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CONFLICT AND CONTROVERSY IN THE EARLY BAPTIST MOVEMENT IN NORTHUMBERLAND: THOMAS TILLAM, PAUL HOBSON, AND THE FALSE JEW OF HEXHAM

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ON 4th June 1653, an extraordinary event took place at Hexham. In the presence of several hundred spectators, a man bearing the name Joseph ben Israel and professing to be a Jewish rabbi, declared that he was converted to Christianity, recited at length the reasons for the change of his faith, and explained why he had chosen to join the Baptist congregation there. The confession of faith was accepted without reserve by Thomas Tillam, the preacher, and the rest of the congregation. Overjoyed by such a significant demonstration of the power of the Lord, they proceeded to an immediate baptism of the converted Jew by immersion in the Tyne. Tillam reflected in exulting fashion, "It is observable that the Lord Jesus Christ was pleased to manifest himself to this poor soul that asked not after him, to advance him as a living monument of free grace and mercy."¹ Before the month was out, however, what had seemed the greatest triumph of the fledgling Baptist congregation at Hexham had turned into a disaster, for Joseph ben Israel was revealed to be an imposter. Bitter controversy and recrimination ensued, leading in the end to the division and decline of the Hexham congregation. The story is of unusual interest in its own right, but is best understood as only part of the stormy history of the early Baptist movement in Northumberland and of the bizarre clerical career of the central figure in the drama, Thomas Tillam.

The origins of the Baptist movement in the area are obscure; those of Thomas Tillam are still more so.² While the North was not one of the main areas of Baptist strength, a scattering of congregations did emerge in the aftermath of the Civil War. The three oldest Baptist churches appear to have been at Broughton, a small village near Cockermouth in Cumberland, Hexham, and Newcastle. As was the case elsewhere in the country, the influence of the army on the growth of these congregations appears to have been significant. Certainly the army presence was a crucial factor in the case of the Newcastle congregation. Since there are no surviving records of this church, only sketchy outlines of its early history can be reconstructed. Even the foundation date cannot be exactly ascertained; the origin of the Newcastle congregation cannot be dated more precisely than to indicate it happened sometime between the garrisoning of the town by the army and 1652. Two army officers who almost certainly played a role in its establishment can be identified, Colonel Robert Lilburne and Colonel Paul Hobson.³ Lilburne served as governor of Newcastle

during the summer and fall of 1647 between the governorships of Skippon and Hesilrige.⁴ His sympathies with the Baptist persuasion are clear enough; even if he may not have been inclined to a "violent" Anabaptism, as one of his critics claimed,⁵ he certainly admitted Anabaptists among his troops through personal favour and intercession, and he remained in contact with Tyneside Baptists after he had left Newcastle to go to Scotland. He was also intimately connected with Paul Hobson, of whose Baptist inclinations there is no doubt whatsoever. When the officers of Lilburne's regiment were shuffled in the summer of 1647, Hobson had become major. Though he was an army officer, Hobson was probably more distinguished as a preacher than he was as a soldier, with the result that when he came to Newcastle as deputy governor in 1648, he almost certainly exercised more direct influence on the movement than Lilburne did. Indeed, it is likely that the Newcastle congregation did not take formal shape until after Lilburne had left the area, and maybe as late as 1650–51.⁶ The third key figure in the Newcastle church was Thomas Gower who served as its preacher.⁷ It is probable that he too had served in the army; although his activities during the Civil War are not known, he was later referred to as Captain Gower and this would suggest service in the Parliamentary army. In addition, he was a close associate of Hobson before either of them came to the Newcastle area; in 1644 he signed, in company with Hobson, the London Confession and two years later, they both signed the second edition as well.

If the origins of the Newcastle congregation seems to be decidedly military in character, the chief mover at Hexham, Thomas Tillam, appears to have had no connection with the army.⁸ Despite this, there is evidence here too of linkages with the military. Hobson himself had some connections with the Hexham congregation, for he appears as the first signatory to a witness of marriage there in November 1652,⁹ while Captains Simpson and Mason were mentioned in connection with the congregation in 1652 and 1653.¹⁰ It was, however, Tillam who had planted the seed and formed the congregation. His account of the foundation of the church at Hexham was duly entered in its records:¹¹

"In the name of the Lord Christ, I came to Hexham the 27th day of the 10th month, 1651, and so wonderfully hath God appeared in this dark corner, that upon the 21st day of the 5th month, 1652 (that is the 7th month following), after serious consideration and some gospel preparation a living temple began of these living stones—the Church of Christ in Hexham."

