provided by the patron in exchange for military service. The *raccomandati*, who “might be major signori or minor rural nobles, formed a special political and diplomatic category, neither subjects nor allies, but semi-independent ‘satellite’ nobles from both within and outside the territories of the state of which they became clients.”

There were benefits and costs to the peasant population, for these military forces provided greater security in the countryside, such as safer travel and trade. Overall there was less warfare among nobles within a patronage relationship. However, there was also constant exploitation of the countryside for resources.

The mercenary contracts provided the revenue by which *condottieri* gathered, trained, and paid their own soldiers. This also transferred much wealth into the hands of mercenary leaders, making the most wealthy of them capable of pursuing their own territories, as did Francesco Sforza of Milan. This also transferred power from the patron to the *condottieri*. Rome, which during the century of papal absence (1309-1420) had no such contracts, was at the mercy of marauding strongmen and their followers, the barons. The barons extended their
control of the countryside and brought factional violence into the city of Rome, controlling
certain sections of the city.\textsuperscript{63} The client-patron system helped control local war. However, states
and cities preferred the protection gained through marital alliances, including fewer revolts
among potential successors.\textsuperscript{64}

**Cities and City-States in Central and Northern Italy**

Three cities were important to Savonarola’s career path as a prophet: Ferrara, the place
of his birth and education from 1452-75; Rome, the residence of the pope, head of Latin
Christianity; and Florence, the city to which the Dominican order assigned him (1481-1487 and
1490-98) and that Savonarola chose to construct as the “new Jerusalem” of the book of
Revelation. Our discussion of each city further defines an aspect of warfare, corruption in the
Church, or issues of governance that formed Savonarola’s views on governance and his rise to
prophetic status.

*Ferrara: Feudal Nobility, Factions, and the Role of the Court.* Ferrara provides a focal
city through which to examine military contracts, patronage, and the function of rulers’ courts in
more detail. Ferrara was part of the Papal States and subject to the pope. It was also a *principate*
in the Holy Roman Empire, subject to the emperor. As such, Ferrara had to balance its loyalties
to both the papacy and the Empire in order to maintain peace. The Estes, the rulers of Ferrara,
had arrived at their position of rule through the military action of the feudal nobility. In the tenth
century, Ferrara had become a self-governing commune. The city was then occupied in 988 by
the House of Canossa and Matilde of Tuscany, a Guelph supporter. After Matilde’s death in
1115, the Guelph family of Adelardi and the Ghibelline family of Salinguerra fought for control
of Ferrara. By marriage into the Salinguerra family in 1184, the House of Este claimed the rule
of Ferrara. Ferrara was extended to nearby fiefs by the military efforts of its feudal lords. Early
in the thirteenth century, the pope transferred the rule of Ferrara, but not its territory, to the House of Este. Estensi rule was uncontested after 1240.

The internal governance of Ferrara was by a communal council, but the authority over the territory was assumed by the lord, the Marquis of Este. Ferrara remained a Ghibelline, not a Guelph, city and it had loyalties to both emperor and the pope. Niccolo III d’Este (1383-1441) held the title “Marquis”, as did his son and successor, Lionello (1407-1450). In 1452, Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III raised Lionello’s successor, Marquis Borso (1413-1470), to the status of Duke Borso I over the fiefs held by Ferrara—Modena, Reggio, and Rovigo. It was Pope Paul II, however, who appointed Borso as Duke of Ferrara in 1471. Although the size of the Este holdings around the city of Ferrara was sufficient to secure its position by its own feudal militia, the province was also populated by many other nobles totally independent of the Estensi. Through their militia, these nobles had the means of controlling access to roads and rivers and intimidating tenants on land of owners who lived in the city. The Este’s client-patron relationship with these nobles placed the forces of the client nobles at the disposal of the Estensi in exchange for political and court privileges. These mutual defense agreements reduced “the ragged wars of petty skirmishing that often continued between major campaigns.”

In Ferrara, Borso’s reputation “was mainly acquired by the luxury of his Court and the perpetual festivities with which he entertained his people.” Court festivities were part of the patronage privileges provided to nobles for their service. In the year of Savonarola’s birth, Borso welcomed the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III with “ten successive days [of] . . . tournaments, banquets, concerts, and balls,” all to be repeated upon the emperor’s return from Rome and the elevation of the Marquis to the title of Duke Borso I. In 1459, the new pope, Pius II, visited Ferrara. By this time, Girolamo was old enough to have witnessed the pageantry. The
festivities, Pasquale Villari stated, were more magnificent than in 1452. Upon the pope’s next visit to Ferrara in 1460, the duke met him in “a magnificent barge,” with other boats flying banners and providing music. Savonarola probably viewed the city’s ruler “attired in cloth of gold and . . . loaded with jewels . . . attended by the nobles of Ferrara.” Duke Borso I was also a humanist, who decorated Ferrara for this visit with classical figures from Rome. As a seven- or eight-year old, Savonarola would have seen evidence that “[p]aganism invaded the land”: The statuary at the entry gate that welcomed the pope into Ferrara featured pagan gods and goddesses. Savonarola’s grandfather critiqued the vanity of the court, Savonarola had direct evidence of his references.

Hereditary rule contributed to stability, but did not eliminate internal struggles among contending successors. Succession wars, when they occurred, were potential sources of bloodshed within cities and states: “[I]t was common practice for estates to be governed by groups of lords—by two or more brothers, by uncles and nephews, by a clutch of cousins,” rather than single individuals. Unlike other houses, the Estensi followed fraternal succession, in which brothers, both legitimate and illegitimate, succeeded to the throne before a son. Niccolo III was said to have had 300 illegitimate children. Borso remained celibate, but there was a bloody struggle after his death. Borso’s half brother, Ercole I, slaughtered the supporters of his rival, Niccolo. Ercole then changed the Estensi succession practice by prohibiting illegitimate heirs from the line of succession. This particular violent succession occurred immediately before Savonarola departed from Ferrara to pursue a Dominican career. We do not know, however, whether the succession violence affected Savonarola’s plan to escape the secular world.
There were, of course, as in all cities past and present, instances of “sanctioned violence,” the punishments for crimes that occurred with sufficient frequency to warrant arrest and imprisonment, sometimes the death penalty. The most frequently cited crimes in Ferrara prosecuted by the Podesta, included theft, homicide, counterfeiting, rape, sodomy, arson, and other miscellaneous crimes. Importantly, violent crime in the city was associated with outside political efforts. At some point between his childhood and adolescence (perhaps 1460-66), Savonarola became aware of the dungeons of torture beneath the ducal palace. The dungeons were “full of immured victims, and the clanking of chains[,] and groans of human beings in pain could be heard from their depths, mingling with the strains of music and ceaseless revelry.”

Among the prison’s residents were those guilty of political crimes: treason and conspiracy. In 1476, Niccolo’ di Leonello d’Este attempted a coup, for which 27 men received the death penalty. In 1482, the year that war with Venice broke out, Ercole I had 18 men executed for political crimes (espionage, sedition, and arson). It was feared that mercenaries from other states had established bases of operation in Ferrara. In spite of these types of violence, Ferrara was generally stable, as Nicolo Machiavelli confirmed in *The Prince*:

> We have in Italy, for example, the Duke of Ferrara, who could not have withstood the attacks of the Venetians in [14]84, nor those of Pope Julius in [15]10, unless he had been long established in his dominions. For the hereditary prince has less cause and less necessity to offend; hence it happens that he will be more loved; and unless extraordinary vices cause him to be hated, it is reasonable to expect that his subjects will be naturally well disposed towards him.

Fulfilling patronage obligations, a major function of the Este court, fostered peace. The Dukes of Ferrara also gave protection to exiles from Florence and elsewhere at their court, as well as ceremonially celebrated new marital alliances.

The House of Este competed to make itself “magnificent,” fashioning the ruler’s public realm to compete with the courts of other states. This required lavish spending on external
aspects of the city, its auditory/listening culture and “visual outward splendour.” Both client nobles and the population of Ferrara were entertained. “Magnificence” was a form of symbolic warfare. The city-states strove from the early fifteenth century onward to establish urban identities that distinguished them from villages and country sides. Educational and public improvements were part of the city environment and also a form of competition with other city states. The Marquis Leonello had re-established the University of Ferrara in 1442. The marquises and, after 1452, the dukes also supported charitable institutions and public improvements, such as road building, extending the walls of the city, and constructing public buildings (the castle, city hall, and the cathedral). Attracting popular preachers to Este would have been part of providing patronage.

There was a cost to the people for this symbolic warfare. To the costs of the Venetian War of 1482-84 that emptied the Estensi treasury were added “a thriving contraband market and the rising consumptive demands of the court.” Close to bankruptcy, the treasury officials “resort[ed] to prayer for financial deliverance.” The impending extravagance of the planned 1491 marriage between Prince Alfonso and Anna Sforza exacerbated the problem. The duke imposed taxes on the people and they revolted.

In summary, court competition was an alternative to the violence of warfare. It included theatrical and musical entertainments and the city’s annual carnival. The court entertainment fulfilled converging motivations: fulfilling patronage obligations; welcoming Italian, European, and Byzantine notables to the court; extending protection to political exiles; and attracting revenues through the spending of pilgrims or tourists. There was a cost, however, as the revolt of the population against taxes revealed. This raised the question of whether the Ferrarese could affect warfare, violence due to succession, or patronage.
Internally, Ferrara’s council had no relationship to the court and the real authority over the territory was in the hands of the signore or lord, the Marquis of Este, who was himself a feudal lord. Ferrara up to the time of the mid- to late 1400s had no institutions that voiced the wishes of the Ferrarese populi or legislated in their favor. Popular support did not keep the Este in power, nor did the population moderate the warfare of the period. Rather, the nobles were the true support for the Estensi. There was little room for civilian dissent, if there was any. Rather than elected by a ruling council, the prince became a hereditary ruler. Rome’s relinquishment of its communal authority to the pope provides another perspective on the rights of city populations during this period.

Rome: Corruption of the Church. Rome was caput mundi of Latin Christianity. In the twelfth century, the spiritual leadership of the Church was uncontested, but complaints that its hierarchy and clergy were corrupt had been common themes, emerging most energetically as the crusading period waned. Hildegard of Bingen had charged the clergy were failing in their pastoral duties. The failure to observe the apostolic life through the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience was regarded as a serious deficiency. This resulted in the repeated call for reform of the clergy and ecclesiastical hierarchy. By the fifteenth century, the laity was developing its own agenda for piety and sought the guidance of prophets. The pontiffs were held responsible to lead reform, although there was disagreement as to the form that reform should take.

The condemnation of the corruption of the Roman curia was heard in fifteenth-century sermons preached before the pontiffs. For preachers, “Rome” meant something even more immediate and important than the great universal institution of antiquity. Rome was the city—the city in which they lived and, in most cases, the city they had adopted. . . . The preachers at the court appropriated and promoted the mystique of Rome that [Pomponio Leto’s 1483 celebration of Rome’s legendary founding—Rome’s birthday] . . . suggested.
The pope was both spiritual leader of the Church and temporal lord as well. He also had responsibility for the governance of Rome. Rome itself had been, like Ferrara, a self-governing commune under guild leadership in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Although the commune had emerged in an ad hoc fashion, by the fourteenth century “communes like Rome were clearly defined jurisdictional entities that claimed sovereignty for themselves.”

The guilds included large-scale agriculturalists (the *bacarri* who raised beef and the *porcari* who raised swine), and merchants and bankers. The population of the city—those with wealth and status and the “little people”—had a culture, argued James A. Palmer, that was “disciplined,” that is, made up of obedient subjects of the Church, even though its hierarchy in the fourteenth and early fifteenth century no longer resided in the city. Some of the city’s residents had been pilgrims; some could trace their history in Rome for centuries.

Outside the city, powerful families and their heads, the “barons,” ruled the countryside. The most powerful barons came from the Colonna, Orsini, and a few other families. A period of civil wars followed in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The communal government provided some leadership, but had little power to control the violence of the barons. The city became more dangerous, and in 1309, the papacy, under Pope Clement V (1264-1314), relocated to Avignon, a city in southern France, and abandoned the city to the barons. Clement also removed the *curia*—the papal court and administration of the Church—to Avignon. The popes’ first absence from Rome, the Babylonian Captivity, occurred between 1309 to 1378. During this time, “a succession of papal legates, local barons, foreign *condittieri* [military leaders with armies for hire], and short-term republican regimes ruled Rome.”

During the papal absence and a period of plague, the population of Rome decreased by nearly half. There was reduced employment in construction, banking, and administration, transportation, and trade.
The violence of the baronial families and chaotic rule led to a coup and seizure of government by Cola Di Rienza that began in 1347. Cola was a notary and the son of an innkeeper and a laundress, and he had support from a number of groups. The coup was built on a remaining heritage of Livy’s Rome and Christian saints and popes. The people’s support for Cola was based on a view of Rome as a city of God. Cola attempted to lay “the groundwork for [a] new buona stato, a just and holy society that would remake Rome and return it to its rightful place at the center of world affairs.” The short-lived revolution led by Cola da Rienza failed. A republic appears to have been the goal of only a part of the population, for others hoped that the papacy would return to Rome. The papacy’s return to Rome after its residency in Avignon required securing a physical location for the papacy. This led, at least in part, to the Church’s secular world view and the many corruptions that occurred.

During the absence of the popes from Rome in the fourteenth century, the communal government had been evolving into an oligarchy of merchant and banking families, and the baronial families began to integrate with leading merchants and bankers into a ruling class. This class was more effective for the barons in their exercise of power in both the city and the surrounding territory. The oligarchy, with these baronial leaders, governed the city collectively. The hope for a return of the papacy was not dead, however. In 1370, the transfer, or translatio, of the relics of the apostles Peter and Paul from the Chapel of San Lorenzo in the Basilica to Rome’s Sancta Sanctorum occurred with all dignities present except representatives of the guild. Symbolically, this represented “the transition of Rome from communal to papal government.”

The oligarchy chose not to contest papal authority when, in 1377, Pope Boniface IX (Pietro Tomacelli, 1350-1404) claimed ruling authority over the city. However, the planned return of the pope to Rome was delayed almost immediately by a rebellion among the cardinals.
Two, sometimes three factions, convened to elect one or more “antipopes.” There had, as yet, been no legal action by the communal government itself relative to papal control of Rome. This would change in 1398 when control of the commune was ceded to Boniface IX, one of three claimants to the papal throne. Current research on Rome’s governance reveals that Rome’s governing class did not passively lose its liberty to an unstoppable papacy in 1398; it deliberately chose . . . its political destiny. Boniface IX’s domination of the commune was enabled in large part by shifts in local political culture and in the character of Roman political society that were already underway . . . . Members of the Roman ruling class understood themselves as citizens of the civic society of the commune but also as part of their city’s broader political society, one inclusive of Rome’s many foreigners, pilgrims, and others.96

The city of Rome now had its monarch.

The Great Schism that followed the attempted 1378 return from Avignon “[a]lmost at once . . . fouled the image of the leading clergy in the fourteenth century.”97 The concurrent election of two, sometimes three, popes between 1378 and 1417 destroyed the popes’ longstanding “political control over central Italy, first to the mercenary companies, then [later] to the territorial aggrandizement of Gian Galeazzo Visconti of Milan followed by Ladislas of Naples.”98 During the continued absence of a pontiff in Rome, various powerful leaders carved out territories in the papal states as well as in Rome itself. Agreement on a single pope as head of the Church finally occurred in 1417 at the Council of Constance (1414-18) that deposed the existing popes and stated that a general council was a lawful assembly that represented the universal Church and held its power directly from Christ; everyone in the church, therefore, had to obey the general council, including the pope. . . . The Church, in other words, was no longer a papal monarchy; its head was the general council, of which the pope was the chief officer.99

The newly elected pope, Martin V (Odone Colonna, r. 1417-31) from the leading baronial family of Rome, would not return to Rome until about 1420, with the decree on the authority of councils
further diminishing his papal authority. Martin faced global and local challenges in 1420. He began the renovation of Rome’s buildings and infrastructure consistent with the power and glory of the head of the Church and inheritor of imperial history.

Re-establishing papal control over the governance of Rome and the Papal States was urgent to demonstrate universal papal authority over the temporal realm. Martin’s Venetian successor, Eugenius IV (Gabriele Condulmer, r. 1431-47), spent little time in Rome. A war broke out in the city, and a popular rebellion in Rome continued to delay the placement of a legitimate pope in the city. Although some pontiffs during this period sought to be valid spiritual leaders, competing temporal responsibilities made this difficult. The temptations for popes to aggrandize themselves led to practices that disgusted the laity and some clergy alike.

The Renaissance successors of Martin and Eugenius portrayed their monarchical status through the grandeur of their vestments, the liturgy, and court life that mirrored their concept of what Rome should represent worldwide to all people. Pope Leo the Great (Leo I, r. 440-61) had viewed Rome as the see of Peter and head of the world, and fifteenth-century preachers in Rome followed his vision: In effect, “[i]f ‘public men’ and leaders in society have a special obligation to be an example to others and to be a ‘mirror’ of the virtues, the obligation of the ‘Roman Church’ was similar.” Yet the preachers to the fifteenth-century papal court openly condemned corruption. During a funeral oration, eulogist Niccolo Capranica bluntly stated to an audience that included the pope that the now deceased Greek scholar and cardinal, Bessarion (1403-72), “hated men who were lazy and pursued a life of piggish sensuality the likes of which ‘the Roman Curia is full.’” The words of another preacher, Guillaume Peres, “to the cardinals about to elect a successor to Sixtus are extraordinarily straightforward about the corruption in the Curia” and the necessity for the new pope to eradicate it. Baptista
Mantuatus, preacher at the court of Pope Innocent VIII, “excoriated the luxury and display of high churchmen. These prelates, dressed in purple, own more gold and silver vessels in their private collections than do the basilicas of God and his saints.”

These popes of the fifteenth century had a different “job” than in previous centuries: reclaiming and protecting Rome, controlling and ruling the papal states, governing and administering the Church, and spiritually leading the universal Church. To have a secure territorial base, the pope had “to reaffirm his control” of Rome and the Papal States through “concessions, political manipulations, and the force of arms.” The popes had to generate revenues to pay for the Curia and military arms. Income to the city from pilgrims was no longer sufficient for re-building the city of Rome as the worthy capitol of the Latin Christian empire and its ancient imperial origins.

There had been a dramatic growth of the Curia in Avignon. Upon the return to Rome, the curia further increased during Eugenius IV’s papacy to 150 members and to about 600 members in Alexander VI’s papacy. The administrative functions of the curia in Rome involved every aspect of papal life: “Rome was the place where appointments to ecclesiastical office were made, legal disputes argued, cases of conscience resolved, and spiritual favors gained.” The opportunities for corrupt practices grew as did the size of papal administration itself. While there had always been fees for administrative services, a new papal office, the Datary, centralized the process of charging fees and receiving payments for appointments, dispensations, indulgences, and all other transactions. This centralization included administering benefices that had previously been handled by the local bishops. The dispensations permitted “pluralism, non-residency, or occupying ‘incompatible’ benefices.” There were still some appointments made
by bishops, but many positions were now reserved for the papacy to confer. There seemed an
unlimited number of opportunities to assess another fee here or there.

Nicholas V (Tommaso Parentucelli, r. 1447-55) was considered the first Renaissance
pope and was also pope when Savonarola was born. The period through 1431 had damaged the
spiritual and moral leadership of the Church. The popes who followed Nicholas sought to
expand their political control over Italian territories by means of mercenary armies. Machiavelli
said the popes “meddled” in Italian politics. In re-establishing control over Rome, the citizens
of Rome lost many republican traditions, and communities in the papal states were embroiled in
wars over the next 50 or more years. This was the same Rome that had been rivaled only by
Jerusalem for its spiritual significance.

Among the seven Renaissance pontiffs who reigned during Savonarola’s life, two were
more influential than the others in Savonarola’s career path: Sixtus IV (Francesco della Rovere,
r. 1471-84) and Alexander VI (Roderigo Borgia, r. 1492-1503). Sixtus disappointed
Savonarola, for he did not take up the reform movement. In 1472, Savonarola, at that time a
young man of 23, wrote his canzone, On the Ruin of the World. A few agonized lines convey his
views of Rome, the holy city of the Christian world, and its pope.

[Verse]

[Rome] is crawling on the ground,
And never will return to its great office.
Those times once chaste and pious are long past.
... [Usury] is now called philosophy
All men now turn their backs on doing good.

This described the world, as the young Girolamo Savonarola experienced it. The papacy was in
“pirate hands” (line 19), a reference to recently elected Pope Sixtus IV Della Rovere. Then
Savonarola said:

Saint Peter is laid low; Here lustfulness and every prey abounds,
And I know not why heaven is not baffled” (lines 20-21).
Savonarola, through his verse, asked,

Do you not see that satyr gone quite mad,
How full of pride he is, a font of vices/
That makes my heart consume itself with scorn?” (lines 23-25).

The satyr referred to Cardinal Pietro Riario, “the young and dissolute nephew (some say son) of Pope Sixtus IV Della Rovere.” Although the thieves “who rob from widows and swaddling babes” (line 36) were not identified, nor the bishop, “the debauched effeminate panderer” (lines 26-7), or the men whom “the world esteems” but whose books and papers are “replete with swindles” (lines 42-3), Savonarola’s audience would have understood the references. It is clear that the young Savonarola had heard a great deal about the papacy and its corruption: “This was a man [Sixtus IV] of whom it was said that he ‘elevated nepotism into a political principle.’ . . .” Several years later, Sixtus undertook to establish control over the Papal States. He entered into a plot to assassinate the sons of Piero de’ Medici, Lorenzo and Giuliano. This Pazzi Conspiracy was successful in murdering Giuliano in the cathedral of Florence.

Alexander VI was most often castigated for corruption. He had fathered at least ten children who could be identified. There were rumors of incest with his daughter Lucrezia preceding “renewing” her virginity by papal bull at least three times. Canon law prohibited a pope from establishing a dynasty, yet placing his son Cesare and other children in estates attained by military conquest of this former papal territory suggested dynastic ambitions. Public criticism also included failure to live a pious life and financial wrongs, pointing to Alexander’s simony in purchasing the papacy. It would be Alexander VI who excommunicated Savonarola in 1497 in an episode that preceded Savonarola’s execution for heresy. For now, it is sufficient to say that Rome was violent and the Church was corrupt. That
corruption touched the rest of the Church and the people directly and Savonarola responded as a prophet to the corruption.

Florence: Growing Diversity in Christian Thought. Florence was a republic in the early fifteenth century, along with three sister republics: Venice, Siena, and Lucca. In the fourteenth century, men who did not have roles in governance earlier because they held no property or business interests “challenged governments” for a role in government and in economic policy making. In Florence, the Ciompi revolt of 1378 demonstrated a significant difference from Rome’s popular response to Cola da Rienzo’s attempt to overthrow the government of in 1347:

The wave of proletarian agitation in Florence . . . was connected in part with the sharp civil discontent over a war between Florence and the papacy (1375-78). . . . The immediate causes of revolution stemmed from conspiracies, from the flaring up of open political discussion among all social groups from several weeks of escalating violence, and from rising bread prices. . . . [P]olitical power suddenly came within the grasp of more obscure levels of the population . . . the petty capitalists and entrepreneurs of the wool industry—dyers, carders, shearmers, tenders [, the small-time employers of labor . . . [and] newly enfranchised citizens . . . in the new guilds.

The Ciompi Revolt reflected “an explosion of discontent by unorganized clothworkers, [that] brought to a head the tension between the poor and the oligarchs.” The Ciompi government lasted five and one-half weeks, but demonstrated an openness to political debate that did not seem to characterize either the Roman population of 1347 or Ferrara’s tax rebellion of the 1480s. This may have reflected freedom from the feudal nobility that in Florence, unlike Ferrara and Rome, had been excluded from the Florentine government in its 1293 communal ordinances. Republicanism “called not only for a populous enough bourgeoisie but also for a weak or defeated nobility, or for one transformed.”

Wealth and mercenary armies determined the security and expansion of a city. The Italian city states were motivated to extend their authority over nearby magnates and surrounding
A small state like Florence without its own army was constantly concerned with self-defense, as well as territorial expansion. Siena and Lucca, Florence’s republican Tuscan neighbors, were territories that Florence sought to control. By the early Quattrocento (1420s and 1430s), Florence had been involved in two wars, having contracted for mercenary armies in both cases. The earlier war (1422-1427) was between Visconti’s Milan and Venice, with which Florence was allied. The later war (c 1430s) was with Lucca, a city that Florence sought to subjugate to its rule. Cosimo de’ Medici (Cosimo the Elder, 1389-1464) had been exiled over payment for mercenary forces: “[T]he virulent civil discord regarding payment for the wars . . . ‘pushe[d]’ Cosimo de’ Medici to the brink of being executed and in the end force[d] him to take exile as a bargain.”

Florence, upon the return of Cosimo from exile in 1434, came under Cosimo’s hidden rule, and his relationship to the militia of Francesco Sforza illustrated the power he held. Although a council might contract for the military services of a mercenary captain, so could a wealthy individual citizen with a faction behind him. The individual could turn his own government to a position favorable to his interests and could use a mercenary army to engage the state in foreign wars beneficial to the interests of his faction. This is what Cosimo did. He exerted power through bribery and manipulation of election lists for office, excluding non-Medicean partisans. Cosimo’s move to a shadow rule involved contracting with Milan’s Francesco Sforza for mercenary arms to carry out expansion of territory. Machiavelli argued that internal dissension and wealth were corruptors of the “domestic space” of the city and directly reflected external warfare.

Piero de’ Medici (1416-69) ruled for only five years, following Cosimo the Elder’s death in 1464. By 1470, Cosimo’s grandson, Lorenzo de’ Medici (Lorenzo the Magnificent, 1449-92),
ruled over the “veiled signorial government” of Florence.\textsuperscript{127} Then in 1471 Pope Sixtus IV named his nephew, Piero Riario, a cardinal, and in 1473 appointed him Archbishop of Florence, placing him squarely in Lorenzo’s view. The pope also attempted to purchase the Milanese territory of Imola for Girolamo, his probable son, with a loan from the Medici bank. These actions threatened Florence, and when Lorenzo hesitated to lend the money, Sixtus moved the papal account to the rival Pazzi bank. Francesco de’ Pazzi formed a conspiracy to murder Lorenzo and his brother Giuliano with the consent of Pope Sixtus IV. On April 26, 1478, the plot was carried out. Lorenzo survived, but Giuliano did not.\textsuperscript{128} The aftermath had many consequences including a war in 1480 with the Pazzi and the papacy. Lorenzo and the whole of Florence were excommunicated by the pope.

A most relevant result for understanding the relationship of the poor of Florence to Medici rule is narrated by Paul Strathern: Several days after vengeance had been taken on Jacopa De’ Pazzi, the main conspirator, his remains were desecrated by a Florentine mob:

\begin{quote}
[W]hat was the real reason for the extreme feelings that surfaced here? This grotesque sequence of events seems indicative of the seething tensions that lay beneath the surface of everyday life in Florence. Here was an occurrence in which eventually more than just a ‘throng of boys’ could legitimately vent their pent-up anger; on this occasion the despised ‘snivellers’ were able to get away with expressing their deepest feelings for their would-be rulers.\textsuperscript{129}
\end{quote}

The “jeering, vicious ridicule and execration” were not accompanied by any “cheers for the Medici . . . or shouts for the proud victors.”\textsuperscript{130} There was support for the Medici, but not, it appears, for the ambitions of the Medici ruler to move his family from the banking and merchant class to the nobility.

This popular response confirmed that even at lower economic ranks, political action, if guided and organized, might be sustained, unlike the five-and-a-half week commitment of the followers of Cola da Rienzo in Rome or the tax revolt in Ferrara. Savonarola’s later agenda of a
“new Jerusalem” depended on such a popular response that would declare Christ as the king of Florence. It also depended on a commitment to a republic, a Florentine tradition at least since Leonardo Bruni had been head of the Florentine chancery (1427-44): A free people was necessary to protect Florence against its enemies. Further, a part of this tradition had emerged in Florence in 1341 when the Florentines had listened to the warning of Giano della Bella about tyrants and overcame the domination of the city by the Duke of Athens. Florence repeated this rejection of a tyrant in 1409 when King Ladislaus of Naples attempted to subjugate the city in 1409. These were all part of Florence’s republican tradition. However, to accept a portrait of Florence as a republic would be to ignore many conflicting aspects of what it meant to govern in late fifteenth-century Florence.

A Spiritual Crisis with Political and Cultural Dimensions

The overwhelming convergence of war and violence spoke to the manner in which leaders of emerging monarchies and principalities sought power and territorial dominance over the people. The loss of meaning in the ceremonial aspects of religion pointed to the failure of spiritual leadership. Taken together the conditions described in this chapter have been characterized as a “spiritual crisis” by historians, especially as the fifteenth century reached its halfway point, and the sense of crisis was growing among the people. This crisis may have affected Ferrara and Rome, but it is Florence that is central to our contextualization of Savonarola’s development and activities as a prophet.

The description of this crisis echoes the discussion at the beginning of the chapter, but the focus here is religious reform rather than the appearance of prophets. One symptom of this spiritual crisis was a widespread feeling that the tensions among the Italian city-states and their leaders pervaded every aspect of life. There was, in addition, “a dissatisfaction [among many
people] with institutional ceremonies and a deep need for a new approach to religion which could re-establish the relations between the human and the divine differently from technical scholastic theology.”

Then there was the threat of invasion by the Turks. This was widely viewed as punishment for the recent sins of Christendom—the papal schism and Babylonian Captivity. To this list might be added the response to the call for reform of all things religious—the Church, the papacy, the mendicant orders, and overall social and economic relations. For the call for reform itself led to disagreement and conflict. In essence, the crisis represented a loss of harmony between politics and religion. Political action no longer reflected spiritual and religious motivations. Even within the Dominican Order the conflict over reform was evident, dividing the brothers from different convents and creating serious questions about the governance of the Order. How could Dominicans reform themselves when they were themselves in a state of conflict?

Santa Maria Novella was a Dominica house in Florence with a longer history and “intellectually more distinguished” than San Marco. Because the rule of the house was more relaxed than in houses that observed stricter interpretation of the vow of poverty, the convent attracted more novices than did San Marco. In the 1460s, the prior of Santa Maria was Giovanni Caroli (1428-1503); he was also the master general of the Dominican Order and a distinguished theologian. Although Dominicans Antonino Pierozzi (1389-1459) and Giovanni Dominici (1356-1419) were noted Dominican reformers earlier in fifteenth century, it was Caroli who brought the crisis over reform into the Dominican house in the later fifteenth century.

Caroli would later publicly criticize Savonarola during the early days of his Florentine mission, but on the matter of the independence of the decision making of the convent,
Savonarola appears to have agreed with Caroli. Caroli believed that the ancient republican model should be used for the governance of Dominicans, and in particular that the authority for reform action should belong to the convent itself, not to any district or regional authority.

Whatever reform actions were taken should respect “juridical autonomy and specific tradition of the convent.” Marziale Auribelli, the general superior of the Dominican order with whom Caroli differed, sought uniform reform across the order imposed from the top. The conflict came to a head in April 1460, and Caroli was exiled to Lucca.136

A critical aspect of this disagreement was Caroli’s formulation of the concept of “heroic disobedience.” This placed the crux of the problem not in the condition of the Church or mendicant order and not in the need for reform itself. The crux of the problem was now in the obligation to obey or not to obey a superior who was wrong and forms a direct link to Savonarola’s 1497 response to the pope’s excommunication: “Obedience, the highest vow in monastic life, was now identified with a tyrant, Marziale Auribelli, and therefore had to be discarded.”137 This dissent among Dominicans fed Savonarola’s passion for reform.

Not only was the authority of superiors in the mendicant orders being called into question, the spiritual crisis also led to challenges of scholasticism, the method by which the Church developed its theology. The theology of the day was dominated by scholasticism and the foundations of reasoning found in Aristotle. It had come under criticism for several failures in the fifteenth century. First, theology had not provided a resolution for the papal schism. Secondly, theology had built-in internal contradictions as the works of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church proliferated, and these contradictions were maintained as dogma. Further, the increasing secular and political orientation of the Church was by ritual observances that were no longer tied to spiritual meaning. Savonarola would grapple with Scholasticism as well, not
abandoning its role in theology but leaving aside the complex reasoning in favor of straightforward preaching.

The call for reform, thus, was broad-based, not limited to a single aspect of belief. For example, Christian humanists, led by priest and physician Marsilio Ficino (1433-99), also called for reform. Ficino’s notions of reform were, however, directed at Catholicism itself, not simply its institutions or rituals. Ficino considered the pagan ancients to have had ancient theologians, *prisci theologiae*, to whom God had made special revelation. His *De Christiana religio* attempted a reconciliation of Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophy with Christian belief into a new humanist theology. For Ficino, “theology proper should be founded on ‘moments of revelation’ . . . [that is] prophecies and miracles as in the Scriptures.”

Although brief, this look at Florence parallels the portraits of Ferrara and Rome by considering the conditions and governance of these cities that Savonarola experienced and that informed and modified his Aristotelian notions of politics. Attention has also been given to the people’s probable interpretation of events. In the discussion of Florence, Caroli’s republicanism was described, including its oligarchic form. In the 1490s, Savonarola’s republicanism advocated a much larger participation of the people in governance than did Caroli.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that prophecy in the fifteenth century and Savonarola’s development as a prophet reflected the religious and political context of the latter half of the fifteenth century. Prophecy was understood in terms of biblical history: The chosen people of God, in this case the Florentines and northern Italians, had sinned and earned God’s punishment. However, if the people repented, their harmony with God could be restored. The warfare and
violence in Italy confirmed that God was punishing the population for their sins, but remained a merciful God.

The chapter established the domination of city states and smaller communities by war and the individual loss that such violence wrought on the people. Further, the continued violence increased the sense of fear and uncertainty of the period, driving the Italians to examine prophecies. The most common collections of prophecies were reviewed to show what people understood and expected to occur in their futures. The existence of manuscripts that recounted the prophecies of centuries fed the interest of fifteenth-century Italians to know more. The review of specific prophecies demonstrated the sometimes contradictory expectations of people about prophecies, the reasons for these contradictions, and efforts to resolve the contradictions.

Most prophecies concerned the political leaders of the people. The role of prophecy in allaying the fears of the people established the reason for the revitalization of interest in ancient and medieval prophets and prophecies. The process by which older prophecies were modified to fit more current circumstances illustrated how prophecies remained current. The chapter argued that the appearance of preachers who were acclaimed as prophets, like Mercurio Corregio, fit popular expectations that the fifteenth century remained a time of prophecy and a time when God intervened directly in the history of Christians. The expectation of a Second Charlemagne and other figures like an Angelic Pope and a Last World Emperor were means by which older prophecies were updated.

The connection of the “present” time to the biblical time of the book of Revelation was examined and role of historical city Jerusalem was related to the prophecy of a “new” Jerusalem, a city that might yet come to pass. The familiarity of the audience with the biblical prophets and their stories enabled preachers and those who would be prophets to maintain a belief in
prophecy. The concern with a corrupt clergy appeared in prophecies of earlier centuries, but the
disappointment of people with their own priests and their failure to provide spiritual counsel
fueled continued search for prophets and the willingness of audiences to respond to prophets in
their midst.

The cities and countryside provided the places and times of war where the failure of the
Church to provide pastoral care actually occurred. Each of the cities that played a central role in
Savonarola’s life was examined. Ferrara, the city of Savonarola’s birth, was examined for its
role in military alliances to expand territory and establish successors on the throne. The role of
the court as an alternative to warfare was explained. Savonarola’s childhood experiences were
discussed as they related to his later prophetic career. The role of Rome as seat of the Church
and its conflicts between spiritual and secular responsibilities explained the origins of the
corruption that the people experienced. The hinterlands provided the locations where Savonarola
learned to preach, and Florence was described as the city where he exercised his prophetic
career.

The experiences of violent invasions into cities and the marauding of the countryside by
mercenaries were increasingly familiar as the timeline moved from mid- to later fifteenth
century. The moral authority of the Church, already weakened by the Babylonian Captivity and
the Papal Schism of late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, decreased still further as the
popes became more politically active and worldly in their performance of the role as head of
Christianity. While the courts of the Este of Ferrara and the Medici of Florence were introducing
new ideas about human identity and destiny, rulers still chastised the Church for its failure to
care for the people. The pope, on the other hand, withdrew his presence from the life of people
into the Vatican itself.
These conditions, given the deepening level of piety of the population, readied the population to both look for and find prophets in their midst, and Savonarola, who was also a child of his time, likewise accepted his time as still one in which God sent prophets among the people. The chapter ends by considering the challenge that reform, particularly of the Church, presented to Italy. First, the call for Church reform was at least a century in the making. A number of high-ranking prelates had called for the popes to begin reform from within the Church. However, what became apparent was that the choice to firm up a temporal kingdom after the Babylonian Captivity and the schism of the Church took precedence, leaving the care of the laity to founder or find alternative ways to be satisfied. Second, even the mendicant orders were unable to respond to the call for reform. They faced internal conflicts over how to proceed and the choice of authority to act. Third, consensus on the basis for theology and the type of Christianity that different groups desired was no longer as uniform as it had once been.

Savonarola not only grew up in a time that confronted these conditions, he was about to forge his prophetic career. The remaining chapters explain how he accomplished this.
Endnotes


4 Reeves, The Influence of Prophecy, 341.


6 Amos Edelheit, Ficino, Pico and Savonarola: The Evolution of Humanist Theology 1461/2-1498 (Boston/EBSCO: Brill, 2008). See the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2 particularly for the religious crisis and Chapters 3 to 5 for their responses to the need for religious reform and the roles of Marsilio Ficino and Savonarola in promoting reform.

