

week 2 . Reading 1:

Selected Writings of **Girolamo Savonarola**

Religion and Politics, 1490–1498

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Introduction

Savonarola remains an enigma, as controversial in our day as he was in his own. He was born in Ferrara in 1452, the grandson of a learned physician who helped him on his way to acquiring a master of arts degree at the University of Ferrara. At the age of twenty-three, however, he rejected the secular world to become a Dominican friar in the Observant monastery in Bologna, where St. Dominic himself had died and was buried. It was there that he acquired the deep learning reflected in his later sermons, as we can now see from the "Borromeo notebook," which he wrote in 1483, a year after he was appointed a teacher in the Observant monastery of San Marco in Florence. There was nothing in it, or in the sermons he gave in Florence at this time, to suggest his later prophetic gift; on the contrary, he drew few listeners ("only some simpletons and a few little women," he recalled in Ruth and Micheas [Micah], Sermon IV, 18 May 1496), and he was faced with dwindling audiences when he left the city after two years. By the time he returned to the monastery of San Marco in 1490, however, he had developed his apocalyptic voice, which came to him (he tells us in one account) just before he left Florence in 1484; and it was honed in the Advent and Lent sermons he delivered in Lombardy and Tuscany in the intervening years. On his return to Florence, he became not only a powerful and terrifying preacher but also, from 1494 to 1498, the most influential figure in Florentine politics, as well as an outspoken critic of the papacy: a combination of roles that led to his being put to death at the stake in June 1498, anathematized and condemned by the Church and the Florentine state alike.¹

How are we to interpret the extraordinary events of these years? To attempt to understand what happened, we need to investigate not only his political and social milieu but also the religious mentality and eschatology of fifteenth-century Italians, especially as the half-millennium approached. For although Savonarola was in some ways very forward-looking in his organizational techniques and his desire to return to apostolic simplicity, his belief in demonic forces and Antichrist is much less modern, as Donald Weinstein has reminded us.² His very success as a leader and reformer in turn drew him into the maelstrom of Florentine confrontational politics that also contributed to his downfall. By 1497, events developed their own dynamic in the aftermath of the increasingly fervent campaign of moral reform

1. For a succinct outline of Savonarola's life, Weinstein, 1994.

2. Weinstein, 1970, pp. 188-189, 228-231.

in the previous year. The Bonfire of Vanities in Lent 1497 was followed by the assault on Savonarola in the pulpit on Ascension Day and his excommunication by the Pope in May. This in turn led to the final drama of the ordeal by fire in April 1498, and the deaths of Savonarola and his companions at the stake the following month.

Historians today are as divided about who should bear the responsibility for what happened as his contemporaries were. Was Savonarola a victim of papal and Florentine politics, or was he so fired by his own success that he was incapable of seeing the havoc he was wreaking by choosing so uncompromising a path to martyrdom? Here his correspondence with the Pope and the chronicles, letters, and political debates of Florentines allow us insight into the position of devout Christians faced with an excommunicated and recalcitrant leader. Even the papacy is finding it difficult to decide whether to sanctify him as a Catholic martyr or to continue to condemn him as a heretic for claiming, as a prophet, to speak directly with God. So this anthology of writings by Savonarola and about him, most of them never before published in translation, is extremely timely. It will enable us to make up our own minds about this controversial figure on the basis of these unique primary sources set in their contemporary context.

The Pastoral Writings

It is appropriate that we are first presented with Savonarola's pastoral writings, for although they are less dramatic than his prophetic sermons, they were what led to the moral transformation that nearly everyone, then and now, agrees was Savonarola's greatest achievement. As Francesco Guicciardini wrote, in the extract translated below, "the work he did in promoting decent behavior was holy and marvellous; nor had there ever been as much goodness and religion in Florence as there was in his time." Savonarola belonged to the Observant, or reformist, branch of the Dominican order, which had been established at the end of the fourteenth century to introduce a return to simplicity and poverty. The movement was led by reformers who worked closely with lay patrons, such as the Este in Ferrara and the Medici in Florence, Cosimo de' Medici being encouraged by Pope Eugenius IV to introduce the new Observant order in San Marco.³

So the ground was already laid for Savonarola when he was invited to return to San Marco in 1490. Nor is it surprising that he quickly gathered a band of lay supporters. Florence enjoyed a strong tradition of lay piety expressed in the charitable activities and sermons of ordinary citizens in their confraternities, where they celebrated the Eucharist together as a commen-

orative love-feast. Even theological debates about sin and grace were held in public, as in 1489, when a debate was held in the cathedral on Adam's sin, to be continued a week later in Lorenzo de' Medici's own home.⁴ All this was in addition to the cycles of sermons delivered every year by invited preachers during Advent and Lent. Some preachers were particularly popular, especially the Franciscan San Bernardino of Siena, whose fiery sermons against sodomy and bonfires of vanities in the 1420s anticipated Savonarola's. So too was Bernardino da Feltre, who was expelled from Florence in 1488 for his provocative sermons against the Jews; and also the Augustinian friar, Mariano da Genazzano, a Medici favorite, whose eloquent and learned sermons in the 1480s provided a challenge to Savonarola when he returned to Florence—as one of his friends pointed out in telling him that his "pronunciation and graceless gestures" compared very badly with Fra Mariano's.⁵ A manuscript containing an anonymous collection of sermons delivered in Florence between 1467 and 1502 shows how eclectic the Florentine taste was, for it includes a miscellany of sermons preached in different churches by Augustinian, Franciscan, and Dominican friars—and only one by Savonarola (which is the first sermon translated here).⁶ So there was already a devout lay audience for topics central to the movement for religious reform.