Little is known of Tillam before he came to Hexham. He may have originally come from Cheshire; his wife Jane was connected with a Baptist congregation in that county and one scholar has suggested that Tillam was serving as the pastor at Hill Cliffe, Cheshire at the time of the outbreak of the Civil War.¹² Although it has been argued that he was of Jewish origin,¹³ there is no evidence to support this view, other than his later Sabbatarian views and his embracing of some other Jewish practices and these are more plausibly construed as the products of his Biblical literalism than the results of Jewish ancestry. On the other hand, it does seem certain that he was, at some point in his youth, a Roman Catholic, a confession he made

openly in 1653 at the height of the controversy over the False Jew.¹⁴ By the late 1640s, he had become a member of Morgan Llwyd's gathered church at Wrexham but he was soon excommunicated on a charge of seeking to divide the church. While the precise nature of the charge is not clear, it may well have been over the issue of believer's baptism,¹⁵ for Tillam next appears as a member of the Baptist church in Coleman Street, London, of which Hanserd Knollys was pastor. In 1651, he published *The Two Witnesses*, an exposition of *Revelations* XI. Two aspects of this tract seem especially relevant to his later career at Hexham. In the first place, the one time Catholic had by now become violently anti-Catholic. Reflecting on the history of the Catholic Church, he wrote:¹⁶

"There crept in ambition, contention, covetousness, attended with abominable Errors, Superstition, Idoltry, and all kinds of luxury and prophaneness, which rushed like waves one on the neck of another, suddenly overwhelming and devouring that sweetness, humility, charity, chastity, and purity which lately were the royal ornaments of this now defiled, polluted Church of Rome."

Indeed, Tillam felt that England had not freed itself from the baleful influence of Catholicism until the very present. "Now the day breaks and shadows fly away; down go Crosses, Altars, Images; away pack Surpless, Service-Book, Organs, and the whole bundle of Popish Superstitious Ceremonies."¹⁷ In the second place, Tillam wrote from a decidedly millenarian viewpoint; he referred enthusiastically to "that full society of Glorified Saints in New Jerusalem, as it is daily expected to be manifested in Power."¹⁸ Significantly, what he called "this wonderful work of the Jews Conversion" was to be the crucial step; "that when the Jews shall be thus wonderfully converted, even then and not before, shall this King of Glory take to himself his great power and Reign."¹⁹

In the same year that he penned *The Two Witnesses*, Tillam was designated an evangelist or messenger from Knollys' church. With that status, Tillam was able to gain appointment by the commissioners set up by the Long Parliament to enquire into the state of religion in the four northern counties to the lectureship which had been established at Hexham in 1625 by the Mercer's Company of London pursuant to the bequest of one of their members, Richard Fishborne.²⁰ What moved the commissioners to make this specific appointment is not entirely clear. Certainly they were well aware of the poor clerical provision in the area. A petition from Muggleswick had made the point graphically:²¹ "We are a people ... who have been destitute of a preaching minister, yea, even since any of us, that are now breathing, were borne, to our souls grieve and dreadful hazard of destruction; neither is it our case alone, but ten or twelve parishes all adjoining are, in like manner, void of the means of salvation." It is possible too that Robert Lilburne played some role in the appointment and Hobson was himself a member of the Commission. In any case, Tillam was settled at Hexham on the lectureship at a stipend of £80 a year, supplemented by a further £40 from the Committee for Augmentations.

At the outset, things went smoothly enough. Although more conservative religious opinion was doubtless concerned by the growth of the Baptist profession in the

area, relations with the authorities were, on the surface at least, reasonably calm. There had been, admittedly, some objections; Captain Mason, for example, had been complained of in Newcastle for preaching corrupt doctrine.²² But the fact that the ministers of the town allowed the Baptists to use the chapel of St. Thomas on Tyne Bridge as their meeting house suggests that conflict was not severe.²³ Tillam zealously embarked on an active ministry. Within seven months, he had made sufficient progress to found a Particular Baptist congregation by baptizing eleven men and five women and adding his wife by transfer from a Cheshire church. The immediate congregation grew in a steady, if unspectacular way; by May 1653 it numbered 26 men and 21 women. This near equality of male and female membership is a striking feature. While it is the case that radical religion during the English Revolution offered many attractions to women, the Baptists were the most conservative of the radical Puritan movements in their attitudes towards women.²⁴ Their literal interpretation of the Bible left them bound by Paul's injunctions against women preaching, teaching, or exercising formal authority in the church. Despite this, Tillam's ministry appears to have had initially at least a considerable attraction to women; and as the size of the church grew, there continued to be a considerable female presence in the congregation; in the late spring of 1654 when the membership consisted of 45 men and 38 women, the percentage of women was marginally larger than it had been a year earlier.