7 Norman Cohn, Pursuit of the Millenium, cited in Reeves, The Influence, “Preface to New Edition,” vii. Cohn, in his 1970 revised edition, described a terrifying and destructive account of “central phantasy (sic.) of revolutionary eschatology. The world is dominated by an evil, tyrannous power of boundless destructiveness—a power moreover which is imagined not as simply human but as demonic. The tyranny of that power will become more and more outrageous, the sufferings of its victims more and more intolerable—until suddenly the hour will strike when the Saints of God are able to rise up and overthrow it.” To the extent that this view of the prophecy of Revelation held the medieval mind of the fifteenth century, the population would find their existence always potentially terrifying. It is unlikely that this level of terror existed by Savonarola’s time, but fear of the end of time was part of the religious environment. See Norman Cohn, Pursuit of the Millenium: Revolutionary and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages (Revised and expanded edition). New York: Oxford University Press, 1970, 21.


9 Edelheit, Ficino, Pico and Savonarola, 138.


14 Reeves, Joachim of Fiore, see for example, Chapters 1-2.


17 David B. Ruderman, “Giovanni Mercurio da Correggio’s Appearance in Italy as Seen through the Eyes of an Italian Jew,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 28(3) (Autumn 1975), 310-11. The details cited by Rudeman on Mercurio’s travels were in an appendix to an article authored by Paul Oskar Kristeller. Eugenio Garin wrote of Mecurio’s appearance in Florence. Ruderman cited other sources on Mercurio as well.

18 Ruderman, “Giovanni Mercurio,” Bibliography.


21 There is no question that Cosimo de’ Medici had procured the Greek manuscripts purported to be written by the ancient Hermes and then commissioned Marsilio Ficino, then a young philosopher and later the greatest philosopher of Florence, to translate them. The translations were intended to honor Cosimo, his patron, and present Cosimo “as a new Trismegistus who excelled for ‘sapientia’, ‘pietas’ and ‘potentia’.” See Campanelli, 58, 63.

22 Campanelli, “Marsilio Ficino,” 54, 57.


24 The specific secondary sources for the present study did not generally discuss prophecy outside the Judeo-Christian and pagan heritage, but Muslims, as a people of the Book, shared some common heritage and Mohammed was considered a prophet who received direct revelation from God.


29 De Jonge, “The Sibyls,” 7. Apparently no complete copy of the original Oracles exists, nor does an English translation of extant books exist. See footnote 2, p. 7. However, a complete set of Books I-VIII was published in 1545 in Greek.


Geoffrey Monmouth, *The Life of Merlin: Vita Merlini* (English and Latin translations by Monmouth; c 1150), (Columbia, SC: ReadaClassic.com, 2011). Monmouth also authored *The History of Merlin and King Arthur* and *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*). Google Books, the source of this historiography, indicated that many of the prophecies of Merlin were integrated into the *Historia*. The preferred source, *Propetiae Merlini* (*Prophecies of Merlin*), was written before 1135 but was not available for use in this study. However, the few citations from *Life of Merlin* are assumed to reflect the prophecies of the kings.


Because the historiography of the “Epistle” is complex, the reader is referred directly to Mesler’s research paper cited in fn 34.

Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy*, 299-300.

See Note 15 above.

Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy*, 300.

Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy*, 301.

Kerby-Fulton, 43.

See Thomas of Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 2II

Kerby-Fulton, 35.


Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy*, 342.

Another critic in the post-Savonarolan period, Machiavelli, on the other hand, focused on political corruption at the governance level for the condition of the cities. He argued that the failure to govern and violence resulted from the “corrupt system of foreign affairs,” the destruction of the nobility, and the rise of the mercenary states. See Christopher Lynch, “Machiavelli on War and Foreign Affairs,” The Review of Politics 74(1) (Winter 2012), 3-4.


Christine Shaw, Barons and Castellans: The Military Nobility of Renaissance Italy (Leiden/EBSCO: Brill, 2015), 4.


The popes were absent from Rome during the “Babylonian Captivity” in Avignon from 1309 to 1377 and again in several periods between 1378 to 1417. During the latter period, the popes attempted to re-establish their control over Rome.

Jane Fair Bestor, “Bastardy and Legitimacy in the Formation of a Regional State in Italy: The Estensi Succession,” Comparative Studies in Society and History 38(3) (July 1996), 549-85. The succession in Ferrara did not follow a strictly patriarchal model, with succession often following the sons of the most recent ruler and when those were exhausted going to the elder son of the previous duke, that is, the eldest brother. In spite of the general pattern in Italy and elsewhere of eligibility for rule requiring legitimate birth, Ferraran dukes were often illegitimate.
The Pope noted this, but apparently had not the power to do much about the situation when the concern was primarily for a stable succession which would guarantee the ability of Ferrara to avoid war with its neighbors.


67 Villari, Life, 8.

68 Villari, Life, 9-11. Villari gave Savonarola’s age at eight when Pius was welcomed into Ferrara the first time.

69 Villari, Life, 9.

70 Shaw, Barons and Castellans, 14.


72 Bestor, “Bastardy and Legitimacy,” 573-75.

73 Gundersheimer, “Crime and Punishment,” 114, 119. Specifics of crime included cases of theft during a homicide and armed robbery. Witchcraft and heresy were not among these high frequency crimes, and the numbers punished for sodomy did not compare to the instances in Florence. Execution was generally by hanging, except in cases of homicide, extreme sexual offenses, and armed robbery for which burning and decapitation were performed. The punishment of a perpetrator illustrated an extreme crime: “. . . [I]n October of 1486, a Ferrarese citizen was dragged through the city, then decapitated, quartered, and displayed for having killed two German students.”

74 Villari, Life, 11, 13.


76 Niccolo Machiavelli, The Prince, trans. with footnotes W.K. Marriott (2015), 4. (Beyond the copyright date by Marriott, only the city and date of printing are given: Middletown, DE, 01 October 1918.)

77 Lisa Di Crescenzo, “‘Leaving hell and arriving in paradise’: Between Victimhood and Agency in the Exilic Experience of Luisa Donati Strozzi (1434-1510),” Parergon 34(2) (2017), 102-4. Di Crescenzo presented outcomes of the patron-client relationship: “Luisa’s court appointment imbued her position in the family with a symbolic capital and practical power that could be converted into tangible outcomes for the benefit of her sons. . . .” Luisa was appointed to be governess of the granddaughters of the Duchess. She gained a voice that saved her son, Roberto, at a time of war. See 125-6, 129. See also Brown, “The Reception of Anna Sforza,” 231-2.

78 Villari, Life, 7.

79 Peter Howard, “Preaching Magnificence in Renaissance Florence,” Renaissance Quarterly 61(2) (Summer 2008), 326.

80 See the 1293 Ordinances of Justice, the constitution of the Florentine commune until the establishment of the Republic in 1494. See “Ordinances of Justice of Florence (1295)” at http://www2.iodehist.uu.se.
81 Brown, “The Reception of Anna Sforza,” 231.

82 Grendler, “Ferrara” and “Princes and Princedoms,” 80-1, 214-5.


85 Grendler, “Princes and Princedoms,” 214.


93 Palmer, The Virtue of Economy, 30,

94 Lauro Martines, Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1988), 130. Martines stated that a commune generally “faced such grave internal and external problems that it had to alter its constitution to survive as a small state. In all cases the choice for the commune seems to have been either to put itself under one-man rule, under one family in hereditary succession, or to narrow the ranks of the political citizens.” In Rome, the integration of the barons modified the government for a period, as the guilds decreased in importance, but ultimately Rome chose “one-man rule” under the pope.

95 Palmer, The Virtues of Economy, 33-4.


101 O’Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 211.

102 O’Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 212.

103 O’Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 213.


105 Stinger, *The Renaissance in Rome*, 123.

106 Stinger, *The Renaissance in Rome*, 123.


110 Kenneth R. Bartlett, *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance* (North York: University of Toronto Press, 2013), xxi. The complete list of pontiffs from Nicholas V to Alexander VI is: Nicholas VI (Tommaso Parentucelli, r. 1447-55), Calixtus III (Alfonso Borgia, r. 1455-58), Pius II (Enea Silvio Piccolomini, r. 1458-64), Paul II (Pietro Barbo, r. 1464-71), Sixtus IV (Francesco della Rovere, r. 1471-84), Innocent VIII (Giovanni Battista Cibo, r. 1484-92), and Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia, r. 1492-1503).


115 Agnes Mate, “The Life and Afterlife of Pontifical Indiscretions in the Renaissance,” in *Premodern Rulership and Contemporary Political Power: The King’s Body Never Dies* (Amsterdam/EBSCO: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 193,

116 Mate, “The Life and Afterlife,” 196.

117 Mate, “The Life and Afterlife,” 197, 206.

118 Martines, *Power and Imagination*, 133.
The wealth from Italian rulers over time gradually transferred to the hands of condottieri, making Italy “a playing field for the ambitions—petty and otherwise—of mercenary captains.” After his return from exile in 1434, Cosimo, who assumed a behind-the-scenes control of Florence, went in times of military need to Milan’s mercenary captain, Francesco Sforza, to contract for his services. Cosimo paid the mercenary leader and his armies from his own funds to do his bidding. Francesco Sforza, through a fortuitous marriage, maneuvered himself into the ruling position of Milan and kept himself in power with his soldiers. Francesco was in the pay of Cosimo during some of this time. He had promised Cosimo the one thing that would distinguish Cosimo’s rule of Florence from others, expansion into territory beyond Florence, specifically the subjugation of Lucca, a prize that had eluded Florence in its earlier war. Francesco chose not to fulfill this promise, leaving Cosimo without “any glorious acquisition outside of Florence” and “the anguished dupe of Francesco Sforza.” Ironically, it was Francesco’s descendant, Ludovico Sforza, who called in the French in 1494. At that time, the Medici lost power in Florence.

125 Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 125.

126 Lynch, “Machiavelli on War and Foreign Affairs,” See full article.


131 Aldo H. Collura, *The Concept of History As It Developed from the Medieval Chronicles to the Florentine Histories of Renaissance Writers*. Dissertation. (New Brunswick: Rutgers-The State University of New Jersey, 1992), 92-6, 97. Florence had had experience with tyrants, first as subjects of the emperor King Frederick until in 1250 they elected twelve citizens as signori. They lost their republic to Frederik’s son Manfred in 1260 in the Battle of Arbia.


133 Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*.


Joachim believed that the combination of religion and worldly wisdom personified by pagan figures like Hermes and Orpheus, and in sacred history like Melchizedek, Moses and by Christ Himself, was necessary in his own time for reconnecting religion and politics. The philosopher, Pico della Mirandola (1463–94), made a significant effort to bring pagan and Christian thought into a single universal religion. Into this already complex environment came exiles from Constantinople, arriving in Italy after the Turks defeated the eastern imperial city in 1453. These brought threats of invasion from the East. Along with exiles came unfamiliar ideas and new manuscripts that circulated widely, including neo-platonic writings that included works attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, about whom Mercurio had preached in Ferrara.
CHAPTER 3: EDUCATION AND THE EARLY FASHIONING OF GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA

On the Feast of St. John the Baptist, April 24, 1475, Girolamo Savonarola left his father's house in Ferrara to pursue his vocation as a Dominican priest. He travelled to the convent of San Domenico in Bologna. After arriving, he wrote a letter to his father dated April 25, 1475, to explain his departure:

With this letter I want you to understand my state of mind and my desires so that you may be comforted and understand that my action is not as juvenile as other people think. . . . First, the reason why I entered into a religious order is this: . . . the great misery of the world, the wickedness of men, the rapes, the adulteries, the thefts, the pride, the idolatry, the vile curses, for the world had come to such a state that one can no longer find anyone who does good; so much so that many times every day I would sing this verse with tears in my eyes: Alas, flee from cruel lands, flee from the shores of the greedy. I did this because I could not stand the great wickedness of the blind people of Italy especially when I saw the virtue had been completely cast down and vice raised up.¹

Girolamo Savonarola was twenty-three years old. This letter and three other writings were the means by which he represented himself and his views as he concluded his lay life to pursue the vocation of a Dominican preacher. The other writings were De ruina mundi (“On the ruin of the world,” 1472), De contemptu mundi (“On contempt for the world,” 1475), and De ruina ecclesiae (“On the ruin of the Church,” 1475).² How do these writings reflect his studies up to this moment in 1475 and compare to his intensive Dominican preparatory studies that followed until 1481 when he began his preaching ministry?³ Chapter 3 asks the question, What
was the role of Girolamo Savonarola’s biblical, scholastic, humanist, and Dominican education in preparing him for his eventual self-representation as the prophet of Florence?

Although secondary sources occasionally referred to other texts written by Savonarola during this period, the references were neither specific nor available as English translations. These four writings, then, are the basis for analyzing how Savonarola developed and adapted his learning to his career from about 1466 to 1481. They provide a means by which to work back to the readings that shaped his views. To address Savonarola’s education, this chapter focuses on the curricula of the humanist school of Battista Guarino in Ferrara in contrast to the medieval curriculum for schoolboys and adolescents, the Master of Arts and medical curricula of the University of Ferrara, and the Dominican curriculum that formed the priest, the preacher, and the confessor. It examines aspects of his biblical learning and the medieval and Renaissance textbooks that included both replacements made by humanists and texts that continued to be in the 1450s to 1470s. The context of Savonarola’s studies involved several centuries of curricular development.

**The Early Education and Career Path of Girolamo Savonarola (1452-c1466)**

Girolamo Savonarola was born in Ferrara and actually spent almost thirty of his forty-eight years in Ferrara (1452-75) and the neighboring Emilia-Romagna (1475-c 1481-2). In 1440, his grandfather, Michele Savonarola, had probably taken a route to Ferrara from Padua, the family home

into the heartland of the broad flat alluvial plain of the Po river valley, the *Val Padana*. This snaking torrent with its dozens of major and minor tributaries saturates the soil from the soil from the rice fields of Lombardy to the farms of Emilia-Romagna, condemning the cities along its banks to winter nights of almost perpetual fog. Dense mists often invade Ferrara at nightfall and turn its streets into narrow dripping tunnels of darkness.
The highly regarded physician had been called to the Este court to serve as physician. His grandchild, Girolamo, was born in 1452, the third child of Niccolo Savonarola and Elena Buonacorsi. Since early childhood, he had been under the educational supervision of his grandfather, Michele Savonarola. Michele and mother Elena had begun the foundations of Christian and moral education and Latin literacy at home, as did all families. Michele continued to tutor Girolamo beyond the age of about eight when other boys were sufficiently literate to begin their Latin grammar and other studies with humanist tutors. By 1466, Girolamo was in his fourteenth year.

Michele was highly qualified to teach Girolamo, for he was university-educated, a published physician, and a professor of medicine in Padua and later at the University of Ferrara.6 The Marquis Nicolo III of the House of Este had requested his presence in Ferrara in 1440 because of his well-established medical reputation in Padua, and Michele then served as physician to him, his heirs, and the court for 27 years. By 1466, however, Michele was at the end of his long life (b 1385), dying within a short time at about 81 years of age.7 His dedication to Girolamo’s education, however, did not end before he had placed Girolamo in the humanist school of Battista Guarini, son of Guarino Guarini of Verona, one of the leaders of the humanist educational movement.

Humanist goals for education, which developed almost concurrently with Michele’s life, promised great benefit to a society in which the Church was no longer an exclusive path to careers leading to prosperous lives. Except for physicians, lawyers, and theologians, university education was not necessary for most of the positions that opened up in the fifteenth century. Even those sons, and some daughters, who would lead or rule their city-states or feudal monarchies did not require university preparation.8 In this era of educational change, humanist
educators had established pre-university schools for intermediate-level education. These humanist schools taught “an expanded liberal arts curriculum that included Latin grammar, rhetoric, poetry, music, arithmetic, and history.” Some schools also included study of the Greek language and the philosophies of its ancients, like Plato. Some were residential for schoolboys who lived some distance from the urban center.

The humanist curriculum spread to virtually every Italian city and court in Italy. This was initially education for boys from aristocratic, noble, and ruling classes, but by the mid-fifteenth century humanist education served the sons of guild leaders, merchants, bankers, and other professionals who aspired to advance their family’s social status, including the possibility of participating in governance. By the 1450s most intermediate schools were taught by humanist educators, and communes “decreed that the upper level Latin master must teach ‘a historian’ along with a grammarian, an orator, and a poet.” A text for study was chosen for each subject area, as for example, Livy might be selected for history. Battista Guarini advocated study of a Roman historian because students would learn about Roman laws, customs, institutions, and its outstanding men.

Savonarola’s Humanist Schooling (c 1466-c 1470)

What were Girolamo’s expectations about his transition to the University? Given that Michele had himself progressed through the liberal arts and medical studies, he probably discussed them with Girolamo. However, Michele’s advancing age indicated a need to plan a transition for Girolamo from his grandfather’s to his father’s guidance and to humanist tutors. Girolamo was, at about fourteen to sixteen years of age, too young for university studies and his university preparation was still incomplete. Thus, Battista’s pre-university school, known to Michele first-hand to be excellent, was chosen for this transition. Weinstein indicated that
Michele had hand-picked the humanist school run by Battista Guarini that Girolamo attended at least by age fourteen.\textsuperscript{11} Ridolfi agreed that Savonarola was studying with Battista except that he set Savonarola’s age at sixteen.\textsuperscript{12} Michele’s probable death, however, shortly after Girolamo started Battista’s school, meant that this transition occurred without the counsel of his grandfather.

Battista Guarini was the son of the humanist educator Guarino Guarini of Verona, whom Lionello, son and heir of Marquis Nicolo III, had brought to Ferrara to restructure the University in humanist fashion. Battista established his humanist school in Ferrara sometime in the 1440s and in 1459 wrote of his program in \textit{De ordine docendi et discendi} (“On the Order of Teaching and Learning”).\textsuperscript{13} A humanist curriculum was “learning that was appropriate to free (\textit{liberalis}) individuals. Its subjects were rhetoric, moral philosophy (ethics), history and poetry. Clearly, the emphasis was on human values and experience.”\textsuperscript{14} This curriculum was a departure from the medieval \textit{trivium} of grammar, logic, and rhetoric taught as separate subjects unrelated to each other or to history or ethical and moral behavior. Notaries had traditionally taught introductory grammar and rhetoric, following the medieval \textit{ars dictaminis}, the manual that provided instruction and samples of letters for imitation. The method of constructing letters was formulaic and its arguments were generally syllogistic, not persuasive or psychological. Humanist education, on the other hand, focused on re-integrating these subjects in the context of the classical Roman period: its culture, language, literature, and written histories. The study of Greek language and philosophers was included as well.

Initially, humanism was an education for sons of aristocrats, nobles, and other elites who needed elegance as they assumed positions in diplomacy and the court. However, the demands for larger numbers of humanist-educated individuals to work in chanceries, councils, courts, and
other governmental entities grew in the fifteenth century. The governments in Florence, Rome and Venice “encouraged parents and communal councils to hire humanistic masters.” Parents living farther from urban centers promoted the development of residential schools for their sons. By 1450, humanist education, initially taught at the intermediate or advanced pre-university levels, was expected at the elementary level as well. Humanist-educated graduates moved into many positions. Medieval education in the cathedral schools had initially restricted laymen from teaching. The universities also excluded humanist educators from teaching, but humanists taught at the pre-university schools and in existing grammar schools, introducing changes to preferred medieval authors, pedagogy, and language. They functioned as tutors in the homes of the wealthy. Humanists also held positions as “official historians and biographers, private secretaries, and public functionaries, propagandists and public orators.”

The pre-history of humanism had begun in thirteenth-century Padua with poet Lovato dei Loviti, who earned Francesco Petrarch’s praise for attempting to understand and emulate the language and style of the classical poets. In the fourteenth century, Albertino Mussato was the first to attempt to write a classicized prose history. Petrarch, already known for his poetry in the late fourteenth century, began in earnest to examine Latin as it was practiced in the writing and oratory of classical Rome as a tool of culture. His “method of Latin study . . . began with the fundamentals of classical grammar, syntax, and vocabulary” and led to “establish[ing] rules for determining the authenticity, accuracy and primacy of variant manuscripts, thus creating the discipline of philology.” For Petrarch, humanist education was for the private lives of the noble and aristocratic classes, to lend elegance to their participation in the social conversation at court. Humanism, in Petrarchan terms, was an effort to “listen to” the ancients through their language and poetry, and to speak and compose with “the flavor of the ancients.” Many
humanist educators taught Petrarch’s poetry in the schools for adolescents, and Savonarola later emulated his metric in his early poems.\textsuperscript{20} Bridging the gap between Christian belief and the writings of pagan Rome was also a goal for Petrarch, but even more for Coluccio Salutati who was at the transition between the private life of the scholar and the public life of the citizen.\textsuperscript{21}

What began as the application of humanism to private life evolved when applied to public life. The development of civic humanism emerged first among lay rhetoricians and other practitioners who handled civil communication (writing and oratory), meeting the diplomatic needs of governmental courts and councils.\textsuperscript{22} Originally these practitioners had been educated according to the \textit{ars dictaminis}, a medieval letter-writing manual based on Tullius Cicero’s early work, \textit{De invention}.\textsuperscript{23} As the diplomatic needs of rulers and councils of government increased in complexity, so too did the demand for more appropriately educated notaries and ambassadors. These public servants required an integrated education suitable to writing and speaking on behalf of governing bodies at all levels across northern Italy, whether council, papacy, or emerging monarchies. In rejecting medieval education, humanists rejected reasoning that was unrelated to historical and moral context. The medieval education was regarded as “jargonized, . . . impersonal, . . . and emotionally persuasive to nobody.”\textsuperscript{24}

By the beginning of the fifteenth century, lay humanists were actively working in society. They were Christians focused primarily on the present world, but also attending to the next world based on the conditions of war or plague in the environment. They were concerned about everyday responsibilities to property, family, and participation in governance.\textsuperscript{25} They were also concerned about making their cities into cultural magnets and ceremonial centers to draw tourists and pilgrims.\textsuperscript{26} This was a group ready for the evolution of Petrarch’s humanism into civic humanism. Giovanni Boccaccio, author of the \textit{Decameron}, had followed Petrarch and, in turn,
had a significant influence on Coluccio Salutati, Florentine chancellor at the start of the fifteenth century. Salutati, a notary by profession, held a transitional position. He followed the values of a contemplative life while participating actively in civil government.\textsuperscript{27} When a backlash against humanist education developed from a fear of losing Christian morality and reverting to paganism, for example, Salutati countered the criticisms of Thomist theologian and Dominican, Giovanni Dominici.\textsuperscript{28} Leonardo Bruni succeeded Salutati as chancellor of Florence at his death in the early 1400s and served again from 1427-44. He was an ardent spokesman for the worthiness of those in the public sphere for education. He wrote on government, the importance of the legal profession, and defended “statesmanly and military careers as worthy of an educated man.” He made the concept of the “active life of civic virtue” into a reality.\textsuperscript{29} Michele Savonarola would probably have understood these views, for he was a man who served the needs of his patients, caring for the body much like the priest or brother cared for the needs of the soul.

The endorsement of civic humanism was also the result of treatises on the humanist curriculum. The humanist educator and writer, Pier Paolo Vergerio, had studied at Padua and taught in both Florence and Bologna. He voiced the need for a new outcome for humanist studies. These were “studies appropriate to a free man. . . . They developed the individual’s mind and body, bringing him to a high pitch of virtue and wisdom.” In his mix of traditional and new studies were “history, moral philosophy and eloquence.” Vergerio’s educational treatise, \textit{De ingenuis moribus et liberalis studiis adolescentiae} (“On the liberal arts and morals of youth”), was one of the most widely read works on education during the fifteenth century. To the \textit{studia humanitatis}, Vergerio added the earlier \textit{trivium} and \textit{quadrivium} to prepare those continuing on to university education. Good character, however, came first and was based on discipline, modesty, moderation, and freedom from vice.\textsuperscript{30}
Thus, Michele’s choice of the humanist school for Girolamo was made with full understanding of new humanist education, although not necessarily a blanket approval of all of its texts and goals. Michele, it must be argued, was supportive of a humanist education for Girolamo, as well as retaining those parts of the medieval curriculum needed for medicine. Michele was no more anachronistic than others, and historian Paul Gehl confirmed the broad continuation of many medieval texts into fifteenth century education and beyond. 31 Before sending Girolamo to Battista’s school, Michele probably guided Girolamo’s study of many of the medieval authors and some of the Christianized Roman classics.

The preferred list of readings in the medieval curriculum formed a pool from which the parent, and later the tutor, selected those readings the child would study. 32 The most basic medieval texts were Latin grammars and readings that instilled Christian morality. Because of new studies of Latin, Humanists were challenging the Doctrinale, “the most famous [grammar] textbook of the Middle Ages,” and other medieval grammars, writing new ones that reflected the study of language begun by Petrarch. 33 Some medieval texts continued to be used, at least for a while, because they promoted both Christian morality and Latin literacy. Some readings from the original medieval list were retained: the Disticha Catonis, or the moral sayings of Cato; Aesop’s Fables; Giovanni Boethius’s Consolation of Philosophy, and the Ecloga Theoduli, a poetic contest between truth and falsehood that contained Old Testament examples. 34 Other texts disappeared by the start of the fifteenth century, such as Prospero of Aquitaine’s Ex sententiis Augustini, also known as Epigrammatica Prosperi; and the Chartula from the treatise De contemptu mundi by Bernard of Morlaix. 35 Classical pagan works, such as Ovid’s poetry, remained, modified for Christian readers, and new classical works were added. The resulting list of choices familiarized the child with many genres of literature. There were also variations of
the same text, for printers often re-wrote the texts to generate sales, and tutors re-wrote texts to conform to their classroom use.\textsuperscript{36}

Gehl cautioned against too broad a generalization about the uniformity of the advances of humanism when he stated:

Latin-trained intellectuals constantly had to resell the elitist ideals of humanism to a public of politicians, churchmen, and influential businessmen. This was as true at the beginning of our period [for Gehl, the mid-fifteenth century], when humanism was still a relatively new movement, as at the end, when Latin, even in its seeming moment of triumph, was beginning to lose ground, eventually to become the shibboleth of a superseded cultural ideal.\textsuperscript{37}

Thus, the Latin that Girolamo learned in mid-fifteenth century is presumed to have been a mix of medieval and Church Latin as well as the newer style of humanist Latin, and the texts he read were both medieval and humanist preferences. He was well-versed in the literature taught by the humanists, but retained the love of the scholasticism and writings of Aquinas.

\textbf{The University Program in the Arts and Medicine}

What were the probable expectations that Girolamo had for his future education just before Michele’s life ended? Career decisions were a family affair. The Savonarola family had designated Girolamo to follow Michele into the medical profession in part because his older brothers were already in other career paths and because Girolamo had the intellectual talent to succeed. Clearly, the Savonarola family believed that a medical career for Girolamo would prove as successful and productive as that of his grandfather. Girolamo, with ties to his eminent grandfather’s reputation, although not to the rewards of his Este connection, could have expected a prosperous life. Michele had not only served patients from many walks of life, but he had continued to serve Niccolo III’s heirs, Lionello and Borso, at court, becoming wealthy from the land and revenues that the Este House provided. Michele, however, was a devout and pious Christian. He had left among his own papers “a plan for preparing oneself for a great mission.”\textsuperscript{38}
It is likely that Michele regarded the work of the physician as a ministry analogous to the ministry of those who taught and cared for spiritual welfare. He probably passed this view to Girolamo, along with his views on the frivolity and decadence of court life. Savonarola was destined for the medical profession, and thus had been prepared for admission to the University of Ferrara.

At this time, those who became physicians first completed the university program in the liberal arts. So did those preparing for legal careers. After that, the student devoted himself to the specialized curricula for law or medicine. Mirela Radu elaborated on this education:

In order to be a doctor, students were supposed to have solid knowledge of psychology, ancient philosophy, Greek and Latin. His [Savonarola’s] grandfather inspired his admiration of Pietro D’Abano (1250-1316) philosopher, medical theorist and physician of Padua . . . . Also from his grandfather, the young Savonarola inherited the belief that moral and intellectual rules only came to complement those of a healthy lifestyle.\textsuperscript{39}

The “ancient philosophy” referred to Aristotle, whose works in Greek had been translated to Latin and transmitted to the west via several means. The expansion of the Islamic empire aided this transmission. Since the thirteenth century, the theology and arts faculties of the universities, following the lead of the University of Paris, had followed competing philosophies. While the theology faculty followed the tradition of Augustine of Hippo, who was oriented toward Platonism, the liberal arts faculty followed Aristotle.\textsuperscript{40} Education in the arts included many subjects on which Aristotle had written with great depth and authority. His approach to logic and reasoning was fundamental to all students, and the \textit{Organon}, the collected works on logic and reasoning, was considered a basic text. Aristotle developed the theory of “act and potency” that became instrumental to understanding physical reality. His theories were rooted in observation of nature. He studied life in different stages of development from birth (generation) to death (corruption). His theory of knowledge was based on the initial reception of the external
world through the senses, and the first knowledge of the person was himself (that is, the perceived self) as the mind reflected on sense perceptions. Aristotle did not teach pre-existing forms of knowledge in the mind, not even the knowledge of God. From observations of nature and life, Aristotle generalized, and became “a pioneer in biology.” This was closely related to his consideration of the relationship of the soul (the anima) to the body, important both to the physician of the body and the physician of the soul.

Thomas Aquinas, like the earlier Dominican bishop and commentator, Albert the Great, wrote extensive commentaries on Aristotle’s works to facilitate student learning. Aquinas was more detailed and comprehensive than earlier commentators, proceeding sentence by sentence through many volumes of the philosopher’s work. The Dominican theologian was drawn to Aristotle, rather than Plato, for many reasons: For one, Thomas’s certitude about the validity of Aristotle came from the philosopher’s methods of observation. For another, “Aristotle’s method of investigation and interpretation of nature were of irreplaceable value for the development of a true philosophy of man, the understanding of nature, and the organization of ethics and political science.” Aquinas also corrected Aristotle to avoid possible conflicts with revealed truth, and, when finding an error that did not involve revelation or contradict observations, Aquinas often offered useful alternative explanations, although some proved wrong. Savonarola’s study probably began with Aristotle’s Organon, perhaps under Michele’s direction.

The medical curriculum was grounded in Aristotelian principles of natural philosophy. The works of Galen, translated from the Greek, provided materials on pathology and clinical practice:

In those days natural science was merely regarded as one of the chief branches of philosophy, and the latter, although used as a preliminary to the study of medicine was . . . purely scholastic . . . . The young Savonarola had to study the works of St Thomas Aquinas and the Arabic commentaries on Aristotle. These were given
to him as indispensable guide and introductions to the study of medicine; and it was strange to behold so young a boy plunged in this sea, or rather labyrinth, of confused syllogisms, and finding so much pleasure in the task as soon to become a very skilful disputant. The works of St Thomas fascinated him to an almost inconceivable extent; he would be absorbed in meditating on them for whole days at a time and could hardly be persuaded to turn his attention to studies better adapted to his medical training.  

Thus Girolamo, under Michele’s guidance, followed a scholastic and Aristotelian course of studies as mediated by Aquinas, because this was the curriculum he would eventually study at the University. Villari observed that it was hardly possible to separate Girolamo from his readings of Aquinas.  

Although humanist studies were the focus of his pre-university studies, Savonarola was ready to pursue the university program, first in the Arts and then in medicine.

**Effects of Humanist Education on Society and on Savonarola**

The date of Savonarola’s matriculation to the University of Ferrara to begin his study of the Arts was not stated by sources, but a date of about 1470 is suggested here. What did his humanist education imply for Girolamo as he approached the 1470s? He witnessed, and, to some extent participated in, the growing self-awareness that characterized leading citizens and aspirants to higher standing in society, their buildings, and cities. Writing was, for these individuals, a self-aware process, one critical to constructing a persona as a Renaissance man. Greenblatt stated of this process:

> [T]he very hallmark of the Renaissance [was] that middle-class and aristocratic males began to feel that they possessed . . . shaping power over their lives . . . . I perceived that fashioning of oneself and being fashioned by cultural institutions—family, religion, state—were inseparably intertwined. In all [the] texts and documents, there were . . . no moments of pure, unfettered subjectivity; indeed, the human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society. Whenever I focused sharply upon a moment of apparently autonomous self-fashioning, I found not an epiphany of identity but a cultural artifact.
Savonarola’s letter to his father on which this chapter opened was an example of a self-aware claim to a higher moral ground than those in the society around him, consistent with the self-fashioning of which Greenblatt spoke. Both his medieval and humanist education constituted forces that served to create his self-presentation as a kind of “cultural artifact”.

Another example of self-awareness that Savonarola witnessed was the “magnificence” of courts and cities in northern Italy. The preaching about the moral implications of this “magnificence” by Archbishop Antonino Pierozzi earlier in the fifteenth century confirmed self awareness by wealthy Florentine families who created magnificent churches, art, and buildings to aggrandize the names of these wealthy families. This applied no less to rulers in the city-states and feudal monarchies of northern Italy. Savonarola had seen the magnificence of the Este court in Ferrara first hand. By the time he departed for San Domenico in 1474, he had rejected avarice and greed and vain displays by the wealthy. In this passage from De contemptu mundi, Savonarola might have been describing scenes of street battles between factions favoring the succession of either Duke Borso’s heir, Ercole I, or Leonello’s son, Niccolo, but Savonarola’s theme is what men do for wealth and gold:

Blind greed for gold drives men into hasty conflict.
Blind hunger for gold makes them fight like bulls.
Heavy batons are often wielded in the City. They fight shield to shield. Banner strikes banner, sword threatens sword. They fight foot to foot. Wealth is pitted against assessed wealth. To their own undoing, they fight one another for money. They rush to death, each side terrifying the other, stirred up to criminal behaviour by the power of gold. He who is after gold very soon resorts to the sword ... So the slaves of gold kill each other in violent conflict.

This was a biblical theme worthy of the prophets of both Old and New Testament prophets, including Jesus. Yet Savonarola expressed this rejection cloaked in images of the fifteenth-century.
Kenneth Bartlett argued that the “myth of the Florentine republic” originated at this time. The myth, according to Weinstein, established the Florence as “a living creature with a destiny shaped by God. Divine Providence had attended her birth and continued to guide her throughout her history. She was a favorite of the Lord.” Girolamo had not resided in Florence at this time, but the acceptance of this myth later paved the way for large segments of the Florentine population to accept his prophecies of Florence as the “new Jerusalem” on earth. There was no reason given for Girolamo’s abandonment of the medical career except to acknowledge the more significant impact of Aquinas on the condition of the soul, or “anima.”

We know little about his ambitions just before his life-changing decision other than that he was a student in the Arts faculty of the University of Ferrara, apparently pursuing the medical career decided for him by his father and grandfather. By becoming a physician he would have been fulfilling his obligation to satisfy their ambitions.

Thus, with the first generation of humanism favoring a private, contemplative life and a second generation favoring civic humanism, Savonarola was about to take the life of contemplation to the extreme of the monastery. He also took a legacy of humanism in his poetry and music. Weinstein stated that Savonarola wrote his verses of 1472 and 1475 “in the manner of Petrarch.” Petrarch composed many forms of poetry, but was best known for his love sonnets dedicated to Beatrice. Ridolfi observed that it was not the theme of Petrarch’s verses that Savonarola emulated in De ruina mundi, but the metric. His 1475 De ruina ecclesiae was likewise “even more Petrarchan in form and Savonarolan in substance.” Writing it during his first year in the convent, he continued a message of anti-clericalism as well.

When Savonarola had completed the Arts degree, he left for Bologna, was granted admission to San Domenico, and then wrote the letter that opens this chapter to his father about
his decision. Again in a statement that reflects both humility and pride in his perceived uniqueness and special relationship to Jesus, he said,

[W]ould I not have been most ungrateful to have prayed God to show me the straight road on which I must walk and then, when He deigned to show it to me, not to have followed it? . . . So sweetest father, you must thank the Lord Jesus and not cry: He gave you a son and then sustained him very well till he was twenty-two years old, and not only this, but He also deigned to make him His knight militant.  

Regarding the family’s cool response to his new career, Savonarola angrily retorted a few days later that the family should “rejoice that God should have made him a doctor of souls rather than of bodies.”

**Becoming a Dominican Priest, Preacher and Confessor**

Had he been able to, Savonarola would have chosen an a-political, a-public monastic life, for upon admission to San Dominico, he asked to perform only manual labor: “He craved to become the convent drudge, as he said, to do penance for his sins, and not according to the general custom of the day to merely change from an Aristotle in the world to an Aristotle of the cloister.” He was not permitted such a life, however. In place of a grandfather, and then a father and family, that had chosen his career path, Savonarola through his vow of obedience accepted the directives of his Dominican superiors to become a preacher and confessor. Like his grandfather and family who expected him to succeed because of his ability, his Dominican superiors also saw Savonarola’s potential for greatness. The difference now was that Savonarola believed that God was directing his career path through his superiors.

Savonarola, in Bologna, was at the Dominican order’s second house, founded by Dominic Guzman, the order’s founder. San Domenico had a major role in the history and conduct of the order. San Domenico’s school also shared in that status, for it was the site of a *studium generale*. All Dominican houses had schools, or *schola*. Each province had a *provincial*
studium, but the studium generale usually indicated a house proximate to a major university (such as Paris, Bologna, Oxford, and others) with mutual benefits to, and sometimes problems for, each institution.