The two pastoral sermons translated here help to explain how Savonarola differed from his predecessors and competitors among the preachers of his day. When he first began to preach in 1490, as he later reminded his congregation (in Ruth and Micahs, Sermon XVIII), people complained that he did not raise *questiones* or moral problems like other preachers, and we can see this is true by comparing his sermons with those of Fra Mariano in the collection referred to above. His Good Friday sermon on 1 April 1496 demonstrates very well his method of preaching. He begins by citing his biblical text for the day, which he quotes in Latin before translating or paraphrasing it in Italian; he then expounds it by comparing the authority of the Old and the New Testaments, explaining Christianity in terms of its humanity (here, Christ's sacrifice upon the Cross) and its naturalism (the natural instinct, shared with plants and birds, being to strive towards self-preservation and perfection). As he explained a few days later, he had initially preached simply, "without philosophy," in order to draw simple people to his sermons, and he began to cite natural philosophy as well as the Scriptures only in response to criticism from the learned elite ("astrologers and philosophers and the wise men of the world"; Amos and Zacharias, Sermon

4. Krzyż, 1996, p. 151; on lay piety, Kristeller, 1956; Henderson, 1994.

5. Rüdolf, 1959, p. 34; cf. Weinstein, 1970, p. 99. On San Bernardino and Bernardino da Feltre, Origo, 1963, esp. p. 199; Weinstein, 1970, p. 103.

3. Rubinstein, 1990, p. 65.

6. Zafarana, 1968, pp. 1058–61 (1 April [1496]).

XLVIII). What made his sermons accessible to the people at large was his use of eloquent images and analogies to make his meaning both clear and relevant. In this Good Friday sermon, he uses the images of the ladder and the Cross to maximum effect—as we can see both from the woodcut of the Cross published shortly afterwards (plate 2) and from the précis of this sermon by the anonymous Florentine. Not only did this Florentine record the seven steps of the ladder with great accuracy—despite claiming to have forgotten many of “the beautiful things” Savonarola said about them—but he also commented that “what particularly pleased the people” was the way Savonarola related the seven steps to the seven mysteries of the Passion. He recorded as well another characteristic of Savonarola’s sermons: that whereas other preachers would have tried to move their audience to tears on this sad day, Savonarola said he wanted instead to teach interior devotion.

Interior devotion is also a theme of his All Souls’ Day sermon later that year, which uses similar arguments and devices to make its impact. He initially embarks on the theme of naturalism and how difficult it is to get people to think about death when the desire to live is our most natural instinct. His solution to the problem is to offer a set of practical rules to avoid sin and the danger of Hell, which he again expounds by using visual images and analogies: the evocative image of “the spectacles of death” and a detailed description of three pictures to be hung at home as a perpetual aide-mémoire. Printed the following year as a separate treatise, *On the Art of Dying Well*, its three woodcuts (two illustrated here, plates 3–4) successfully imprint on our minds the message of his sermon, evidence in itself of the effectiveness of his novel techniques.⁷ These woodcuts were also intended to encourage another common theme of the sermons: the importance of inward reflection instead of the outward outpouring of emotion.

This is the message of his treatise *On Mental Prayers*, printed in Florence in 1495, which also exemplifies another novel feature of Savonarola’s moral campaign: the use of the printing press to reinforce the messages of his sermons. Like the treatise *On the Art of Dying Well*, it contains woodcuts to stress the importance of private meditation at home without the trappings of outward ceremonies and cult—as happened in the primitive Church, he said, when Christians were able to empty their minds of worldly matters without the need of songs or organs to raise their minds on high. Music was, of course, another area for reform and simplification where Savonarola again anticipated later reformers, with his preference for plain chant instead of polyphony—although he did not scruple to adapt the secular carnival

songs popularized by Lorenzo de’ Medici to bond his own supporters.⁸ Similarly, he attacked religious art for using images of recognizable Florentines to represent Mary Magdalene, St. John, and the Virgin Mary: “Do you believe the Virgin Mary went dressed as you paint her? . . . You would do well to cancel these figures that are painted so unchastely.”⁹

It was in the same vein that he addressed the nuns in the enclosed convent of the Murate and printed a treatise *On Widowhood*, in which he advised widows not to remarry, nor to attend weddings and banquets, nor to chat with men, wander in the streets, or even gaze at the streets from their windows. He had previously attempted to involve women in the work of reform, only to be rebuffed by a woman from a leading Florentine family. But he remained closely involved in women’s reforming movements, and even his advice to widows was consistent with his desire to encourage inner spirituality free from external distractions. When the Medici were restored after 1512, the convents he had reformed insisted on retaining a certain independence and responsibility for themselves as Savonarola’s legacy to them.¹⁰