There are, in the Hexham records, a number of other indications of the vigorous work undertaken by Tillam. Formal organization was further strengthened. John Thirlwall, a member of the congregation, was nominated and shortly afterwards ordained as a deacon.²⁵ At the same time, the church began to acquire a stock of funds which it put into his hands.²⁶ The evangelical zeal of Tillam gave a significant dimension to the Hexham church. Tillam appears to have regarded himself as having a roving commission as Baptist minister in the area with the result that in addition to encouraging the life of the Hexham community, he set out to establish other communities in the surrounding countryside. He appears to have had some marked success in this regard, and eventually the missionary efforts of the Hexham church were to extend as far afield as Cheshire, Yorkshire, and Scotland.²⁷ The Hexham congregation itself felt blessed by the work that Tillam was doing for them. To the church at Coleman Street, they wrote that "in the place where it was there were not a people, are we (through grace whereby we stand) become the people of God," and noted that Tillam "whom we love in the truth, and very highly esteem for his work's sake, hath been eminently instrumental in carrying on the Lord's work amongst us."²⁸ In the same letter, they expressed a desire that the Coleman Street congregation would recognize them and "that you who are strong and grown in the faith will support us that are weak," a request quickly granted by the London congregation who owned them "in the Lord to be a visible constituted church of God, who are made partners with us in one Lord, one faith, one baptism."²⁹ The culmination of the process of growth and consolidation was the application by the Hexham church to Coleman Street to have Tillam designated officially as their

pastor. To this point, his status had been simply that of a messenger from Coleman Street.³⁰

“As our eyes and our hearts have formerly been, so more at present they are, more intently set upon that eminent servant of the Lord, and your messenger, Mr. Thomas Tillam, to call him to take the charge of us, and as a pastor to be over us in the Lord. For, although as a general officer he hath laboured in the gospel among us from the first day until now, and hath faithfully supplied to our great comfort and spiritual advantage, whatsoever service hath been lacking to us in the things of Christ, yet our heart’s desires after him are for a nearer and closer interest in him, if, by the will of God, this grace may be ministered unto us by you.”

The congregation added pointedly that they had had full proof of the vitality of Tillam’s ministry, “whereby he hath been thoroughly manifest amongst us, approving himself a man of God, whose purpose and manner of life we have fully known”.³¹ Tillam himself at about the same time had occasion to express to the Hexham church his own satisfaction at the growth that had taken place.³²

“O my beloved brethen! My sons, my daughters in Christ, my own children in the faith, I cannot tell you how well I love you. Does not every artist love, prize, and praise his own workmanship? It is the joy of my soul that ye, even ye, are my workmanship in the Lord. For I have begotten you through the gospel, either from prophaneness unto holinesse, or at least from error unto order.”

For all these encouraging signs and the enthusiasm of the young church, a number of less favorable circumstances had also arisen. The success of Tillam and the Hexham congregation was breeding a reaction, not just among more conservative religious elements in the area, but also among their potential colleagues, the congregation of Gower and Hobson at Newcastle, “that only church in this county which was in the profession of the faith before us”, as Tillam described it.³³ That the growth of an aggressively evangelical Baptist church would cause alarm among more mainstream Puritans was only to be expected. In the popular mind, Baptists were considered the begetters of all sorts of social ills. For many, the mere mention of Baptists called up memories of the excesses associated with John of Leiden in the north German city of Munster more than a century earlier; for them, Baptist congregations were synonymous with anarchy.³⁴ But there were other concerns as well. The Baptist insistence that infant baptism was meaningless alarmed orthodox Puritans, for, as one writer put it, it made “infants of best believing parents” little better than pagans.³⁵ The practice of baptism by total immersion also aroused fears, especially since in the early 1640s it had been practised by many Baptist congregations at night to avoid discovery. Concerned Puritans feared that it was a cover for promiscuous behaviour; others claimed that it was a danger to life or that it would spread diseases, which were assumed to be common among the promiscuous Baptists. A number of criticisms of this sort appear to have been directed at Tillam’s congregation. In a letter to the Coleman Street Church in 1652, the Hexham

community noted that there had been great opposition to them since they had first made visible profession of their faith. There had been, they stated, evil reports by "formal professors, atheists, and papists, whereof there are multitudes swarming in these dark corners of the land."³⁶ They went on to say that the most severe conflict was with the ministry of the region, especially those who were in the popular view accounted most notable for godliness and learning. There had been public dispute over the doctrine of baptism in which the practices followed at Hexham were described as detestable and blasphemous and at least one cleric had preached specifically against their actions at his parish meeting. "Thus we are perplexed on every side, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; on fire round about, but not consumed."³⁷ Tillam recorded attacks on his ministry of a more personal nature.³⁸ It was claimed that when he baptized a group of twelve persons, he blasphemously referred to them as his apostles. It was also alleged that he extorted money from people for baptizing them, that he had been seen drunk on the road, that he had robbed a man near Corbridge, and that some of those whom he had baptized had gone mad, contracted the palsy, became blind, drowned, or committed suicide.