From April 24, 1475, to sometime in 1481, Girolamo studied and prepared for his Dominican career without writing anything for posterity except one verse. He was effectively silent, while the Dominicans fashioned him. He was taught the practices and refinements of the more than two centuries that went into shaping the religious life of the Dominican. These had been established in the thirteenth century and were still largely part of Dominican education in the fifteenth century. During a probationary period of at least two years, and in Tuscany often three, the novice and then newly-professed brother was not allowed to leave the convent. Nor was the new brother permitted spare time or assigned duties that might distract him from a total dedication to his religious formation.  

After Savonarola requested admission to San Domenico, like all applicants, he was then examined, perhaps, “during a friendly walk in a garden,” to determine the sincerity of his motives, his competence in Latin, and his learning. A committee determined the applicant’s eligibility, and recommended him to the prior. Each candidate was then led into a chapterhouse meeting where he prostrated himself before the members and answered the prior’s questions about his willingness to conform to the Dominican lifestyle. He was then welcomed by the community, tonsured, and dressed as a Dominican novice. He would have been assigned a companion, a slightly more experienced novice, who taught him the basics of convent life: how to walk, eat, sleep, dress, bow, and how to speak or keep silent. This was an aspect of becoming a monk. Then he had to learn all the other behaviors that distinguished a Dominican from other
monks. Traditionally the first weeks were carefully regimented to focus the novice on the internal, community environment. He was to forget the world.

With his knowledge of Latin already established, Savonarola began to learn the Divine Office, also called the psalter, and other literature on spiritual formation. The Divine Office contained the liturgical calendar, the Psalms, and other prayers and responses that were often sung. Because it governed the liturgical day, memorizing the Divine Office began in the first week along with responses so that the novice could directly and immediately participate in the ritual of the convent. Certain hours marked the daily life of the convent: matins, prime, compline, terce, sext, and none. Like all Dominicans, the novices were to sing certain liturgical hours aided by study of the hymnal, antiphonary, gradual, and lectionary. The celebration of compline in the evening included collaciones, or short sermons, readings, or expositions. Participation in the Divine Office was a required part of Dominican life, even after the friar’s formal education was completed and when he traveled to preach or study. Exemptions from attending some hours were given, and relaxation of requirements that occurred in fourteenth and fifteenth centuries became a reason for the emergence of reformed houses, including San Marco in Florence, later led by Savonarola.

During the first year, the novice also studied the constitutions, rules, and Dominican history, including significant theologians, preachers, and saints. This was unique to the Dominican order. By the end of the first year, the novice demonstrated the outward behaviors and religious readiness to profess the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Savonarola took his vows at the end of the first year in May 1476. This accomplished one purpose of the first year, shaping the exterior man to exhibit Dominican behavior. The novice did not begin to study in the Dominican schools until after taking his vows, that is, until after becoming a priest. The
second purpose, according to historian Mulchahey, was the “reformation” not just of the intellect, but “fundamentally cultivating a correct attitude towards learning,” “a refashioning of heart and soul and mind” in the “Dominican way.”

This was more difficult, for initially the Dominicans had no pedagogy or manuals for study to accomplish this. They relied on readings, such as the Meditations of Bernard of Clairveaux, Augustine of Hippo’s Confessions, the lives of the fathers and legends of the saints, The Summa de virtuus et virtutibus by the French Dominican Peraldus, who served the diocese of Lyon, and other readings. The Master of Novices developed a few lessons from these readings each day that the novices learned. He directed the novices to memorize one or two passages to “tuck away” for future sermons.

The assumption that memorizing passages or instilling observable discipline through practice could change the interior life was not a reliable way to prepare the brother for a life of asceticism. Peraldus (William Perault (1190-1271)) wrote a treatise on virtue and vice that was widely read and gave instruction on asceticism. While he discussed the spiritual life, Peraldus did not identify the actual practices that developed it. However, ascesis meant training or exercise, so the religious asceticism of the Dominican needed to be taught as spiritual discipline.

At the end of the thirteenth century, a Dominican, “Frater Anonymous” of Toulouse, provided lessons on practicing contemplation. Pictures were included to raise the novice’s thoughts to spiritual things. The novice was instructed to consider how allegories on ordinary life or other subjects in order to teach him to think beyond the outward properties of objects. For example, the cloister became a cloister of the soul; the soul became a guest house for the heavenly visitor, God; love was an altar in the temple of the soul; and the garden was a paradise where good works took root, with the allegory continuing with other locations. Meditation on various subjects enabled the novice to put his mind in order. When the location was the classroom,
specific meditations on the secular arts showed that none could lead to the spiritual level of Divine Wisdom. The intention of these exercises was to break the preoccupation with secular subjects of the schools outside the monastery. Rather the secular arts were to be put in service to theology.\textsuperscript{65} The use of allegories for meditation was also a tool of the biblical exegesis that the brother learned as he started his second year in the Dominican classroom.

\textbf{“De ruina ecclesiae”}

Sometime during that first year, Savonarola composed a poetic verse on the ruin of the Church, \textit{De ruina ecclesiae}. Although Savonarola left no words to testify to his response to his Dominican education, he seemed to have become even more serious and more oriented to the spiritual realm than before. He must have heard news of Rome from visiting Dominicans, for his \textit{canzone} continued to express the moral outrage of his other writings, focusing on the conduct of the clergy and Rome:

\begin{quote}
I spoke to our ancient, pious mother [the holy Church]  
Out of my great desire always to weep . . . .  
And here she said – When I  
Did see that haughty woman [the ambition for ecclesiastical honors] enter Rome,  
Who goes among the flowers [carnal pleasures] and the grass . . .  
I withdrew so much  
That now I lead my life in constant weeping.\textsuperscript{66}
\end{quote}

His use of personification in his poetry continued into his later writings, and the use of metaphor (a haughty woman for the Church) was evident in this writing. Both his poetic study in humanism and his instruction on meditation combined to complement his inclination to express himself in this way.

\textbf{Preparation for the Priesthood}

A professed brother was not ordained for another year. For that Savonarola needed additional study, but he now attended the \textit{studium}. First, he studied to become a priest, including
the ritual and theology associated with the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist and penance. At the end of the second year, the novice was ordained; for Savonarola that occurred in 1477.67

The pace of study had been slowed in the studium to ensure that the brother truly sought the religious life, not simply access to advanced education, a motive that prompted many who lacked a vocation to apply for admission.68 Each day, for the rest of his novitiate, the new brother and then priest attended two lectures. The first was on the Scripture and other biblical studies, for every sermon had to be based on the Scriptures. The second lecture varied in the topic. The Scriptures were too large to cover the full New and Old Testament texts in one year, so a multi-year cycle dictated when particular books were studied. Studies included biblical exegesis and learning to use a variety of manuals that Dominicans had constructed to facilitate understanding and using scriptural themes and passages. The manuals on the art of preaching, artes praedicandi, had been written by many earlier Dominicans. The Dominican now focused on preaching as his highest priority, as his official title “Order of Preachers[OP]” proclaimed.

Although there was much included in Savonarola’s education, Savonarola’s knowledge of Scripture was especially noted when he began his preaching mission. He came by this knowledge from Michele’s tutoring, but biblical exegesis may explain his ability rapidly to choose appropriate biblical passages for his sermons and preach knowledgeably on them. Exegesis was not the thorough investigation of the theologian. Rather it included the study of biblical history and geography as it was known at that time, primarily through Peter Comestor’s Historia scholastica. Exegesis had been prominent in cathedral schools, and there was a long tradition and texts to draw upon. Students also studied practical morality as grounded in the Scripture.
Both exegesis and the study of practical morality were relevant to preaching and confessing. Hugh of St. Cher (Paris, 1230-35) greatly improved the student’s grasp of the Scriptures through his *Postillae in totam Biblium* (biblical commentaries or opening words). Because a single passage from the Scripture might have multiple interpretations, Hugh mined the scriptural texts for passages that reflected “all four senses of Scripture—the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical.” Then passages were reclassified by figurative, symbolic, or thematic uses of words. When the preacher determined a sermon theme, he could look up a word and find various biblical passages which related to that word. The *Postillae* were constructed by the scholastic method of classification and division of the many biblical passages collected. These provided many examples for the preacher to use. Hugh sometimes selected a psalm or gospel passage or other text to be taught in a sermon. Mulchahey illustrated Hugh’s approach using *Psalm 17*, David’s thanksgiving for victory. The passage might have metaphors, moral examples, or other relationships upon which the preacher might build. Here are verses 14-15:

The Lord thundered from heaven;  
The Most High made his voice resound.  
He let fly his arrows and scattered them;  
shot lightening bolts and dispersed them.

Hugh selected “arrow” as a word of interest: “As Hugh explains, ‘The preacher is said to be an arrow because of the many properties of the arrow, which he ought to have in himself.’” Hugh then lists ten qualities of the arrow which symbolically suggest the moral qualities of the preacher and his preaching.” Drawing from Hugh, Mulchahey paraphrased the qualities of the arrow: swift, fragile, light, slender, “puts wolves to flight,” plain and smooth, penetrating, feathered, straight, and curved at its head. Each quality was further accompanied by additional biblical passages—other Psalms or books—that illustrated the quality further and established an authority for the quality. A preacher whose sermon topic was preaching could draw from the
Postillae by looking up “arrow.” The novice learned to use the Postillae and similar sources for preparing sermons in the classroom.

Similarly, Hugh selected the words “Beatitude,” or “Beatus vir” for exegesis from the opening psalm of the Psalter. This was Psalm 1. Here are verses 1 and 2 from that Psalm, identified in the text used for this discussion, “True Happiness in God’s Law”:

Blessed is the man who does not walk  
In the counsel of the wicked,  
Nor stand in the way of sinners,  
Nor sit in company with scoffers.  
Rather, the law of the Lord is his joy;  
And on his law he meditates day and night.

Hugh constructed a postilla by dividing “beatitude” into six things, each of which is then subdivided into three aspects. Then Hugh commented line by line on Psalm 1, developing a schema of six things about happiness that were further subdivided into three aspects. This was an approach that the novice learned to apply and, if necessary, to perform if source materials were not available. However, the Dominican preacher was taught to engage the listener through this variety of examples and construct chains of authorities through examples and sayings from Scripture. Even “approved” pagan authors could be included, as in the case of Ovid, Horace, and Juvenal.

Learning a systematic approach to using the Bible enabled Savonarola to become even more fluent with biblical texts. As with learning to meditate, considering what the future preacher learned helps to understand how the novice gained the multiple skills of the preacher. During the first three years, the novice would hear many sermons, but would not preach. For all Dominicans, the final task was becoming a confessor. As his studies progressed and the curriculum undertook pastoral instruction, the young brother would eventually be called upon to
preach. He would not, however, preach outside the convent until he had been mentored in preaching and was judged ready to begin his ministry beyond the convent.

During this period in the convent, Savonarola deepened his knowledge of Scripture and theology through study and prayer. One exception for Savonarola was that he was, unlike other students, selected as a *studens formalis*, or “student in formation,” an indication that he was being considered for the role of teacher in the order. Limited assignments within the Dominican community were gradually given to new Dominicans during the latter part of this long period of preparation. Savonarola received his first teaching assignment in 1480 as a sub-lector for the Dominicans at Ferrara’s convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli.  

**Analysis of Savonarola’s Writings as Key to Self-Representation**

Attempting to learn about Savonarola’s self representation from his writings, especially *De contemptu mundi*, permits an analysis of the relationship of Savonarola’s writing to other texts of the period. Savonarola placed himself prominently in his writings, as almost alone among other men in his rejection of the greed and vice of the age. That position of independence from other men—from popes, from secular rulers, even from those he loved—would later be heard in his sermons and read in his writings. This was a voice characteristic of Stephen Greenblatt’s “man of the Renaissance,” and Greenblatt argued for understanding how the Renaissance citizen came to shape himself in that time.  

Consider Greenblatt’s concern with “unfettered” freedom to fashion the self in contrast to the self as “cultural artifact.” Girolamo, in his letter to his father presented himself as choosing the higher ground, one superior to the vast majority of the people around him. By implication, he portrayed himself as innocent or immune from the wickedness, idolatry, and various sins to which others succumbed. Konrad Eisenbichler
noted the relevance of the *Disticha Cato* in Savonarola’s “On the Ruin of the World,” for Cato was uncompromising in his morality.  

In his letter and in his poems, Savonarola, the moral man, stood against these evils in an outspoken manner, reflecting outcomes that a late medieval education sought.  
Savonarola stated these judgments whether he found them in the papacy, the clergy, or the people of his city. Further, he portrayed himself as “not as juvenile” as others might see him. Perhaps others had told him that he was unrealistic about the nature of man and the world, but the reader may also see the “I” of the individual who stands almost alone, choosing a different path. The motive to obey God might be medieval, but this “I” reflects more an outcome of humanist education than a medieval one.  

The text that opened this chapter was extracted from Girolamo’s treatise, *On Contempt of the World*, left behind for his father when he departed for San. Here is a second passage taken from the same treatise:  

He who lives chastely and modestly is called a man of no spirit; he who believes and hopes in God is deemed a simpleton. But the man who knows how to plunder orphans and widows is called prudent, he who can hoard the greatest store of gold is deemed wise, and the man who can devise the most cunning fashion of robbing his neighbour is looked upon with respect. Everywhere does wickedness abound (*omnia sunt plena impietate*); everywhere does usury and robbery flourish; on every side are heard horrible and filthy blasphemies; the most abominable vices are everywhere freely practiced. 'There is not one who acts aright, no, not one.' And yet there are simple folk, unlettered rustics, and untutored women, who put to shame the vaunted but false wisdom of the world; boys and youths who flee from the world and its lusts.  

The relationship between the two fragments was not indicated by sources nor was the order of the two passages relative to each other. In addition, they were by different translators, so comparisons of form or style are not possible. Yet the content of this second fragment
confirms Savonarola’s dismal assessment of the world reflected in his earlier poem, *De ruina mundi*.

*De contemptu mundi* was also a title and a genre that appeared in medieval literature, including a work by Pope Innocent III in 1195. That provides additional clues to his reading and learning. Implying that Savonarola’s use of the title for his 1475 treatise was spurious, Weinstein assured his readers that Savonarola did not emulate Innocent III’s *De contemptu mundi* or “the medieval ascetic genre that goes by that name.” Had that been the case, Weinstein argued, Savonarola would have been writing a tract similar to that authored by Pope Innocent III in 1195.⁸⁰ Savonarola’s *De contemptu mundi* was “of a different spirit. . . . Girolamo’s screed expresses only indignation and scorn—and justifies his coming flight from society.”⁸¹ It was “highly personal and censorious, a venting of disgust for the unrelieved human wickedness he saw filling every worldly space.”⁸² However, it was probably not Innocent III’s work that Savonarola imitated. It has more similarities to Bernard of Morlaix’s *De contemptu mundi* written circa 1140.

Grendler connected the *Chartula*, or *Chartula nostra* to Bernard’s *De contemptu mundi* on Grendler’s list of medieval moral readings for children because of its first word, *chartula*. Grendler, thus, implied that the *Chartula* was an extract from *De contemptu mundi*.⁸³ In his historical research, John Balnaves argued an independent creation of the *Chartula nostra* by Bernard of Morlaix.⁸⁴ However, no comparison texts or translations have been published by which to test possible differences in the origin of the *Chartula*. It is, in any case, to Bernard’s *De contemptu mundi* that this analysis refers. Savonarola had possibly been led to the verse poem by Michele in childhood or later to readings of similar texts, like the writings of Pope Innocent
III. What seems clear, however, is that Savonarola arrived at similar literary patterns in his *De contemptu mundi* as Bernard did in his.

Bernard composed his verse treatise as satire. Balnaves did not look for later appearances of similar verses and did not mention Savonarola in his research. Bernard meant by satire, according to Balnaves, a work that had three characteristics: First, the work must consist of a “dish composed of various ingredients, a medley . . . of humorous topics.” A second aspect was an association with obscenity and scurrility that Balnaves linked to anticlerical verses and “diatribes against women.” Finally, there was a sense of rebuke or censure or “sanative castigation.” Here one must entertain the prospect that satire was at work when Savonarola wrote of the “spiritless man” and “the simpleton” who contrasted with the “wise and cunning man” whose wealth came from usury and robbery. Girolamo had a good role model for writing satire, for Michele had written a satire on the frivolities of court life, entitled *De Battibecco et Serrabocca* (“Of the marriages of Chatterbox and Looselips”).

Balnaves observed that “satire shades off into complaint, and complaint into homily.” In that analysis, satire represented an extreme of “simple personal attacks, or libel” that Balnaves did not find in Bernard’s work. However, the genre of complaint had been present in biblical literature and in classical works. This was the genre that Bernard of Morlaix chose for his *De contemptu mundi*. This was a genre that Savonarola knew from biblical study. This was a genre that was known from the literary heritage of Bernard’s works as they continued to be read down to the Savonarola’s time.

Balnaves spoke of several types of complaint: There were complaints of “corruption of classes of men (kings, soldiers, lawyers, and . . . of course, the clergy.” These complaints were “closely related to estates satire.” Savonarola, in *De ruina mundi*, wrote:
The scepter has come into pirate hands;  
Saint Peter is laid low;  
Here lustfulness and every prey abounds,  
And I know not why heaven is not baffled.  
Do you not see that satyr gone quite mad  
How full of pride he is, a font of vices  
That makes my heart consume itself with scorn?  
Oh! Look at that debauched effeminate,  
That panderer in purple dress, a clown  
the rabble follow.  

In line 4, Savonarola wrote, “I know not why heaven is not baffled,” holding heaven accountable for blindness to corruption.

Examples of estates humor, particularly of those in high Church office, were Savonarola’s references to: the pirate, Pope Sixtus IV Della Rovere, who unlike, Peter would not be a fisher of men; the satyr, thought to be Cardinal Pietro Riario, the nephew of the nepotistic pope; the panderers in purple dress who were, in reality, the bishops.

A third form of complaint concerned groups associated with particular vices “(backbiters, misers, atheists, women, and so forth).” In Savonarola’s On contempt for the world were references to those who replaced virtues with vice in all the lines, particularly the lines that call out prudence, wisdom and respect:

But the man who knows how to plunder orphans and widows is called prudent, he who can hoard the greatest store of gold is deemed wise, and the man who can devise the most cunning fashion of robbing his neighbour is looked upon with respect.

Savonarola ridiculed those who despised the chaste and modest life, who saw the faithful as simpletons, who believed that to rob, cheat, and hoard is prudent, and that more creative means of robbing one’s neighbors was akin to garbing oneself in “cunning” fashion. Complaint also focused on specific abuses (dress, swearing, use of cosmetics), that is, the vanities.
Although Savonarola had no audience for his satire, other than his father and family, the intended humor is grim.

Up to this point, Savonarola’s texts may well have met the characteristics of satire that Balnaves laid out for the twelfth century. Finally, however, there was the genre of complaint about divine providence, treatment of virtue and vice, present miseries, and the “idea of man’s inner condition as the microcosmic expression of the state of the world.”\textsuperscript{90} In this final category may be found Job’s complaint, complaints in the \textit{Psalms}, for they were directed at divine providence and mankind at large, and include even Jesus’s complaint on the cross, as given by \textit{Matthew 27:46}, echoing David’s \textit{Psalm 22}: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”\textsuperscript{91}

These complaints held God to blame for the sinfulness of man whom God could have removed through punishment. Job (13:3), having suffered for what he considered faithful service, said: “But I would speak with the Almighty; I want to argue with God.” Then he continued (13:23-26): “What are my faults and my sins? My misdeed, my sin make known to me! Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy? Will you harass a wind-driven leaf or pursue a withered straw? For you draw up bitter indictments against me, and punish in me the faults of my youth.”\textsuperscript{92} This was only one of Job’s complaints to God. Did Savonarola complain to God in such a direct manner? Savonarola’s complaints appear to be directed at mankind but Savonarola implies that God is also to blame. Savonarola wrote in \textit{De contemptu mundi},

\begin{quote}
Everywhere does wickedness abound (\textit{omnia sunt plena impietae}); everywhere does usury and robbery flourish; on every side are heard horrible and filthy blasphemies; the most abominable vices are everywhere freely practised. 'There is not one who acts aright, no, not one.' And yet there are simple folk, unlettered rustics, and untutored women, who put to shame the vaunted but false wisdom of the world; boys and youths who flee from the world and its lusts.
\end{quote}
Even though implicit in any complaint was God’s failure to do anything about the condition, Savonarola seemed to hold God blameless for all this, although Weinstein said of the canzone, *De ruina mundi*, that Savonarola “addresses God almost reproachfully.”

As an alternative, Savonarola expressed the loss of hope for the present world as an expectation for the future world. However Balnaves said of Bernard of Morlaix’s *De contemptu mundi*:

> Apocalyptic and eschatological literature may be subsumed under the fourth category of complaint. The end of the world and heaven and hell feature largely in Bernard’s works, especially in the *De contemptu mundi*.  

The only available English translation of *De contemptu mundi* is an extract called, *The Heavenly Land*. This excerpt became a prayer during the Reformation, for it depicted an earthly life that was to pass to a heavenly land, and may be part of the apocalyptic aspect of *De contemptu mundi* that Balnaves discussed. Savonarola seemed also to escape through his apocalypse:

> All men now turn their backs on doing good;  
> No-one is on the straight path any more.  
> So now the little worth I have grows cold,  
> But for a little hope  
> That will not let it go away completely,  
> For I know in the next life  
> It will be clear to all which soul was gentle  
> And who did raise his wings to a lovelier style.  

### Conclusion

How did Savonarola’s education shape the way that he presented himself at this time? From childhood through his time as a seminarian, Savonarola persisted in his studies and that study transformed him, re-directing his career goal from that of a physician to that of a Dominican. His competence in Latin and knowledge of the Scripture was established early in
life. He read the materials that every child of a well-to-do class had read, many from the medieval tradition and others from the emerging humanist tradition. His grandfather Michele and father Antonio ensured that his education in a humanist school prepared him for a promising future. The family guided him to a profession following family tradition in a seamless fashion as his father assumed Savonarola’s guidance upon the death of his grandfather. Savonarola’s love of music and poetry were reinforced by humanist studies in the school of Pier Paolo Vergerio, a leading humanist educator of the period. The analysis of his writing showed his learning of literary forms, such as satire and complaints. Although Savonarola did not complete his medical studies at the University of Ferrara, he did complete his degree in Arts. This served to advance him in his Dominican studies. Of his studies at San Domenico, his preparation from the earliest days to his assignment to teach in 1481 were thorough. These studies and the environment in which he lived and prayed formed him as a Dominican. One of the most significant areas of his learning was that of helping other novices to “fashion their hearts” through internal conversion. From an applicant who desired only to perform the most menial of duties, Savonarola was sent to undertake his first assignments of preaching and confessing.

There are many factors that might have accounted for particular aspects of his letter to his father and his verses. However, the question implies that Savonarola had the freedom to determine his responses to his education. It is more likely that Savonarola battled with different aspects of his education. Each curriculum was a cultural force, in Greenblatt’s terms, and Savonarola was not “unfettered” and free to choose his formation. What is apparent from his texts is that they could not exist without the mix of values and methods that each curriculum pushed at him. He borrowed from humanist poetry and from scholastic methods. He absorbed Thomas Aquinas and biblical exegesis. He called out the Pope and Church hierarchy. He
rejected directions from his family but not because there was anything inherently wrong with them.

Two discussions were only briefly touched upon in this chapter because they become relevant to later chapters. The first is the scholasticism of the fifteenth century. Scholasticism had come under attack by the humanists for its failure to produce a theological solution to the ills of the Church, especially the papal schism. However, scholasticism was the methodology for Savonarola’s theological grounding. It was developed in the thirteenth-century university as an alternative to the often contradictory positions emerging from the many schools that had existed until then. As the methodology of theology, it was intended for those who would become theologians. Based on Aristotle, it enabled theology to fit into the science curricula of the universities. Yet scholasticism became the basis for developing sermons and conveying matters of faith to the laity. Savonarola would grapple with the place of scholasticism in his role as a preacher, even as it was central to his studies and his love of Aquinas during his education. Savonarola would interact with the leading humanist of his day, Marsilio Ficino, who led a movement to replace scholasticism.

A second matter that has not been treated in this chapter was the controversy over reform in the Dominican Order and the sense of spiritual crisis voiced by some Dominicans. Giovanni Caroli (1428-1503), Dominican Prior of Florence’s Santa Maria Novella convent and founder of the Observant reform movement, had called for a return to apostolic zeal in the 1460s and been banished for his efforts. Savonarola’s predecessor, Antonino Pierozzi, Archbishop of Florence and prior of San Marco, had fully supported the Observant movement against much resistance. These controversies no doubt were part of the environment of the convent of San Domenico and gave Savonarola much insight into his later clerical reform message. Adding these notes to the
conclusion of Chapter Three has the purpose of demonstrating the full nature of Savonarola’s education as a Dominican.

Perhaps Savonarola saw a culture whose center was changing from the divine to the secular, but he also saw the corruption at the center of the institution that was supposed to bring God’s people to salvation. There was no concern for the widow, urban or rural poor, sick, or dispossessed.¹⁰⁰ From the conflicting values and views that Savonarola encountered came a voice that stood alone to pronounce “I” and, if there was a start of the prophetic voice at this time, it was in this ability to assert a unique identity that was apocalyptic, learned, and unafraid to speak a truth about the greed and corruption that divided people from their God. As yet, he had no audience for his voice nor was it yet the voice of a prophet.
Endnotes


2 Konrad Eisenbichler, trans., Girolamo Savonarola: A Guide to Righteous Living and Other Works, Vol. 10 Renaissance and Reformation Texts in Translation (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2003), 35-7 (letter to his father), 61-3 (canzone “On the Ruin of the World”), 64-8 (canzone “On the Ruin of the Church”). There were several sources for “On Contempt for the World.” From this point forward, each text is cited individually as it is discussed in the study.

3 Michelle M. Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study . . . .” Dominican Education before 1350 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1998), 18-9. See this brief summary of the importance of study, reading, treatment of books, and the importance of doctrinal knowledge to ground the preacher. This applied not just during the novitiate, but throughout the lifetime of the preacher.

4 Donald Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 11, fn10; 14; Roberto Ridolfi, The Life of Girolamo Savonarola, trans. Cecil Grayson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), 9. Weinstein gave the source of the April 25 letter as “Lettere e scritti apologetici, 5-6.” The author then quoted a letter of response to his father on the family reaction to his chosen vocation. It is possible there were other uncited letters by Savonarola as well. Ridolfi also confirmed a “short letter which has come down to us without any address or signature, but which may be accepted as his.” This suggests that there may have been still other letters during the period of concern for this study, 1468-81, but none have been identified or available in translation.


6 Weinstein, Savonarola: the Rise and Fall, 7-8. Weinstein identified both medical and religious texts authored by Michele. Girolamo grew up understanding that authoring works was expected.

7 Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, 8; Pasquale Villari, Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola [Vol. 1], trans. Linda Vallari (New York: Haskell House Publishers, Ltd., 1969), 4, fn 1; Ridolfi, The Life of Girolamo Savonarola, 2. Weinstein’s date of 1466 would have made Girolamo fourteen when Michele died, and Weinstein stated that Girolamo may already “have been attending a school in the city, probably the school of liberal arts directed by Battista Guarino and founded by Battista’s father Guarino da Verona, whom Michele had praised . . . .” Villari discussed several dates for Michele’s death, the earliest as 1461 when Girolamo would have been almost 10 years of age; he also cited documents that put the date between 1466 and 1468, when Girolamo would have been about 14 to 16 years of age. Ridolfi accepted 1468 as the date for Michele’s death, when Girolamo was 16. Ridolfi’s date would have allowed almost seven years under the guidance of his father Niccolo until Girolamo departed for the monastery, and seems ample time for his schooling especially if Girolamo had started Guarino’s school before Michele died, as Weinstein indicated. The date of 1466 Michele to have either died very recently or to still be alive for another short period and eases the problem of an inexact chronology across the biographers.

8 Kenneth R. Bartlett, A Short History of the Italian Renaissance (North York: University of Toronto Press, 2013),
9 Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, 4.

10 Paul F. Grendler, Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning 1300-1600 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1989), 256.

11 Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, 8


13 Grendler, Schooling, 119.


15 Grendler, Schooling, 136.

16 Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, 4.


18 Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, 3.

19 Witt, In the Footsteps of the Ancients, 38.

20 Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, 8.

21 Grendler, Schooling, 161.

22 Witt, In the Footsteps of the Ancients, 90-2.

23 Grendler, Schooling, 114-5, 136.


27 Bartlett, A Short History, 71.

28 Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, 5.

29 Bartlett, A Short History, 73-4; Watkins, 22.

30 Grendler, Schooling, 117-19.

31 Gehl, Humanism for Sale, Section 0.01.


36 Gehl, *Humanism for Sale*, Section 0.02. “In traditional pedagogy, every teacher was to some degree an author of the texts he used. Even texts in longstanding use were modified at almost every copying for the specific needs of a given classroom. Teachers in the first age of print were unwilling to relinquish this sovereign power to customize texts, even though the easy availability of printed textbooks encouraged the opposite behavior, standardization. Teachers could at every period create local, miniature markets.”

37 Gehl, *Humanism for Sale*, Section 0.01.


39 Mirela Radu, “Medical Background of a Dominican Preacher,” *Journal of Romanian Literary Studies* 16 (2019), 488. Radu cites John Abraham Heraud and Pasquale Villari for Michele’s instruction of Girolamo, but has no source for the particulars in this quote. However, Judson Knight in a brief “About this Person” for Science and Its Times Vol. 2: 700 to 1449 (2001), 162-3 confirms that d’Abano was “a professor of medicine at Padua” and “attempted a synthesis of Arab medicine, Greek philosophy, and the Catholic worldview that prevailed in the Europe of his day. He is remembered . . . for his efforts at making Padua one of the Western world’s centers for medical study.” Further there is reference to a translation of Aristotle and an attempt to reconcile Avicenna to Greek thought. However, he was brought before the Inquisition twice and declared guilty of heresy. See also


46 Peter Howard, “Preaching Magnificence in Renaissance Florence,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 61(2), 325-69. Savonarola admired his predecessor at the convent of San Marco, the Dominican Antonino Pierozzi. When Antonino later ascended to the position of archbishop of Florence, he preached on magnificence, endorsing approaches that kept the great families who benefited from their investment of great wealth in buildings from sins of pride and greed.


Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, 34.


Ridolfi, *The Life of Girolamo Savonarola*, 9. The sum of this unaddressed, unsigned letter, according to Ridolfi, was: “‘For what do you weep, blind fools, why do you lament, why do you murmur you who lie in darkness? . . . What can I say of you if you grieve at this, if not that you are my chief enemies, and even the enemies of virtue? If this is so, I can say to you only, Discedite a me . . . [Begone].’” He ends by exhorting the family to rejoice that God should have made him a doctor of souls rather than of bodies.”


M. Michele Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study . . .” *Dominican Education before 1350* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1998). Major changes were made only at councils attended by leading Dominicans from all the provinces. Thus it is unlikely that major changes to the preparation of novices were made in the fifteenth century. However, the separation of the convent of San Marco from the larger Tuscan provincial house would have had to be approved at this level. Mulchahey’s detailed history of the Dominican order was the source for much of the discussion of the course of education that Savonarola generally followed.

Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study . . .,” 106.

Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study . . .,” 75-8.

Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study . . .,” 59.

Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study . . .,” 100-2.

Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study . . .,” 194, 203.

Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study . . .,” 108.
Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study . . .,” 110-15, 119.

Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study . . .,” 120-22.


Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study . . .,” 108.


Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study . . .”, 493-4.

Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study . . .”, 496.


Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study . . .”, 486, 489.

Mulchahey, Girolamo Savonarola, viii.

Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning, 1-2. Greenblatt argued that the emergence of self-fashioning occurred in the sixteenth century, but the application of the concept of self-fashioning, as argued in this study, was evident at the time of Savonarola. There is no single moment when the late fifteenth century becomes the sixteenth century, nor was a single time the same in all places for all peoples of the Renaissance.


Grendler, Schooling, 113 ff. See 113 ff. for Grendler’s discussion of the medieval texts used to teach Christian morality. Among them is also the Chartula, “the first word of a verse treatise, De contemptu mundi,” attributed to the Cluniac monk Bernard of Morlaix, c. 1140.” This is, like the reference to Cato, an indicator of how powerful the sources Savonarola studied were to his view of the world.

Herbert Lucas, Fra Girolamo Savonarola, 6.

Savonarola, Del dispregio del Mondo, in Herbert Lucas, Fra Girolamo Savonarola, 6. In Latin, the title would be, De contemptu mundi. More will be said about this as a form of medieval literature, known as “complaint literature.”


Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, 12.

Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, 12.
“Bernard of Morlaix was certainly the author of the poems *De contemptu mundi*, *Carmina de Trinitate et de fide Catholica*, *Decastitate servanda*, *In libros Regum* and *De octo vitis*. He may also have written the poem *Mariale* and the prose *work Instructiosacerdotis* and the poem *Chartula nostra.*” See note 4 on the Chartula.

Grendler, *Schooling*, 113; Balnaves, *Bernard of Morlaix*, 21. Balnaves identified the Chartula by the name *De vanitate mundi*, or by the first two words *Chartula nostra*. Attributing the possible confusion of titles to the inclusion of the Chartula in a manuscript also containing *De contemptu mundi*, Balnaves stated:

It is a relatively short poem. It shows the same ingenuity in metre and rhyme as Bernard’s other poems, but its vocabulary is limited. It is totally lacking in the tropes and word plays which are prominent in all other poems. It displays none of Bernard’s classical learning, and there are no echoes of the De contempetu mundi, despite the similarity of theme. But it is a very different kind of poem from any others of Bernard. It is expressly written for and addressed to a young boy who has just entered the Cluniac Order. He could well have been as young as ten years.


Balnaves, *Bernard of Morlaix*, 68, citing John Peter, *Complaint and satire in early English literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 11. This is referred to by Balnaves as the basis for his own argument that *De contempetu mundi* was a complaint, a subgenre of satire. As is demonstrated in the analysis, however, elements of Savonarola’s texts have aspects of the satire to which Balnaves referred.


Savonarola, *Del dispregio del Mondo*, trans. Herbert Lucas, 6. In Latin, the title would be, *De contempetu mundi*. More will be said about this later as a form of medieval literature, known as “complaint literature.”


My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
Why so far from my call for help, from my cries of anguish?
My God, I call by day, but you do not answer;
by night, but I have no relief.


Balnaves, *Bernard of Morlaix*, 70.

96 Savonarola, *De ruina mundi*, trans. Eisenbichler, 63


100 Bartlett, *A Short History*, 69-70.
CHAPTER 4:

GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA’S PREACHING AND HIS MODELS

Moses . . . said to the Lord, “If you please, my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and tongue.” The Lord said to him: “Who gives one person speech? Who makes another mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it now I, the Lord? Now go, I will assist you in speaking and teach you what you are to say.”

Moses was considered the greatest prophet of the Old Testament, a man chosen by the Lord to be an intermediary for his people. He was chosen to bring the people into covenant with the Lord and give his Law. According to the Scriptures, however, Moses first had to lead the people out of Egypt and secure their release from slavery. To do that, Moses had to speak with the Lord’s words and authority. Because he had no gift for oratory, Aaron, his brother, eventually spoke the words given by the Lord to Pharaoh, while Moses represented the authenticity of the message and the authority to speak in God’s name. Of all that the word “prophet” implied, the true prophet of the Lord to the people required the authority and the inspired word to speak for Him. Chapter 4 asks, How Savonarola did gain the authority and voice necessary to represent himself as a prophet? Who were his models?

Savonarola, like Moses, faced the problem of oratory, the lack of a voice. Nor did he have a message of his own to deliver to the Florentines of the early 1480s. He did not possess the authority of God to speak on behalf of God to his people, except in traditional Dominican fashion. He had much to learn to become a preacher and a prophet. There were many potential models in a city and territory that provided a veritable marketplace of preachers and preaching.
Some of these found favor with those in power while others were candidates for expulsion. Popular and sometimes controversial preachers of his day and Dominicans of the recent past influenced Savonarola greatly, and several of their examples are discussed below. However, the biblical prophets were also models for Savonarola. This chapter concerns Savonarola’s initial failure to gain the hearts of Florentines and, within a few years, his success in developing both a message and a voice that were unique to him.

**Overview of Savonarola’s Career Path (1482-90)**

Savonarola began to preach in Florence in late 1482, but in less than two years he was judged a failure in his own estimation and that of his superiors. He was sent to preach in the countryside of San Gaminano in mid-1484 where, shortly after his journey there, he received his “call” to prophesy. Convinced of the message he was to deliver, Savonarola preached the Lenten sermons of 1485 and 1486 in an apocalyptic fashion. In Brescia and other small communities, his sermons began to attract increasingly larger audiences.

Between 1484 and 1486, Savonarola returned intermittently to Florence, his home base, but in 1487 he was recalled to San Domenico in Bologna to continue his studies toward the degree of master of sacred theology. His superiors had planned this earlier as part of his academic career path. He served in 1487 to 1489 in Bologna as master of students. Several times over these years, Savonarola crossed paths with the Dominican theologian Vincenzo Bandelli, first in 1481 at a disputation in Ferrara, then in 1482-83 when Bandelli was Savonarola’s prior at San Marco, and again in 1487 in his theological studies in Bologna, where Bandelli dismissed him from his theological studies, effectively ending Savonarola’s academic career path. Savonarola was then sent back to Ferrara in 1489. With Ferrara as his base, Savonarola resumed itinerant preaching assignments in Genoa, Brescia, and other towns. Then,
in 1490, he was called back to his former duties in San Marco at the request of Lorenzo de’ Medici.