The common themes running through the whole of Savonarola’s pastoral ministry are the desire to return to apostolic simplicity and to base his teaching on the Scriptures. Both are exemplified in his treatise *On the Simplicity of the Christian Life*, which one of his followers, Girolamo Benivieni, translated for the printed edition of 1496. Another humanist admirer of Savonarola also praised him for his “simplicity of heart . . . bodily simplicity, too, and simplicity of cult,” describing Savonarola’s brilliance in expounding the Scriptures “to us” as a norm to be absolutely obeyed, “like an evangelical missionary.”¹¹ Similarly, the Florentine merchant chronicler Bartolomeo Cerritani recorded in his *Storia fiorentina* that Savonarola introduced “an almost new way of pronouncing the Word of God, that is, like the Apostles, without dividing the sermon, or posing questions, without singing or rhetorical tropes, his sole aim being to explain something of the Old Testament and introduce the simplicity of the primitive Church.”¹²

So it was as a reformer that Savonarola won the support of many Florentines, for “until now,” Girolamo Benivieni’s brother Domenico wrote in his 1496 *Trattato*, “people never knew what the true Christian way of life was . . . believing that good living consisted in ceremonies and external

8. See Macey, 1992; also Aggeus, Sermon VII, below.

9. Gilbert, 1980, pp. 157–158; Hall, 1990, pp. 499–500.

10. Polizzotto, 1993, 1996 (esp. p. 236 on Le Murate), 1997; Kent, 1983. On *Vita rituale*, which ran to four editions between 1490 and 1496, Eischenblich, 1996.

11. Nesi, 1973, pp. 163, 165.

12. Cerritani, 1994, p. 192.

7. Printed three times before his death, the treatise is discussed by Weinstein, 1989, and by Polizzotto, 1989.

works, which were praised by the clergy and friars because they brought them personal honor and profit.¹³ The implicit criticism of the religious in this passage suggests one source of future hostility to Savonarola: the old-established clergy in Florence whom he was to nickname “the lukewarms,” or *tiepidi*, those who spoke fine words but refused to reform, like the former Medicans, the Greys or *Bigli*, who also stood midway between Savonarola’s angry opponents (the *arrabbiati*) at one extreme and the puitan Whites or *Bianchi* (whom their opponents nicknamed the Snivellers or *Piangioni*) at the other.¹⁴ Although he suggested abolishing the party labels of “White” and “Grey” in his sermon of 28 December 1494, he and his own supporters helped to encourage this factionalism, to which they themselves fell victim.

The Prophecies

Savonarola was transformed from a pastoral reformer into the scourge of Florence and the papacy by his role as a prophet—although in fact there was no initial contrast between these roles, since his earliest prophecies were made in the context of pastoral reform. Reform of Florence’s clergy and its ruling elite, not the forthcoming scourge of Italy, was the theme of his very first prophecy in Florence. It was delivered in February 1491 as part of his cycle of sermons on the Apocalypse of St. John. The importance of these sermons can be seen in his claim (made at the end of the cycle) that in them he had preached “new things in a new way,” *nova dicere et novo modo*, which he regarded as a sign of their divine origin; and also in the care with which he dated them in October 1492 as beginning “two years and three months ago, that is, 27 months, that is, 810 days.”¹⁵ What they contained was an assault on the greed and self-interest of the leading men in Florence, not only the religious but also lawyers, judges, brokers, bankers, and merchants, as well as members of the great families who competed for ecclesiastical benefices and were able to “buy anything with money,” an attack he summarized in a later note in the margin of the manuscript: “I said that the devil uses the great to oppress the poor so they can’t do good, etc.”¹⁶ This is the context for his first prophecy on the second Sunday in Lent 1491, in what he later called his “terrifying” (*speranzosa*, or in Latin *terrificus*) sermon that he preached after a sleepless night. In it, he predicted a time when men

13. Benivieni, 1496, fol. 33r–v (with the woodcut shown here as plate 2).

14. Brown, 2000b, pp. 22–26; Zancartini, 1997, pp. 49–51. On the “lukewarm,” Aggeus, Sermon VII.

15. Sermon 49 (5 April 1491), Savonarola, 2001, p. 297; and “*In domino confido*” (21 October 1492), Savonarola, 1992, p. 83, discussed by Verde, 1998, p. 136.

16. Sermon 5 (20 February 1491, repeated a year later), Savonarola, 2001, pp. 29–35, 312, n. 12.

would risk their lives for Christ, would not amass riches or build great palaces or become clients of the powerful but would carry Christ in their hearts (a sermon, according to a later marginal note, “in which there are many prophecies and other things”). As Armando Verde points out, the overall message of these sermons was about Christ’s compassion, however, not his anger.¹⁷

So we must be careful not to confuse the prophecy in this early cycle of sermons with either Savonarola’s earlier visions or the later visions described in the important “Renovation Sermon” of 13 January 1495, translated here, and in the *Compendium of Revelations* printed later that year in Florence. According to the 13 January sermon, his visions began in the years between 1475 and 1480 and were first preached in Brescia in 1489. As Giulio Cattin argues, however, these early sermons are strongly influenced by scholasticism despite their attempts at a new simplicity and lightness of touch; and even those preached after his “illumination” in the church of San Giorgio in Florence in 1484 are not visionary but are instead careful meditations on the theme of why the Church needed to be scourged.¹⁸ Encouraged by the sermons of itinerant preachers, as well as by the new invention of the printing press, there was at the time a widely diffused belief in millenarianism and portents.¹⁹ As the half-millennium approached, fears of the end of the world preceded by the rule of Antichrist were accompanied by portents of “the second Charlemagne,” who would return to Italy on his way to recover the Holy Land from the Turks. Other widely believed portents included the striking of the cupola of the Duomo in Florence by a thunderbolt three days before Lorenzo de’ Medici died on 8 April 1492, which caused its marble lantern to crash onto the north side of the cathedral. Because it fell towards the Medici palace, the chemist Luca Landucci (like many others) interpreted it as a portent of Lorenzo’s death three days later; and even the skeptical Machiavelli and Guicciardini cited this as evidence that serious events, in ancient and modern times, are always foretold by “divination or revelation or by prodigies or by other heavenly signs.”²⁰ At the same time, there was growing interest among Renaissance scholars in the prophecies of ancient magi rediscovered in Hermetic writings and oracles. So Savonarola’s predictions, like his pastoral work, found fertile ground in Florence in which to develop.