As disturbing as such attacks must have been, the growth of conflict and controversy within the Baptist movement itself was potentially even now destructive. In retrospect, it is easy enough to see that cooperation and mutual support were needed if the Hexham and Newcastle congregations were to flourish, but in practice there was little of either. It is important to recognize that there was already disagreement between the Hexham and Newcastle churches before the episode of the False Jew if that incident and its aftermath are to be understood properly. To some extent the conflict appears to have been the result of an unfortunate clash of personalities between the two clerical protagonists, Tillam and Gower, but it also clearly involved matters of substance as well. There were disputes over matters of practice and belief and these tended to increase rather than diminish as time went by. While the circumstances were specific to the Hexham and Newcastle churches, the situation was not unusual in the history of Baptist congregations of the period, which frequently became divided over such issues. One point of controversy which had clearly manifested itself before the arrival of the False Jew was the issue of whether members of the clergy should accept a stipend for their work or not. This was an issue which not only caused division with the Newcastle church but also seems to have troubled the Hexham community internally as well. Tillam, who conceived of his spiritual work as a full-time occupation, had no qualms about accepting payment for it, so long as such payment was freely given; Gower appears to have dissented from this view and to have argued that receiving money for preaching was inherently wrong. The issue was of concern within the Hexham community itself. Edward Hickhornhill, who was sent by the church as an evangelist to Scotland, indicated in several letters to the congregation his doubts about this matter; initially he had resisted the invitations extended by Colonel Lilburne and the Baptist church to accept a remunerative post, but he subsequently changed his mind and in the process expressed the hope that Gower would soon be like minded

with respect to living on the gospel when the maintenance was freely given.³⁹

Hickhorngill also noted another cause of controversy in the church at Leith, namely whether it was lawful to pray with an unbaptized believer or to listen to a preacher if he were not under the same gospel order as the Baptists.⁴⁰ Whether this issue, which was a troublesome one for the Baptist movement in general, had already affected relations between Hexham and Newcastle cannot be determined from the extant records, although it certainly did in the aftermath of the case of the False Jew. The fact that Hickhorngill drew attention to it does, however, suggest that it may already, by the spring of 1653, have become a matter of dispute on Tyneside. The disagreement that was emerging there was not, on the other hand, entirely a matter of differing views about practice. Gower appears to have had doubts about the precise status enjoyed by Tillam, an issue made all the more meaningful by the expressed desire of the Hexham church to install Tillam as their pastor and the fact that he tended to act as such, whether he had been formally installed or not. Gower not only questioned Tillam's conception of the ministry, but in effect challenged his credentials as well, and wrote to the Coleman Street congregation to express his concern and seek clarification of the matter. For their part, the London church noted that Tillam had indeed only been sent as a messenger, though one in which they had high hopes, "from the little knowledge that we had of him,"⁴¹ that he had indeed been endowed by spiritual gifts. Whether he should become the pastor at Hexham or not was an issue they felt the Hexham congregation would have to resolve for themselves, "you having more knowledge and understanding of his qualifications than we", but they also indicated that Tillam should respond to the accusations of the Newcastle church, which they appear to have taken seriously. They concluded their letter with the hope that, for the good of the movement, "the occasions of your differences might be removed, and all your breaches healed."⁴²

It was thus into a situation fraught with controversy and suspicion that Joseph ben Israel, the False Jew of Hexham, intruded himself in 1653. Although some details remain obscure, the main outlines of the episode can be readily summarized.⁴³ On 21st April 1653, the *Elizabeth* of Newcastle under the command of Christopher Shadforth landed at Shields after a voyage from Hamburg. Among the passengers was an Englishman calling himself Thomas Horsley whom Shadforth had encountered in a state of extreme need at Hamburg; Horsley told him that he had been born in Newcastle and that he still had friends there and added that he had been at Rome where he was appalled by the religious doctrine and that he desired to return to his native country. During the voyage, when Horsley was stricken with seasickness, he had further told Shadforth that he had been under papal instructions at Rome where many Jesuits were being prepared by the papacy to seduce the English. It was intended that he himself should work in this manner after securing employment as a tailor. But his conscience had deeply troubled him and so he had fled. Finally, he told Shadforth that he knew of many others who were intended for similar missions and that, when he got to England, he would inform on them to the authorities. Horsley's behaviour on reaching Newcastle in part helped to establish his identity but at the same time aroused some suspicions. Being in need, he applied