This chapter addresses Savonarola’s career path during the period of 1482 to 1490. This period was effectively split in half: The period began with Savonarola’s preaching in Florence to an urban audience, the occasion of his failed preaching. The period ended with his preaching in the Tuscan countryside to people of pastoral and small town environments and his growing popularity. Savonarola’s perceived call to prophetic status divides the two periods.

**Savonarola’s Understanding of Prophets and Prophecy**

The study first considers how Savonarola regarded the prophet and prophecy and the growing knowledge and access of the laity to Scripture. Savonarola’s ability to establish common ground between himself and the laity was critical to his rise as a prophet. Thomas Aquinas defined prophecy through a complex set of theological propositions:

“[P]rophecy is a kind of knowledge impressed under the form of teaching on the prophet’s intellect” and the knowledge of the student is like the knowledge of the teacher, so nothing false comes under prophecy. . . . Prophecy is chiefly knowledge expressed in speech by which the prophet declares what God has taught him. . . . It is a gratuitous grace, not earned by merit nor given to everyone, but a divine light given to enable prophetic speech. . . . A prophet recognizes what is from God with “greatest certainty,” yet he does not know all, only what is necessary for the instruction of the people. . . . Only the will of the Holy Spirit is necessary for prophecy, not natural disposition, for God can create an entity and gives it prophetic grace. . . . No prerequisite is required for God to do this, not even a good life. . . . The false prophet is one who injures others. The true prophet tells no falsehoods since he is always inspired, but the false prophet is not always true.\(^5\)

Savonarola would not stray from either Scripture or Aquinas as he justified his later prophecy in Florence. In his 1495 *Compendium of Revelation*, Savonarola explained:

Before I begin what I have to say, the character of prophetic revelation must be clarified in order to understand these matters. Each one can then understand how God teaches prophets the things they preach to the people. . . . Future contingents
cannot be known by any natural light . . . First, he [the Lord] infuses a supernatural light into the prophet, a form of participation in eternity. From this the prophet discerns two things . . . that they [the messages from God] are true and that they come from God . . . . Second, God sets before the prophet in a clear way whatever he intends him to know or to predict, and he does this variously . . . . In these . . . ways, I have always grasped [these matters] as completely true and certain through that light’s illumination.\(^6\)

Girolamo’s experience of having no voice was completely biblical. For Savonarola to have believed that he created his own voice or bade it to occur at a particular time would have proved him a false prophet and guilty of heresy. It was, perhaps, this belief that enabled Savonarola to deny consistently that he claimed to be a prophet. Paul Strathern called him a “stickler for the truth” but also “devious” and “too clever for [his] own good.”\(^7\) However, the status of prophet was God’s to reveal, not Savonarola’s. Donald Weinstein called this “discovery of his apocalyptic voice” Savonarola’s own inspiration, but Savonarola spoke of it later as God’s gift to him.\(^8\)

From the perspective of a biblical scholar comes an explanation of the prophet’s relationship to God as the source of all prophecy and the call of the prophet. Although independent of thirteenth-century theology, the view is highly consistent with Aquinas’s theology:

As a rule, God is silent; His intention and design remain hidden from the mind of man. What comes to pass is a departure from the state of silence and aloofness, God’s turning from the conditions of concealment to an act of revealment . . . The fact that inspiration is independent of the will of the prophet expresses negatively and indirectly its transcendent nature. Positively, the moment of turning is understood as an expression of God’s will to communicate. The statement, “surely the Lord does nothing without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7), contains a thought which lies at the very root of biblical religion: “The Lord said: Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” (Gen. 18:17).\(^9\)

The prophet Amos spoke of the close relationship of God to his prophet. In Abraham’s case, the Lord was about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness and chose not to
conceal this from Abraham. The Lord also listened to Abraham’s plea to save the city if at least some righteous people lived in the city, although none could be discovered and the cities were ultimately destroyed. The relationship between the prophet and the Lord, thus, was extremely intimate and trusting but often not known to the people until God determined the time to speak of it. Savonarola himself referred to the book of Amos when discussing whether he was a prophet. Preachers brought knowledge of the biblical prophets to the laity.

Lay access to biblical knowledge and texts was also critical to Savonarola’s career in Florence, for Savonarola faced intense competition in the marketplace of preachers and prophets. The biblical knowledge of the lay population of the late medieval period was growing, as increased literacy and piety provided motivation to examine biblical texts directly. Preachers were important for bringing Scripture to the laity, especially those who lacked literacy, but, by Savonarola’s time and even earlier, preachers were not exclusive sources for biblical knowledge. The collaboration of secular and civic sources to bring religious education to the laity was complex. Even street entertainers brought religious content to the laity, sometimes accompanied by the denunciation of preachers but at other times with their approval:

Although better known for singing chivalric tales and bawdy songs, their repertoires also included religious or devotional works, often verse renditions of parts of the Bible or lives of saints. These compositions were closely linked to other performative genres—laude, later sacre rappresentazioni—and evidently enjoyed great popularity. Hence by the time the press arrived in the 1460s, already there was an eager audience for religious entertainment.

Many biblical texts circulated in Florence. They were not complete texts of Old and New Testaments, but “re-arrangements of biblical materials according to the liturgical calendar” and sometimes multiple versions and interpretations of the same materials by different writers. This was not a development of the later Reformation period, but a development made possible by
printers who disseminated these texts during the Catholic fifteenth century in Italy, France and Germany. One of Savonarola’s contemporaries, the Franciscan Bernardino of Feltre, preached the virtue of Christians who sought out biblical texts. In a 1493 sermon, Bernardino said:

> What does it mean, such an abundance of books filling every town and every house? Once it was forbidden to translate the Bible into vernacular and now it is put into print in vernacular. What could this mean other than that God in these dark and miserable times has given us so much light that it is not possible to make allowances for yourself?¹³

According to modern studies of lay and non-professional access to Scripture, laity and clergy cooperated in the dissemination of vernacular readings, meditations, and readings, and construction of manuscripts that met the needs of the laity and confraternities. Rather than restricting access to biblical texts, clerics aided the laity through translations. Dominico Cavalca, a Dominican of Pisa, wrote in a forward to his fifteenth-century translation of the *Acts of the Apostles*: “To satisfy the request of some devout persons (probably the members of one of the confraternities linked to the Dominican monastery) I decided to translate into ‘common and clear’ vernacular the book of the Acts of the Apostles.” He further stated that he changed the grammatical structure and explained some words to “grant a better access to this complex and multifaceted text.”¹⁴ Whether literacy or the desire for greater learning occurred first, the fifteenth century was marked by a lay demand for greater understanding of Scripture.

**Lay Confraternities and Mendicant Preaching**

Confraternities were ubiquitous, particularly in the second half of the fifteenth century. Active in Florence since the foundation of the guild republic in the late thirteenth century, the confraternities were lay brotherhoods that administered charitable services. From the beginning they were closely tied to the mendicant orders whose friars supervised them, and their membership came from the artisan and merchant classes.¹⁵ They also became sponsored by city
leaders, including Lorenzo de’ Medici, and evolved to have many functions, including
processional and carnival entertainment. Providing basic education in faith and morals
education remained central to their purpose. This was achieved by sermons given by and to lay
members, both youths and adults. By the 1470s, there was significant participation by a new
generation of lay Christian humanists who composed sermons and used the confraternity
platform to preach on a variety of religious and civic topics. The humanists developed a “new
kind of sermon” outside the guidelines of scholastic traditions. Rather than focusing on
theological points, the humanists focused on the biblical theme of “the love of God and the
emotional yearning for the divine.” In these sermons, the listener heard “Christ . . . represented
not only as a religious figure but also as a political one.” They also heard less about the
theological positions of the Church Fathers and Doctors and more about the natural religious
impulses of the ancient Greeks and Romans and their role as ancient theologians, or prisci
theologiae, whose beliefs could only be perfected with the coming of Christ, his sacrifice, and
the Church.

Marsilio Ficino was the origin for much of the development of lay humanist theology
from the mid-1470s to 1480s. He was also involved in the work of the confraternities and new
directions for preaching. Ficino was ordained as a priest by 1473 and, later in 1487, made a
canon of the Cathedral Santa Maria. He was the central figure in the Laurentian circle, a group
that formed around Lorenzo de’ Medici to discuss philosophy and theology and also in the lay
confraternities. Lorenzo himself was greatly influenced by Ficino’s philosophy, the prisca
theologia, that tried to unify early Christianity with the “ancient theology” of Plato and his
predecessors Zoroaster, Orpheus, Hermes Trismegistus, and others. Ficino himself had been
influenced by other neo-Platonists already in Florence who brought a tradition from the early
Church Fathers, both Greek and Latin, of admiring Plato for his “special insight” into Christianity. His great work was *De Christiana religion* and at times he skirted condemnation for heresy. A result of Ficino’s influence on Florentine humanists was to de-emphasize the importance of much of scholastic preaching—its dependence on medieval sources for authority, its “devotion” to arguing points of theology *ad infinitum*, its effect of moving Christian piety away from the Scriptures and practices of the early Church, among many effects.

Ficino was a preacher, but he used his influence to promote an active role for the Christian laity through the Christian confraternities. Of importance here, however, is that in the climate of the late fifteenth century, making a connection with the divine was a goal of the pious Christian. Regardless of the particular means, the laity was seeking and using previously unavailable ways of making that connection. Equipped with literacy and the printing press, the laity had means by which they could directly tap the Scriptures, and lay movements were overcoming the limitations of a corrupt Church hierarchy. The lay preachers even addressed the papacy itself in sermons intended for the confraternity audience. The leading humanist Marsilio Ficino led a lay confraternity where his students preached.

An example of a rhetorical exercise given as a youth sermon came from Ficino’s student, Giovanni Cavalcanti, and was addressed to Pope Sixtus IV in 1473:

Sixtus, most honourable and Holy father, you taught me when I was very young to suffer the most severe torments in the name of Christ; now, in control of so many great things, you must come to the assistance of the collapsing Church of the same Christ.²²

This passage illustrated the increasingly close connection between religious conviction and political concern. Cavalcanti also criticized the “avarice of former popes which has almost destroyed the Christian religion.”²³ A comparison to the verses of Savonarola at about the same time (“On Contempt of the Church,” 1472) showed that both youths were of like mind. Edelheit
argued that the lay sermons responded to the crisis to Christianity from both external events (for example, Turkish advancement) and internal corruption that was felt by the laity.

A second example from 1474 came from Giovanni Nesi, a well known Florentine aristocrat. This sermon on the Eucharist was delivered to members of the confraternity of St. Antonio of Padua. The sermon demonstrated the absence of references to the Fathers and Doctors of the Church and the lack of scholastic argumentation. Rather its goal was to reach the ordinary member of the laity:

Firstly, I shall explain what this Eucharist is according to my poor talent, and I shall develop this discussion, as much as time permits. Then, I shall briefly explain, as much as the divine power enables me, what our disposition and preparation for taking the spiritual food should be. And finally, we shall arrive at the most humble act of washing the feet, which is celebrated by us today following the example of our benevolent Lord: these things, to the extent that my feeble faculty can see them, will put an end to my inept speech.24

Such sermons were common in Florence. Many of the lay intellectuals had intense interest in theology, including the missteps of the mendicants who followed scholastic methods of preaching. Scholastic methods that parsed theology into divisions and subdivisions, these Christian humanists maintained, effectively “hid” the real meaning that the biblical message should have for Christians.

The sermons given by humanists in confraternities had the purpose of disseminating their concepts of religion to ordinary people in a style and structure that was accessible to those who were not theologically educated. Instead of dividing attention between the biblical theology and the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, the sermons focused on biblical passages and related examples from classical Roman and Greek authors. There was reaction and opposition by mendicants, who, themselves had a reform agenda, although not the same agenda as the Christian humanists.25 While mendicants had worked for religious reform of the Church for
many decades in Florentine civic life, the confraternities emerged to provide an alternative reform experience for the laity.  

**Role Models for Savonarola**

While the lay sermons were playing a greater role in bringing the Scriptures to Florentines, Florence and northern Italy had many itinerant preachers of high reputation who also provided competition that Savonarola had to face. His own Dominican predecessors were significant influences on his directions after he arrived in Florence, as were the Franciscan itinerants. Several preachers had recently been canonized or were in the process of being canonized, keeping memories of their saintliness and the popularity of their preaching alive: These included Dominicans Antonino Pierozzi (1389-1459) and Giovanni Dominici (1357-1419) and Franciscan San Bernardino of Siena (1380-1444). Giovanni Coroli (1428-1503), exiled Dominican prior of Florence’s monastery, Santa Maria Novella, continued the Dominican reform movement that Savonarola would address in early 1490s. Among near contemporaries against whom Savonarola would have been measured were: Giovanni of Capistrano (1386-1476) and Giacomo of Marcche (1394-1476). Bernardino of Feltre (1439-1494), namesake of Bernardino of Siena, was an active preacher at Savonarola’s time, as was the Augustinian Fra Mariano of Genazzano (nd), Lorenzo de’ Medici’s favorite preacher. Bernardino was considered a rabble rouser and expelled from Florence for a period late in the 1480s. This list is not exhaustive. Community competition for the best preachers was implemented through contracts between preachers and communities for the sermons for Advent, Lent, and other feasts. Savonarola was, therefore, attempting to join this group of preachers as an unknown and inexperienced preacher in 1482. Although impeccably credentialed as a Dominican academic, Savonarola would need to learn to preach to the particular audiences of the sophisticated city.
The mendicants had to learn to preach in order to be recognized among their peers. An anonymous Franciscan friar preached once in May 1493 at the time Savonarola was preaching. He recorded, in his diary, his own process of moving from inexperience in the 1480s to maturity in preaching in the 1490s. Nothing is known of his ambitions, only his satisfaction at having achieved a solid reputation as a preacher by the early 1500s. His documentation gives insight into the process Savonarola might have considered in 1482, as he began his preaching career. First, the anonymous preacher recorded his thoughts after almost every sermon: the location and date, the schema (theme, divisions/distinctions, authorities, and exempla/stories and metaphors), and the reactions of the audience. Second, the anonymous friar sought models to emulate among the popular Franciscans preaching contemporaneously: Cherubino of Spoleto (1414-84) and Roberto Caraccioloda Lecce (1425-95). Roberto’s sermons were available in print and manuscript form, and the anonymous friar might have attended Cherubino’s sermons because they both traveled to the same locations. The anonymous preacher looked for new topics to add to his course of sermons. Cherubino’s sermons fostered devotion to the Virgin Mary. The anonymous friar particularly looked to Roberto for frightening sermons (on the verdict of Judgment, the wrath of God, Mary Magdalena, the Passion of Christ) that drew out the audience’s emotional response. Savonarola, too, practiced the habit of recording reactions to his sermons.

How did preachers establish their reputations and by what criteria were they judged? Perhaps the most influential preacher of the fifteenth century, Bernardino of Siena, provided a perspective on the criteria for successful preaching performance that Savonarola would have as context as he attempted to carve out a niche for himself. The people of Siena “had an excellent chance of seeing a miracle performed by the wonder-working ‘prophet,’” for Bernardino was
regarded as “tamquam propheta” (just like a prophet) by no less an individual than the future Pope Pius II, Enea Silvio Piccolomini. Bernardino had completed his preaching by 1450; Savonarola would not begin his preaching for another three decades.

**Savonarola’s Early Preaching and Assignment to Florence**

At Santa Maria in Ferrara in 1481, as a *studens formalis*, Savonarola was a junior lector. In this position, he lectured and preached within the convent under the guidance of the teaching master for students and the master of novices. Savonarola also had the opportunity to attend the 1481 Dominican provincial chapter meeting in Ferrara. Upon completion of his novitiate in 1482, one of his first public assignments was to take part in the Dominican General Chapter meeting in Bologna where he represented the Dominicans of Ferrara. There he participated in a disputation with Vincent Bandelli, prior of San Marco in Florence, and other brothers.

Every Dominican learned the practice of disputation in the classroom from the time of founder and saint, Dominic Guzman. Disputation was the order’s decision-making methodology for theological issues. Novices were well prepared to participate in disputations, for disputations in the *studia Bibliae* were to be conducted once every two weeks. Savonarola, during the formal debate in Bologna, delivered an attack on the corruption of the Church, a view widely shared throughout northern Italy. His remarks were met with sympathy, and his performance impressed Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola as well as Vincenzo Bandelli who was prior at San Marco, soon to become Savonarola’s convent. Pico became and remained an admirer.

By the time Savonarola left Ferrara for the General Chapter Meeting in Bologna in 1482, his commitment to reform of the Church and clergy had not diminished. Savonarola had been ordained for about five years and had celebrated the Eucharist many times. He had also heard
confessions as he studied his pastoral role. These experiences, no doubt, brought him to a deeper understanding of his pastoral duties, but within a somewhat narrow segment of the population.

Because of political turmoil (Venice was threatening to invade Ferrara), Savonarola’s return to Ferrara from Bologna in 1482 would have been dangerous. He was sent instead to the convent of San Marco in Florence to become lector principalis on biblical exegesis. Savonarola was, in effect, an exile to Florence because of the threat of war, a foreigner and stranger to Florence whose life had been mapped by Ferrara, Bologna, and the wars of Milan and Venice. He would later write that he was a “stranger in a strange land,” as Moses had been during his self-imposed exile in the land of Midian as he fled Pharaoh. In the early 1490s, Savonarola again reflected on this status: “Florence was but a grain of sand in a vast land, and in any case he, the foreigner, would remain while the citizen [Lorenzo] would be the one to go.”

These experiences also contributed to his “great and daring ambitions for reform and the renewal of virtue.” Although characterized by some historians as an isolated, introverted youth, Donald Weinstein has never accepted that portrait. Rather Savonarola’s passion for reform as expressed in his early writings persisted in a message for the Church and clergy to return to the life of the apostles and their evangelical poverty. This was the general agenda of the Observant movement. Since the time that he had entered the order in San Domenico, Savonarola had been committed to strict poverty. Lauro Martines described Savonarola’s arrival in 1482 on foot “as a statement of his commitment to poverty and humility,” according to the original rule of St. Dominic. Yet he would find San Marco compromised on the matter of apostolic poverty and the practice of austerity. Among other lax behaviors, the resulting practices concerning wealth and ownership of property demonstrated that the pressure for reform had not been taken to heart by the convent. San Marco in its most recent affiliation in the
Dominican order had become attached to the Lombard congregation, a “conventual,” or unreformed, convent.

Both Franciscans and Dominicans had distinguished their reformed convents by the term “observant” since the 1300s, but the term did not necessarily indicate consistent reform across mendicant communities either regionally or locally. The observant movement was part of the larger lay and monastic reform effort that was the context of Savonarola’s career path as a prophet. It was a broad movement of “clerics and lay people, monks and other religious, women and men as important protagonists in a larger story.” Mixson argued that observant reform “proved an explosive and unpredictable force, [that] shaped, channeled and resisted [moral corruption] in ways distinct to the 15th century.” For the mendicant orders, generally, the observant movement meant a return to the “spiritual foundations, and to the rules and statutes prescribed for [their] way of life.” Among the individual preachers who had been observant were the saints, Catherine of Siena, Bernardino of Siena, and Savonarola’s Dominican predecessors. A tug of war over the poverty within the Order of Preachers had led Giovanni Dominici (1357-1419), cardinal and Dominican theologian of the early fourteenth century, to establish the reform movement known as “observant” in Italy. Antonino Pierozzi (1389-1459), Florentine archbishop and also prior of San Marco, had also led the observant movement, in spite of having made practical compromises on the poverty of the convent of San Marco to allow the monastery to survive.

There were brothers at San Marco who favored a separation from the Lombard association in order to return to a more ascetic rule. Savonarola had been dismayed at the laxity of the practice at San Marco. Mendicants had relaxed their commitment to the early Christian model of chastity, obedience, and particularly poverty. Now in 1482 as he arrived at
Florence, Savonarola witnessed the effects of the failure to practice the strict vows each friar had taken during his profession to the order, including personal ownership of property. Savonarola provided an example that other brothers began to admire:

[W]ith Savonarola there came into San Marco a new spirit of true poverty, a new feeling of brotherly love. So much so that the most beautiful of the precepts of the Divine Master . . . ['I give you this rule; that you love one another'] . . . was revived in that house by the exhortations and teachings of the new lecturer.  

**Savonarola’s Responsibilities at San Marco**

The Scriptures were the primary focus of learning in the Dominican *schola*, not only for the novice, but also for working Dominicans who attended lectures in whatever area their itinerant routes took them. Two lectures were given each day. At San Marco as lector of biblical exegesis, Savonarola was responsible for the first of these two daily lectures. His task was to explain the Scriptures, “and these he knew and understood better than any other scholar of his day, so it is no wonder that he gave his pupils the greatest satisfaction.”

Besides teaching biblical exegesis in his academically-oriented post, Savonarola also instructed the novices on logic and philosophy. By 1484, he had written various philosophical essays, or *compendia*, for his students on a variety of topics, using Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas as foundations. By this time, writings that represented the Order were to be reviewed by a superior; however, Savonarola’s writings had not risen to this level of notice being based on Aristotle’s writings rather than original with Savonarola. Savonarola’s biographers, until Villari, did not regard them highly. Each *compendium* focused on a different subject, such as: natural and moral philosophy, government, logic, and physical science. The essays, following a scholastic structure, consisted of several subparts, or books. Weinstein said of the final part of the *Compendium of Morals*, entitled *On Politics and Government (De politica et regno)*, that its
brevity made it seem almost a postscript, but gave “some insight into Savonarola’s thinking about government and society long before he set foot on the political stage and even longer before his ideas about government came to be part of the canon of Renaissance political thought.”

In addition to holding the position as lector of biblical exegesis, Savonarola was also appointed master of novices soon after his arrival in Florence, presumably in 1482 or 1483, although sources do not indicate the exact year. The work of the master of novices was substantively different than that of lector. As conceived of by Humbart of Romans, the position of master of novices was to teach the novice “about both the exterior man and the interior man.” The master of novices was to shape the heart and soul of the novice into that of the Dominican by providing a learning environment that transformed the interior state of the novice. The master was to frame “a correct attitude toward learning,” leading the novice to voluntarily turn away from the secular sciences to a love of the divine science. The means for accomplishing this were assigned readings like Augustine’s *Confessions*, the lives of the Fathers of the Church, the legends of the saints, the *Summa de vitiis* and *Summa de virtibus* of William Peraldus, and others that touched upon shaping the interior life. The master typically instructed novices to select and memorize one or two passages and understand them. The assumption from early in the order’s history was that such activities would in some way seep into the heart of the novice to transform him spiritually. There was, of course, a ritual component to the position of master of novices. The processes of acceptance into the order, the act of robing, and behavior during confession, meals, sleep, and prayer that Savonarola had himself learned as a new novice were now his responsibility to teach to others. The novices were to read Humbart’s
Instructiones novitorum, the manual that also detailed the responsibilities of the master of novices.\textsuperscript{57}

Savonarola began his Dominican career as an academic rather than as an itinerant preacher. As a result, he had little experience of the lay audiences that were to be his primary audiences. He may also have been less familiar with the new directions of lay preaching that had been taking place in the confraternities. There were also distinctions in styles of preaching between the mendicant orders. While the Franciscans were acknowledged to be more affective in their preaching, Dominicans were scholarly, rational, and rooted in study. Savonarola at this time remained true to this heritage and to scholastic discourse.\textsuperscript{58} As he taught, he was careful to ground his arguments in Scripture and other medieval authorities, and quickly won the respect of his brothers through his ascetic practice and his ability to inspire them. His lectures, often given in the garden, were almost sermons, for his position had given him a sort of pulpit.\textsuperscript{59} Judging from Ridolfi’s account of Savonarola’s arrival to deliver lessons to his brothers in the garden of San Marco with tears in his eyes, Savonarola’s experience of reading and reflecting upon Scripture probably had an intensely emotional dimension. Some characterized his preparation as a mystical experience.\textsuperscript{60} It is likely that Savonarola’s preparation to shape the external and internal dimensions of spirituality of the friars eventually carried over into his goals for preaching to the laity.

**Savonarola’s Early Preaching**

Savonarola finally began his preaching career late in 1482, with occasional Advent sermons to his brothers and the nuns in the nearby Convent of the Murate. He was already looking toward other preachers for models. His 1482 meditations treated themes previously made popular by Bernardino of Siena and Giovanni of Capistrano.\textsuperscript{61} In fact, it would probably
have been difficult to avoid a comparison to Bernardino’s Florentine sermons of 1424 and 1425 as well as Bernardino’s reputation for sermons in Siena and other Tuscan communities in the 1430s to 1450s.

One of Savonarola’s early followers suggested that the Augustinian Fra Mariano of Genazzano would be a suitable model for Savonarola. Mariano was the favored preacher of Lorenzo de’ Medici. As an example of what the educated Florentine expected from the preacher, Mariano was studied for his “words, phrases, and gestures” and “his lines from the Latin poets were declaimed with much elegance; and he was lavish of quotations from Plato and Aristotle.” Such a model was quickly rejected by Savonarola because of these vanities. Savonarola preached using citations from Scripture. He was an observant, one who tried to live according to the practices of the early Church. Observant preachers also integrated ideas of humanism, civic religion, and reform into their sermons. They generally believed that the sermon was critical to transforming the attitudes and behavior of Christians and was the path to ecclesiastical as well as personal reform.

Bernardino of Siena, a model for Savonarola, was observant and was unique even among observant preachers because he adapted the sermon to the needs of his listeners. He used biblical themes, rather than strictly following liturgical traditions. A course of Bernardino’s Florentine sermons for 1424 and 1425 numbered fifty-eight and forty sermon titles respectively on confession, the judgment of the world, the passion of Christ, preparation for the Eucharist, the Virgin Mary, and other topics. Several sermons concerned the “Name of Jesus,” a central theme for Bernardino’s preaching for the next several decades (for example, “That one must ever have the Name of Jesus in one’s heart, work, and words . . . ,” “How one should love the Name of Jesus,” and “On the power of the Name of Jesus”). The sermon titles for preaching in Siena and
Padua in 1425 and 1443 show that they were similarly prolific in number.\textsuperscript{64} The sermons of 1427 in Sienna over a seven-week period were preached in the piazza because the numbers in the audiences could not be accommodated by churches. The sermons were recorded as reportationes, “a privileged homiletic source . . . that . . . capture[d] dynamic and intimate exchanges between preacher and audience.”\textsuperscript{65} These detailed reports by someone witnessing the sermon in the audience illustrated, according to Carolyn Muessig, the many methods that Bernardino incorporated into his preaching. Such reports demonstrated how Bernardino worked to blur the “distinctions between orality [hearing] and literacy [reading],” in order to meet the needs of those “who could read with their eyes . . . [and] those who could ‘read’ with their ears.”\textsuperscript{66} Savonarola was not ready to integrate the many methods employed by Bernardino to reach his audience.

Savonarola preached again at the Murate in Lent of 1483 and delivered a second series of Lenten sermons in the church of Orsanmichele.\textsuperscript{67} The Lenten sermons were followed by five sermons for Pentecost and Ascension. Except for the first Lenten sermons, the scriptural texts upon which these additional sermons were based are not indicated by the sources. Major performance indicators for the successful preacher during Lent were physical tears and overall weeping behaviors and vocalizations that resulted from the preacher’s sermon. Lamentations, the book Savonarola chose for the first course of his 1483 Lenten sermons, consisted of five books. Savonarola preached only on “Book 1: The Desolation of Jerusalem.” Lamentations focused on the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the exile of Jews to Babylon. The book had been linked to Jeremiah who, after Jerusalem’s desolation, “sat weeping and lamenting this Lamentation over Jerusalem.”\textsuperscript{68} Book 1 contained both expressions of penitence and
complaints of God’s harsh treatment of his people. A few excerpts illustrate the power of the Scripture itself to prompt an emotional response from preacher and audience alike:

How solitary sits the city, once filled with people.  
She who was great among the nations is now like a widow . . . .  
She weeps incessantly in the night, her cheeks damp with tears. (Lam 1:1-2)

Jerusalem has sinned grievously . . . .  
She herself groans out loud, and turns away . . . .  
‘Look, O Lord, at my misery; how the enemy triumphs! (Lam 1:8-9)

‘Look, O Lord, and pay attention to how I have been demeaned! (Lam 1:11)

He [the Lord] proclaimed a feast against me to crush my Young men;  
My Lord has trodden in the wine press virgin daughter Judah.  
For these things I weep—My eyes! My eyes! They stream with tears! (Lam 1:15-6)

The Lord is in the right; I had defied his command. (Lam 1:18)

Without actual sermons, it is not possible to state how Savonarola treated the book. Yet the verses of *Lamentations* I might have been sufficient in themselves to produce extreme sorrow in an audience and various types of audience reactions under the leadership of a capable preacher, such as cries from the audience, chants or songs, and particularly tears and weeping.

Lay audiences were, after all, accustomed to perform with tears and weeping during Lenten sermons. Such responses would have been interpreted as external indicators of the internal heart of the penitent. Tears testified to sincerity or contrition in the late medieval to Renaissance period and, during Lenten seasons, the preacher no doubt made greater effort to produce these indicators of successful preaching. Their occurrence in confession was also important to convincing the confessor of the penitent’s internal state. Bernardino of Siena had said of behaving contritely in confession:

If you cannot feel sorrow of the body, then at least [feel it] in your heart, and if you cannot weep with [your] bodily eyes then at least [weep] in [your] heart.
Skepticism about this link between the visible tears and vocalizations to internal sincerity was growing in some parts of the population by Savonarola’s time, as evidenced by the later ridicule of Savonarola’s followers as *piagnone*, or weepers. For the most part, however, these external signs were evidence that a preacher had reached the heart, and this belief in tears and weeping persisted.

Savonarola’s critique of his own preaching at this time was echoed by the lack of enthusiasm of his audiences and by their decline in size to perhaps a few dozen individuals. Among Savonarola’s summaries of his own effectiveness were notes on his “gravelly voice” and his Ferrarese speech (probably a dialect that was difficult to understand). Further, had he been able to produce the tears and weeping appropriate to the Lenten season, Savonarola would probably have noted this in his remarks. Weinstein compared Savonarola’s performance as a preacher unfavorably to that of San Bernardino of Siena’s “folksy, conversational manner, homely vignettes from everyday life and simple moral instruction.”

**Bernardino of Siena’s “Cult of the Divine Name”**

Bernardino’s cult of the Divine Name illustrated how the passionate Franciscan preacher worked his audience in the conduct of his ministry. First, Bernardino’s preaching performance was fundamentally tied to more than producing tears and weeping. For Bernardino, success meant making the baptism of the laity into a real, continuing conversion. He would lay down a series of sermons in a city aimed at having the audience receive the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. All the sermons would strive to repeat “the saving truths of the gospel message . . . to strengthen Christian faith.” When Bernardino entered a city, the event was welcomed:

Under the standard or banner of the Name of Jesus, the sermons of Bernardine became the public event for a month or more as his pulpit was set up beside a specially built altar in the Piazza communal, the very heart of the city in those
days. . . . [T]he ordinary sermon averaged three to four hours; the vivacious and
dramatic presentation entertained as well as instructed while his mastery of the
mimed gesture made his meaning clear to everyone of his listeners.74

Bernardino regarded the sermon in an Augustinian manner, as a form of meditation, in which, as
the “mind concentrates on what the preacher says, the person can ascend to heavenly
discourse.”75

The sermons on the Name of Jesus were the central focus of the course of sermons and
Bernardino had a tablet “with the monogram of the Name, YHS, set in a twelve-rayed sun blazing
on a field of blue.” After celebrating a mass, the audience formed a procession through the town
and made a general confession. There was more to this ritual participation that might involve as
many as 30,000 individuals. However, the details here demonstrate that this was a well-planned
and executed religious event that was community wide.76 Whether Savonarola looked directly to
Bernardino’s example is not known, but elements in Savonarola’s later preaching reflected
similarities in the processions and music accompanying his preaching. All this, however, was
still several years in the future. The drama of Bernardino’s sermons, however, caused an
Augustinian friar, Andrea Biglia (1395-1435) to charge Bernardino with “a sort of idolatry and
magic,” for which Bernardino was summoned to Rome to answer charges.77 This would not be
the first example of the vigilance of Church hierarchy with innovative preaching as Savonarola
would directly experience.

Bernardino had been a true Franciscan itinerant preacher for several decades. Savonarola
had not yet had this experience and, unlike Bernardino, had continued to preach in the scholastic
fashion that he had been taught. From the 1420s through the 1440s, Bernardino visited large
numbers of communities in northern Tuscany and prepared for his sermons by learning the
conditions of these local communities and collecting examples from the lives of these particular
communities for his sermons. He employed local expressions in his vernacular sermons and spoke to the audience ("direct discourse") and was accepted by many in his audience as a "familiar friend." Bernardino incorporated invented dialogues between himself and imagined members of the community to explore doubts and questions, as well as to entertain his listeners. He used the familiar "you"—and familiar settings. Savonarola had employed dialogues in his sermons, but in the pulpits of Murate and Orsanmichele, his use of "mi" and "ti" brought laughter from both the lay audience and fellow brothers. A preacher could not simply imitate a method, but needed to integrate method with message.

**Assignment to Tuscan Countryside**

Savonarola was invited to preach the Lenten sermons in 1484 at the basilica of San Lorenzo. This time his biblical text was the *Song of Songs*, attributed to Solomon. Weinstein characterized the *Song of Songs* as the "soul’s search for God’s illuminating love." The imagery was that of a wedding party, with songs of praise for the beauty of the bride, and a metaphor of her as a garden. This theme, the soul’s search for God, had been developed in the preaching of lay humanists, reflecting Marsilio Ficino’s philosophy of love in the 1470s. There is no indication that Savonarola chose the text for that reason, but this chapter has already discussed Savonarola’s deep concern with the exterior and the interior person in his fashioning of young Dominicans. The theme of yearning for the divine would have been consistent with his goals for preaching to the laity as well as to his young brothers.

In delivering a sermon in the parish church of the Medici, Savonarola was preaching to a highly critical, humanist-educated, and patrician audience that expected a performance worthy of this Medici church, classical allusions and all. The audience in the Medici church wanted "a more civilized method of preaching . . . [with] subtle arguments, quotations from the poets,
something unusual, whereas this foreign monk only gave them verses from the Bible. "83 Again, Savonarola was disappointed in the response of the audience. 84 His audiences dwindled:

I had neither the voice, nor the strength, nor the ability to preach; as a result everyone was bored when I delivered my sermons . . . just a few simple men on one side of the aisle, and a few poor women on the other, came to hear me. 85

Only gradually did Savonarola, like confraternity and more humanistic preachers, grow impatient with aspects of scholastic arguments required in the traditional Dominican sermon.

With two, perhaps three, years of total experience in preaching in addition to whatever sermonizing he did during his novitiate, Savonarola was still in the infancy of his preaching. He possessed the zeal for rescuing the sinful city from God’s punishment but was unable to develop a voice of his own and unwilling to work to the humanist expectations of the educated elite. The example of Bernardino of Siena’s masterful preaching had been in evidence for more than a quarter of a century, including the power of his cult of the Divine Name to knit a community across a series of sermons, yet Savonarola had not yet developed his own approach to bind the lay audiences to himself.

When Savonarola completed his planned preaching for 1483, the poor feedback on his preaching confirmed that he did not yet have the skills to evoke responses from his audiences as did the popular preachers. In response, his superiors sent him in 1484 into the countryside to preach, perhaps not as an exile, but at least as a form of humiliation. The year 1484 was fateful for Savonarola for another reason, however. Pope Sixtus IV died in 1484. Rather than elect a reformer, the cardinals, influenced by money, had elected Innocent VIII (r. 1484-92). This was a pope who acknowledged his natural children and committed himself to their aggrandizement and his own. As in the years before and during his novitiate, Savonarola wrote privately to express
intense emotion. Reflecting his distress that reform would not come to the Church by way of Innocent VIII, Savonarola composed this prayer for the Church:

Jesu, sweet comfort and highest good of every suffering heart, look upon Rome with perfect love. Alas! See with pity in what a tempest Thy bride is tossed, and how much blood, alas! Must be shed if Thy merciful hand, delighting ever in forgiveness, does not return her to that peace she knew when young and poor . . . . Save Thy Holy Roman Church, which the devil is destroying.\(^86\)

As in his private poetic writing from his early years at San Marco, Savonarola added an additional verse, choosing to observe Italy from above, a point external to Florence as an individual conscious of his own foreign status might:

I saw Italy at war, with famine everywhere; God lets loose . . . the plague, and his judgment falls upon us; these are the fruits of your way of life, blind and helpless from your little faith. Alas, alas, alas! All fear of God is lost.

Astrologers and prophets, learned and holy men, worthy preachers, all have foretold your tears; in your folly you seek delights of song and music; but sunk in vice you have no virtue in you. Alas, alas, alas! All fear of God is lost.\(^87\)

In these verses, Savonarola did not speak of the renewal of the Church. At this time, in fact, Savonarola gave no thought to a plan for the reform of the Church, based on this limited text. It would not be until 1490 that Savonarola would realize that his Dominican predecessors, Antonino Pierozzi and Giovanni Dominici, had given him the place to begin the internal reform of the Church, the convent of San Marco. For now, however, he was about to start his itinerant career, travelling on foot to various Tuscan communities. Although still tied to San Marco, Savonarola traveled approximately 30 miles south to his new assignment in San Gimignano. There Girolamo Savonarola first perceived his destiny to become a prophet.\(^88\)

**The Call to Prophecy**

There are several accounts of Savonarola’s 1484 call to prophecy. According to Ridolfi, Savonarola “awaited but the sign; and that sign came.”\(^89\) Savonarola would claim in 1495 that
he had received his call to prophesy at this time, i.e. 1484, but he made no public claim. What was clear to Savonarola in 1484 was that he needed a voice of his own. It was also clear that reform of the Church, his only unique message at this time, would not come from the papacy of Innocent VIII. Ridolfi wrote that Savonarola signaled in his laude, O anima cecata, a determination to end his private, but “proud cry of revolt and struggle . . . ‘To take up arms.’”