What is difficult for us to pinpoint is the moment when Savonarola

17. Sermon 12 (27 February 1491), *ibid.*, pp. 75–83; cf. Savonarola, 1974, pp. 9–10, 135–136; Verde, 1998, pp. 143–147.

18. Cattin, 1953, pp. 155–161.

19. Niccoli, 1990, esp. pp. 3–29; also pp. 33–34; Hatfield, 1995, pp. 106–114.

20. Machiavelli, 1983 (I, 56), p. 249; Guicciardini, 1970, p. 70.

began to have visions of specific future events. He had begun to preach publicly but “very circumspectly” about the forthcoming scourges and tribulations before Lorenzo de’ Medici’s death in April 1492. Since Lorenzo had made himself unpopular for driving out Savonarola’s rabble-rousing predecessor, Bernardino da Feltre, he did nothing to stop the sermons. Nevertheless, as Savonarola told a fellow Dominican in 1491, he had always to be careful, preaching the renovation of the Church and future tribulations but not “absolutely” and always with a basis in Scripture, “so no one can reproach me.”²¹ So without either accepting the visions at face value or rejecting them as later inventions, we can see how their message became transformed under the pressure of events—the French invasion and the political revolution in Florence—that made it easy, with hindsight, to interpret them as fulfillments of his predictions of the scourge to come.

The sermon of 13 January 1495 is important for the claim Savonarola made in it that his prophecies were based on what God said to him and not simply on his interpretation of the Bible (“believe me, Florence, it is not I, but God, who says these things”). It is also important for containing Savonarola’s first public account of his mission, including his two earliest “mental images,” or visions. The first of these (later ascribed to 20 April 1492 and printed as the treatise *Triumph of the Cross* in 1497) describes two crosses: a black cross above Rome, on which rained down swords, knives, and lances; and a golden cross above Jerusalem. The second vision (later ascribed to 22–23 December 1492) describes the hand of God poised to strike the wicked, “Gladus Domini super terram cito et velociter,” with angels offering men red crosses and white mantles, both visions influencing the illustrations reproduced here (plates 2, 8).

These prophecies are described in greater detail in his *Compendium of Revelations*, written in response to the Pope’s request in July 1495 (in the letter translated below) that he explain himself.²² In the *Compendium* Savonarola claims to have predicted the deaths of both Lorenzo de’ Medici and Pope Innocent VIII in April and July 1492, but only to friends, and also the crossing of the Alps into Italy by someone like Cyrus.²³ Although Charles VIII had announced his intention to claim his rights to Naples in 1491, and had supported his announcement by vigorous propaganda to influence public opinion, it was only two years later that the invasion began to be discussed seriously (together with the idea of using it to foment a revolution in Flor-

ence), and only in the late summer of 1494, after considerable opposition within France, that it was finally agreed on.²⁴ When Savonarola preached on Genesis in Lent 1492 and Lent 1494, he failed to give Florence the special role referred to in later sermons, in the *Compendium*, and in his *Dialogue concerning Prophetic Truth*, that Florence was “especially decreed to receive the seed of this divine word in order to propagate it throughout the world.”

By the time Savonarola had reached the Flood in his Genesis sermons, in the month in which Charles entered Italy, the appropriateness of God’s message finally sank in, making the eminent humanist Pico della Mirandola’s hair stand up on end (Savonarola tells us in the *Compendium*).²⁵ The sacking of Florence’s fortresses and the revolution followed swiftly. From then on, Savonarola’s predictions corresponded closely to the course of events. The controversy aroused by his prophecies led to the events described in his 1495 correspondence with the Pope, translated below. But far from silencing him, the Pope succeeded only in bringing the controversy into the public arena by provoking Savonarola’s *Open Letter to a Friend* and the so-called pamphlet war of 1496–97.²⁶ Savonarola’s long *Dialogue concerning Prophetic Truth* was written to confute the charges made against him in this war of words, but it would perhaps have been better if it had remained “terrifying” and enigmatic than for Savonarola to have attempted to rationalize with scholastic arguments what was not susceptible to scientific proof.²⁷ Faced with the hostility of the papacy and his eloquent critics, however, Savonarola had little option but to answer the charges that his dialogue, the *Compendium*, and the *Open Letters* summarize so well.