to the ministry of the town for aid and, according to their account, he was "courteously entertained."⁴⁴ At the house of Ann Horsley, he showed some familiarity with the surroundings, pointing to a closet where he said he used to keep his books, and enquiring after the daughter and other members of the family. But curiously, considering he was claiming to be Thomas Horsley, he intimated that he had this knowledge because he and his father had formerly lodged in the house. Even more suspiciously, he almost immediately left Newcastle to seek out Colonel Hobson, alleging that he could find no lodging in the town. He seems to have spent much of the month of May with Hobson. Hobson in turn commended him to Tillam who, within a few days, had completely accepted the story that Horsley was, in fact, a Jewish rabbi named Joseph ben Israel who had been born in Mantua. He had been a considerable scholar, having mastered eight languages, but in the course of his study of philosophy, he had come to doubt his own faith. "I found such light in the glorious mystery of the Trinity, that I was wonderfully surprised and amazed, and the more that Heathens should come to the knowledge of this most excellent Doctrine."⁴⁵ After much meditation, he was drawn towards Christianity, but rejecting the Roman Catholic form, he had gone to Germany to investigate Protestantism there. This, too, he found unsatisfactory. He had then come to England where, as he put it, he was seeking Christ without but also found him within through the teachings of the Baptists. Tillam, already obsessed with the idea of the centrality of the conversion of the Jews to the creation of the kingdom of God, quickly proceeded to baptize him. The only thing that marred the occasion was that the converted Jew did not proceed to take communion, arguing that he was indisposed and that he still had some scruples to resolve. For his part, Tillam was overjoyed and proceeded to publish an exultant account of these strange proceedings.⁴⁶

While Tillam was thus proceeding with more zeal than caution, doubts continued to grow in Newcastle. What role, if any, the Baptist church in Newcastle played in this does not appear in the surviving evidence; the chief instigators appear to have been four of the clergymen of the area, Thomas Weld of Gateshead and Samuel Hammond, Cuthbert Sydenham, and William Durant of Newcastle. They demanded that the Jew come to Newcastle to clear himself of the suspicions they had about his story. Three things in particular concerned them. In the first place, the Jew spoke perfect dialect English and they felt that this provided a strong argument that he was not a Jewish native of Mantua. Secondly, his familiarity with the Horsley household, while it had given some credibility to his story when he was posing as Thomas Horsley, seemed very puzzling now that he claimed to be Joseph ben Israel who had never been in England before. In the third place, there was the matter of his sudden departure to seek out Colonel Hobson which had bothered them all along. A formal hearing was held at the house of alderman George Dawson in the presence of the mayor, Henry Dawson, and other town officials. It was attended by Christopher Shadforth, the shipmaster who had brought him over, Joseph ben Israel, Tillam and other members of the Hexham congregation, and the clerical quartet of Weld, Hammond, Sydenham, and Durant. To this point, it should be

stressed, Tillam was still convinced that the Jew's story was true and that the conversion was both genuine and a glorious work of God. "He seemed to us a real Convert and therefore we did but our duty in rejoicing."⁴⁷ The apparent inconsistencies in the Jew's story all, to Tillam's mind, had logical explanations. The fact that he spoke perfect English to Tillam proved nothing; Jews, he asserted, were so trained that they could speak perfect English. That he sought out Hobson was also inconsequential; the clergy were simply attacking Hobson because he opposed infant baptism. Even when the Jew stated at the hearing that he had been given Hobson's name at Rome, Tillam was not concerned, but countered that papal intelligence was such that the names of the four clergymen were probably also known at Rome. "What strange suspititious insinuations are these?"⁴⁸ That Joseph ben Israel knew about the Horsley household was also perfectly explicable to Tillam. He had learned this from an acquaintance in Italy and from the seamen in his voyage over. Even the fact that he had not arrived under his own name but had chosen to masquerade as Horsley seemed perfectly logical to Tillam; until he could establish his conversion, Joseph ben Israel had been afraid of the laws of England against the Jews and so had temporarily assumed Horsley's identity to avoid trouble.

During the hearing, however, further evidence was produced that demolished the account in which Tillam wanted so fervently to believe. Two letters had arrived in Newcastle from a Mrs. Ramsay, wife to Dr. Alexander Ramsay in Scotland. The first was addressed to a townsman, the second to Horsley/ben Israel; the latter stated that Dr. Ramsay had earlier received a letter purportedly written by Horsley but he had recognized the handwriting as that of his son whom he now urged to come home. The Jew admitted that he had written to Dr. Ramsay using the name Horsley but tried to explain this unsuccessfully by saying that he had met the real son in Florence. At this point in the hearing, a private conference took place between Tillam and Joseph ben Israel; at whose initiative it was called is not clear. The town ministers asserted that it was at the request of the Jew; Tillam, in his account, maintained that it occurred on his own initiative since his suspicions were now aroused and he wanted to get to the bottom of the matter. Whatever the case may be, the conference led to a statement by the supposed Jew that was as sensational as his original conversion had seemed to be. Horsley/ben Israel now revealed that he was in fact Thomas Ramsay, born in London of Scottish parents. After studying at Glasgow and Edinburgh, he had gone to Germany where he had been persuaded by some fellow countrymen to go to Rome. There he spent some time with the Dominicans, followed by a year of training at the Jesuit College. He then returned to Germany in the service of the Jesuits and from there, after further orders had come from Rome, had been sent over to England "to use his first endeavours there to propagate their ends."⁴⁹ His mission was to undermine the church by allying himself with spiritual error and crying up all sorts of false theological notions, hence his recourse to Hobson and the charade of conversion he had carried out for Tillam. The Newcastle clergy noted that "Satan hath no better way to turn churches into aire and dispirit them of the power of godliness, then by filling their heads with errour and fancy."⁵⁰