Savonarola experienced in a monastery garden in San Giorgio “a sudden vision . . . [of] the many reasons (they were at least seven) showing that some scourge of the Church was at hand.” Ridolfi added, “[I]t is quite clear that he [was] speaking, not of a process of reasoning, but of sudden revelation.” Savonarola later stated, “[F]rom this moment on I fell to thinking much of these things.”

Weinstein acknowledged that Savonarola’s “sudden thought ‘about seven reasons’ why the Church was soon to be scourged and renewed’” occurred while he was composing a sermon during a visit to San Giorgio. However, Weinstein did not characterize Savonarola’s insight as a divine revelation or a prophecy of a great renewal of the Church. In Weinstein’s chronology, this new insight occurred after Savonarola composed his “Prayer for the Church.” By this time, the “Prayer’s” apocalyptic scenario had already been incorporated into his preaching. Likewise, Villari did not describe Savonarola’s newly formed conviction about his role as a “prophetic call.” Villari reported that Savonarola preached in 1485-86 on ideas that had come from his study of Scripture. These were the ideas which had so long filled his soul, and pronounced the words which were to become his war cry and the standard of his whole life: namely, first, that the Church will be scourged; secondly, that it will be speedily regenerated; thirdly that all this will come to pass quickly.
Savonarola’s authority, according to Villari’s account, came from the “history of the Hebrew people, . . . [with its] unceasing series of transgressions and punishments” forgiven by God.  

As Ridolfi indicated, Savonarola’s determination to do something had been pushed to the fore and was catalyzed by the election of Innocent VIII. It was as if Savonarola considered his own role as a Dominican in a new way: always calling for reform of the Church, Savonarola now seemed to realize that if he did nothing, no one else would either. As he preached in San Gimignano from 1484 to 1485, he worked to make the people commit to this message. Villari stated:

Although [San Gimignano’s] inhabitants may have lacked the exquisite refinement of the Florentines, at least their simplicity was uncorrupted by over-study and sophistry. Their religious ideas were not drowned in a sea of classic phraseology, nor were they . . . content to hear nothing from their preachers save skilful syntax and a musical flow of words. . . . Therefore, among the towers of San Gimignano, Savonarola could raise his voice more freely and with greater effect.

With increasing confidence and success, Savonarola continued to preach, and his superiors in San Marco again assigned him to preach the Lenten sermons in 1486. His sermons were evolving and he tapped into the needs of his audience. They proved to be as concerned as he was about the condition of their world. Other preachers of the period had addressed the personal salvation of the people and reception of the sacraments; they had not addressed the salvation of the Church. They did not preach an apocalyptic message. By 1486, Savonarola had perfected his three-fold message: the scourge of the Church, the need for renewal of the Church, and the rapid onset of this renewal. Savonarola did not, however, preach a message of an imminent end of earthly time and the coming of a heavenly city or kingdom of God, accepting that none but God knew the exact date or time. Savonarola’s apocalyptic message was that the renewal that was to come would be to the Church. There is little documentation of his sermons
in San Gimignano in late 1484 or 1485. Aside from knowing that he preached his three-fold message, the only other matter that is known is his specific use of the *Book of Revelation* in his sermons.

It is apparent that during this period he needed to test out a new voice and new means of drawing forth an audience response. Ridolfi, based on notes for several 1486 Lenten sermons in San Gimignano, reported that Savonarola began his prophetic sermons by “expressing . . . that the Church must be castigated and reformed with the greatest speed” and “that the words of Luke, ‘And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees’, would come to pass in their own day”:

> We expect at any moment a scourge, or Antichrist, or war or plague or famine. If you ask me with Amos if I am a prophet, I answer with him: ‘I am not a prophet.’ The following day he repeated the same things, and insisted: ‘Know that I do not tell you this as a prophet, but that I infer from the Scriptures that the Church awaits a great scourge.’ Thus he hid his inspiration by turning to the evidence of the Scriptures, as he will always do from now until 1495, but with particular insistence down to 1492.\(^96\)

As in the earlier passage on prophecy, Savonarola again alluded to the ancient prophet Amos as a model for this time. Echoing Amos, Savonarola chose to represent himself as “not a prophet,” but as one who prophesies like a prophet. Savonarola assumed, as can be inferred from his remarks, that that the audience was familiar with Amos.

Why, when his internal experience seemed to confirm that he had had a revelation from God, did Savonarola choose Amos’s words to hide his status? According to Villari, Savonarola later in 1495 stated that he did not believe the people were “ripe for such things.” In addition, Savonarola had learned to be cautious.\(^97\) What else, however, might the people have understood from Savonarola’s choice of Amos as his model? They might have understood that Amos denied that he was a prophet, but not because he was not a prophet. Rather, God declared his prophets.
Amos was God’s prophet, a shepherd of Tekoa, who received his call from God in a series of visions. Savonarola’s denial might also have clarified that he (Amos) was not a professional prophet of the northern kingdom who earned his living by prophesying. Nor was Amos a discredited prophet. To reinforce this, perhaps, Savonarola did not seek special donations for his preaching. Through Amos, the Lord chastised the Israelites for silencing the prophets:

I who raised up prophets among your children,
And nazirites among your young men.
Is this not so, Israelites? . . . .
But you made the nazirites drink wine,
and commanded the prophets, “Do not prophesy!” 98

Rather Amos responded, “The Lord God has spoken, who would not prophesy?” 99 Amos was rejecting membership in a guild of prophets, or “a company of prophets.” 100 The high priest of the northern kingdom, Israel, had accused Amos of treason against King Jeroboam. The priest called upon Amos “to flee to the land of Judah and there earn [his] bread by prophesying! But never again prophesy in Bethel; for it is the king’s sanctuary and a royal temple.” 101 Amos, however, was the Lord’s prophet and began to prophesy God’s word immediately. Amos, moreover, was a defender of the poor and needy exploited by the Israelites and “denied access to and deprived of fair treatment by the court systems.” 102 Savonarola, then, appeared to be doing the will of the Lord in preaching as he did and did not go beyond what he believed he was authorized to do.

The End of Savonarola’s First Assignment to San Marco

When Savonarola returned to the convent of San Marco later in 1486, he remained only a few months. He was then recalled to Bologna in 1487 to complete his studies and taught for a year at the Studium generale (the University). He was not retained in his theological studies, but was posted back to Ferrara in 1488. 103 This became his home base for itinerant preaching for the
next two years. Savonarola was sent to communities in Tuscany, like Brescia, Piacenza, and Genoa. According to Villari, nothing is known about his sermons in Genoa. In Lent of 1489 in Brescia, however, Savonarola preached “on the twenty-four elders of the Apocalypse.”

According to Villari, Savonarola, using the *Book of Revelations*, “found it easier to stir the sympathies of his hearers.” In what seems to have been a prophecy, Savonarola spoke of a great scourge that was about to descend on the city, “saying that fathers would see their children slain and shamefully mangled in the streets.”

The most dramatic account of this sermon is that of Strathern: Savonarola “spoke with a voice of thunder, reproving the people for their sins, denouncing the whole of Italy, and threatening all with the terrors of God’s wrath.” Savonarola also referred to the four and twenty elders of the Apocalypse seated around the throne of God and told the Brescians that he had a vision of one elder prophesying that they

would fall prey to raging foes; they would see rivers of blood in the streets; wives would be torn from their husbands, virgins ravished, children murdered before their mothers’ eyes; all would be terror, fire, and bloodshed.

Savonarola’s reputation in northern Italy was growing. He sensed his success. In a letter to his mother, while he was between cities, he wrote:

> You should know that if I were to stay in Ferrara all the time, I would not reap such a harvest as I do when I am away. . . . I do not write this because I seek human praises, nor because I take pleasure in praise, but to show you why I stay away from my country, so that you may know that I stay away gladly because I know that I do something much more pleasing to God and more profitable for me and for the soul of my neighbor.

As he wrote this letter, he had achieved satisfaction as an effective and successful preacher. As he wrote in 1475 in a letter to his father, Savonarola referred to his desire and pleasure for having been selected for a special task by God. Most probably he was convinced
that he was a prophet because he had been so selected, but he did not characterize himself as one. As did the Old Testament prophets, he waited for God to reveal him to the people. Savonarola would learn within a few months that this period of itinerant preaching was to end. He would in learn that Lorenzo de’ Medici had requested his return to Florence, and by June of 1490 have begun his journey back to his former position in the convent of San Marco. As this period of his career came to a close, he had become a prophet, in all but name. He had also learned that the prophet is built upon the preacher.

**Conclusion**

This chapter argued that Savonarola, without claiming himself to be a prophet of God, had represented himself in such a way that he had become a prophet. The figure of Moses was always evident in Savonarola’s understanding of the prophet, in his humility and his obedience. However, his self representation was also built on Amos: The prophet did not declare himself to be the prophet, for that was God’s prerogative. However, a verbal claim to be a prophet was not necessary if the living example of the preacher Savonarola demonstrated his intimacy with God and behavior truly marked the man as truly pious.

The chapter discussed the differences between observant, or reformed, preachers and those who preached to please the tastes of the patricians. The chapter also introduced Fra Mariano of Genazzano, a preacher favored by Lorenzo the Magnificent, who would later charge Savonarola with being a false prophet. Mariano did not become a model for Savonarola. Rather Savonarola favored the Old Testament prophet Amos. Although focusing on Amos, all of the biblical prophets followed the general characteristics of the true prophet, first and foremost, that there must be a call and the prophet had not the power to initiate that call. Thus, by generalizing this concept, Savonarola modeled himself on Moses, Amos, and all the biblical prophets. Basing
his self representation on Amos was fitting, for time and again Savonarola would return to Amos in his preaching. Amos prophesied in a powerful voice, just as Savonarola would soon do, condemning the vanity of women, the economic exploitation of the poor, and the many other sins and corruptions of the powerful and rich. The *Book of Amos*, thus, provides a brief description of the many aspects of the biblical prophet that characterized Savonarola.

Of equal, if not more, importance, Savonarola learned to preach. This required several efforts: He had to accept his failure as a preacher during his first assignment to Florence. He had to evaluate his own performance and consider the methods of other contemporary preachers. He rejected the model of Fra Mariano, whose goal was to be the focus of the sermon by displaying his classical learning and elegant Latin. Savonarola examined other models, especially the preaching of the Franciscan Bernardino of Siena. Bernardino’s goal was to transform the soul of his listener. Savonarola shared that goal. Savonarola probably adopted some of Bernardino’s methods after his order sent him to the countryside to work on his preaching, but Savonarola finally realized he needed a message. Whether a divine call or a realization that the reform of the Church that he had privately held throughout his youth was his goal, Savonarola created a unique message that he began to preach. As he practiced the delivery of this message, he found that it resonated with the people of northern Italy. Also as he practiced his call for reform, he generated the drama that Bernardino had achieved. However, Savonarola did not imitate Bernardino’s message. Like Bernardino, Savonarola brought into his sermons the conditions of life that the people experienced. Like Bernardino, Savonarola focused on the reform of the Christian to be ready for salvation. However, Savonarola focused on the clergy, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the civic leaders who failed to provide for the poor and orphaned
and to meet the pastoral needs of Christians. Without the unique message and energetic practice, Savonarola would not have become a prophet by the time he was recalled to Florence.

The work of becoming a prophet was not complete in 1490. However, Savonarola had laid the foundations necessary to declare himself a prophet and to accept the challenges of Giovanni Dominici and Antonino Pierozzi to reform San Marco. He had not yet fully perceived that to build Florence as “new Jerusalem” with Christ as its King required the fusion of the religious and political motivations of the people. He needed a plan. He would continue to rely on the biblical prophets as models for this work.

Although for decades, Florence had experienced a growing “personal sense of crisis . . . and an intellectual malaise that would affect Florence in the final decades of the century,” there was no indication of just when Savonarola turned back to consider completing the reform of San Marco. His forebears in the Dominican order in Florence itself had sought to begin reform of the Church from within the Dominican order itself. Giovanni Dominici had founded the Observant Dominicans to restore their commitment to early Christian poverty. Antonino Pierozzi, prior of Savonarola’s own convent of San Marco and Archbishop of Florence had likewise led reform, and more recently to Giovanni Caroli (1428-1503) as prior of Santa Maria Novella had tried to reform the Dominicans. He was exiled to the Dominican convent of St. Romano in Lucca. All of Savonarola’s forebears had taken the corruption brought about by wealth as a serious matter and tried to return the Dominican order to its early commitment to poverty, chastity and obedience. As Savonarola considered his new message after 1484 and as he preached with more conviction than ever in 1485 and 1486, he must have begun to plan how he could and would address the urgency of the reform needed—action that would address the coming scourge at the individual, Church, and community level. Further, as Edelheit argued, the
crisis that Florence faced could not treat the spiritual challenge without addressing political conditions. This was the direction his career was taking.
Endnotes


2 The Name by which Moses was to identify the Lord was the subject of Thomas Aquinas’s theology and probably influenced Savonarola as well as other preachers. Bernardino of Siena preached a cult of the Name of Jesus and was, at one time, suspected of heresy.


4 Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall*, 64.


Dennis F. Lackner, “The Camoldese Academy,” in Michael J. B. Allen and Valery Rees, eds., 20

Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico*, 133. Edelheit did not clarify how this sermon was delivered, but it would at least have been delivered to the members of the confraternity who were present.

Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico*, 133.

Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico*, 189.

Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico*, 127. Giovanni Dominici, Antonino Pierozzi, and Giovanni Caroli were role models for Savonarola as he undertook the reform of San Marco.

Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico*, 127.


Lyn Blanchfield, *Tears that Tell: The Ritualistic Uses of Weeping by Participants of Late Medieval Florentine Sermons*. Dissertation. (Binghamton: Binghamton University/State University of New York, 2003), tbd. Blanchfield explained the complex system for selecting preachers for sermon cycles. It involved a contract between the community and the preacher, stating the fee to be paid to the preacher. In larger venues, it involved a collaborative decision by the pope, the orders, and the community. Thus, it may have been the Dominican’s turn to preach at San Lorenzo.

Yoko Kimura, “The Bildungsroman of an Anonymous Franciscan Preacher in Late Medieval Italy (Biblioteca Comunale di Foligno, MS/C.85),” *Medieval Sermon Studies* 58(1), 47-8.


33 Strathern, *Death in Florence*, 51.

34 M. Michele Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study: Dominican Education before 1350 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1998), 9, fn 17; 342.

35 Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall*, 26-7. Roberto Ridolfi, *The Life of Girolamo Savonarola*, trans. Cecil Grayson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), 11. Weinstein described a 1481 disputation of Bandelli and suggested substantive differences between his and Girolamo’s positions related to the former’s strict scholastic theology on the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and Girolamo’s “more spiritual theology nourished by sacred scripture and the writings of the Fathers.” Bandelli must have approved of Savonarola’s performance in Bologna because he apparently welcomed Savonarola to San Marco in 1482. They disagreed on the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and on communal property and the poverty to be maintained by the order. Bandelli later became Savonarola’s enemy. By the 1490s, Bandelli was the head of the Lombard congregation from which Savonarola sought independence for San Marco, in order to restore an observant or strict posture relative to poverty.

36 Strathern, *Death in Florence*, 52-3.

37 Exodus 2:22, 23. The text cited was worded, “I am a stranger residing in a foreign land.” The home of the biblical prophet, including Jesus, gave no credibility to the prophet; only when the prophet was in other lands or with other people was the prophet generally accepted.


40 Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall*, 8, 26-7. Weinstein described some of the attributions of Girolamo by secondary sources as “Clichés of medieval hagiography.”


44 Mixson, “Religious Life,” 201, 203.


46 Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall*, 18-9, 24, 30-1.


Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study,” 156. The review was a 1313 Dominican chapter decision.


51 Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, 31-2. Weinstein added that Savonarola returned in the 1490s to his conviction, first stated here, that God was “prince of the universe” and the best model for government and rule.

52 Strathern, Death in Florence, 70. Strathern also stated that Savonarola held the position of teaching master for novices in Ferrara in 1479 (49). Weinstein (Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, 25) described Savonarola’s 1479 position as “junior lector” and has been reported here as more consistent with Savonarola’s status as a novice. Weinstein agreed that his posting to San Marco in 1482 was as master of novices (27). No clarification of the dual role of lector (31) and master of novices was made; thus this paper assumes that Savonarola held both positions.

53 Strathern, Death in Florence, 71.

54 Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study,” 109; Leo Carruthers, “The Sermons of William Peraldus: An Appraisal (Review), Medieval Sermon Studies 62(1) (2018): 90-2. Peraldus was a French Dominican who authored summaries on the vices and virtues, which, according to Carruthers, influenced later penitential writings, possibly Savonarola’s prison writings on Psalms 31 and 51. Peraldus also wrote sermons on the Gospels and Epistles. Apparently, the sermons were original with Peraldus, not reportiones of others’ sermons, intended for use by other preachers. The writings were intended as commentaries on biblical materials used for Sunday readings.

55 Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study,” 113-26. The “syllabus” for this task evolved over the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and the exercises designed for meditation by a certain Frater Anonymous Tolosanus made a significant contribution to the novice’s control over his own spiritual growth.

56 Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study,” 75-8, 100.

57 Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study,” 101 incl. n124.

58 Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, 76. During his second period in Florence, Savonarola “would speak new things in a newmanner” . . . meaning that he intended to replace the cerebral intricacies of the scholastic sermon with a plainer, Scripture-based exposition. One who heard him said: ‘He introduced an almost new way of speaking the word of God, that is, apostolically, without dividing the sermon, not starting with a question, avoiding the singing of eloquent embellishments. His only purpose was to expound something of the Old Testament and introduce the simplicity of the early Church.’” He was not, however, entirely successful in giving up the scholastic style, however.


60 Donald Scott Surrency, Between Private Faith and Public Witness: Girolamo Savonarola and the Making of Sacred Space. Dissertation. (New Haven: Yale University, May 2003), 12-3. Surrency did not discuss this particular incident but dealt with Savonarola’s mystical experiences in a manner that fit this incident.
The narrative returns later in the chapter to Bernardino da Siena, the Franciscan preacher and later saint. Giordano da Capistrano was a preacher who was successor to Bernardino and a contemporary of Savonarola’s, although not as famous as his predecessor.


Cuthbert Gumbinger, “St Bernardine’s Unedited Prediche Volgare: (Florence, 1424 and 1425; Siena, 1425; Padua, 1443),” *Franciscan Studies* 4(1) (March 1944), 12-3, 18-9, 22-3, 28-9.


Irene Nowell, “Commentary,” *Lamentations*, in *Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther. New Collegeville Bible Commentary Old Testament* 24 (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 48-9. Nowell clarified that the first two books from which these excerpts are taken are dirges or funeral songs, while Book 3 is a lament, a cry to God by an individual. These distinctions have not been made in this narrative, but only to lamentations, the title of the whole book.

*M Lamentations Book 1 in Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther*, 50-3.


McAodha, “The Holy Name of Jesus,” 40.


82 Strathern, *Death in Florence*, 71. This was the burial place for the Medici, and the family had made handsome contributions to it. The author cited the source for this quote the sermons.


85 Strathern, *Death in Florence*, 71.


Girolamo Savonarola, *laude, O anama cecata* in Roberto Ridolfi, *The Life of Girolamo Savonarola*, trans. Cecil Grayson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), footnote 1, 19. Ridolfi discussed Savonarola’s continued resort to verse in this laude as well as in the *Oratio pro ecclesia*. He characterized these verses as laments and threats of punishment. It appeared that these were private verses, and Ridolfi observed: “If in the past he had always replied to this proud cry of revolt and struggle with the same humble counsel which at that time he gave to himself . . . , things had now come to such a pass that he seemed to have lamented in silence long enough. ‘To take up arms,’ he now awaited but that sign; and that sign came.” Ridolfi, 19-20.

88 Strathern, *Death in Florence*, 72.


91 Strathern, *Death in Florence*, 72.


95 Villari, *Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola* I, 82-3.


99 Amos 3:8, in Amos, Hosea, Micah, 20.


101 Amos 7:10-13, in Amos, Hosea, Micah, 31.

102 Carol J. Dempsey, comm., in Amos, Hosea, Micah, 18.


105 Villari, Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola I, 94. Villari sets the date for Brescia as 1486; however, Weinstein reports that Genoa and Brescia were assignments after Savonarola returned to Ferrara in 1488. Savonarola spoke of the assignment in a letter dated 1490 (65-7).


107 Strathern, Death in Florence, 96. Strathern drew on Villari’s paraphrase of Savonarola’s early biographer Pacifico Burlamachi.


109 Strathern, Death in Florence, 96. Strathern cited Villari, Life and Times . . . I as the source for the paraphrase of Pacifico Burlamachi’s Savonarola. Villari, however, on p. 84 identified this as a 1486 Lenten sermon, not a sermon correctly dated to 1489.


111 Edelheit, Ficino, Pico, 51.

112 Edelheit, Ficino, Pico.
CHAPTER 5:

PROPHECY AND SAVONAROLA’S ACCEPTANCE AS PROPHET

Savonarola, from a sermon in 1491: “[He] will adopt a new kind of preaching, for as Isaiah says, ‘The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, for the Lord has anointed me [Isa 61:1].”

From 1490 to 1494, popular regard for Girolamo Savonarola as God’s prophet to Florence grew. From his reluctance to speak of himself in prophetic terms before 1490, Savonarola gradually built his self-representation in biblical terms through the message that he had practiced in the Tuscan countryside: the sinfulness of the city, imminent punishment by God, and the opportunity to restore the relationship with God through reform. His sermons continued to be based on the Old Testament books of prophecy. The people began to see him in terms of the biblical prophets. At the focal period of this chapter, November and December of 1494, Florence faced a political crisis when French king Charles VIII invaded the city. Savonarola served a crucial role in defusing the crisis and the king departed from Florence without violence. The people regarded Savonarola’s intervention as miraculous and he achieved his highest popular acceptance as a prophet at this time. Why did he achieve this position? What were the conditions that supported Savonarola’s self-representation as a prophet at this time?

When Savonarola entered Florence in 1490, he had just completed preaching in smaller Tuscan cities on the Book of Revelation. He had honed his message about the sinfulness of the city, its imminent punishment by God, and penance and restoration of right relations with God.
In Florence, he continued his attention to this book in his preaching in 1490 and 1491. This would not have been the first time his audiences had heard the prophecy of its author John for a “new Jerusalem.” The Florentines were already convinced of the special status of Florence, what Donald Weinstein called, “the myth of Florence.”

Savonarola had not proposed a solution to the destiny of earthly Florence, and he had already clarified that no one but God knew the time or date when the temporal world would end. His efforts at reform of the Church and moral reform of Florentines were for earthly effects, to produce a better, more moral society in this world. Moral action taken during a lifetime assured salvation in the next world. This position distinguished him from the prophets, like Joachim of Fiori, who preached a heavenly “new Jerusalem” that followed the end of time.

By 1490, Savonarola was ready to act and preach as the biblical prophets had. Savonarola’s self-representation generally met the widespread, popular need for religious security, and Savonarola reinforced his authority as a prophet by pastoral care that brought people closer to God, the primary religious aspiration of the era. Savonarola was concerned about salvation at the end of the individual’s life, but he preached a moral society on earth. He sought to forge a renewed Christian community. In caring for the individual soul, particularly by fostering mental prayer, Savonarola enabled individuals to reach the goal of personal piety. Generally, popular opinion agreed that moral behavior in the city was in decline.

Florence in the early 1490s remained the factional city it had been in earlier times. Those without political power sought security in the face of potential violence. During these years, Lorenzo de’ Medici, ruler of Florence, died (1492) and Piero de’ Medici, his son and successor, abandoned Florence (1494), leaving a gap in more than sixty years of Medici leadership. A biblical prophet traditionally castigated corrupt rulers and sought reformed governance.
Savonarola had stepped into that role in a city that moved very quickly from strong to weak to no government at all. The chapter argued that Savonarola’s acceptance as a prophet was based on his representation of the prophet’s divine authority to act for God. The biblical prophet was subject to God, but independent of political rulers. Savonarola built and then manipulated his image as a prophet to achieve a union between religious and political ends. In turn, Savonarola’s audience gave him power, for a time at least, to act as a prophet because of their desperate need for both religious and political security and safety. Foreshadowing the period of 1495 to his execution for heresy in 1498, the chapter also traced the beginnings of Savonarola’s problem of conflating spiritual goals with political action.

**Savonarola’s Second Assignment to Florence**

Savonarola’s reputation preceded him as he made his way to Florence in June 1490. He had been specifically invited to return to his previous post at San Marco by Lorenzo de’ Medici. His apocalyptic sermons, particularly in Brescia, had created expectations among the Florentine people. The public was, thus, curious about his preaching.\(^3\) When he arrived at the convent of San Marco, Savonarola immediately introduced himself to Florentines by giving instruction in the garden of San Marco in June and July. This was the same garden that Savonarola had used for his early lectures to his Dominican brothers eight years earlier. Passers-by began to attend these informal sessions, and his Dominican confreres witnessed the growing public interest in Savonarola’s lessons:

> It seems that on Sundays after vespers it was his custom to explain passages from the Scriptures . . . beneath a damask rose-bush in the garden of San Marco. The beauty of the setting, of the hour, and of the season, joined with the spiritual attraction of the subject and the wonderful gifts of the speaker, fascinated all who listened to him, and the fame of these lessons soon spread beyond the walls of San Marco.\(^4\)
His earliest followers were his brothers who noted his piety and knowledge. The example of poverty, asceticism, and prayer that Savonarola displayed was an important component in the support that the brothers and others gave to Savonarola. Many of these brothers would remain life-long believers in Savonarola as their prophet, and they continued their devotion to him after his death. Savonarola’s mystical experiences, evident from the time of his youth, were also a factor that persuaded his brothers to support him. As early as 1490, his brothers saw visible aspects of the intense emotional effect of prayer and meditation on him, his tears as he lost himself in meditation, . One of his listeners “told how most times Fra Girolamo would come to the lesson with eyes full of tears, having evidently been lost in some divine meditation rather than preparing the lesson.” Florentines were familiar with mystics. For example, Catherine of Siena, one of the Church’s most venerated mystics, had been canonized in 1461. Devout citizens read her mystical writings. She would be associated with the movement of lay piety throughout western Christendom and with lay prayer movements.

Lay followers grew in number, first among the pious and those who were benefactors of the convent, and then among the educated and important men in the city. Some theologians and philosophers of the period sought to aid pious Christians to make a connection with God without the aid of a priest. For Savonarola this was not new, for he “was possessed by [this desire to aid the pious] from his birth . . . . His sole aspiration towards God, and his sole desire [was] to make the world share in the blessedness of his hopes.” This desire filled him with “holy fury,” a passion that drew people to him.

As the increased number of listeners made the continuation of his lessons in the garden impossible, Savonarola moved his lectures inside to San Marco’s convent church on August 1, 1490. His instructions took on the characteristics of sermons. On October 31, 1490, with the
onset of the Advent season, Savonarola began his instruction on the *First Letter of John.*

John’s epistle concerned the followers of Christ during a dangerous period of early Christianity. John wrote: “Beloved, do not trust every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they belong to God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

The context of John’s warning was the First Commandment of the Mosaic Law: The faithful were not to have other gods before Yahweh. Moses had also established that miracles or wonders alone were not the test of the true prophet. The self-acclaimed prophet who told the people to worship false gods and then produced a miracle was a false prophet (*Deut.13:1-5*). Just as John, using Moses’ words, reminded the early Christians to beware false prophets, Savonarola probably intended to remind his listeners to be cautious when their faith was tested. They, too, would encounter false, as well as true, prophets.

Moses had then continued to counsel the chosen people:

> Should you say to yourselves, ‘How can we recognize that a word is one the Lord has not spoken?’ If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the word does not come true, it is a word the Lord did not speak. The prophet has spoken presumptuously; do not fear him.

The true prophet gave proof of prophecies. The eye-witness chronicle of Cerretani reported that Savonarola preached the 1491 sermons on the *First Epistle of St. John* and the *Gospel* of the Epiphany with the “simple eloquence” of San Bernardino, directly to the people.

Villari explained the appeal of Savonarola’s sermons:

> Accordingly, the secret of Savonarola’s enormous success may be entirely attributed to his mystic religious ardour, and to the earnest affection he felt for the people and elicited from them in return. His was the only voice that addressed them in familiar and fascinating tones. He used language that stirred the hearts of the multitude, and he spoke of subjects which came home to them. He was the only one who fought sincerely for truth, was fervently devoted to goodness, and deeply commiserated the sufferings of his hearers; accordingly he was the one really eloquent speaker of his age.
Savonarola preached in the manner of the Apostles. Although he had abandoned many of the divisions and arguments of the scholastic form of preaching, Savonarola had also rejected the “artificial eloquence” of the classicists during his first assignment to Florence. Now his message was based on Scripture and apocalyptic themes, consisting of the three simple propositions that he had perfected during his Tuscan sermons of the late 1480s: the sinfulness of the Florentines, the impending punishment of God for their sins, and their need to reform, do penance, and be restored to God.

The first reference to an actual sermon by Savonarola was to Sermon XIII of the *First John* cycle delivered on December 26, 1490. In this sermon, Savonarola described “the contemplative but unwritten truths regarding the life and deeds of Christ which [could] be somehow comprehended from the Scriptures.” His remarks were addressed to elite intellectuals attending his sermon. Some of these were from Lorenzo de’ Medici’s inner circle and had interests in ancient philosophy including Plato. This was a group that Savonarola needed to engage; for he was now in their intellectual territory. Following the January 1, 1491, sermon of the *First John* cycle, the venue was moved again to provide more space for the listeners, demonstrating that he was making inroads to a larger segment of Florentine society.

**Claiming the Mantle of the Prophet**

By Ash Wednesday of 1491, February 16, Savonarola’s Lenten sermons, *On the Lamentations of Jeremiah and the Gospels Proper*, were preached from the pulpit of Florence’s cathedral, Santa Maria del Fiori. “Like Elijah,” wrote Weinstein, Savonarola had “come to accuse King Ahab and his family of bringing drought and famine to the land by forsaking the lord’s commandments.” Savonarola intended the accusation of “Ahab” to chastise Lorenzo de’ Medici and his government. From the beginning, Savonarola’s Lenten sermons sought to turn
his audience away from the popular preachers in Florence, including “their so-called authorities, their ‘gentile’ books [and] their refinements,” to listen to his preaching:

He knows (sic.) that this is not easy for them, but the very fact of his own presence among them signals that it is the beginning . . . . [T]herefore he will adopt a new kind of preaching, for as Isaiah says, “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, for the Lord has anointed me” [Isa 61:1].

In this first Lenten sermon, Weinstein described Savonarola as clearly having “claim[ed] a divine mandate.” From this time on, Savonarola did not turn back from that claim.

His rhetoric was filled with references to the books of the Old and New Testaments. These were his authorities. Because accusations of heresy were constant threats to any innovative preacher, Savonarola used comprehensive references to biblical sources protect himself. He did not offer his own authority for his interpretations, but the authority of those inspired prophets of the Old Testament and writers of the New Testament. In this manner, Savonarola claimed divine authority. However, the rhetoric of Savonarola’s identification with the ancient prophets was also a preaching strategy that created “a succession in time between past and present”:

[T]he interpretation of the Scriptures in their historical context [was] not separated from the critical analysis and discussion of the Florentine society and state at present; by this means the interpretation of Scripture bec[ame] a critical instrument which aspire[d] to discover both the ‘truth’ in the Scriptures and the ‘truth’ in the Florentine reality. Thus, in fact, a unity and succession exist[ed] in the sermons between an ancient and exemplary past represented by glorified events from the Scriptures and the present time of religious and political reality in the Florentine city-state.

This view is consistent with Weinstein’s argument that Savonarola claimed identity with the biblical prophets. Savonarola’s treatment of time, from a modern perspective, was ideological. It reflected Savonarola’s religious convictions and his understanding of the timeless nature of Christian truth. Savonarola shared this mental model with his audience. In this context, the
people understood Savonarola’s discourse about “imminent” punishment or the “coming” renovation of the Church to refer to events that would begin “soon,” a flexible timeframe spanning years or even decades. They accepted that none knew the exact day or hour of God’s time. Because Scripture was regarded as revelation from God for all time and continually applicable, Savonarola treated the revelation of Scripture as always true, allowing the present to move in the same reality as the past. Most importantly, God’s “talk” with an ancient prophet was valid for all true prophets, including Savonarola, not just Isaiah, Jeremiah, or even Moses.

Savonarola proved his ability to master the audience. Giovanni Caroli, a Dominican theologian of the conventual, or unreformed and conservative, convent of Santa Maria Novella, described Savonarola’s preaching:

He began to read the Apocalypse, in which there are great mysteries, hidden from common knowledge and perhaps not yet revealed. The common people liked what he made of it... visions of ruin, voices, candelabras, trumpets, precious stones... and many other things, all loaded with spiritual and sacred meanings... [H]is sermons inflamed everyone’s mind. It seemed as if it was not he who was talking nor was it organized in the usual way. It was as if the spirit was talking through his mouth.\(^{21}\)

During his preaching in the northern Tuscan communities, Savonarola had developed his religious imagination and the ability to incorporate the dramatic images of his scriptural sources.\(^{22}\) Biblical exegesis, an ongoing study for Savonarola throughout his life, had given him command of biblical history, verses, imagery, analogies, allegories, and more. Villari said, With so varied and flexible a method of interpretation, there was nothing that could not be supported on the authority of Holy Writ; and whenever [Savonarola] should let himself be carried away by his imagination, the Scriptures, instead of acting as a check, would only urge him to wilder flights. In fact, whenever his excited fancy evoked strange visions of futurity; whenever he heard voices of sinister omen in the air threatening chastisement to Italy and the Church, he always found this confirmed in some page of the Bible.\(^{23}\)

On the second Sunday of Lent in 1491, Savonarola preached a “terrifying sermon”\(^{24}\):
With a vehemence unusual even for him, Savonarola lashe[d] out at the intertwined ills of Church and city. Like the people who sacrifice to alien gods, so Christians, even bishops and priests, have replaced the worship of God with preference for money . . . . Widows and the poor are told, “Pay! Pay!” Murderers go free while the innocent are blamed. Young girls are exploited.\textsuperscript{25}

Throughout the Lenten cycle of 1491, Savonarola preached on “public corruption, unequal taxes, selective application of the laws, and harsh penalties for worker protest.”\textsuperscript{26} Besides claiming a divine mandate, Savonarola had clearly rebuked the Medici regime and the patron of San Marco. This was not a challenge to a princely form of rule, but to corrupt rule and to Lorenzo de’ Medici as a corrupt ruler. He gained support from those without power or money, but could hardly have won over those whose wealth was the source of their power in Florence. Savonarola held Lorenzo de’ Medici responsible for “the harm wrought on public morals by the prince. . . . [Lorenzo] was not only . . . the foe and destroyer of freedom, but . . . the chief obstacle to the restoration of Christian life among the people.”\textsuperscript{27} The life of the city—its gambling, prostitution, and other violations of Christian morals—was particularly corrupting of the city’s youth. For Savonarola, sin was always the act of an individual. Even when a system—such as an agreed-upon method of selecting candidates for election or the working of the economy—might be blamed for unfortunate results, only the individual was accountable.

\textbf{Wealth, Corruption of the City, and Discrediting Savonarola}

The response of Lorenzo to these early sermons was initially ambiguous. Lorenzo wanted Church reform, although he did not want to be the instrument by which it was undertaken. He also wanted San Marco to regain its earlier status as an exemplary observant convent that would again attract recruits to a revitalized convent as it had done under San Antonino Pierozzi, its former prior. However, Lorenzo’s illness had progressed, and, with the little time remaining to him, he had more concern for his sons, for Florence, his legacy, and his
soul than for the attacks of Savonarola. Those humanists of Lorenzo’s inner circle, including Pico della Mirandola, who followed Marsilio Ficino, also supported Savonarola’s call for Church reform, a key principle of the group. Yet as Savonarola’s attacks on Medici rule continued through Lent, Lorenzo needed to act or suffer damage to his authority. Some in Lorenzo’s aristocratic and wealthy court at his behest attempted unsuccessfully to bribe Savonarola to curb his challenges to Medici rule.²⁸ Savonarola’s immunity to the Medici’s efforts to bribe him only enhanced his reputation among many.

Lorenzo then chose an indirect means of censuring Savonarola, plotting with his favored preacher, Fra Mariano of Genazzano, to discredit Savonarola’s status as a prophet. Medici patronage extended to the church of San Gallo and to Fra Mariano himself. Mariano was “entirely Lorenzo’s creature on account of favors received.”²⁹ He was considered a learned and effective preacher who met humanist criteria with his references to ancient Latin sources and elegant Latin phraseology. Mariano had become jealous of the rapid rise of Savonarola’s popularity and his “usurpation” of many of Mariano’s followers.³⁰ On Ascension Day, May 12, 1491, from the pulpit of San Gallo, Fra Mariano delivered a personal attack on Savonarola, “label[ling] him a false prophet who was responsible for spreading subversive sedition.”³¹ Mariano added personal slurs to this charge. Commentaries of the time indicate that his remarks denounced Savonarola bitterly. This first attack on Savonarola’s self-representation as a false prophet previewed later charges against him.