Politics

Savonarola’s political influence in Florence was foremost among these charges, which accused him of getting involved, as a cleric, “in the administration of the city.”²⁸ The truth of the charge is indisputable. Even before the Medici regime fell on 9 November, Savonarola was elected one of five ambassadors to Charles VIII in Pisa to renegotiate the terms of submission that Piero de’ Medici had agreed to with the king without authorization. He interceded with the king again in Florence, and although the Florentines had to agree to pay Charles a large indemnity of 120,000 florins and make concessions to the Medici, it seemed to them miraculous that a settlement

21. Guicciardini, 1970, p. 103; Weinstein, 1970, pp. 102–103.

22. In Italian in August and in Latin in October (Ridolfi, 1959, p. 135), Savonarola, 1974, pp. 12–14, 22–23, and 138–140, 148–149. English translation by McGinn, 1979, pp. 192–275; discussed and quoted at length by Weinstein, 1970, pp. 67–78. 23. Savonarola, 1974, pp. 14–15, 140–141.

24. Peyronnet, 1995, pp. 49–53; Mallett, 1995; Brown, 2000a, pp. 16–22.

25. Savonarola, 1974, pp. 11, 137.

26. See Ridolfi, 1959, pp. 132–143; Polizzotto, 1994, pp. 66–67, and, on his critics, pp. 64–69; Weinstein, 1970, pp. 227–239.

27. As Toussaint suggests, 1996, p. 171.

28. Cf. Savonarola, 1974, p. 65.

had been reached five days after the intercession of "this holy man and prophet," and that Charles had left the city only two days later, on 23 November, without sacking it and with very little bloodshed. It was just a week later, in his seventh sermon on Aggeus (Haggai), translated here, that Savonarola celebrated Florence's release from the potentially serious danger posed by the large number of French troops billeted within the city: "O Florence, if things had ended badly, as they could have done, many, very likely . . . would today be in Hell."

This sermon provides a bridge from his earlier pastoral and prophetic sermons to the politically engaged sermons that proposed the program of legislative reforms largely achieved in 1494 and 1495. The program consisted, first, in the creation on 23 December 1494 of a Great Council, modeled on that of Venice. In Florence, however, the members were to be not a closed noble caste but some 3,500 former officeholders (qualified by holding one of the three "major" elective offices over four generations). This council passed the reform program that Savonarola summarized in the cathedral on the Feast of St. Victor on 28 July 1495.²⁹ It included the amnesty law of 19 March 1495 and the law abolishing *parlamenti* of 13 August 1495; both measures were intended to strengthen the rule of law against the threat of the sudden plebiscites and the tyrannous "vote of Six Beans," which could sentence people to death, without appeal, by only six of the eight votes of the Signoria, or the Eight of Ward. Then there were laws against sodomy, gambling, and taverns; the abolition of arbitrary taxation in favor of assessment by neighbors; the establishment of a charitable *Monte di Pietà*; the building of a great hall in which the new Great Council could meet; and provisions for the time of plague and for the publication of laws a day before they were voted on.³⁰ Although he was criticized for creating "a government of madmen," these laws provide convincing evidence of Savonarola's influence on the reform of the state. As a result, the old Medicean oligarchy was transformed into a new, much broader system of government, in which — Bartolomeo Cerrerani recorded — "for the first time, nearly the whole of Florence participated."³¹

The coherence of this program suggested to his critics that Savonarola was politically ambitious, not content with the simple life of a friar but eager to "meddle in affairs of state." For this reason, it is important to look care-

29. The law of 23 December is edited by Cadoni, 1994, pp. 33–60; Savonarola, 1969, II, pp. 168–176 (*Pratiche sopra i Santi*, sermon XXVI, 28 July 1495).

30. Cadoni, 1994, pp. 108–118, 185–195. On this program, Polizzotto, 1994, pp. 28–36.

31. Cerrerani, 1993, p. 270. On the charge and the chancellor's defense against it, *Open Letter to a Friend*; Scala, 1997, p. 400, cf. 407–408.

fully at the political sermons and the treatise translated here to see how fully integrated they are with his pastoral writings and with his writings on moral reform. The first sermon, for instance, adopts the pattern of his earlier pastoral sermons in its use of naturalistic, Thomist arguments and striking images to make his point, followed by specific advice on how to achieve salvation. So he begins by explaining that whereas animals are guided by unerring instinct, and saints and the elect are unerringly guided by God's special light, man's uniqueness lies in having free will and a soul as well as a body; hence he stands "as if between two magnets," pulled both upwards and downwards and needing God's special light to achieve certainty. How to acquire this special light provides the context for introducing his reform program. In this sermon he talks about repentance and the need to live uprightly, whereas in his more famous sermon on Aggeus XIII on 12 December he goes on to propose "what the natural government of the Florentine people should be" — recapitulated in his 1498 *Treatise on the Government of Florence*, which is equally indebted to Aristotelian-Thomist arguments.³² It was only after this, on 16 December, that he began to quote Haggai as relevant to his theme of rebuilding, concluding on 28 December by emphasizing the need to establish a hierarchy of order within this greatly enlarged and socially mixed government. So it is misleading to regard either the prophet Haggai or political ambition as the main inspiration of the program, since its purpose was entirely consistent with the aims of his pastoral ministry, to teach people how to achieve salvation.