Reaction to these sensational revelations varied considerably. Faced with the confession of Ramsay, Tillam openly acknowledged that he and his congregation had been duped; accepting the Jew as an agent of Rome, he agreed that Ramsay had feigned conversion and that he had used "exquisite hypocrisy" in his dealings with the Baptists.⁵¹ On this point, all agreed, for they recognized that they had experienced as a real event what was one of the most widespread popular fears of the period, that Catholic priests were being sent to England in great numbers to penetrate the sects with a view to deepening England's miseries.⁵² But Tillam, predictably, tried to put the best possible light on his actions. He denied that he had acted rashly and defended his support of Ramsay's story on the grounds that until the letters from Scotland had been produced, nothing had actually been proved against Ramsay, all the Newcastle suspicions being merely circumstantial in nature.⁵³ Both he and the Hexham congregation took the position that the uncovering of Ramsay had been the result of God's mercy. It was God, not the Newcastle clergy who had unmasked the hypocrite.⁵⁴ "A child of the devil came from Rome to ruin this church ... but the Holy One of Israel, our gracious Protector, brought the hellish impostor to light before he had any church communion; ever blessed be his glorious name for this great deliverance."⁵⁵ Tillam sensed that the actions of the Newcastle clergy were not simply a matter of Christian concern about the False Jew but were also designed to discredit the Baptist community at Hexham. He linked them with the other attacks that had been made on his character and behaviour and argued that they had suppressed part of the Jew's declaration of conversion in order to make Tillam's response to it seem dishonest.⁵⁶ That the Newcastle clergy did act in such a way is confirmed by the way in which they seized upon his admission that he had once himself been a Catholic. Not only did they hint that Tillam might still be a papist, but playing on the popular fear of Catholicism, they fostered rumours that all Baptists were papal agents. "This professteth the rude multitude, that we are certainly Papists, contriving by baptizing Disciples, to turn all to Popery."⁵⁷ Angrily, Tillam pointed out that now Ramsay was revealed to be a notorious liar, the Newcastle clergy chose to believe anything in his relation that might in any way defame the Baptists; who, he asked, was the more guilty—himself for believing in the Jew's conversion or the Newcastle clergy for accepting whatever Ramsay told them to the discredit of the Baptists.⁵⁸ The charge that Baptists were papal agents in disguise must have particularly stung Tillam, for, if anything, the whole episode increased his own anti-Catholicism. Noting that there were many papists in the Hexham area, he argued that the whole affair had been arranged in Rome specifically to destroy the Baptists there, since they were the most vigorous opponents of the great anti-Christ, the Pope.⁵⁹

Ramsay, whose deception had created the situation, adopted a contrite attitude once he was exposed. According to the Newcastle clergy, he freely acknowledged the "wickedness" of his undertaking and stated that he would be willing to inform on any others engaged on similar missions if he caught sight of them; his willingness to act as an informer was qualified, however, by the fact that he alleged at the same time that he could not remember the names of anyone else involved in like activities.⁶⁰

What in fact happened to Ramsay in the aftermath is not certain. On 13 July 1653 a warrant was issued for his arrest and he was sent to London to be further interrogated.⁶¹ No evidence survives to indicate what further questioning revealed or what use, if any, was made of his revelations by the state authorities. In March 1660 a Thomas Ramsay was given a pass to go to France; whether or not this was the same man is not clear.⁶²

The reactions of other Baptist churches to the affair was complex. On the one hand, there were obvious pressures tending towards solidarity with their beleaguered colleague; on the other hand, the rifts between the Newcastle and Hexham congregation were already considerable and the ease with which Tillam had been duped not only added to existing doubts about his suitability to be the pastor at Hexham but also raised more general doubts about the credibility of Baptists in general as the Newcastle clergy intensified their campaign against them. Various Baptist congregations, including the Coleman Street church but very noticeably not that at Newcastle, combined to write a joint letter to the Hexham congregation about the affair. Noting that the False Jew had been "likely either to have corrupted you or brought you into obloquy", they congratulated the Hexham congregation on the mercy and grace that God had shown to them in exposing the imposter and assured Hexham of their readiness to be of assistance in any work of the Lord.⁶³ They then proceeded, however, to strike a more cautionary tone, which indicates a sensitivity to the fact that the events at Hexham could reflect adversely on the whole Baptist movement. Noting that Hexham had many adversaries who might seek to discredit them either by cunning or violence, they urged the Hexham church to be scrupulous about its own conduct. "We think it safe for you that you be exhorted by us to look to your garments, that they be kept clean, that you may be as the sons of God, without rebuke in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, amongst whom ye shine as lights in the world."⁶⁴ The warning ended with a plea to the Hexham congregation to shun those who caused division and offence, contrary to received doctrine, and to obey those that were over them in the Lord.