The scriptural text for Mariano’s sermon had come from the Acts of the Apostles. In the Acts, on the day that the risen Jesus was to ascend into heaven, the apostles asked him whether he would “at this time restore the kingdom of Israel” (Acts 1:6). Jesus answered, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority.” (Acts
1:7). The passage referred to an earthly restoration of Israel to its status at the time of King David, but the passage had apocalyptic meaning for Jesus as the “climax of Israel’s history” and, by implication in the fifteenth century, the end of time. Mariano responded to Savonarola’s repeated and audacious claim to speak for God as blasphemy. Savonarola repeatedly prophesied that God’s judgment would come “quickly” and “soon.” According to Mariano, Savonarola’s prophecies amounted to blasphemy as did the sins of idolatry or using God’s name in vain. These were most serious sins against Mosaic law. If convicted of blasphemy, Savonarola could be excommunicated for heresy.

Excommunication was a judgment not only against an individual, like Savonarola, but also potentially against the city itself. Christians feared the Church’s authority to excommunicate a person and others in their Christian community. Excommunication had economic, political, and religious consequences. Penance and compliance with Church authority was generally an antidote to excommunication. Thus Mariano, at Lorenzo’s direction, intended to turn Savonarola’s listeners against him, threatening excommunication against anyone who were reluctant to reject Savonarola. However, Fra Mariano’s attack had the opposite effect. Many in the audience turned against the Augustinian for his vitriol and instead became followers of Savonarola. This response to Mariano’s accusation of false prophecy was proof of the growing acceptance of Savonarola’s status as a true prophet in Florence. With the acceptance of his self-representation established across a broad population base, Savonarola needed to advance his prophetic career to the next phase.

Reform and Prayer

In these first sermons of 1490 and 1491, Savonarola had spelled out the behaviors he wanted to see removed from the public life of Florence and Rome—gambling, sodomy, and sins
of greed—and among the clergy and papacy, a return to the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. Savonarola sought care for widows, orphans, foreigners or aliens, and others whom the prophets had protected. He sought the restoration of spiritual care for the laity. Some Church rituals, such as those found in the mass or sacraments, had been developed centuries earlier to compensate for the loss of the fervor of the early Church. By the fifteenth century, some of these had lost their meaning. Savonarola sought restoration of the zeal of early Christianity when the exterior (culto exterior) behavior of Christians corresponded to interior actions (culto interiore). Savonarola encouraged the faithful to take the “evangelical law of charity towards both God and neighbor” seriously. His reform sought to restore the inner spiritual element to public behavior:

The task is both external and internal. The outward part is easy—perform good works, go to Mass, confess, listen to the word of God—but the internal task is difficult, for it consists in trying to know God. . . . [S]hedding the habits of the exterior life is not easy, first because there are so many earthly attractions, second because superficial ecclesiastical ceremonies hinder our inner progress. . . . We must pray.

Savonarola’s view of penance was biblical rather than sacramental and only total transformation of the interior life of the sinner would abate the punishment of God. The biblical prophets required more than ritual confession of disobedience to God. Reconciliation with God required a change of heart. Only “individual conversion” could dissuade God from punishment. This was penitenzia (penance).

Prayer, both communal and private, was central to Savonarola’s reform. Prayer was also consistent with the needs of Christians who increasingly saw the route to their salvation more through individual effort to build a personal relationship with God and less through communal ritual. The observant reform movement had been going on throughout Europe since the late
fourteenth century, and among its many effects in Italy was the practice of mental prayer and dissemination of the teachings of the Dominican tertiary and observant Catherine of Siena.\textsuperscript{41}

Many of Savonarola’s sermons were prayer-like, and his audience was invited to pray along with him. Unlike some prelates and clergy of the Church who endorsed only vocal or formulaic spoken prayer using conventional wording to ensure that no heretical ideas crept into lay practices, Savonarola wrote that prayer that was vocal or silent or public or private was equally heard by God. His words reveal his concern:

\begin{quote}
In prayer a man may take heed to his words, and this is a wholly material thing; he may take heed to the sense of his words, and this is rather study than prayer; finally, he may fix his thoughts on God, and this is the only true prayer. We must consider neither the words nor the sentences, but lift our soul above our self, and almost lose self in the thought of God. This state once attained, the believer forgets the world and worldly desires, and has, as it were, a foreshadowing of heavenly bliss. To this height it is as easy for the ignorant as for the learned to rise . . . . When man is truly rapt in the spirit of devotion, speech is an impediment, and should be replaced by mental prayer.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

Prayer in Savonarola’s preaching emulated the prophets’ dialog with God that the people were intended to overhear. The prophets’ pleas for mercy were on behalf of the people, fulfilling the prophets’ role. These prayers were also self-referential, revealing the prophet’s perception of his or her close relationship to the Lord. In Savonarola’s sermons, these prayer texts informed the audience of Savonarola’s view of his own relationship with the divine.\textsuperscript{43} A passage need not be a direct claim to that status.

Prayer was also prominent in Savonarola’s pastoral writings. These, like the \textit{reportationes} of his sermons, were frequently printed from 1491 onward and disseminated to his devotees. These tracts personalized Savonarola’s relationship with his followers and bound them to him. For women, particularly, with limited access to lay confraternities and other public religious activities, prayer books, printed meditations, and Savonarola’s tracts were readily
brought into the home. An early work of 1491, *The Book on the Life of the Widow*, illustrated Savonarola’s pastoral care, including his scriptural references:

> [Jesus] has so much compassion for widows and their orphans that he severely forbids, under the ancient Law, that any harm whatsoever be done to them . . . for, if you wrong them, they will cry out to me and I will hear their voice and their tears . . . *[Exo. 22:21-2; Psa. 145/146:9]*. [In our treatise, first,] we will see what a widow should be; second, how she should live; and third how she should teach others, so that she may gain a precious crown in heaven.⁴⁴

Many other short writings addressed the virtues of Christian life, such as humility, prayer, the love of Jesus Christ, and aspects of the Catholic faith, like “Exposition of the Sacrament and Mysteries of the Mass” and mental prayer. Some pamphlets provided examples for contemplation. The pamphlets encouraged the reader to meditate and pray along with Savonarola, accomplishing more than simply teaching the reader how to pray. The degree to which Savonarola revealed his own interior thoughts suggests how powerful his writings were in binding him to his followers.⁴⁵ The pamphlet on the love of Jesus gave vent to all kinds of exclamations on the goodness and mercy of the Lord, on the ardent longing of his soul to become as one with him, to be bound on the same cross, pierced by the same nails, and crowned by the same thorns . . . [These were written as ] utterances of the soul in the transports of complete prostration before God, and of a man who found in this holy delirium a species of consolation . . . [and] succeeded in communicating his enthusiasm to a people apparently converted to skepticism by the leaders of the new learning.⁴⁶

Donald Surrency argued that at the heart of Savonarola’s reform of the Florentines “was a direct experience of and relationship with the divine, first in his own life and, then . . . in the lives of his listeners and readers through the practice of *orazione mentale*.” In mental prayer,

> the sacred text loses its shape and takes on a new one for the mystic. The question of meaning becomes paramount. The mystic transforms the holy text, the crux of this metamorphosis being that the heard, clear, unmistakable word of revelation is filled with infinite meaning. The word which claims the highest authority is opened up, as it were, to receive the mystic’s experience.⁴⁷
Savonarola asked his supporters to accept that his authority was from God. He also exhibited the mystical experience, or ascent to the divine, that many desired. Yet Savonarola’s was a familiar relationship as well, a friendship with God. Even Coroli had made reference to Savonarola’s “speaking with another voice” in his 1491 Lenten sermons. It was as if the spirit was talking through his mouth. With Savonarola’s help, the devout could achieve the experience. From another perspective, Savonarola’s encouragement of prayer was much like his work as a Dominican master of novices, who, following Humbert of Romans and Fra Anonymous, developed novices’ ability to meditate and pray directly to God. Without that “culto interiore” there would be no private experience to motivate public action.

These pamphlets and his focus on prayer generally, increased the people’s perception of Savonarola’s saintliness and his presence in their lives. In turn, they became more devoted to him and were less likely to question his self-representation. The laity and Savonarola still desired a public ceremonial life and Savonarola did not propose any abandonment of the ceremonial Church or its liturgy. Besides, “spiritual leaders who sought to act outside any such tradition [of Catholic ritual] eventually found themselves in serious trouble with the Church hierarchy.” Excommunication was used to exert control to bring the wayward preacher back into conformity. Savonarola’s reform agenda thus engaged the laity on several levels.

Proofs for Savonarola’s Prophetic Status

Three other events during 1491 had a bearing on the direction that Savonarola’s prophetic career path took as he sought to provide proofs of his status. First, in July of 1491, Savonarola was elected prior of San Marco by his confreres. The second event concerned Savonarola’s prophecy of three deaths, those of Lorenzo de’ Medici, Pope Innocent VIII, and King Ferdinand of Naples. Two of these deaths occurred in 1492: Lorenzo de’ Medici on April 8, 1492, and
Pope Innocent VIII in July of the same year. Ferdinand did not die until 1494, but all three deaths were accepted by the people as proofs of Savonarola’s prophecies. Third, in 1491 King Charles VIII of France expressed interest in pursuing the Neapolitan throne as Pope Innocent VIII had suggested to him in 1490. Because the Neapolitan king, Ferdinand, was still alive in 1491, Charles was as yet unable to act on the pope’s suggestion. A move against Naples would have been an opportunistic means on the pope’s part to “rid himself of the Aragonese usurpers” who threatened to surround the papal states. There was an advantage for Charles, as well in placing the French king in a prophetic context. Charles had “inherited” his father Louis XI’s pledge to crusade and was already being cast as the “second Charlemagne” of prophecy who would reform the Church and conquer the Turks. These several matters influenced Savonarola greatly from 1492 through 1494.

Relative to San Marco, Savonarola began to consider how his election as prior fit into his agenda to reform the Church from within and the proofs of his prophetic status that he might offer. San Marco had suffered, as had many convents, from the loss of brothers during recurring re-infections of the plague. San Marco had been independent of other Dominican congregations earlier in the fifteenth century, a circumstance that allowed it to become Observant under the guidance of its prior Antonino, later archbishop of Florence. Dominic Guzman had founded the Order of Preachers on “evangelical poverty,” with a constitution that strictly followed the asceticism of the early Apostles. Dominicans were “required to live in individual poverty and to lead the common life in chastity.” Because of its low population, San Marco could not sustain itself financially as donations dried up. The convent was joined to the unreformed Lombard congregation in 1456, compromising the convent’s adherence to observant practice. The convent was later separated from the Lombard congregation in 1469 and rejoined to it again in 1474.
It had been Antonino who, as Florence’s archbishop, had first relaxed the practice of poverty by allowing San Marco to hold property. His motivation was to compensate for loss of lay contributions for the maintenance of the house. However, the relaxation of the rule had not reversed the dire straits of the almost deserted convent. In general, however, since the late fourteenth century, the observance of evangelical poverty had not characterized the lives of either mendicant or monastic orders. Individual Dominicans themselves had begun to acquire possessions, endangering the goal of evangelical poverty even further. This was the situation that Savonarola faced in 1491 when he was elected prior.

Many late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century religious groups sought a means for renewal that was “directed towards the recovery of the primitive rules of Observance, and towards the construction of a new religious identity.” In addition to a return to the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, this included a “revival of eremitism,” the life of solitude and asceticism of the early desert fathers. Groups within orders like the Camoldensians and the Dominicans of San Marco, as well as the Augustinian Hermits, had places where the religious could practice meditation and prayer apart from others. The hermitage of Santa Maria founded in 1470 served this purpose for the Dominicans of San Marco. Aspects of the eremitic life were also practiced by lay groups as a “widespread form of penitential spirituality that privileged poverty, asceticism, and contemplative silence.” The piety, particularly of women in tertiary orders and lay and aristocratic women, was notable. Savonarola, of course, had followed an observant path since choosing the Dominican life, and it was to aspects of eremitism that Savonarola turned for the reform of San Marco.

Savonarola’s reform goal was to return the convent to the observance of ascetic practices of the apostolic life. As with his reforms of the laity, Savonarola focused on the personal
morality of individual monks: their fidelity to evanglic poverty and their lifestyle. Savonarola sought to demonstrate on a smaller scale that the reform of the Church from within could be achieved. His effort to return San Marco to observant reform began in earnest in 1492 and 1493. Initially he sought to build a new convent in a more secluded location, but his plan was rejected by his patron, Lorenzo de’ Medici, who continued to have an interest in seeing San Marco returned to its earlier observant status under Antonino Pierozzi and the patronage of Cosimo de’ Medici. Thus Savonarola’s efforts focused on changes at the Florentine convent. The living quarters of the novices already provided for individual cells for meditation and solitude, as indicated by Cosimo’s quarters in the convent.\textsuperscript{59}

\textbf{The “New” Cyrus and King Charles VIII of France}

Savonarola continued to preach in addition to pursuing his reform activities. The Lenten sermons of 1492 began with Noah’s Ark. Although interrupted in 1492 and later continued in 1494, the sermons continued the theme of punishment and renovation of the Church. Fra Benedetto, Savonarola’s biographer, transcribed this passage:

\begin{quote}
My Lord will renovate the Church, and convert every barbarian people.\ldots
But first Italy will have to mourn, And so much of her blood will be shed, That here people shall everywhere be thinned.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

His central text was Noah’s Ark from the book of \textit{Genesis}.\textsuperscript{61} Across the sermons on Noah’s Ark, Savonarola focused on the interior transformation through penance as a prerequisite to individual interior renewal. As in the Scriptures, God would provide an Ark to save the righteous from the flood that would cover the earth to destroy its corruption. However, the Ark to which Savonarola referred was actually the Church which permitted entry of those who those who practiced \textit{penetenzia}. The imagery of the Ark over the series of sermons
portrayed the gathering together of the righteous: its length representing faith; its width, charity; its height, hope. [He gave] each day a different interpretation of the ten planks of which the Ark was composed, again expounded the virtues good Christians were bound to possess and the duties they should fulfill. Finally on Easter morning, he declared the Ark to be complete, and ended his sermon with the following words: “Let all hasten to enter the Lord’s Ark! Noah invites ye all to-day, the door stands open; but a time will come when the Ark will be closed, and many will repent in vain of not having entered therein.”

Savonarola spoke for Noah, another instance of his self-representation of identity with a biblical figure.

Savonarola continued to censure the great men of Florence—poets, philosophers, humanists, powerful men in government, and Medici supporters. Savonarola, in effect, invited and even cultivated their opposition to him, although at this time their response to him was not open, as it would be in the later 1490s. Savonarola intentionally delivered a message about the corruption of the clergy and the Church that aroused opposition. He now also preached openly about the power of the Pope to excommunicate. In the third sermon of Lent, on the first Friday, he prophesied on the “true preacher,” a prophecy that could later be applied to himself:

Think, therefore, how great and of what kind this persecution will be when the true preacher falls into their hands. Who will believe him when he has been excommunicated? When he has been seized, when the masses have been seduced with cunning and false doctrine, when the great of the Church hypocritically make show of holiness to the people?

He also began to characterize Charles VIII more specifically in his prophecies. Savonarola “foretold the coming of a new Cyrus, who would march through Italy in triumph, without encountering any obstacles and without breaking a single lance.” In Scripture, Isaiah revealed God’s plan for the restoration of Jerusalem to the people captive in Babylon through Cyrus, king of the Persians:

Who has stirred up from the East the champion of justice [Cyrus] and summoned him to be his attendant?
To him he delivers nations and subdues kings;
With his sword he reduces them to dust...  

In his sermon, Savonarola reminded his listeners that God had chosen a foreign land and leader to be the instrument of punishment for the people’s failure to obey God’s commands, just as God chose Charles VIII who was a leader from a foreign land. This Lenten sermon occurred sometime before Easter, March 27, 1492, reflecting the threat of French king, Charles VIII. By June 1492 a small number of Florentine observers, hitherto “asleep,” according to chronicler Piero Parenti, began to see the French threat more clearly. The newly elected pope, Alexander VI, also regarded the French as a potential threat to Italy.

Savonarola began to speak of visions, adding them to the proofs of his self-representation. The first vision occurred on Good Friday, April 20, 1492, less than two weeks after Lorenzo’s death. Savonarola described two crosses, a cross of God’s anger contrasted with a golden cross of God’s mercy. Savonarola’s second vision occurred on the night before the last Advent sermon, late in 1492. As described by Strathern,

Alone and sleepless in his cell during the long, cold winter night, Savonarola racked his brains, seeking inspiration for the last Advent sermon that he was due to deliver the next day. . . . Then suddenly he had a vision of a hand brandishing a sword, which was inscribed with the words “Gladius Domini super terram, cito et velociter” [“The sword of the Lord over the earth quickly and soon.”]. . . Later, he heard a great booming voice, which proclaimed itself as the voice of the Lord and announced to him: The time is nigh when I shall unsheathe my sword. Repent before my wrath is vented upon you. For when the day of my judgment comes you may seek to hide but you will find no refuge.

Savonarola continued in prophetic rhetoric:

Then I said, still illuminated by God, that one like Cyrus was going to cross the mountains, [he] of whom Isaiah wrote: “Thus says the Lord to my Christ Cyrus, when he has taken [Cyrus] by the hand that he might subdue nations before him and undo the might of kings, and open the gates before him, and no gates would be shut: I [the Lord] will go before you and humble the proud of the world.”
The text is another example of the conflation of Savonarola’s fifteenth century and biblical times. The “I” of Line 1 in this text appears to refer to Savonarola himself as the prophet. Thereafter, the identity of Cyrus, “my Christ Cyrus,” and the person of Savonarola are ambiguous. Weinstein, however, after examining alternative sources, accepted Savonarola’s claim that he intended to refer to a New Cyrus and that Charles VIII was that chosen person.\textsuperscript{71} As the biblical Cyrus had been the instrument of God’s punishment in biblical history, Charles VIII would be God’s instrument in the punishment and restoration of the Florentines to God’s elect nation.

In 1492 and 1493, Savonarola made several visits to Venice and Pisa to preach and to attend meetings of the Dominican Order. It may have been in spring of 1492 that Savonarola first approached General of the Order, Giovacchino Torriani, to approve the separation of the San Marco congregation once more from the Lombard congregation.\textsuperscript{72} This laid the foundation for his first reform effort of the clergy.\textsuperscript{73} With Savonarola’s efforts, San Marco regained sufficient donations to return to a self-sufficient status. On May 22, 1493, Pope Alexander VI approved the separation of San Marco from the Lombard congregation and placed it directly under Torriani.

Savonarola began reforms by imposing a regimen of evangelical poverty on the brothers.\textsuperscript{74} The younger brothers who had been attracted to San Marco because of Savonarola’s call for Church reform fully endorsed his reforms. The older brothers who had lived under a more relaxed rule were generally not favorable. Mariano of Genazzano criticized Savonarola’s tone and message, but as the reforms took effect, those Florentines who noticed generally approved of Savonarola’s efforts. This included ordinary citizens as well as the learned.\textsuperscript{75}
Although approval of his program was generally widespread, he was beginning to gather more powerful enemies among the clergy and the wealthy.

By 1493 Savonarola’s preaching had created more widespread understanding of the political threats from the French. In the minds of people, that threat became fused with the prophesied religious apocalypse. In and around Florence and Italy, Charles VIII, as earlier his father Charles VII, had been regarded as the person most likely to fulfill the prophecy of the Second Charlemagne. Savonarola himself accepted this prophecy and saw Charles as a likely candidate for the role. Finally in August 1494, Charles VIII began to march his army of 40,000 men into Savoy. In September, after meeting Ludovico Il Moro of Milan in Asti, Charles moved into Liguria. He reached the northwest border of Tuscany in October and sacked the fortress town of Fivizzano. Charles proved to be a bloody conqueror.

As he moved south through the Tuscan countryside, Charles sought the rich prizes of the fortress towns of Sarzanello and Sarzana which protected Florence. Florentine leader Piero de’ Medici, in an effort to appease Charles, acquiesced to these French territorial demands. The Florentine people revolted and expelled Piero from Florence, and Savonarola’s sermons against tyrants helped to create the popular uprising.

By mid-November Charles directly threatened Florence. Savonarola was called upon three times in November to serve Florence on embassies to Charles VIII, both before Charles’s arrival and then during his time in Florence. When Charles and his troops entered Florence on November 17, 1494, the people fully expected him to sack the city. When Charles peacefully departed Florence on December 1, 1494, the people regarded this as miraculous. The people believed that Savonarola, through his intervention, had saved the city. Savonarola was a true prophet.
The “New Jerusalem”

Savonarola preached almost every day during the crisis in 1494.\textsuperscript{82} Just as the ancient city of Jerusalem had to be purged and to recommit to their Lord, Savonarola preached that Florence must be purged. In biblical Jerusalem, Savonarola found a model for Florence to become a New Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{83} Unlike the heavenly city of Revelation, Savonarola’s target for moral reform was the earthly city of Florence. Rome was no longer the holy city because of its corrupt popes; thus Florence would also lead the reform of the Church. Creating the “new Jerusalem” was the next phase of Savonarola’s career.

The crisis of 1494 continued with the challenge to form a government. Without a Medici to head the government there was a need of, at least, a “style of leadership and guidance that would promote a reconciliatory civic spirit and prudent governmental reform.”\textsuperscript{84} Savonarola acted with the authority of the prophet Haggai (or, in Latin, Aggeus), the prophet who had been tasked with rebuilding the temple upon the return of the people from Babylon to Jerusalem. On December 10, 1494, the first sermon of the Advent cycle “redefine[d Savonarola’s] prophetic message embracing Florence’s own triumphal New Charlemagne mythology. . . . [Savonarola] now asserted that temporal empire would accompany spiritual renewal.”\textsuperscript{85} He claimed unity with the prophets of the Old Testament—Jeremiah, Noah, Haggai, and Moses—and he asserted that Florence would “not only recover Pisa and the other lost territories; they would extend their dominion beyond all previous limits.”\textsuperscript{86} The people of this “new Jerusalem” would live according to the moral principles established by the Old Testament prophets. In a number of his sermons, Savonarola highlighted “how he had been sent by God and how the Lord had chosen Florence to undergo a process of tribulation, purification, and salvation that would
subsequently spread to the rest of Italy and Christendom.” This city should hail Christ as its king, he preached.87

On December 10, 1494, in addition to everything else he had preached, Savonarola also proclaimed the earthly destiny of Florence:

I announce this good news to the city, that Florence will be more glorious, richer, more powerful than it has ever been. First, glorious with regards to God and to men: and you, Florence, will be the reformation of all Italy and the renewal will begin here and expand everywhere . . . . Second, Florence you will have uncountable riches and God will multiply everything for you. Third you will spread your empire, thus you will have temporal and spiritual power . . . . But if you don’t do what I have told you, you won’t have it.88

Again, Savonarola’s expectations of his followers were clear: In addition to temporal and spiritual power, Florentines would gain “uncountable riches” and more. With the authority of a prophet and priest, Savonarola led the city. Savonarola treated this prophecy as direct revelation with Scripture as his model: “the Florentines were the ancient Israelites, God’s chosen people, delivered from bondage.”89 The people, given the apocalypticism of the period, were ready to accept the judgment that their own wrongdoing was responsible for their plight and that their salvation was at risk. They gave Savonarola their support.

This prophecy was tied to the rise of a new republican government guided by Savonarola from the pulpit. Many referred to the legislative hall that was ultimately built as the “Hall of Christ.” This new government was a decision endorsed by most, but not all, of Florence’s factions: “[T]he majority of Florentines—regardless of class—enthusiastically embraced the image Savonarola sketched of their city and of themselves assuming a divinely-willed primacy destined to become a spiritual and political hegemony.”90 In December of 1494, the Council of Seventy and other councils by which the Medici faction had governed were dissolved. With the participation of the majority of citizens, a Great Council assumed legislative functions. On
December 22, just three weeks after Charles VIII’s departure from the city, this Council adopted a constitution. The governo largo modeled many features of Venice’s governing body. Throughout the process, Savonarola’s goal was the reconciliation of the factions that had always plagued Florence, and amnesty for those Mediceans who had opposed the new government.

Having completed the Advent sermons just the week before, Savonarola preached sermon XXIII of the Aggeus, or Haggai, cycle on December 28, 1494. He turned his attention from the book of Aggeus to discuss the reform of the government of Florence. After a preamble that reminded his listeners of the capabilities of the senses and the intellect, Savonarola moved to the divine light by which to see divine mysteries and to see truth. He intoned:

So, once again I say, concerning your new reform, which you seek to attack and ruin: you will see in the end that you fight in vain. But tell me something: is this reform good or evil? You cannot say that it is not good; why, then, do you attack it? If we try to build a heavenly city and a government like to that of Heaven, of the angels and of God, what can you add to it and on what point can you say that it would not be good. The heavenly city is ruled and governed with the utmost order and quiet and peace; so would I like your city to be.\textsuperscript{91}

Savonarola described the orderly arrangement of choirs of angels in heaven as “beautiful” and that, if he could, he would make Florence’s government like it. Each choir has a function and, communicating to the choirs above and below, works to carry out the divine will. One of these has entered Florence to aid in the creation of the new government. Savonarola described the interaction of angels within the city of Florence and how the reform of the city would lead to the renewal of the Church.\textsuperscript{92} Savonarola’s plea for Florentines to conform to the guidance of angels seems quite literal: “[A]ll should be content, each within his own degree and limit . . . without seeking more beyond.” He also spoke of the role of the prophets and other holy men: “[T]he people of God, while they were good and did good, were always directed by the divine light and by the prophets and the holy men illuminated by God, and the king always had to have
at hand near to him the book of *Deuteronomy*, wherein is the law of God.”93 Thus, the king was of the people, but the prophet was above the king in his link to God. However, Savonarola’s prophecy was conditional, requiring the penitent behavior of citizens: “O Florence, if you will be well-ordered this way, you will be the City of God.”94

In sum, Savonarola was quite clear about what was expected of Florentines. In this new government, Savonarola sought to undermine the rule of despots and the established social order that privileged the wealthy over the poor and denied most a voice in government. Savonarola, in his preaching of government, made no distinction between political and religious goals. This lack of separation of political and religious goals affected support for Savonarola. The convent became the center for the activities of Savonarola and his brothers. The convent, however, was also the place where the laity went for counseling and confession. Some citizens, especially those with less enthusiasm for the new government, expressed concern and suspicion that the friars were directly involved with the formation of government and might be carrying on political discussion at San Marco. This caused confusion for some and a basis for opposition by others. Some suspected that secret meetings to plan treason and assassination were held at San Marco. These were severely punished under Florentine law.95 Secret meetings for political planning or agreements to vote for certain men were regarded as “subversive and divisive.”96

Although various factions had come together to support the revolt against Piero di Lorenzo de’ Medici and a constitution had been approved, factionalism reappeared immediately with desire for retribution against the “former agents of Medician tyranny.”97 Savonarola called for amnesty for supporting the Medici regime. The *Signoria* (eight priors and the Gonfaloniere of Justice) had the power of the ultimate punishment for treason or other crimes against the state through the law of Six Beans.98 This was the status of the reform at the end of December 1494.
Chapter Six continues with Savonarola, its new Republican government, and the reform of a “new Jerusalem.”

**Conclusion**

This chapter argued that Savonarola built and then manipulated his self-representation as a prophet of God. This, in turn, gave Savonarola power, for a time at least, to act as a prophet. He needed this power to lead Florence to the status of a “new Jerusalem.” The motivation for popular support of Savonarola was the people’s desperate need for both religious and political security and safety. Savonarola’s widespread acceptance by Florentines of all classes was a result of Savonarola’s having brought the religious and political life of Florence into a single entity to be reformed by the same religious processes that reformed the individual: prayer, penitence, and a reformed moral life that extended to the city of Florence. Bernard McGinn had stated that Savonarola’s great innovation was to conceive of the Florentine people as the “new Jerusalem” on earth.99

The findings demonstrated that Savonarola’s support as a prophet was not monolithic. The great majority of the faithful were motivated to achieve salvation and increase the piety of their lives, and the sanctity of Savonarola’s life convinced them to believe in him. There were, however, special interest groups whose support was conditional. This included the clergy, Christian humanists, and others who had traditionally exercised power in the city. However after the protection that Savonarola provided when French king, Charles VIII, threatened to destroy Florence in 1494, Savonarola enjoyed his highest acclaim as a prophet of God. Even the political leaders of the city sought him out when writing a new constitution for Florence.
Endnotes


6 Donald Scott Surrency, Between Private Faith and Public Witness: Girolamo Savonarola and the Making of Sacred Space, Unpublished Dissertation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 11. To be a mystic was to be a man or woman, “. . . who ha[d] been favored with an immediate, and to him real, experience of the divine, of ultimate reality, or who at least strives to attain such experience [through a] the mystical quest for the divine.”

   See also: Kerra Gazzero Hanson, “The Blessing of Tears: The Order of Preachers and Dominico Cavalca in St. Catherine of Siena’s ‘Dialogo dells divine provvidenza,’” *Italica* 89(2) (Summer 2012), 150. There were many precedents for mystics whose efforts to ascend to the divine were known, as, for example, the Dominican Catherine of Siena a century earlier (1347-80). In her mystical communion with God the Father through the “bridge” of Christ’s body, she, as a penitent, experienced different kinds of tears at each stage of the ascent to perfection. As a prophet, Savonarola’s mysticism was an inherent part of his connection to God and the renovation people wanted to experience as penitents.


8 Weinstein, *Savonarola: the Rise and Fall*, 75.


10 *Deuteronomy* 13:1-6 in *The Book of Deuteronomy*, comm.. J. Edward Owens, *New Collegeville Bible Commentary Old Testament 6* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 47. There is no extant text of a sermon that verifies this statement, yet it seems plausible that Savonarola would have preached on a key message of the epistle: “Every word that I command you, you shall be careful to observe . . . . If there arises in your midst a prophet or a dreamer who promises you a sign or wonder, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ whom you have not known ‘and let us serve them,’ and the sign or wonder foretold to you comes to pass, ‘do not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer; for the Lord, your God, is testing you to know whether you really love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and soul. The Lord, your God, shall you follow, and him shall you fear; . . . But that prophet or that dreamer shall be put to death . . . .”


12 Villari, *Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola I*, note 1, 143.


Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall*, 78.

Villari, *Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola I*, 84. Savonarola’s liberal use of violent imagery in Brescia (for example, his reference to “rivers of blood in the streets”) demonstrated that he was well practiced in frightening audiences by the time he returned to Florence. Savonarola also spoke of the role of imagination in his religious life.

Villari, *Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola I*, 120.


34 Ridolfi, *The Life of Girolamo Savonarola*, 42-3. On Sunday May 15, Savonarola answered Fra Mariano’s arguments on the same biblical text. Then he addressed Mariano directly: “Who put it in your head to attack me?” Fra Mariano was humiliated and, later, after his retirement to Rome, “emerg[ed] as leader of [Savonarola’s] enemies in Florence and elsewhere.”


43 See Phillip K. Arrington, “Soliloquies Divine: God’s Self-Addressed Rhetoric in the Old Testament,” *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* XXXIV(3) (Summer 2016), 223-42. The discussion of the prophet’s prayer as self-referencing communication was suggested by Arrington’s treatment of God’s initial use of soliloquy in the Old Testament, followed by the use of prophets as a conduit for his communication. Prayer seemed to describe the prophet’s reflection on his own relationship with God intended to be overheard by the prophet’s audience. See also: Phillip Arrington, *Eloquence Divine: In Search of God’s Rhetoric* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books/Proquest, 2017). Phillip K. Arrington examined the genre of “divine soliloquy” for the self-referential rhetoric of God in the Old Testament. The texts he examined were instances of God’s speech when no other individuals were present to form an audience and thus were *de facto* addressed to Himself. These were confined to the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis and a few other books. After these instances, God’s messages to his elect were through the prophets. By inference, the self-talk of a prophet revealed the prophet’s own self-referential relationship with God.


45 Villari, *Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola I*, 110-15; Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall*, 91-2. See also Surrency, 63-5. “Savonarola addresses himself—his soul, his heart, his tongue, his mind . . . . The soul is left speechless, unable to communicate, and so Savonarola insists forcefully, almost violently: ‘O anima, rispondi, anima!’ He pleads with his soul to respond!”


48 Surrency, Between Private Faith and Public Witness, 58.

49 Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, 78.

50 See Chapter 3 of this study.

51 Surrency, Between Private Faith and Public Witness, 5.

52 Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, 94.


54 Ridolfi, The Life of Girolamo Savonarola, 57.


58 Zarri, “Ecclesiastical Institutions,” 49, 51. Zarri stated that “Catherine [of Siena] became the model Observant woman, mystic, and saint. She was surrounded by a vibrant intellectual circle of religious people from various orders, including learned Dominicans drawn to her because of her charisma and her multifaced vocation. On the one hand, as a lay debout woman dedicated to charitable activities and close to Dominican spirituality, she opted for a ‘mixed life’ of contemplation and action.”

59 Strathern, Death in Florence, 113.

60 Villari, Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola I, fn1, 187. This was recorded by Savonarola’s contemporary biographer, Fra Benedetto.

61 Genesis, comm. Joan E. Cook, New Collegeville Bible Commentary Old Testament 2 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011). Noah was introduced in the genealogy of patriarchs in Gen. 5:29 and the full narrative of the flood is written in Gen. 6:1-9:17. The narrative of Noah and his family entering the ark and the animals he was to bring until the flood receded and the ark was opened is Gen 7:6-8:6. See pp. 25-31.

62 Villari, Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola I, 186.


64 Villari, Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola I, 186-7.


66 Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, 95-6.


69 Strathern, *Death in Florence*, 141-44.

70 Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall*, 96.

71 Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall*, 97. Weinstein examined alternative sources to confirm this introduction of Cyrus, for no reportatione of this sermon survived, nor did Savonarola’s recollections in the *Compendium of Revelations* or his *Reformation Sermon* of January 13, 1495, clearly refer to Cyrus.


73 Peter Serracino-Inglott, “Ficino the Priest” in Michael J. B. Allen and Valery Rees, ed., *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy* (Brill: EBSCO Publishing, 2002), 1-13. Savonarola had been examining the role of the priest, in preaching and providing pastoral care, for most of his life, finding the current “versions” of the clergy who served the laity deficient in fervor or morality or both. Savonarola, as he thought about the reform of the clergy, cannot have been oblivious to the views of Marsilio Ficino. Florence’s leading philosopher, also a physician and an ordained a priest, had written to the Pope advocating medical training for priests to prepare them for the dual role of the healer of bodies and the healer of souls. Priests needed the skills to facilitate the powerful words that the priest spoke to patients. There is no specific indication of what Savonarola thought about this neo-platonic idea, except that Savonarola generally rejected neo-platonism. That Ficino became an early follower of Savonarola spoke perhaps to the shared background of the career of the physician that Savonarola originally pursued. His response to the failure of the clergy to meet the needs of the laity was to awaken a desire to ascend to the divine. Although the methods of Ficino would include occult phenomena condemned by the Church, he must have seen in Savonarola’s early preaching the desire to bring the lay population to God in a way more direct than through scholastic argument.


75 Dall’Aglio, *Savonarola and Savonarolism*, 15.

76 See Chapter 2 of this study.

77 Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall*, 103.

78 Dall’Aglio, *Savonarola and Savonarolism*, 19; see also Martines, *Fire in the City*, 36.


82 Besides sermons recorded in written form by others, *repertationes*, Savonarola wrote many sermons so that his opponents could not twist his words. Some sermons are only known from reconstructions from notes and outlines.


85 Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall*, 122. See Chapter 2 of this study for the Second Charlemagne prophecy.


87 Dall’Aglio, *Savonarola and Savonarolism*, 20.


89 Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall*, 123. Weinstein continued with text directly from Savonarola: “Until now I have been the prophet Jonah, . . . I will from now on be Jeremiah . . . .”

90 Dall’Aglio, *Savonarola and Savonarolism*, 23.


95 Martines, *Fire in the City*, 74, 77-8.

96 Martines, *Fire in the City*, 78.


CHAPTER 6:

GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA’S FALL FROM POWER

Until now I have been the prophet Jonah, who told the city it must convert, but I tell you that if they do not do what I have told them to do, I will from now on be Jeremiah who predicted so many years in advance the destruction of Jerusalem, then wept for it, destroyed and desolate.¹

The wide acceptance of Girolamo Savonarola as a prophet reached its height at the time he preached this sermon from the Haggai, or Aggeus, cycle in November 1494. Savonarola preached on the Bible from “the same books of Scripture [that] gave the prototypes of his own prophetic role; he was Jonah, he was Jeremiah, he was Noah, Haggai, even Moses, according to the circumstance.”² From January 1495 on, as he reinforced his authority as a prophet and began the reform of Florence, he earned enormous reverence and loyalty from most of the Florentine populace, and he retained most of this support to the end of his life and inspired many reformers who would follow in the sixteenth century. Yet there was never unanimous acceptance of Savonarola, his reforms, or his prophecies. It is well to remember that his opponents were the same individuals who believed in all the prophets and prophecies that had been passed down from ancient to late-medieval times.³

Given Savonarola’s enormous popularity, it was convenient for those who did not support his reform program to refrain from opposing him for a time. That opposition, although not representing the populace at large, came from powerful groups who had much to lose if Savonarola succeeded in his reforms. Some lost political power to Savonarola’s republican government. Some lost revenue from public vice. There was also hostility and jealousy among
the clergy, occasioned by the people’s devotion to the preacher coupled with Savonarola’s blistering attacks on the corruption and vice of the clergy. Savonarola’s actions enabled his ecclesiastical enemies to raise questions about blasphemy, heresy, and obedience and would bring the pope into direct conflict with Savonarola.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the responses of Florentine churchmen, patricians, merchants, bankers and others to Savonarola’s intrusion into their exercise of power, and the concerns of pious citizens over matters of obedience to the Church and its head, the pope, and bring the study to its conclusion. Ultimately, Savonarola’s approach had unintended consequences. Conflicts developed over whose religious authority was to be obeyed, the pope’s or the prophet’s. The laity had to choose between Savonarola and the ecclesiastical authority of the Church, particularly the pope, to whom they owed allegiance and obedience. While miracles were not proof of the prophet’s standing, the absence of new miracles contributed to some wavering of support among the laity. In the end, Savonarola lost sufficient political support with the result that his enemies could brand him a heretic, but support for his reforming agenda would continue.