During these years, Savonarola also maintained his reputation as a successful prophet and defender of the city. He was invited into the government palace to discuss reform with the Signoria at the end of 1494. He was sent on another successful embassy to the king of France in June 1495 in order to deter Charles from passing through Florence on his return from Naples to France. And in October 1496 he was ordered by the government to deliver a public sermon in order to protect the city from being attacked at Livorno by the imperial fleet, his prediction of divine help being once more miraculously fulfilled by the destruction of the fleet in an unexpected storm. Given this apparently unbroken success, why did he fail?

The most obvious reason, apart from the continuing failure of his pro-French policy to recover Pisa for the Florentines, was the Pope's hostility to his claim to be a prophet and to his repeated onslaught on the Church, which led to his preaching being frequently prohibited and to his eventual excommunication in May 1497. But there were also other reasons relating to his political role in Florence. Although he was invited to Florence by Lorenzo

32. Savonarola, 1974, p. 27; Rubinstein, 2000; Weinstein, 1970, pp. 289–316.

de' Medici and soon got taken up by Lorenzo's circle of friends, his open and repeated criticism of the wealth and unbridled ambition of the ruling elite cannot have failed to hit its target, especially when his 1491 Lent and Advent sermons were followed by the equally hard-hitting 1492 Lent sermons in San Lorenzo.³³ Lorenzo may not have been mentioned by name as an extravagant palace builder, as Filippo Strozzi was, but he must have been implicated in the charge of "buying villas and shops from the poor at a low price, joining one field to another," and certainly in the charge concerning the dowries and wealth of contemporary marriages, which Savonarola boldly made in a sermon in San Lorenzo on the morning of the very day that Lorenzo was buried there. In another sermon he imagined the magnates protesting that he should not "say these things in the pulpit, because you make us despised by the people." And he much later recalled that "at the time of Lorenzo de' Medici" he had been cautioned about his preaching by five leading citizens, who he assumed came at Lorenzo's behest.³⁴ So although his onslaught was essential to his reform campaign and was not in itself politically motivated, it nevertheless drew him irrevocably into the field of politics, making constitutional reform a priority after the fall of the Medici.

Constitutional reform in turn drew Savonarola further into the political arena. He made his proposals for reform ten days after the Medici constitution had been revised by the oligarchs in their own favor. Despite being firmly associated with the popular party, Savonarola found himself opposed to later attempts to radicalize the government by choosing it by lot instead of by nomination, so detaching himself from the very people who had been his early supporters.³⁵ Moreover, by pardoning the Mediceans in his amnesty law, he had ensured the continuance of factionalism in the city, getting drawn into the party system himself by the need to join with other groups in order to gain a majority in the vast new Great Council. So gerrymandering became part of the now frequent and contentious process of electing officeholders, "and what's worse, I hear there are some who say, 'He belongs to the friar's party, let's vote for him.'"³⁶ And as a party leader, he found himself offering increasingly tempting rewards to his followers—more wealth and power, the recovery of Pisa, lower income tax—making him vulnerable to the charge that instead of criticizing the old proprietary view of religion, he was now

pandering to "the credulous multitude."³⁷ In the long run, these developments helped to compromise Savonarola's initial message of reform and to reveal the ambiguities in his situation. When he was unwilling to allow Medicean conspirators the right to appeal to the Great Council in August 1497, he was accused of even greater hypocrisy, making it "plain to all," Machiavelli famously wrote in his *Discourses on Livy* (I, 45), "that at heart [Savonarola] was ambitious and a party-man," which "ruined his reputation and brought on him much reproach."³⁸

The final paradox of Savonarola's political position concerns the question of his leadership. From the fall of the Medici in 1494 until his *Treatise on the Government of Florence* in 1498, he had consistently preached against allowing a single head (*capo*) to recapture power. Faced with the need to fill the vacuum left by the Medici, however, he first proposed Christ as the Florentines' king and leader, a year later extending this idea to include the people through the Great Council. "Who is our Lord?" he asked in October 1495; "Christ is. Who holds the place of Christ? Not the Signoria, but the people are the Lord, and therefore I say to you, keep your eye on the Lord, that is, on the Council." But by behaving like Moses in claiming to enjoy undisputed authority as God's mouthpiece and by appealing to want "to be lord," as he put it in the *Compendium*, he ended up being accused of the very vices of irreverence and hypocrisy that he had condemned.³⁸ These ambiguities help to explain the increasing weakness of his position in Florence, despite the success of his fervent moral crusade against corruption.

Moral Reform

Palm Sunday, 27 March 1496, in many ways marks the high point of Savonarola's fortunes. He had remained silent since the papal ban on his preaching in July 1495, when the Pope had also tried to reattach San Marco to the Lombard Congregation (attempting a year later, with equal lack of success, to make it join a new Tuscan-Roman congregation).³⁹ So his return to the pulpit in Lent 1496, at the request of the government, was celebrated with unusual fervor. What impressed contemporaries was the transformation of the Carnival rites that preceded Lent, as well as the spectacular procession that ended it. Traditionally, Carnival was celebrated by boys hurling stones at passersby and barricading streets to prevent them from entering without

33. Polizzotto, 1989, 2000; Verde, 1992.

34. Verde, 1992, pp. 516, 519–20; Savonarola, 1956, II, pp. 326–327 (*Prediche sopra l'Evangelio*, sermon XXII, 18 March 1498).

35. Prodi, 1997, pp. 47–48; Brown, 2003, pp. 304–306.

36. Prodi, 1997, pp. 45–46; Brown, 2000b, pp. 24–25.

37. *Epistola responsiva*, ed. Garfagnini, 1991, pp. 106–107; and on proprietary religion, Brown, 2004, pp. 26–29.