Whether this latter caution was simply a general observation or a specific reference to the disputes with the Newcastle Baptists is not clear. What is evident is that the conflict between Tillam on the one hand and Hobson and Gower on the other intensified in the period after the episode of the False Jew. The range of issues and practices dividing the two churches extended and the bitterness of feeling at a personal level appears to have intensified. Not all the issues that caused division were, strictly speaking, religious. Tillam, for example, had signed a loyal address to Cromwell, referring to him as "a wise, valiant, faithful Joshuah", following the dissolution of the first Protectorate Parliament;⁶⁵ Hobson, on the other hand, circulated a manuscript shortly afterwards giving eight reasons why church members who signed loyal addresses to Cromwell ought to be excommunicated.⁶⁶ But what were chiefly divisive were issues of belief and practice, now extended well beyond the dispute over receiving pay for preaching. Three subjects became of particular concern: the issue of Arminian beliefs replacing predestinarian views, the question of the relations of Baptists to those outside the faith, and the practice of laying on

of hands. Dispute over these matters was not something confined to the Tyneside Baptists; each had caused dissension and disunity in the Baptist movement elsewhere and, in that sense, the conflict between Hexham and Newcastle was only reflective of broader tensions within the Baptist church.⁶⁷ The issue of Arminianism was the least important and most vague. Hobson had asserted in a rather general fashion that Arminianism was spreading very widely in the North⁶⁸ Tillam admitted that it had indeed "tainted" other Baptist churches but he gave ready assurance that none of the Hexham congregation were infected by what he called "the Arminian poison" and the matter does not appear to have been pursued further.⁶⁹ Relations with non-Baptists was a much more troublesome issue. It had already been raised by the Coleman Street congregation who expressed doubts about the wisdom of the Hexham church in "singing psalms in the world", that is with the general multitude.⁷⁰ But the issue had broader ramifications, for Tillam's congregation adopted a policy of toleration and acceptance towards those outside the Baptist community, while Gower and the Newcastle church strongly favoured an attitude of exclusiveness that was more characteristic of the Baptist mainstream. Explaining their position to the church at Coleman Street, the Hexham congregation stressed the intransigence of the Newcastle church on this point:⁷¹

"Those conflicts have been most sad, which for some months last past we have had with the brethren of a neighbouring church who profess to walk by the same rule with us, because we can own unbaptized churches and ministers for churches of Christ and ministers of Christ; though we also judge in those churches and ministers something as to order wanting, which God in his own time may reveal unto them."

Tillam made much the same point in a letter to the Baptist church at Leominster,⁷² arguing that the Newcastle church

"hath rather weakened our hands in the Lord's work, through much harshness (as we humbly conceive), striking at our very foundation because we dare not but own godly preachers and congregations (though unbaptized) as ministers and churches of Christ. For though as touching baptism we look on them as deficient, yet beholding so clear a seal to their ministry, we are even constrained to bear this testimony."

The issue of the laying on of hands appears to have been the most important of the differences. When Tillam adopted this practice is not entirely clear. He seems to have already been employing it in some form very early on in his ministry.⁷³ He certainly openly defended his employment of the practice to the Coleman Street congregation on a visit to London and was further strengthened in his advocacy of it by his contact with Peter Chamberlen at the same time.⁷⁴ He wrote to the Hexham church to express his joy at the encounter with Chamberlen:⁷⁵

"I was by a blessed hand guided to my most heavenly brother Doctor Chamberlen, one of the most humble, mortified souls (for a man of parts) that ever yet I met with, in whose sweet society I enjoyed the blessing of my God, by the laying on of their hands. And after a love feast, having washed one another's feet, we did joyfully break bread, concluding with a hymn, in all which the singular majesty of Christ shined forth to the mighty conviction of some choice spectators."

Tillam's split with the Newcastle Baptists over the issue of laying on of hands was made very public when he published an attack on Hobson's views on the subject in 1655, insisting that the practice was a standing ordinance of the true church. "I confess laying on of hands is but a simple service, no more is its companion (Baptisme) but tis one of the first words of thy deare Redeemer, a part of that form of Doctrine which he delivered and hath owned, and by signs and wonders confirmed, which he would not so signally have ratified, had it not been a part of his own service."⁷⁶ When Gower presented twelve specific charges against Tillam and alleged that the Hexham church had only gone "out of Babylon by half",⁷⁷ the issue of laying on of hands appears to have been his most substantial point, and it was over this issue that he eventually succeeded in persuading the Coleman Street congregation to disown Tillam.⁷⁸ Following this development, the church at Hexham itself divided over the issue. A member of the congregation, Stephen Anderton, openly criticized Tillam over the practice and was summarily expelled along with one of his followers.⁷⁹ Five months later two more members were expelled, apparently over the same issue,⁸⁰ and within a short time, the Hexham congregation had split into two meetings, one loyal to Tillam, the other repudiating him. With his flock thus divided, Tillam's ministry was at an effective end and sometime in late 1655 or 1656, he withdrew from the area.⁸¹