**Florence in 1495: Becoming a New Jerusalem**

Every vice that was curtailed by Savonarola’s political and religious reforms earned the enmity of those who no longer profited from the activity. The reform of the city ran counter to the interests of some in the business community; for in suppressing gambling, horse racing, and other entertainments, some lost money. Opposition from political enemies within Florence also grew as their exercise of power became restricted. There was growing pressure to restore Medici rule or an oligarchy or, at least, to deflate any democratic leanings of the Great Council, established with the help of Savonarola. In addition to the political misfortunes facing
Savonarola, the city faced plague, famine, and failure of crops. At this time also, opposition from some of the clergy and preachers in several orders in Florence became more vocal. While on the surface, the new government of Florence appeared unified under the Frateschi, Savonarola’s party, in reality many competing parties rapidly appeared.

Savonarola’s sermon of December 10, 1494, that unequivocally placed him in the prophetic tradition of Moses, Amos, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and others, accounted to some extent for the growth of clerical opposition to Savonarola in Florence and Italy as a whole. Some clergy were jealous of Savonarola, and others believed him to be a “false prophet.” The immediate focus on political opposition against Savonarola, however, was prompted by the election of new government leadership at the beginning of 1495. The Florence’s twenty election commissioners, the Accoppiatori, had placed Filippo Corbizzi in the position of Gonfaloniere of Justice at the beginning of the year. This leader was opposed to Savonarola and was indifferent to the needs of the people, but he attracted others to his party’s policies. The Arrabiati hated the Medici, but were almost equally opposed to Savonarola whose party, the Piagnoni, had defeated them. The Arrabiati were powerless to do anything other than ridicule the Piagnoni until Corbizzi provided a means of attacking Savonarola.

On January 18, Corbizzi convened a group of theologians and other ecclesiastics to the government palace. Upon assembling, Corbizzi informed the group that he intended to proceed against Savonarola for his interference in government. The ecclesiastical rules were clear and well known to Savonarola: Members of ecclesiastical orders were not to participate in government roles, as was. Savonarola, having been called to attend the January 18 conference, had no prior knowledge of its agenda. After being attacked by a number of the clergy present, Savonarola reminded the assembly of the work of Archbishop Antonino Pierozzi, Catherine of
Siena, and other Dominicans whose mission was to impact government leadership. Savonarola argued, “To be concerned with the affairs of the world in which God had placed us is no crime in a monk, unless he should mix in them without any higher aim and without seeking to promote the cause of religion.” The verbal battle at this assembly caused Savonarola to become “resigned and defiant.” He told his January 20 congregation: “I have now become the scandal of Florence; nevertheless I am still here.” Savonarola said of himself that “he was not at all impressive in the exchange.”

Somewhat later, perhaps in March or April, Giovanni Caroli, the Dominican prior of Santa Maria Novella and a critic of Savonarola since his arrival in Florence in 1490, also attacked Savonarola for interfering in Florence. Fra Caroli then extended his attack from politics to theology. He contended that prophecy was so rare in these days as to call Savonarola’s claim into question. Savonarola was “an imposter, a deceiver driven by ambition and the desire for celebrity and power.” Behind the scenes during 1495, a number of clergy worked to have Savonarola accused of heresy through various pressures on the pope, either writing to him directly or through other advocates in Rome. An accusation of heresy would have required the pope to convene a trial to examine Savonarola for his beliefs. A conviction on the charge would likely have resulted in the death penalty. This was, then, no minor charge, but charging the preacher also brought risk to the pope, for Savonarola was extremely popular.

The pope and the preacher “met” through an exchange of letters that took place from July to October 1495. The summary here is inadequate to express the anger and sarcasm of the parties and the restraint that each man exercised to keep from revealing his true feelings. On July 21, 1495, Pope Alexander VI wrote:

As in recent days . . . we have come to understand your resolve and intention, which is to disclose to the people in your preachings those things which you know
to be in God’s service, and since people have recently related to us that you subsequently have said in public sermons that those things which you announce are to come you say not from you yourself or from human wisdom but by divine revelation, desiring, as is befitting to our pastoral office to speak with you about these things . . . so that we might carry out what is pleasing to God, we exhort and command by virtue of holy obedience that you come to us as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{11}

On July 31, 1495, Savonarola responded, pleading his inability to attend the pope in Rome.\textsuperscript{12} In August, Savonarola sent his recently completed and published \textit{Compendium of Revelations} to the pope. This was the response that Savonarola intended to answer the pope’s July 21 questions about his prophetic experiences. In the \textit{Compendium}, he first recalled for his reader that God sometimes worked without images directly “imprinting in the imagination different figures and images that signify what the prophet is to understand and predict.”\textsuperscript{13} Sometimes God inspired the prophet through dreams, or by the hand as he did for the thousand nobles and King Belshazzar in Babylon: “Suddenly . . . the fingers of a human hand appeared, writing on the plaster of the wall in the king’s palace.”\textsuperscript{14} He spoke of visions, and explained,

\begin{quote}
I never disclosed the manner and great number of visions and many other revelations I had, because the Holy Spirit did not inspire me to, nor did I think it necessary for salvations. I did not think that men’s minds were ready to accept them. Now necessity compels me to write down the coming events I publicly preached about.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Savonarola explained that in his early days in Florence, words from God were the medium for divine revelations, but powerful visions often accompanied words in conjunction with or during sleep. The vision was the medium that God used to provide his prophet with his message. Savonarola, too, was a visionary prophet following in the tradition of Old Testament prophets.\textsuperscript{16} This was also the tradition of medieval prophets, like Hildegard of Bingen.

When conveying an understanding of his communication with God, Savonarola initially kept the divine origin of a vision from the faithful by using a parable or story. He frequently reported a sword in the prophecy: “Thus says the Lord God—the sword of the Lord will come
upon the earth swiftly and soon.” In another case, looking back on the second Sunday of Lent in 1490, Savonarola had a vision, but had decided not to preach this vision of the coming scourge of Florence. Having lost sleep, he prayed “and in the midst of prayer, I heard a voice that said to me: ‘Fool! Do you not see that God wants you to announce these things in this way?’ And so the same morning I gave a terrifying sermon.” In 1492, Savonarola reported, he “saw a hand in heaven with a sword.” On the sword was written

“The sword of the Lord will come upon the earth swiftly and soon.” Above the hand was written, “The judgments of the Lord are just and true.” The hand’s arm seemed to proceed from three faces in a single light. . . . Then a great voice from the three faces thundered out over the world: “Hear, all you who dwell on earth, thus says the Lord. I the Lord am speaking in my holy zeal. Behold the days are coming and my sword will be unsheathed against you.”

The sword was to be a frequent image in Savonarola’s visions. From then on, Savonarola explained to Pope Alexander VI and to the thousands who read the printed copies of his Compendium, he spoke of his visions in his preaching and used them to reinforce his prophetic status.

However, the pope “treated the Compendium as further evidence that the friar was not only a nuisance but a dangerous heretic.” On September 8, 1495, the pope wrote to the brothers of Santa Croce, a Franciscan convent in Florence, that he had heard of a “certain Girolamo Savonarola from Ferrara” and that this preacher

is delighted with the novelty of a perverse dogma and in this same insanity of mind is misled by the shift in affairs in Italy, so that without any canonical authority he attests among the people that he has been sent by God and speaks with God, against the canonical decrees.

After several more letters, the pope wrote to Savonarola on October, 16, 1495, telling him, “You ought rather to have attended in your preachings to union and peace than to preach such things as the vulgar call your prophecies and divinations [but]
we decided to write to you again. And responding to your letters, we command you, by virtue of holy obedience, to abstain entirely from any preaching, whether public or private, so that in ceasing from public sermons, you might not be charged with consorting to conventicles.²²

Savonarola, upon receiving this October 16 letter, was silenced. Although Savonarola did not continue to preach on political matters, he “talked” about the actions of the Great Council on October 18 and again on October 25, 1495.²³ Savonarola’s distinction between “preaching” and “talking” was ambiguous at best, indicating that he accepted the letter of the pope’s order, but not its spirit.

Late in 1495, Savonarola returned to the pulpit to preach on the prophet about whom he first preached sometime 1486 or 1487 in San Gimignano. This was the prophet Amos, the shepherd of Tekoa and dresser of sycamore trees. Amos, who was the owner of sheep and trees, was a wealthy man. He was also righteous, living in a “right” relationship with God’s covenant, observing God’s command to care for widows and orphans, foreigners and slaves. He was unlike the priests of the temple who performed the required ritual but not tzedakah, or charity. Amos held that “Israel’s lack of tzedakah, its lack of right covenant relationship, [was] best seen in the treatment of the poor.”²⁴ Many of Savonarola’s attacks on the wealthy mirrored this social justice theme of Amos and other biblical prophets. Savonarola earned the enmity of those whose position was jeopardized by his reforms and preaching.

Amos had received his call from God in a series of visions, and in the late 1480s Savonarola had explained to his listeners in San Gimignano that, like Amos, he was not a prophet for hire, as were those who formed bands of professional prophets, nor did he have membership in a guild of prophets who were only paid if they prophesied what was expected.²⁵ Through Amos, the Lord chastised the Israelites for commanding the prophets, “Do not prophesy!”²⁶ The prophets were God’s, not men’s, to command, and Amos had responded, “The
Lord God has spoken, who would not prophesy?" Further, the high priest, Amaziah, of the northern kingdom, had accused Amos of treason against Israel’s King Jeroboam. Now in 1495, Savonarola again modeled himself after Amos. Amos represented the silenced Savonarola while King Jeroboam stood for Pope Alexander VI, whose own counselors were charging that Savonarola was a traitor.

Savonarola spoke on October 11, 1495, before Alexander VI’s order to stop preaching took effect. He addressed the matter of the Arrabbiati campaign to influence the pope, echoing the prophet Amos:

They [the Arrabbiati] have conspired together: . . . They have conspired with your [i.e., Alexander’s] enemies, and they have said what the Pharisees said of Christ when they asked him if it were lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not. They said: ‘We shall catch this fox [i.e., Savonarola].’

He was silent after that. The silencing interfered with some of his planned reform activities, and Savonarola had to employ alternative means to sustain his momentum.

In late 1495, Savonarola directed Fra Domenico da Pescia to reorganize the youth of the city, the fanciulli, into religious companies to control their violence and harassment of women and Jews. These youth had themselves become targets for sexual exploitation by older men. Their dress, behavior, and language were disciplined. They performed charitable work and led processions. They were also “the shock troops in the Savonarolan war on vice,” including the collection of art and other vanities for destruction in Savonarola’s bonfires of 1497 and 1498. Yet this activity aroused opposition to Savonarola among the Florentine priors, the elected leaders who made up the Signoria, for “having delegated police powers to children.” Sodomy came in for particular denunciation, with the passage of a severe law on December 19, 1495. Its punishments could, on a third offense, result in being burned alive.
While Savonarola had to ask others to assume roles originally planned for himself, he continued to assert leadership. In place of the sermons that drew thousands of the faithful to open plazas or to the cathedral to hear him, Savonarola assigned sermons to his other brothers and focused on writing his sermons and other instructions. Printed materials reached a very wide audience and became the means that Savonarola employed to correct errors attributed to him by those who disseminated their own versions of his sermons. Consequently, Savonarola continued to preach and prophesize using the written word and reports of his visions to strengthen his self-representation as a biblical prophet. There was no other enforcement of silence communicated with the pope’s warning.

**The Work of the Preacher in 1496**

The official papal silencing of Savonarola was still in effect at the start of 1496, but the Signoria ordered Savonarola to preach the Lenten sermons from the pulpit of the cathedral Santa Maria del Fiore starting on February 11, 1496.³⁴ His sermons continued with his reform message. On March 18 Savonarola spoke of the reform of the fanciulli that fra Domenico da Pescia had begun at the end of 1495. In his March 20 sermon, Savonarola addressed the reform of women.

There was controversy in both Rome and Florence over the reform of the fanciulli, and a proposed role for women generated reactions in Florence. The protests of the clergy in Rome who called for the pope to discipline Savonarola intensified and included direct advocacy to the pope for action against Savonarola by his enemy, Fra Mariano Genazzano.³⁵ At some time in March, Pope Alexander VI appointed a commission consisting of two cardinals, two bishops, the Dominican general, and several Dominican theologians “to take up the case of the errant Friar.”³⁶
The Signoria learned of the commission on March 30 from Florence’s ambassador to the pope, Ricciardo Becchi. The commission did not come to a decision, and Savonarola had already been preaching with approval of the Signoria. His self-representation in light of complaints led to this defense later in spring: “If I lie, Christ lies.” His other key statement was his declaration, “I’ll tell you the truth, the preaching is for my benefit; I can’t live without preaching.”

Savonarola’s campaign for moral reform continued. A new tax law was passed in 1496, angering the wealthy. Sumptuary laws condemned displays of wealth, such as “shameful pictures, . . . musical instruments and music books, . . . costly foreign draperies.” Later in 1497 and 1498, these objects, as well as mirrors, hairpieces, cosmetics and other vanities were gathered and burned. In 1496, the rigor of sumptuary laws further exacerbated the ill feeling of prosperous citizens toward the preacher. Perceived threats to the political power of the aristocrats and wealthy set limits on how far and for how long their political support for Savonarola would last. The strength of the Medicean faction was growing. Talk began about the restoration to power of Piero de’ Medici or someone else in the Medici line. All of these developments contributed to increasing disenchantment with Savonarola. The discontent was from a numerically small but important part of the Florentine public. During this time, the papal office bided its time, except for tempting Savonarola through intermediaries to accept “a cardinal’s hat.” Rather than directly confront Savonarola about his claim to prophetic status, the pope hoped to bribe Savonarola by making him a Church prelate.

Savonarola needed to reinforce popular commitment to his reform ideas and to make clear that he placed the salvation and religious growth of the individual as his highest priority. Thus, on Good Friday, April 1, 1496, Savonarola preached his forty-fourth sermon from the
Amos and Zacharia cycle in the cathedral of Florence. The biblical text referred to the ladder in Jacob’s dream, the means by which angels ascended and descended from heaven. As he urged the faithful to move toward God, Savonarola took his audience up each of seven steps, telling every member of this Lenten audience the name of the step and the penitential action required at each step. Among the steps were: “necessitas,” accepting the necessity of suffering to reach the kingdom of God; “conformitas,” by which the faithful accept the tribulations sent by God; and promptitudo, the readiness and willingness to suffer. As his words turned to the passion of Christ, Savonarola said,

This, then, is a strong mental image for me: that time is short, and tribulations are light compared with that glory which is prepared for you. . . . Likewise, one who is spiritual lives his life with vigor; no tribulation can break him. . . . . Now, our savior did this because he wanted to give this example [that He went willingly to the Cross].

Savonarola then inserted a prayer of his own into Christ’s prayer on the cross:

And so I pray You, Father, accept this sacrifice to free those fathers [patriarchs and prophets]. I commend to you the Hebrew people, the sinners, the Gentile peoples, and the whole world, all souls present and future, and My city of Florence.

Savonarola’s insertion of this prayer into the scriptural passage not only emulated the role of the prophet who pleaded to God for his people, but it also reflected Christ’s, as well as Savonarola’s, acceptance of his death. This prayer came close to Savonarola’s earlier prophecy of 1492 in which he prophesied what would happen to the true prophet in the hands of Church prelates:

Here I am, ready; here I am freely offering myself. Here I am to ascend this wood and be offered as holocaust and host . . . . To you I recommend this Hebrew people, sinners, gentiles and the whole world; all the living and future souls and my city Florence.

Having invited his own martyrdom, Savonarola preached the remaining Lenten sermons of 1496 on Amos. Focusing on Israel’s disobedience to God, Amos focused on sins that
violated the covenant, including the exercise of excessive power and failure to provide justice to
the poor, the righteous, and the needy. Amos gave special attention to the royal women, the
“pampered darlings” of Israel’s society, for their exploitation of the poor.46 Savonarola’s sermon
called attention to Florence’s new sumptuary laws. These were the sins that Savonarola
preached against in his sermons, reinforcing his continued self-representation as a prophet and
his apocalyptic paradigm of judgment of sin, God’s promise of punishment, and the need for
penance.

On the feast day of John the Baptist, June 24, Savonarola preached on simplicity, using
the book of Ruth for the theme, followed by the book of Micah.47 Meanwhile, Florence was
experiencing famine and was at war to recover Pisa. King Charles VIII had returned to France,
but Florence at Savonarola’s urging continued to maintain its loyalty to France. The cost of this
alliance was burdensome to Florence. Savonarola’s position was increasingly precarious as he
undertook additional reforms in Florence. At this same time, the Signoria had proposed a
change to the taxation of the clergy, and many members of the clergy erroneously blamed
Savonarola for this.

In 1496, the Florentine Franciscan friar Domenico da Ponza, as had the Dominican
Giovanni Caroli in 1495, publicly expressed his concerns about Savonarola’s claim to prophetic
status, continuing to stir up clerical opposition to Savonarola. Domenico himself was a
suspected agent of Milan’s Ludovico il Moro, and the pope’s new league against France included
Milan.48 The interests of both the papacy and Milan were to separate Florence from allegiance to
France. Repeating Caroli’s earlier accusation that Savonarola was a false prophet who had
intruded in Florentine politics, Domenico changed the focus on Savonarola from that of creating
the new Jerusalem to the legitimacy of his prophetic apostolate to Florence.49
By casting Savonarola’s mission as a theological issue, the clerical opposition hoped to focus papal enmity on the preacher and rid Florence of Savonarola through ecclesiastical punishment. The Church had two severe punishments for egregious offenses by notable figures and groups in the Catholic community: excommunication and interdiction. The first was an individual punishment; the second a collective sanction. Savonarola’s grievous sin was persistent disobedience to the pope for not going to Rome as commanded.

An excommunication cut off a member’s communication with the Church. Excommunication by itself was intended as punishment of an individual for serious matters, and “to lead the sinner to penance and eventual restoration to communion.” The excommunicate faced denial of the sacraments. He (or she) was also prevented from communicating with or otherwise participating in the community. The punishment was limited to physical contact, for “one could be separated physically from contact and communion with the faithful and yet remain, spiritually, in the body of Christ.” Excommunication could be pardoned upon confession and performance of penance. The nature of the sin affected the scope of the excommunication. The excommunication might affect only the individual and be limited in scope if the sin did not have broad implications for a larger community.

The normal excommunication barred the sinner from receiving the sacraments, but it could be extended. This was done by accompanying the excommunication with an anathema, a pronouncement that extended the punishment into the eternal realm. Both the temporal and eternal dimensions of excommunication were debated from the twelfth century onward and are beyond the scope of this discussion. However, the sin of a high-status member of the community, as was Savonarola’s disobedience to the pope in failing to appear in Rome, might involve excommunication with anathema attached. The important impact was that members of
the laity were aware that they might be in danger of committing sin by interacting with a member of their community who had been excommunicated. In the instance of Savonarola, an anathema might make someone attending a sermon guilty of sin. Thus members of a community might be warned against contact and communication and worried about what they should do relative to attending sermons.

Papal interdiction was a punishment for a different audience than excommunication. The interdict made a community responsible for the sin of an individual. That is, the interdict punished a whole community for the guilt of some of its members. Being subject to an interdict required a determination that sharing a penalty for some wrongdoing was appropriate for a community of some type. “Retribution against the group for the offence of its guilty members” was well established in medieval culture. As a community punishment, interdiction included penalties that denied spiritual benefits to the whole collective, guilty and innocent alike. The mass and sacraments were not performed within a city or other designated community. Thus they were not available to the faithful at large, even at the time of death.

The interdict also cut the community off economically and politically from other communities. The business community particularly worried about an interdict of Florence by the pope because of Savonarola’s conflict. They had the experience of the interdict of Florence by Pope Sixtus IV following the Pazzi Conspiracy of 1478 and feared a repetition:

[The interdict] meant both the suspension of the sacraments, with the accompanying potential for increased spiritual anxiety in the Arno city, and the exposure of Florentine merchants to sequestration of their goods—a potent economic threat to Florence’s commercial livelihood. Indeed the papacy seized Medici holdings in Rome and repudiated its debts to the Medici Bank.

In summary, the clergy who opposed Savonarola considered excommunication as the most effective step to force Savonarola’s obedience to the papal order. To the excommunication
could be added an anathema that subjected one or more other persons to the same punishment as the excommunicate. As will be discussed later in this chapter, if the people appeared to be supporting Savonarola in his actions, the pope had the power to interdict Florence itself.

In August of 1496, however, the pope was not at the point of excommunicating Savonarola. Instead, he wanted Savonarola to stop supporting Florence’s alliance with the French and he chose alternative means to try to bring this about. Through the visit of Fra Ludovico of Ferrara, the Provost General of the Dominican Order, the pope arranged an offer of a cardinal’s hat if Savonarola would ally with the pope and encourage Florence to join the Holy League. Savonarola gave his answer in the sermon of August 20, 1496, delivered in the new hall of the Great Council: “If I coveted such a thing would I be standing before you in this threadbare habit? . . . [T]he only gift I seek is . . . death, a crimson hat of blood, that is all I wish for.”55 As he had on Good Friday, Savonarola invited martyrdom. While clerical opposition continued without pause, Savonarola worked to keep his reform program moving forward. However, the populace became increasingly aware of the threat of papal punishment and their anxiety grew.56

Another serious problem of 1496 involved damage to Savonarola’s relationship with France’s King Charles VIII. The king had promised to restore Pisa to Florentine control, but Florence had to participate in its recovery. The war became more costly as Florence maintained its mercenary army outside Pisa, and Florence was almost bankrupt.57 Rome and Milan increased their pressure on Florence to abandon its French alliance. Savonarola would not hear of this, but even he had to refuse a request for additional support from the envoy of King Charles VIII. Then two forged letters purportedly came from Savonarola to French agents. One urged an immediate, new French invasion; the second charged that the French ambassador had spoken
badly about Charles VIII’s friends. Both letters were intended to damage Savonarola’s reputation. In light of Savonarola’s denial of authorship, the letters had little effect. Rather, in late August of 1496 the Duke of Milan threatened to eradicate the French in Italy altogether. Savonarola had built the foundation of the new Jerusalem on the prophecy that King Charles VIII was the biblical Cyrus fulfilling a “messianic mission . . . ordained by God.” A rift in the alliance between Florence and France would weaken the belief of Florentines in Savonarola’s prophecy. It would provide the pope with a stronger papal league and lessen the impact of Savonarola’s constant harangues about corruption in the Church and specifically the pope’s corruption.

Then in October, to the delight of the pope, the French called off the planned re-invasion of Italy. King Charles VIII’s son and heir died on October 2, having lived just twenty-five days. What was a tragedy for King Charles VIII opened the door for Pope Alexander VI to order his military force to take Florence. Florence abandoned its efforts to re-take Pisa, and turned the papal troops back. This did not stop Savonarola from providing an alternative explanation for his failed prophecy of the restoration of Florence, the territory that Florence had previously lost.

Pope Alexander VI’s attempts to eliminate further sermons from Savonarola had not yet worked. Silencing had not worked in 1495, for the Florentine government had intervened to order Savonarola to preach. Nor had the offer of a cardinal’s hat resulted in a change to Savonarola’s sermons. Thus, the pope changed his approach from threats to flattery. In mid-October the pope sent a letter to Savonarola suggesting that he avoid topics that led to discord:

>[A]s though rejoicing over the recovery of a strayed sheep, “In other letters,” so he said, “we have manifested our grief to thee, regarding these disturbances in Florence, of which thy sermons have been the chief cause; forasmuch as instead of preaching against vice and in favour of union, though dost predict the future,
the which think might give birth to discord even among a pacific people, much more therefore among the Florentines.”

Savonarola, facing challenges to the prophetic future that he had promised, but continuing to refuse to attend the pope in Rome, preached three advent sermons on October 28, November 1, and November 2, 1496. He reminded the laity that if they turned to God in prayer, they would again be “free[d] from danger.” He again prophesied in the voice of a prophet:

I am laughing because I have good news from heaven . . . . I tell you that this is a matter of Christ and that I’m clear about it. Now, consider a little whether you are as clear as I am . . . . I’m clear about the things I’ve predicted to you and I know they can’t fail and I also know something else that I have not told you openly . . . . I’ve got a secret that I can’t tell you, I have to be silent; my secret is mine, my secret is mine . . . . I’m clear that God will confound the mind of Italy. Many will be deceived. God revealed the mysteries of his Church from the higher angels to the lower, then down to his prophets who passed their light down to ordinary mortals.

Savonarola continued to prophesy the renewal of the Church. In addition, “Florence will have many blessings and more empire than she has ever had.” With this declaration by Savonarola, the pope realized that the preacher was not going to obey his orders. Savonarola refused to submit to Pope Alexander VI, for it would amount to abandoning his prophetic mission. Nor would the pope let the matter of Savonarola’s disobedience go.

In a papal brief of November 7, the pope ordered the monastery of San Marco to submit to and join a newly created Roman-Tuscan congregation. This reversed Alexander VI’s May 22, 1493, approval for San Marco to separate from the Lombard congregation and become independent. Excommunication was the punishment for failure to comply with this 1496 order. This would place Savonarola, who had been independent for four years, under the authority of one of his Dominican critics. Savonarola remained silent on this directive for seven months, well into 1497, but did not comply with it. This disobedience to the pope’s directive added to
the argument that Savonarola’s action was theological, not political, grounds for Church punishment.

Savonarola and the pope remained on opposite sides of a political conflict that was increasingly expressed in religious form.\textsuperscript{66} The rift between Pope Alexander VI and Savonarola was not yet irreversible. No doubt, the public nature of Savonarola’s refusal to appear in Rome to defend his prophetic claims was an affront to the pope’s authority. Members of the Florentine clergy continued to call on the pope to label Savonarola a heretic. Savonarola was aware of this threat, but he was confident of his popularity and his innocence. Further, he and the people of Florence expected divine punishment for the sins of the city. The pope gained more by letting the threat of excommunication remain an option so that Florentines could consider the long-term impact of Savonarola’s disobedience on their city.

Earlier in the year, in the sermon of February 24, 1496, Savonarola had preached:

‘\textit{Ne prophetetis.}’ They do not want anyone to prophesy. Tell me, why do you wish to drive out this divine faculty from the Church? . . . Jeremiah and Amos were ready to die rather than not prophesy and not obey God . . . . It is not I, but all earth and heaven that prophesy against you.\textsuperscript{67}

Now, as the season of Advent arrived, with accusations of heresy circulating and the threat of excommunication looming, Savonarola had returned to the prospect of martyrdom and showed “little fear” of this outcome.\textsuperscript{68}

\textbf{Papal Excommunication of Girolamo Savonarola in 1497}

In early 1497, Carnival was celebrated in Florence and featured Christian songs and pageantry in place of pagan anthems. A bonfire had been lit to purge the vanities of art and other sumptuous belongings. However, the matter of Savonarola’s disobedience had not been resolved, and on May 13, 1497, Alexander VI excommunicated the friar. The threat of excommunication had brought political leaders in Florence into agreement with the clergy that
Savonarola needed to be silenced. Many of these leaders of Florence had privately opposed Savonarola’s role in the formation of a new republican government. Their occasional support for Savonarola for expedient reasons had sometimes simply been acts to appease Florentines and avoid angering the population at large. The threat of excommunication had been defused prior to 1497, but its proclamation by Pope Alexander VI in May of 1497 confronted political leaders, even those with strong loyalties to Savonarola, with the additional threat of papal interdict. Operating as an interdicted state would bring devastating economic and political consequences to Florentines.

The excommunication was not read in the churches until June 18, 1497. Savonarola was excommunicated, according to the pope because

“he has not obeyed our apostolic admonitions and commands.” Moreover, on pain of suffering the same penalty, all Christians, male and female, laity and clergy, are ordered “to avoid friar Girolamo altogether, as one excommunicated and suspected of heresy.” . . . The friar was cut away from the Church’s sacraments: he could not confess; he could not have holy communion; he could not, if dying, have extreme unction; all churches were closed to him; and he was to be avoided by all Christians.69

Contained within this pronouncement was not only the excommunication of Savonarola but also the anathema that made any Christian, “male or female, laity or clergy,” who did not avoid the preacher subject to the same suffering as would befall Savonarola.

Savonarola apparently drafted a response to this document on May 20, asking the pope, “What is the cause, my lord, of your being so angry with your servant? What bad thing have I in hand?” However, Savonarola probably did not send this missive, but rather on June 19 wrote and printed for distribution a letter contending that the excommunication could not have

“any value for God or the Church, [for it was] imposed by the false recommendations of men, so as to do evil and to work against God and the truth. . . . Unable to find a just reason . . . they have given the [p]ope false reasons . . . and say that I am spreading pernicious doctrine and heresies.” . . . In fact, he
continues, he has never been disobedient to his superiors in the Church, although he insists that Christians should not obey commands that are contrary to God. Any man who “issues an order against God is not our superior.”

Savonarola claimed that the excommunication was invalid. He reasoned that because the pope had not replied point-by-point to his earlier objections, he (the pope) had not rejected Savonarola’s arguments. Savonarola argued that the pope was not free of error in himself (“if he commands a thing in error, he does not command as pope”). Obedience, he argued, was only required for the office, not the man. He tried to allay the fear of Florentines by citing the words of San Antoninus, former archbishop of Florence, in paraphrasing Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*:

> An unjust excommunication is not to be feared with respect to the punishment of the law, since, in truth, one who does not observe a judgment which is nothing incurs no punishment at law, but with respect to blame, it is to be feared for reasons of scandal. . . . Thus when someone is publicly excommunicated and publicly denounced, let him in his own defense, make public a reason why the judgment is not valid . . . . When this has been done, any scandal [alleged] will be that of the Pharisees rather than of the little ones. In such a case, it is to be disregarded.

According to Savonarola, there was no absolute requirement to obey the pope if his commands were contrary to God’s will. Savonarola refused to join San Marco to the non-reformed Tuscan-Roman congregation, and openly rejected any obligation to obey the pope who, he claimed, was illegitimate because of his corruption and simony. Again, Savonarola reinforced his image as one who defered to his predecessors in the Dominican order and enhanced his image for respectfulness of authority, hoping to weaken the accusation of disobedience to the pope.

While paperwork and procedures for Savonarola’s excommunication were being prepared and in transit, with consequences for the leadership of republican Florence and ultimately for Savonarola, the pro-Medicean faction was also drawing the city into a different challenge to the reformed republic. The followers of the exiled Piero de’ Medici were plotting to
bring him back to Florence and overthrow the Great Council. Piero was communicating with a
number of elite Florentines in the city through other trusted men who carried secret letters to and
from Florence. By April 1497, a network of conspirators had been operating, and beginning on
April 28, key members of the conspiracy and many other pro-Mediceans were arrested.
Investigations took place over the spring and summer months, culminating in August 1497 with
findings, convictions, and sentences. Understanding why the consequences for Florence and for
Savonarola were of such moment requires some details on the five key conspirators who were charged with treason.

A key messenger for the conspirators provided evidence of Piero’s plot to invade
Florence and seize power. Early in 1497, the pro-Medici conspirators had committed to writing
their list of those Florentines to be eliminated upon Piero’s return to leadership. Many of the
elite families who supported the republican government were on the list, as was Savonarola who
was to be either exiled or executed. The messenger who carried this secret list was Lamberto
dell’ Antella, a member of a well known Florentine family. He seemed to be constantly skirting
the law and the republican regime had become suspicious of him because of a previous record of
arrest and questioning. He had been exiled to Pisa, and his transport of the list of conspirators
was a violation of “the terms of his exile and incurred penalties of being a ‘rebel’ and
‘outlaw.’” He was later judged guilty of “malice and evil intentions” in the present affair, but
not treason.

The list provided the first identification of the conspirators. The questioning of
conspirators continued over the spring and summer months as first dell’ Antella and then other
named members of the conspiracy each added names to the list of presumed guilty pro-Medici
conspirators. The charges and testimony were heard by a “mass jury” of 200 Florentines over
these months. When interrogations were complete, many of those were convicted of advancing the plot and were handed over for punishment. Five conspirators were singled out for the charge of treason, a crime carrying the death penalty. In fact, under the new laws of Florence, “merely to think of plotting against the government” could result in execution.\textsuperscript{74}

These five were arrested on August 4. They were: the aged and well regarded Bernardo del Nero, one time gonfaloniere of Florence; Niccolo Ridolfi, a respected Florentine from an aristocratic family that had held positions in the \textit{Signoria} and other councils and was related to Lorenzo de’ Medici by marriage; Lorenzo Tornabuoni, “a prime model of courtesy, generosity, and gentility” who had been a partner in the Medici bank and was related to the Medicis by marriage; and Giovanni Cambi, manager of the Medici bank in Pisa until that city revolted against Florence; and Gianozzo Puzzi, one of Piero’s “boon companions” who had little wealth of his own but was one of the earliest to encourage Piero to attempt the overthrow of the republican government. Financial losses had been incurred by Gambi when the Pisan branch of the Medici bank collapsed. Nevertheless, Gambi was a loyal Medician who helped raise money for Piero’s return to power, the crime for which he was convicted. Tournabuoni’s wealth had been co-mingled with Medici assets and had been confiscated along with Medici wealth to repay debts.\textsuperscript{75}

The five were pronounced guilty of treason sentenced to death on August 17, 1497. All were well known in the city, so their plotting and the resulting convictions and sentences were shocking to Florentines. The death penalty was the type of sentence for which the Six Beans law of appeal was designed: Without an appeal, the five Florentines faced immediate execution and confiscation of their property, leaving their heirs with nothing. An appeal of the \textit{Signoria’s} verdict to the Great Council was legal because of Savonarola’s reform of the Six Beans law.
Sending the appeal forward involved a debate in the Signoria from August 17 to August 21. Advocates and witnesses for and against the death sentence appeared before the priors. To submit the appeal, some argued, was to delay punishment and provide additional time for the conspirators to advance their plan. In effect, they argued, sending the appeal forward was tantamount to placing the conspirators above the law. By another “Six Bean” decision, the Signoria denied the right of appeal for the conspirators. Very quickly, the accused, their families, the executioner, and a priest were notified of the impending execution. At 4:00 a.m. on August 22, the five were beheaded. The secrecy surrounding the executions was a response to fear of a backlash from the citizens.

For the next several months, Florence seemed to return to something like normal. The plague subsided, and San Marco reopened as friars and visitors returned. Francesco Valori retained control of Savonarola’s party, although the families of those who were executed in August blamed Valori for the deaths of the conspirators. More letters were exchanged between Rome and Florence by various parties, with the hope of lifting Savonarola’s excommunication. In the interim, Savonarola remained distant from the trial. He dedicated himself to writing and completed writing several works. In the Triumph of the Cross, Savonarola defended his fidelity to Christian faith.

An October 13 letter from Savonarola to the pope hoping for reconciliation resulted in a stalemate:

I, troubled more on account of Your Holiness’ interdicted favor than on account of any other loss, repeatedly fly to your feet, entreat ing that my outcry may be heard at last in your presence, and that you not desire that I be any longer torn from your bosom. . . . Already I would have fallen at your feet, if a route safe from the injuries and plots of my enemies had been known to me.
Savonarola did not indicate any intention on his part to comply with the pope’s orders, so the pope may have regarded Savonarola’s humility as disingenuous. Neither Savonarola nor the pope would move from their positions. Yet Florence still loved its prophet. In November, the government issued a bronze medal of the prophet featuring his profile on one side and the swords from one of his visions on the reverse.\(^{79}\)

Questions about Savonarola’s motivations during this period circulated in the city. The people wanted him to return to the pulpit. Although Savonarola took no part in the execution of the five Florentine traitors, many erroneously thought he had a hand in the decision to deny the conspirators their appeal of the verdict, an action that tarnished Savonarola’s prophetic status for many Florentines. Those who believed this rumor did not understand Savonarola’s reluctance to fight for the right of appeal that he had championed.

Still excommunicated, Savonarola neared the end of the year. His *Triumph of the Cross* had clearly and powerfully declared his submission to the faith, the Church, and the authority of the Pope and Councils to be free from error when declaring dogma. He also held that “[n]o sentence of excommunication that has been justly appealed against, or that contains manifest errors of fact . . . can be held valid or worthy of obedience.”\(^{80}\) It was becoming evident that the pope’s position was political and of a personal nature, for even the pope’s commission had found no error in Savonarola’s statements of dogma.