38. Brown, 1988, pp. 57–65, citing Alkoviti, 1991, pp. 123, 125; cf. Savonarola, 1962, I, p. 27 (*Prediche sopra Rubh e Michan*, sermon I, 8 May 1496); Savonarola, 1974, pp. 65, 190.

39. Rüdolf, 1959, pp. 132–143, 178–180.

paying a toll. Now, however, the boys collected alms and placed crucifixes on the street corners where the barricades had been. On the last day of Carnival they processed in large numbers through the city to collect alms and gifts, and on the following day and throughout Lent, they attended Savonarola's sermons in the cathedral with great devotion. This transformation reduced their elders to tears, who saw it as another miracle; but nowadays it perhaps interests us more for what it tells us about the organizational techniques that Savonarola displayed in using youth groups to spread his message. Preadolescent children were seen at the time both as the scourges of their day and as holy innocents, and we find Savonarola (like others before him) organizing them to tame them as a potentially disruptive force and also to use their purity as the means through which to mediate reform.⁴⁰ Savonarola's awareness of the dramatic effect of mass processions of these children and of their apparel is demonstrated by his last Lenten sermon, on Palm Sunday, translated here, in which he wanted both boys and girls to be dressed in white for the procession with red crosses in their hands and olive garlands on their heads. The impact of this procession—which also served as a successful fundraising event for the newly established *Monte di Pietà*⁴¹—is reflected in the chronicles of Landucci and Piero Parenti, who also commented on its sheer size: “five thousand boys, and also a great number of girls,” according to Landucci; “six to seven thousand children,” according to Parenti. Music played its part, too. Girolamo Benivieni's poem of celebration and other lauds were sung in the Piazza della Signoria during the celebrations, and afterwards the friars of San Marco danced and sang in the piazza in front of their monastery. “Long live Christ who is our King!” was the cry that went up throughout the city.

A year later, the famous “Bonfire of Vanities,” on 7 February 1497, was intended to repeat the purifying ceremony with the same success. Contemporaries regarded the exceptional size of the bonfire and its destruction of so many treasured possessions as dramatic evidence of what could be done “through the agency of children,” the culmination of Savonarola's moral campaign through his youth vigilantes. Yet there were already signs of unease, even among Savonarola's supporters, that the zeal of the vigilantes was not “eliminating,” but simply “recycling,” the ritualistic aspects of this pagan-Christian festival.⁴² For although the current head of government, Francesco Valori, was a strong supporter of Savonarola, his partisanship stimulated

factionalism, and disorder broke out again two months later. On Ascension Day, 4 May 1497, a group of young aristocrats hostile to Savonarola, the so-called Compagnacci, caused a riot during Savonarola's sermon in the cathedral, having previously planned to put explosives in the pulpit (which were replaced by nails and ordure on the day).⁴³ The government had already banned all preaching in public after Ascension Day, so four days later Savonarola had to resort to an open letter, as in 1495, to keep up the spirits of his followers. Only five days later, on 13 May 1497, Alexander VI issued a bull of excommunication against him. This marks the final period of Savonarola's life.

Excommunication and the Last Year

The papal bull of excommunication was promulgated in Florence on 18 June, transforming the controversy about Savonarola from a local issue to one of wide ecclesiastical and political concern.⁴⁴ No longer able to preach or to say Mass, Savonarola again reacted by writing open letters in his own defense. Then he devoted himself to writing devotional works that circulated widely through the printing press and exercised a powerful post-humous influence on the religious reforming movement. The events of this last year are described eloquently in the documents translated here and need little additional comment. Savonarola's fate hung not only on the Pope and his situation vis-à-vis the French in Italy, but also on the flux of Florentine politics as friendly and hostile priorates succeeded each other every two months. The division of opinion in Florence was so equally balanced that two quite new coalition magistracies of “peacemakers” were appointed to deal with the crisis in April and July. The consultative meetings of citizens held to discuss Savonarola's fate in July (as again in March–April 1498) were equally divided in their views, as we can see from the unparalleled evidence of their debates in these crucial months, which pondered whether Savonarola's authority as a prophet overrode that of the Pope as Christ's vicar on earth (or, as they put it, whether God's power was greater than Christ's), and whether the threatened interdict would damage Florence's economic interests.⁴⁵ They provide an interesting counterpoint to the epistolary debate described here between the Pope and Savonarola, which led to the turbulent events of 1498.

The Pope warned the Florentine ambassadors in Rome on 25 February 1498 that Florence would be interdicted if Savonarola continued to preach

40. Bertelli, 1980–81; Plaisance, 1993, 1997 (esp. p. 125); Niccoli, 1997; Terreaux-Scott, 1997; also Texler, 1980, pp. 474–482; Polizzotto, 2004, pp. 110–123.

41. A charitable pawnshop intended to replace usurious moneylending by Jews, *Mening*, 1993, esp. pp. 1–63; cf. Plaisance, 1997, pp. 125–126.

42. Ciappelli, 1997, p. 139.

43. Violi, 1986, pp. 73–74. On the Compagnacci, Rocke, 1996, pp. 220–222.

44. Rüdolf, 1959, pp. 197–205.

45. Ed. Fachard, 2002, pp. 493–500; 1993, pp. 41–71; discussed by Brown, 2000b, pp. 29–34.

and summoned him again to Rome (his response is translated below).⁴⁶ On the same day as this audience, Savonarola made himself a hostage to fortune by declaring in his Carnival Sunday sermon that if he was deceiving the people, he might be swallowed into Hell by a fire from Heaven. Since he failed to be swallowed up when he issued the challenge two days later, the chronicler Parenti saw it as a clever device to endorse the truth of his teaching, as well as a source of disillusionment among those who had hoped for a miracle that never materialized. Disillusionment was in fact the ultimate outcome, for although none of his opponents responded at the time to his challenge to put themselves to the test, the Franciscan fra Francesco da Puglia did later challenge Savonarola's substitute preacher, fra Domenico da Pesca, to a trial by fire. Savonarola professed to be willing to undergo the ordeal himself, as did his religious and lay followers, several thousand of whom, he claimed, cried out in response to his sermon in San Marco, "Here am I, here am I, I will go into this fire for your glory, O Lord."⁴⁷ But the opinion of the citizens whom the government consulted about the ordeal was more skeptical, as we can see from their debates. In arguing (on Christ's authority) that to seek for a sign was a mark of depravity, the lawyer Guidantonio Vespucci put his finger on the most dangerous aspect of Savonarola's initial proposal to challenge God on 25 February, the archaic notion that truth could be proved by a sign.⁴⁸

The events that ensued are well known. Plans for the ordeal went ahead despite widely conflicting views about its legitimacy, until on 6 April the looked-for "sign" was provided by a sudden downpour that doused the flames of the bonfire. Even believers had been scandalized by the Dominicans' plan to take the consecrated Host, "the most sacred Body of Christ" into the flames, "something horrendous and execrable even to talk about," one Florentine wrote; and after the event was aborted, everyone felt frustrated and disillusioned.⁴⁹ The following day, Palm Sunday, San Marco was attacked by an angry mob, and Francesco Valori and his wife were murdered. Savonarola was declared a rebel, and he, fra Domenico, and a third friar were imprisoned. After interrogation with torture, they were condemned by the state, as well as by the papal commissioners sent from Rome, for being schismatics and heretics and for preaching

"new things." They were handed over to the secular authorities to be hanged and burnt on 23 May 1498.⁵⁰

The manifest contradictions in Savonarola's life are reflected in the comments of contemporaries translated here, which range from the faith of supporters like Landucci, Simone Filipepi, and Lorenzo Vioi, to the criticism of the neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino and the balanced assessment of Francesco Guicciardini. Another Florentine, Tommaso Ginori, deleted a whole page he had written in his journal describing Savonarola's trial and death, for the reason (as he explained overleaf in huge letters) that because many lies had been spoken during his trial, he didn't know what to think—except that Savonarola was a man "of great learning and from what one could see in San Marco of good and perfect life . . . and I think a great error was committed in depriving him and other friars of their lives."⁵¹ What strands out in the assemblage of texts presented in this volume is the contrast between the didacticism and gentle pietism of the earlier pastoral sermons and treaties and the demagoguery and violence of the later sermons and writings, which resorted to invocations of hellfire and the threat of a "great multitude of demons" reserved by God "in this caliginous air of ours" to test our faith. In addition to Ficino's criticism of Savonarola's "violence" and Machiavelli's description of Savonarola tearing up the Bible and repeatedly stabbing at it (to illustrate Moses' attack on the Egyptian in Exodus), he was also criticized by the humanist Marcello Adriani, who countered Savonarola's attacks on pagan philosophy with his own measured defense of a curative god, very different from Savonarola's vengeful Old Testament God, who, like a pawn-broker, needed propitiating with gifts.⁵²

After the trauma of his legal process with torture, Savonarola wrote two last *Prison Meditations on Psalms 51 and 31*.⁵³ Liberated from the scholastic and prophetic language of his sermons, his "Exposition of Psalm 51" takes the form of a simple humanist dialogue between Hope and Sadness that movingly conveys the alternating shifts between these two emotional states. It provides us with a valuable link between the simple piety of the early reformer and the trapped and angry victim of his often self-inflicted wounds. The *Meditations* became, with Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, one of the most popular books on inner piety linking him with reformers north and south of the Alps. It can be read as a fitting memorial to his conflicted life and legacy.

46. Florence, Archivio di Stato, Signori, Dieci, Otto, Legrazioni e Commissarie, *Mis-sive e Responsive*, MS 30, fol. 16v; Ridolfi, 1959, pp. 221–230.

47. Ridolfi, 1936, p. 238; on these events in general, Weinstein, 1994, pp. 13–14.

48. Fachard, 1993, p. 65, cf. Brown, 2000b, pp. 32–34. On ordeal, first abolished in 1231, Bartlett, 1986 (and on Savonarola, p. 22, n. 32).

49. Florence, Archivio di Stato, Acquisti e Doni, MS 142, ins. 7, fol. 14 (9 April 1498); cf. Cerretani, 1994, p. 245.

50. Weinstein, 1970, pp. 285–288.

51. Ginori, 1910, p. 104.

52. Machiavelli, 1961, p. 88 (letter to Riccardo Becchi, 9 March 1498). On Adriani, Brown, 2004, pp. 27–29.

53. Savonarola, 1994.