On Christmas Day 1497 Savonarola celebrated the mass three times, serving communion to his monks and to many of the laity. He promised to preach again, even when the vicar to the archbishop forbade ecclesiastics to attend and threatened to deny the laity confession, communion, “and even burial in consecrated ground” if they listened to Savonarola.\(^{81}\)
Savonarola’s Arrest, Imprisonment and Execution in 1498

On January 6, 1498, Savonarola again defied his excommunication by the pope. This was the Feast of Epiphany when the visitation of the Magi was reenacted and a procession of the friars of San Marco took place. Savonarola and two of his Dominican brothers were costumed as the three magi. These events were to have been private, but they were not. Opposing groups objected to this pageant for different reasons, among them the consequences of disobeying the papal ban on preaching and Savonarola’s excommunication. Even more disturbing was the Signoria’s approval of the pageant. The Signoria continued to plead unsuccessfully with Alexander VI to lift his ban on Savonarola so that their prophet could again preach. By February 1498 it was clear that Pope Alexander VI would not lift the excommunication, even though Savonarola apparently still hoped for such a resolution. On February 11, Septuagesima Sunday, seven weeks before Easter, the Signoria unilaterally lifted the ban on Savonarola’s preaching.

The impact of the government’s suspension of the pope’s silencing was confusing to at least some of the laity. They faced a dilemma. They were glad that Savonarola would preach, but given that the excommunication was accompanied by anathema, people feared that they would sin if they attended a sermon given in defiance of the pope’s commands. The people of Florence had not discarded the Church, its pope, or their clergy. They sought its reform, as Savonarola had promised, but they sought it within the Church, as Savonarola had also promised. Previously, Savonarola had asked them to reform morally, and they had willingly given up the sumptuous dress, gambling and horse racing, and other activities of questionable moral quality. Now, in the spring of 1498, Savonarola’s request that they disobey the pope did not fit his earlier message of reforming the Church from within. Most of his followers did not abandon Savonarola. Many attended his sermons when the Signoria permitted Savonarola to preach the
1498 Lenten sermons. Some of them were probably pleased by his preaching against the pope and the corrupt clergy. Many of them were probably conflicted, however. Savonarola’s enemies, on the other hand, were not in conflict; they felt that Florence needed to be rid of the friar.

Savonarola’s February 11 sermon was the first of the Exodus cycle, and only this sermon and the sermons of February 18 and 25, were preached in the cathedral. February 11 was the day before Ash Wednesday and the start of the Lenten season. A crowd gathered outside the Florentine cathedral before the mass, hoping for a miracle or some sign of divine approval of Savonarola. In place of a miracle, Savonarola promised that on February 25 the faithful would learn whether or not he was a true prophet: “I’ll hold the Sacrament in my hand and everyone will pray hard, so that if this is invented by me and I am being deceptive, Christ will bring a fire down from heaven over me and draw me into Hell.” He continued:

Believe me, I’m not crazy; I know what I’m doing; I wouldn’t make myself a target like this if I didn’t know that I have God with me, . . . . We’ll be here, as I’ve said, with the Sacrament in hand. Tell one of these tiepidi to do the same with the Sacrament in hand in the presence of the people and have everyone pray that if this cause is not false, God will kill him in the sight of everyone.84

Aware that his defiance of the pope was troubling to some of his followers, Savonarola tried to reinforce his self-representation with a sign that would uphold his status as a prophet, one that operated within the Church’s sacramental life.

The February 25 sermon was well attended in expectation of the heavenly sign that Savonarola had promised, but none occurred, as his opponents pointed out. Savonarola instead prayed that “if my deeds be not sincere, if my words be not inspired by Thee, strike me dead on the instant.”85 Savonarola still lived, a weak proof by omission. The fire that was lit later in the
day was not a heavenly sign but a bonfire to burn vanities collected from Florentines, “crowned by a figure of Lucifer surrounded by the seven cardinal sins.”

On February 26, the composition of the new Signoria proved to be hostile to Savonarola. On that date, the pope issued an ultimatum to the Florentine signoria: Silence Savonarola or face an interdict of the city-state. After repeating the grounds for Savonarola’s excommunication, the pope’s brief stated:

[W]e now hear, that, to the grave hurt of religion and the souls of men, this Friar still continues to preach, despises the authority of the Holy See, and declares the excommunication to be null and void. Wherefore we command you, by your duty of holy obedience, to send [Savonarola to Rome to repent . . .]. But if [you] refuse to obey these commands, we shall be forced to assert the dignity and authority of the Holy See, by subjecting you to an interdict and more effectual remedies.

Now fearful that the new government would force him to appear in Rome, Savonarola pursued a safer course. On March 1, he announced that he would no longer preach from the cathedral, but only at San Marco. This was to avoid further scandal, for letters from Rome continued to condemn him. He used his time in March and part of April to complete several treatises that he had in progress, including ones on astrology and the government of Florence.

In Rome, Fra Domenico Bonsi wrote of shock and outrage over the audacity of this Friar, who refused to acknowledge any authority as superior to that of God and his own conscience; who dared to declare that all believers in the validity of the excommunication were heretics!

Savonarola’s old enemy, Fra Mariano da Genazzano, was also residing in Rome at this time and was commissioned to respond to Savonarola from the pulpit: “O Pope! O cardinals! How do you tolerate this monster, this hydra? Has the authority of the Church come to such a pass that a drunkard of this sort my trample it so ignominiously under his feet?” However, rather than convincing the faithful, Mariano’s audience was “disgusted with his coarseness of speech.”

On March 9, 1498, the Signoria listened to the reading of the pope’s latest brief. It was
an all-out assault on Savonarola, aimed at his arrogance, presumption, illegal preaching, scandalous behavior , and effrontery in daring to argue that he ha[d] not been excommunicated. As a speaker of poison, he must be arrested, held a prisoner in his convent, and have all his conversations with others cut off. In fact the pope wants the culprit sent to him, so that if he cooperates, he may be duly absolved and restored both to the Church and to Florence.93

The discussion among the councils of government now reflected a change in the climate of Florence. Crucial to that change was the threat of interdict, a likelihood that seemed even more certain. The probable outcome of the interdict was paralysis of Florence’s economic life both in and outside the city.94

A small selection of contemporary arguments revealed the debate over the obligation of obedience to papal and to civil authority:

[The directive in question came from ‘the Supreme Pontiff, vicar of God, lord of Christians. He is commanding this Signory, the least of Italy’s five [great] powers, even when it has all its empire. . . . The Pope, after all, had a right to that which was his due: jurisdiction over men in holy orders.95

This was opposed by an argument that by complying with Rome’s orders, Florence gave the pope temporal authority he did not have.96 Still another vigorous argument to silence Savonarola came from an international merchant, Giuliano Gondi. His argument was based on the Signoria’s oath of obedience to the pope:

And I would remind you, my Lords, of your dignity and obedience, for you promised your obedience to the Supreme Pontiff. I was one of the guarantors [of your faith] when you took office, and I heard Messer Bartolomeo Ciai recite your oath, which included your being faithful and obedient to the Holy Church; and if you are not, then that turns into perjury. This man [Savonarola] preaches that the pope is not the pope, that we should have no belief in him, and other things of the sort that you would not even say to a cook. This man will create a sect of fraticelli [heretical minorite friars] as happened in this city, and it’s a sect of heresy you’re fostering in this city.97
Finally the civil and canon lawyer, Messer Ormannozzo Deti, summarized the arguments: Either it was preferable to obey God because Savonarola gained his thoughts from God, or it was better and easier to obey the pope.98

Although the discussion reflected a slight defense of Savonarola, there was more emphasis than previously on the need to suspend Savonarola’s preaching for good. In the final polling, the consensus was that Savonarola should no longer be permitted to preach. Savonarola learned this on March 17, 1498, and gave his last sermon from San Marco on March 18 on Exodus. The pope was notified of the decision. Yet there was still no evidence that the pope attempted to silence Savonarola’s publications, and his published sermons continued to be disseminated as before.

While the early Signoria of 1498 had supported Savonarola, the next Signoria that took office for April and May of 1498 was hostile to him. The pope’s excommunication and threat of interdict created political and economic tensions within Italy and brought unity to Florence’s leadership: Savonarola had to be silenced, as the pope decreed. Savonarola’s loss of support from the business, merchant, and leadership class, as well as continuing hostility of the churchmen, ultimately tipped the balance against Savonarola. Savonarola’s acts of defiance had also put his followers in a difficult position. With his excommunication, accompanied by anathema, Savonarola forced the faithful to choose between obeying him or obeying the pope. God’s punishment of Florence was no longer “imminent,” as Savonarola had prophesied; the threat of interdict was a tangible reality.

This was not the only cause of Savonarola’s loss of support in the city. Events of April and May of 1498 served to make this religious crisis more visible. First, like the failure of a sign to appear on February 25 as promised by Savonarola, there was a failed “ordeal by fire” on April
7, 1498, that created doubt among many followers. The ordeal by fire was not of Savonarola’s making, but the result of the conflict between some of Savonarola’s brothers and some Franciscans from Santa Croce. The ordeal had been scheduled for April 7 with a promise of a clear sign from heaven affirming Savonarola’s prophetic status. On that date, a series of delays and finally rainfall resulted in the cancellation of the ordeal. Angered by this perceived subterfuge to let Savonarola avoid this test of his prophetic status, the crowd became angry. It appeared to the Florentines that Savonarola had been unable to call upon God for a miracle either earlier on February 25 (the trial by sacrament) or on April 7. He had to rely on postponement and then rain to end the ordeal. The postponement occasioned a second period of civil discord with street confrontations and deaths.

On the evening of April 7, those who had mobbed San Marco took their revenge on Valori and his wife at their home, murdering them. There was still anger among Florentines for the role that Valori had played in the execution of the five Florentines for treason in August 1497. Several of those who had been executed—Bernardo del Neri and Niccolo Ridolfi, for example—had been leading citizens of Florence. The mob that murdered Francesco Valori blamed him for not forwarding the appeal of the Six Beans decision to the Great Council. A successful appeal would have saved the five Florentines. On April 8, amidst the continuing unrest, Savonarola and his associate Fra Domenico Buonvicini da Pescia were arrested. On the morning of April 9, Fra Silvestro Maruffi was arrested and joined the prisoners.

Savonarola was examined under torture in three trials. Each occurred on several days: April 10-19, April 21-25, and May 20-21. The third examination included ecclesiastical rather than civil questioning. Under torture, Savonarola confessed to heresy. He immediately recanted each confession when the torture stopped, but not soon enough to counter the
disillusionment of some of his followers. The friars were held in custody for 45 days. For Savonarola, this imprisonment became a period of intense prayer and preparation for the execution that would follow. Savonarola regarded this as his desired martyrdom. Unable to re-inspire the devotion that he had achieved when his miracles, visions, and prophecies had been regular features of his preaching and when he led the reform of the city, he turned, as he always, had to intense prayer and writing. Nor did Savonarola’s recantations deter the court from sentencing Savonarola and his companions to death for heresy.

For more than twenty years of his active mission, the Psalms were part of Savonarola’s Daily Office, his preaching, and his meditation. In prison in April and May of 1498, Savonarola turned to the penitential Psalms of repentance, particularly to Psalm 50/51, “Miserere mei, Deus,” that prayed for mercy from God. He began to write commentaries both for himself and for the faithful. The printing and dissemination of his writings and prayers for the faithful were always part of Savonarola’s plans. John Patrick Donelly, translater of the Prison Meditations, observed that . . .

[i]t was Savonarola’s failure in politics that led to his arrest and imprisonment, but he was not [as Machiavelli claimed] a prophet totally unarmed, for in prison he retained the pen . . . . There he wrote [the prison meditations]. They became the most read of all his writings and prove that physical torture did not destroy his literary and spiritual powers.  

He completed his commentary on Psalm 50/51, but he did not complete his commentary on Psalm 30/31 as he had hoped to do.

By May 8, 1498, “word spread throughout Florence” that Savonarola had completed his meditation on Psalm 50/51, “Miserere mei, Deus.” Written in approximately two weeks’ time, this meditation was by far the most read of all Savonarola’s works, making a significant impact
on Savonarola’s followers and the growing reform movement that developed at the beginning of the sixteenth century.104

This narrative can offer nothing further to the detailed biographies on the interrogations, torture, confessions, recantations, and final sentences that have already been dealt with by Weinstein, Martines, Strathern, Ridolfi, Villari, and many other historians.105 On May 23, 1498, almost 45 days after their arrest, the prisoners were led out to the Piazza to be hanged and then burned. Savonarola’s writings were eventually smuggled out of prison following his death and published.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to examine Savonarola’s fall from power and particularly the failure of Savonarola’s self-representation as a prophet to maintain a hold over the population sufficient to protect him. His rise and fall concerned his authority to fulfill the position of prophet. His was not a unilateral authority, although he represented himself as having the authority of a prophet and the direct relationship to the deity that this involved.

According to others, the reality was that Savonarola was a Catholic priest, obligated to the pope of Rome and to his Dominican order. Savonarola’s obligation of obedience in his own view was directly to God who had called him as a prophet. In the eyes of others, Savonarola had no secular leadership role, although the Great Council followed his reform agenda voluntarily. Savonarola’s obedience was owed to God through his immediate superior, then through the general of the Dominican order, and then to the pope who was subservient to God. Savonarola’s vow of obedience reinforced this chain of authorities.

The findings of this chapter demonstrated that there were many elements that weakened people’s commitment to Savonarola’s self-representation as a prophet. The clergy’s success in
turning the problem of Savonarola from a political to a religious issue resulted in enlisting the pope’s power to punish. The pope’s religious authority to punish disobedience was a threat that the civil leadership of Florence could ignore only with trepidation, but one punishment superseded the others: The pope could interdict Florence and punish the entire city, economy, and international relationships of the city. The leaders of the city had a history that demonstrated the severity of that punishment.

There was little action that those who followed Savonarola could do in the face of the spiritual and political power of the Church to discipline its members. The Florentines were not revolutionaries. Savonarola had protected them when they needed protection in 1495. The people in general had agreed with and abided by many of Savonarola’s moral reforms, but as challenges to his leadership grew (some aggravated by Savonarola’s sermons attacking clerical and political abuses), Savonarola’s hold on the people weakened. The quiet opposition, the secular leadership that went along with Savonarola’s moral reforms in the first years after Savonarola rose to power, was becoming less quiet as political reforms eroded the power of various factions. Opposition to the republican form of government that Savonarola supported grew. The plot to restore Piero de’ Medici to power demonstrated powerful undercurrents in the factions that opposed the republic. Further, Savonarola could no longer validate his continued status as a prophet. His resources—his miracles, visions, and prophecies—were exhausted. Savonarola was found guilty of heresy by an ecclesiastical court, excommunicated with anathema, and executed by hanging, followed by burning.

The rise of Savonarola as a prophet in terms of popular support had occurred quickly after the resolution of the French invasion in November 1494. Savonarola had claimed to be the prophet of Florence in the sermon of January 13, 1495. His popularity remained high among the
general population for almost four years, but Florence was a complex city and the origins of opposition among the clergy and the secular factions began almost immediately to bring the prophet down. When Savonarola created his self-representation as a prophet, he created a persona that he would need to defend indefinitely. The clergy and secular factions had a target in dismantling that representation, and enlisted the pope in that process.
Endnotes

1 Girolamo Savonarola, Sermon on Haggai [also known as Aggeus], December 10, 1494, quoted in Donald Weinstein, Savonarola: the Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 123. Weinstein based his discussion on the sermon cycle on Haggai delivered between November 1, 1494, to December 28, 1494. He had just completed quoting from the December 10 sermon and continued with the cited paragraph without confirming that the source was the same sermon.


5 Villari, The Life and Times I, 328.


7 Villari, The Life and Times I, 329.

8 Weinstein, Savonarola: The Rise and Fall, 140.

9 Martines, Fire in the City, 159.

10 Martines, Fire in the City, 160.


15 Savonarola, The Compendium of Revelations, 192.

16 The early New Testament prophets were part of this biblical tradition. Because early Christianity was regarded for a time as a sect within Judaism, the present study does not distinguish prophets, such as Paul of Tarsus, as “New Testament” prophets but groups them as within the same tradition as the pre-Christian prophets of the Bible.


19 Savonarola, *The Compendium of Revelations*, 198


21 Alexander VI, “Letter from Pope Alexander VI to the Brothers of Santa Croce” (Rome, 8 September 1495)” in *Selected Writings*, 265-7


27 Amos 3:8, in *Amos, Hosea, Micah . . . , 20.*

28 Amos 7:10-13, in *Amos, Hosea, Micah . . . , 31.*

29 Miller II, “Amos: Prophet of Justice” (Lecture 15-Course 6013-and Notes), 96-100. There was a further bond between Amos and the conditions of Florence, however. Both Israel and Amos were prosperous, but Israel’s leaders chose not to share that wealth with the less fortunate of the country. This message of social justice and concern for the poor, the widow, orphan, and stranger were themes that Savonarola preached to both the clergy and the wealthy. Also, like Amos, Savonarola found a strict conformity to ritual that the priests of the temple and the churches practiced to fail God’s commandment for care of the poor or the orphaned alien. See also Amos was a defender of the poor and needy exploited by the Israelites and “denied access to and deprived of fair treatment by the court systems. . . .” (Carol J. Dempsey, “Commentary”, in *Amos, Hosea, Micah . . . , 18*).


33 Weinstein, *Savonarola: the Rise and Fall*, 154-5. “Savonarola called for war on sodomy without limit. . . . [The officials of the city] could demonstrate their fear of God by purging vice—and now he offered a more extensive list: dancing, corrupting young people with poetry, the effeminate style of dress affected by young men,
gaming in the streets, nighttime drinking (taverns should be closed at sunset), and keeping open on feast days nonessential shops and businesses,” 156.


46 Carol J. Dempsey, comm. in *Book of Amos*, 22, 27. See note 26 above.


49 Stefano Dall’Aglio, *Savonarola and Savonarolism*, 24.


51 Brasington, “*Differentia est*,” 114.

52 Brasington, “*Differentia est*,” 108-9.
Peter Douglas Clarke, *The Theory and Practice of the Ecclesiastical Interdict in the Age of the Decretalists* (Dissertation: University of Manchester, 1995), 10. The rules for collective punishment were historically collected in the *Decretum*, or “the definitive compilation of the law of the Church down to 1140.” These rules do not cover the practice of interdiction itself, but are rather a record of legal practices that “show how popes used the interdict to intervene in temporal affairs and so translate the theory of papal monarchy into political reality.”


Strathern, *Death in Florence*, 256-7. See for details on Pisa and Florence’s war to recover the city.


*Strathern, Death in Florence*, 256.


Weinstein, *Savonarola: the Rise and Fall*, 204.


Ridolfi, *The Life of Girolamo Savonarola*, 61-3. Ridolfi gave the full account of the 1493 papal decision on San Marco’s independence.


Weinstein, *Savonarola: the Rise and Fall*, 211.

Martines, *Fire in the City*, 170.

Martines, *Fire in the City*, 173.

Savonarola, “Open Letter against the Recently Imposed Sentence of Excommunication (Florence, end of June 1497)” in *Selected Writings*, 303. The paraphrase of Thomas was for *Summa Theologica* Part 1.2, Ques. 94, Art. 2.
72 Martines, *Fire in the City*, 174.

73 Martines, *Fire in the City*, 182-4.

74 Martines, *Fire in the City*, 185.

75 Martines, *Fire in the City*, 184, 186, 187.

76 Martines, *Fire in the City*, 192-3.

77 Martines, *Fire in the City*, 197.

78 Savonarola, “Letter from Savonarola to Pope Alexander VI (Florence, 13 October 1487)” in *Selected Writings*, 308.


80 Villari, *Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola II*, 245.


84 Weinstein, *Savonarola: the Rise and Fall*, 252.


86 Villari, *Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola II*, 256.


93 Martines, *Fire in the City*, 206.

94 Martines, *Fire in the City*, 209.
95 Martines, *Fire in the City*, 209-10.

96 Martines, *Fire in the City*, 213.

97 Martines, *Fire in the City*, 214.

98 Martines, *Fire in the City*, 216.


101 Strathern, *Death in Florence*, 332.


105 See Bibliography for references to these works.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrated that Girolamo Savonarola’s acceptance by the people as a prophet of Florence from 1491 to his death was conditional upon the degree to which Savonarola’s pronouncements about himself fit the religious, political, economic, and social condition of their lives. The arguments of the study demonstrated that the creation of Savonarola’s self-representation as a prophet depended on a society whose firm belief in prophecy had been energized when war and other violence threatened lives and livelihoods of late fifteenth-century Italians. The findings also demonstrated that Savonarola’s career path as a prophet reflected a Church that had become more corrupt and worldly, with no sign of reform by the papacy. Savonarola’s spectacular rise as a prophet reached its height in 1495 and began to decline as the pope threatened economic and religious punishment of the prophet and the citizens of Florence. He was put to his death in 1498.

The study traces Savonarola’s career path in the context of northern and central Italy from the 1450s to 1490s. Savonarola’s education formed his highly religious mentality and his decision to pursue his career as a Dominican preacher and pastor. His meditation on the Scripture, convinced Savonarola that he was called to reform the Church, particularly the papacy. The people began to believe that he was a prophet. Having already given proofs of visions and prophecies, he declared in 1495 that he had been called as a prophet to undertake the reform of
the Church. In consequence of this self-representation, Pope Alexander VI at the instigation of
the clergy charged Savonarola with heresy for his blasphemy. The weakening of popular
commitment to Savonarola by 1497 occurred as attacks against Savonarola by his enemies—the
pope, the clergy, the business community, and some of the ottimati or elite of Florence—became
more virulent. His responses to these attacks were inadequate to maintain his self-representation
as the prophet of Florence that the people had come to expect. His death was regarded as
execution by his enemies and martyrdom by his remaining loyal followers. The findings
presented in the chapters of this study support these conclusions.

**Religious, Social and Political Conditions**

Chapter 2 established that Savonarola would not have been accepted as a prophet had the
late fifteenth century not looked to prophets and prophecies to guide their lives. In turn, the
people would probably not have looked to prophets had the years of Savonarola’s life (1452–
1498) been peaceful, rather than extraordinarily violent and corrupt. In addition to significant
changes in governance of the cities, Church leadership failed to address issues of great
importance to the populace. Chapter 2 demonstrated that prophetic discourse was a cause and
effect of this period of turbulence.

The prophecies circulating in the late fifteenth century emphasized political events and
leaders, but were in interpreted in religious terms. Following Amos Edelheit’s argument, politics
and religion were not viewed as separate activities, but part of a unified view of society. The
failure of political leadership to express religious values produced a profound crisis during this
period.¹ The biblical prophets had, as spokespersons for God, challenged rulers to reform their
rule and provide good government. However, during the late medieval period of Italy, few
agreed on the form that religious reform should take. This led to religious movements initiated by the laity, in the convents, and other efforts pronounced as heretical.

The vibrant prophetic tradition that thrived in Savonarola’s Quattrocento Italy was part of the common ground that the people across all classes shared, along with their Christian traditions and acceptance of the authority of the Church. Fundamental to the context of prophecy in Quattrocento Italy was the shared Judeo-Christian heritage of Scripture and its prophets and a conviction that a divine hand controlled their lives. Rulers and leaders, even corrupt and evil ones, were agents of divine retribution and reform. The model for Judeo-Christian prophecies of medieval time reflected that of biblical times: transgression of the covenant with God by His chosen people, prophetic warnings of imminent punishment by God, and the call for penance or reform to restore of right relations with God. When the crusades failed to restore the historical Jerusalem to Christian control, the rise of a “new Jerusalem” as foretold in the scriptural book of Revelation became the focus of late medieval prophecy. The role of prophecy was significant at this time in dealing with this general anxiety.

Chapter 2 examined key medieval prophets who were known and revered in mid- to late-fifteenth century believers, such as Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202). Figures like the Antichrist, the Angelic Pope, the Last Emperor, and the Second Charlemagne populated the prophecies. Because towns in Italy were saturated in Christian teaching and culture, the preacher-prophets who traversed the cities and countryside had no difficulty interpreting the meaning of famine, disease, and other disasters as punishment for the sins of leaders and individuals. The chapter provided examples of the conditions of the people from three cities important to Savonarola’s career: Ferrara, Rome, and Florence. In this apocalyptic period, people expected the end of time to be near.
In summary, the context of Savonarola’s life was bound to the popular commitment to prophecy and prophets of the mid- to late fifteenth century. Savonarola was born into a time that expected the appearance of prophets and found them among preachers of various traditions. Chapter 2 laid the foundation for the laity’s keen sense of their need for salvation, the failure of the Church to address that need, their actions to take responsibility for their own moral condition, and their eagerness for religious and moral leadership. Under these conditions, prophets prospered and appeared frequently in the cities and countryside of Italy. These conditions were not sufficient to create a prophet like Savonarola, but without these conditions, Savonarola may well have become a good, but very ordinary Dominican.

The Education of Girolamo Savonarola

Education for boys in late fifteenth-century Italy, as shown in Chapter 3, reflected the dynamic changes of its social, political, and religious environment. The chapter provided evidence of the depth of Girolamo’s education and emphasized that he received scholastic and humanist education and was prepared first for the medical and then the priesthood. The findings justified the high opinion that both well educated and ordinary Italians had of him by.

Girolamo was born and educated in Ferrara, first in the family home under the guidance of his devoted grandfather, the physician Michele Savonarola, and his mother Elena. Girolamo studied the Scriptures, Thomas Aquinas, the Latin language, and the scholastic and Aristotelian foundations he would need to follow his grandfather into the medical profession. By 1466, however, Michele was at the end of his long life (b 1385), but his dedication to Girolamo’s education did not end before he had placed Girolamo in the humanist school of Battista Guarini, son of Guarino Guarini of Verona, one of the leaders of the humanist educational movement. He completed preparation for the university and then he entered the University of Ferrarra where he
completed one degree in the Arts. In 1475, at the age of twenty-three, Giralamo changed his career directions and entered the convent of San Domenico in Bologna to become a Dominican friar.

Besides his thorough education and his dedication to study, the chapter established the importance of Latin studies, including classical Latin and some knowledge of the ancient Roman writers, and knowledge of the Scriptures that later brought notice from his brothers in the Dominican convent and from his lay audiences. The chapter provided some background on scholasticism and the growing challenges by the educated to scholastic methods and theology. The chapter discussed the desired outcomes for the boys who studied with Guarino, and the origins of the civic humanism and differences advocated by Christian humanists, like Marsilio Ficino in the 1480s. Besides documenting the changes in education of the elite, the chapter documented the requirements to prepare for the medical profession that Savonarola was pursuing at the time he decided to enter the Dominican convent. In this manner, the chapter demonstrated how very well educated Savonarola was and why the educated elite of Florence would flock to him when in 1490 he was brought to the city by Lorenzo de’ Medici. The chapter also discussed the concern of the elite leadership in the cities of northern and central Italy at this time for self-fashioning an identity, the basis for this study’s examination of Savonarola’s self representation.

Had he been able to, Savonarola would have chosen an apolitical, almost reclusive monastic life, for upon admission to San Dominico in 1475, he asked to perform only manual labor. However, in place of a grandfather, and then a father and family, that had chosen his career path, Savonarola through a vow of obedience accepted the directives of his Dominican superiors to become a preacher and confessor. Chapter 3 provided substantial detail on the curriculum that Savonarola followed as he prepared for the Dominican life in order to provide
insight into the values and religious commitments that governed his life as a religious. The chapter emphasized how Savonarola learned to practice contemplation, a habit that Savonarola incorporated into the mental prayer that he taught the faithful. Learning a systematic approach to using the Bible, biblical exegesis, enabled Savonarola to become even more fluent with biblical texts. As with learning to meditate, this discussion documented how the novice gained the multiple skills of the preacher and confessor. The novice would hear many sermons, but only gradually began to preach at the end of their novitiate.

In summary, Chapter 3 provided a portrait of Savonarola as he progressed from boyhood through his education to become a preacher and provider of pastoral guidance. Understanding the life of Savonarola as a prophet could not be attempted without considering the scope of learning that his grandfather and family, his humanist and university teachers, and his Dominican superiors guided him through over a period of almost thirty years. By 1482, the time had come for Savonarola to perform as a preacher and pastor.

**Experiences as a Preacher and First Steps in Becoming a Prophet**

Chapter 4 asked what models Savonarola chose to emulate as he undertook his career as a mendicant preacher and confessor but emphasized that, at the beginning of his preaching career, Savonarola had not yet considered the possibility that he was called to be a prophet. Following the completion of his Dominican novitiate in Bologna, Savonarola was assigned to San Marco in Florence as a new preacher. Chapter 4 narrated the early history of his first few years in that city and background on San Marco as the recipient of Lorenzo de’ Medici’s patronage.

Savonarola’s early performance as a preacher was disappointing to the faithful who attended his sermons, to his superiors who were faced with the dilemma of what to do with this young Dominican whom they believed offered much promise for the order, and to himself. He
was sent to preach in the Tuscan countryside where he would develop his preaching skills. Savonarola later told his faithful that his call to prophesy was revealed to him as he meditated in a garden in Tuscany. This call was unlike those of the biblical prophets; there was no vision or audible call. Rather Savonarola realized that his study of Scripture was demanding that he preach. Savonarola crafted this awareness into the threefold prophetic message of imminent punishment for the sins of Florence, the call for reform, and the restoration of a right relationship with God. However, like the greatest prophet of the Old Testament, Moses, Savonarola had to develop a voice to deliver God’s words to the people.

Chapter 4 provided an account of contemporary preaching and preachers from whom Savonarola may have drawn practices as he worked to improve his preaching skills. He had outstanding Dominican predecessors who led the way in calling for reform of the order: the Archbishop of Florence and former prior of San Marco Antonino Pierozzi and Fra Giovanni Dominici, also a Dominican prior in Florence. The preaching of the Franciscan Bernardino of Siena was also praised in Florence and the Tuscan countryside. The chapter related the cooperative efforts of both mendicants and laity to disseminate translations of Scripture. The Dominican Fra Dominico Cavalca of Pisa, for example, provided a vernacular translation of the Acts of the Apostles. Christian humanists created a new role for participating in the religious education of the laity by using the confraternity platform to preach sermons on a variety of religious and civic topics. The chapter introduced Marsilio Ficino, who as priest, philosopher, and leader of Christian humanists, sought reform of the theology. The record of a number of other preachers who populated the preaching landscape provided evidence of the strong desire of the laity for religious education and evidence of how tightly bound religious concerns were to the social and political life of Florence was.
The chapter illustrated that Savonarola learned to preach by responding to the needs of the faithful and by experiencing the variety of methods and messages of other preachers. As he learned to deliver the message of penance, reform and renewal he also was learning to teach the faithful to pray, an important part of his pastoral care. Following the intense practice of this period, Savonarola was ready to return to Florence in 1490 as an acknowledged preacher whose message resonated to the laity. The convergence of lay desire, in this instance the interest of Pico della Mirandola, philosopher and client of Lorenzo de’ Medici, and Savonarola’s sermons now developed into forceful calls for reform that Savonarola brought back to Florence as he undertook a second assignment to Florence.

**Acceptance of Savonarola as a Prophet of Florence**

In 1490, as recounted in Chapter 5, Savonarola returned to Florence. Some in his Tuscan audiences had begun to consider him a prophet, although he had been careful not to claim this status. He was well aware that such a claim amounted to blasphemy. His early contacts with Florentines came from his lessons in the convent garden of San Marco. There his brother Dominicans observed his piety. His mystical experiences sometimes brought him to the garden with tears in his eyes. Intended primarily for the other Dominicans, this instruction attracted passers-by and soon became popular enough to require the space of the convent church.

Savonarola gradually acknowledged his prophetic status more openly. He had first preached on the prophet Amos in Tuscany. The findings explained more fully his use of Amos’s view of God’s prophet in later representing himself a prophet. Finally, in his first Lenten sermon in 1491, Savonarola appeared to clearly “claim a divine mandate” for his preaching.\(^2\) Savonarola maintained comprehensive ties to biblical references, not his own authority, in order to protect
himself from a charge of blasphemy. His authority for his interpretations was that of those

Chapter 5 documented his visions and prophecies of 1492 and 1493. Still unwilling to
declare himself a prophet, he did allow others to accept his prophetic status. His lifelong enemy
Fra Giovanni Caroli, a Dominican theologian of the conventual, or unreformed and conservative,
convent of Santa Maria Novella, was introduced to illustrate the cynical attitudes of the
Florentine clergy that accompanied their charges that he was a false prophet: “The common
people liked what he made of [the book of Revelation] . . . visions of ruin, voices, candelabras,
trumpets, precious stones. . . and many other things, all loaded with spiritual and sacred
meanings.”3 Responding to their jealousy, Savonarola’s openly invited his audiences to consider
what constituted a false prophet. The origins of Savonarola’s later antagonistic relationship with
the Pope Alexander VI was also introduced.

In 1494 Florence was threatened by the invasion of French king Charles VIII and his
army. Concurrently the city’s ruler Piero de’ Medici fled the city. Called upon by the
government of Florence to accompany an embassy to Charles, Savonarola was immediately
credited by the people with saving them from invasion when Charles abruptly left Florence to
continue on to Naples. Savonarola’s part in this event was regarded as miraculous. His
reputation soared. Without a government, given Piero’s abandonment of the city, the people
immediately looked to him for leadership and help to form a new government. Savonarola
reached the height of his acceptance by the Florentine people.

**Growing Hostility to Savonarola and His Martyrdom**

Savonarola had internalized his role as a prophet over a lifetime of biblical study,
teaching, and prayer. This was a natural role for him to assume: The biblical prophets had been
his models since childhood. The relationship of the biblical prophet to God was also the role that Savonarola desired more than any other. On January 13, 1495, Savonarola finally declared his status as a prophet of God. Chapter 6 presented the events that led from Savonarola’s greatest acceptance as a prophet to his decline from power, his excommunication for heresy and his trial, and his execution by hanging and then burning. Many regarded this as his martyrdom. The chapter provided the evidence that Savonarola not only considered himself to be a prophet, but proclaimed that representation in his sermons and his written sermons. This was not blasphemy, even though some members of the clergy regarded it as such.

Much of Chapter 6 was devoted to the deteriorating relationship between Savonarola and Pope Alexander VI. Savonarola was silenced by the pope for much of the period between 1495 and 1498, although the findings first presented the evidence of his active political-religious leadership in Florence. The narrative examined Savonarola’s writing during these times, as Savonarola turned to preaching by printing and disseminating his sermons, tracts, and books. His writings formed the strongest evidence that Savonarola continued to maintain his representation as a prophet for the duration of his life.

When, in 1495, Savonarola claimed that he was a prophet, the pope directed Savonarola to appear in Rome to explain himself. Savonarola declined as explained in an exchange of letters that documents the relationship from July 1495 to the end of that year. Savonarola, rather than appear in Rome, wrote a defense for the pope, entitled the *Compendium of Revelations*, a work that the pope dismissed. Chapter 6 described the opposition of the clergy and the cardinals both in Florence and Rome grew as word of Savonarola’s various responses were carried back and forth from Florence to Rome.
The letters documented the pope’s directives and Savonarola’s reasons for disobedience. The later grounds for Savonarola’s excommunication were also identified from papal letters, as were Savonarola’s legal arguments that claimed the legitimacy of disobeying a superior who was in error. A number of other events in 1497 were narrated to show the escalation of the conflict and the weakening of the people’s commitment to Savonarola as a prophet: the pope’s dissolution of the congregation to which San Marco was joined, ordering the convent to join a new Roman-Tuscan congregation; the development of a plot in 1497 to restore Piero de’ Medici, or someone of the Medici line, to power; and the execution of five Florentines charged with treason as an outcome of the plot.

Savonarola’s disobedience to the pope and the damage it did to people’s continued commitment to him were the major findings of Chapter 6. The chapter presented the options that the pope had for disciplining Savonarola and the risks that the pope took if that discipline angered the people of Florence. Enforcing Savonarola’s compliance with papal directives to appear in Rome to explain his claim as a prophet could be achieved by simple excommunication or excommunication with anathema, a condition that extended a penalty to anyone who interacted with the excommunicate. Community punishment, the interdict, had severe economic consequences. The findings of the chapter demonstrated the growing concern on the part of the business community that the pope would interdict Florence, endangering trade and Florentine property in the whole region. The findings supported the conclusion that fear of these punishments was a significant reason that many in the business community turned against Savonarola. Individuals also became cautious about or stopped attending Savonarola’s sermons because of the threat of these punishments. The chapter concluded with Savonarola’s arrest, writing in prison, his trials, and his execution by hanging followed by burning.
General Conclusion

This study argued that, to continue to be accepted by the people as a prophet, Savonarola needed to bolster the faith of Florentines with new prophecies and new fulfillments of those prophecies. The findings demonstrated that, by the end of 1497 and start of 1498, Savonarola could no longer provide miracles and prophecies. In addition, Savonarola raised doubts about his motives. Savonarola remained a devout and faithful Dominican and Catholic, but his expectation about the renovation of the Church evolved with his changing belief about his own special role in salvation. Even as proofs of his prophetic status began to fail, Savonarola continued to represent himself as a biblical prophet until his death: He prayed for the people. He led the people in prayer. He led an exemplary life. He demonstrated compassion for the poor and widows, including action to alleviate poverty. He willingly accepted martyrdom, in this way proving again, at least to himself, God’s choice of him for a special status.
Endnotes

1 Amos Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola: The Evolution of Humanist Theology 1461/2-1498* (Boston/EBSCO: Brill, 2008). See the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2 particularly for the religious crisis and Chapters 3 to 5 for their responses to the need for religious reform and the roles of Marsilio Ficino and Savonarola in promoting reform.


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