One further aspect of this last stage of the controversy between Hexham and Newcastle needs to be noted, the role played by the clergy of Newcastle in encouraging it. In the last stages of the controversy, Tillam launched a personal attack on Hobson. It transpired that he had been supplied the information on which he based the attack by Samuel Hammond.⁸² Hammond had clearly seen the opportunities available in further stirring up the troubled waters of the Baptist churches and had avidly seized upon it. The Newcastle church pleaded with the Hexham Church to recognize that Hammond was as prejudiced against Tillam as he was against Hobson and that he was only trying to create trouble, but the damage had been done.

If Tillam's ministry at Hexham had ended, his career had not, and, in the end, his unusual ministry was once again to touch the North. From Hexham, he proceeded to Colchester where a promising beginning once again developed into a divisive ministry. By the time of his Colchester ministry, Tillam had become a pronounced Sabbatarian; in this development, the influence of Dr. Peter Chamberlen, who had become a Sabbatarian Baptist as early as 1651, was almost certainly crucial. Colchester, in some ways, provided fertile ground for Tillam's ministry; not only were there a number of persons of Anabaptist sympathies among the Dutch colonists in the area, but the town itself was described in 1656 as "a rugged and factious town, now swarming with sectaries."⁸³ Tillam impressed the mayor and other civic authorities sufficiently that they successfully petitioned Cromwell and the Council of State to appoint some convenient place within the town for services for Tillam and his church.⁸⁴ However, when Tillam, in pursuit of his Sabbatarian views, began holding services in the church on Saturdays and closing it on Sundays, he found himself in conflict with the authorities and was put in prison. He occupied his prison

sojourn by extending his arguments in written form, publishing in 1657 *The Seventh Day Sabbath Sought Out and Celebrated*.⁸⁵ One of the other ministers of Colchester, Edmund Warren, in answering this tract, expressed what was doubtless the orthodox view of Tillam's position on the Sabbath when he classed Tillam's treatise as being part of "that African breed of Erroneous Books which the lawless liberty of the press has midwiv'd into the world."⁸⁶ He also provided a decidedly hostile description of Tillam's methods of argumentation. "Let neither the pompous phrases, nor proud threats of men either allure you, or afright you from the truths of God. T.T. abounds in both these artifices, charming some with his rhetorick, scaring others with his bulk and big words."⁸⁷ Tillam's imprisonment at Colchester was of short duration. In 1658 he was to be found in London, engaged in public debate with Jeremiah Ives over the sabbath question.⁸⁸

Following these debates in London, Tillam left only scattered traces in surviving records. What does seem clear is that his millenarian attitudes, which he had expressed early in his career, once again came very much to the fore. His name was increasingly associated with that of Christopher Pooley, an East Anglian Fifth Monarchist and Sabbatarian. Tillam was again arrested in 1660⁸⁹ and once again employed the time to pen a tract, a vast, rambling work of some 400 pages, *The Temple of Lively Stones*, containing a preface by Pooley which expressed his "high esteem" for Tillam.⁹⁰ In it, Tillam returned to many familiar themes: the validity of adult baptism only, Sabbatarianism, and the doctrine of laying on of hands. At the same time he launched off in some new directions. In addition to the prevailing millenarian tone, there was a noticeable emphasis on the true believer separating himself from a sinful world. "True believers must keep clear of Babylon's merchants, that is all who have either immediately, or more remotely, received ordination from that sink of pollution, such as trade for the souls of men (unto which all who have taken the National Covenant are particularly engaged)."⁹¹ It was a virtual reversal of the more open attitude he had adopted at Hexham.

It was also the seed of the conviction that led him to renewed contact with the North. Although the authorities were sure that Tillam was implicated in various anti-royalist plots in the early 1660s,⁹² his primary activity in the 1660s appears to have been to persuade fellow believers to leave England and join a new community he had founded in the Palatinate in anticipation of the arrival of the millennium. In fleeting and underground visits from the continent, he and Pooley sought to encourage the scheme in the two areas of his former ministry, East Anglia and the North. Despite the difficulties, as many as 200 families may have followed his lead.⁹³ The nature of the community itself gave the final bizarre touch to the career of Thomas Tillam. The man who had been hoaxed by the False Jew of Hexham had now incorporated into his religious practices considerable elements of Jewish ritual and ceremony. If the Sabbatarian impulse had paved the way, it was now accompanied by circumcision and other Jewish rites, as well as community of goods and perhaps of wives as well.⁹⁴ The fate of the community is unclear; Tillam himself appears to have died in the mid 1670s and French Catholic armies, hardly likely to be sympathetic to such forms of religious expression, ravaged the area in 1689. By

the time of his death Tillam, who had hoped to plant the Baptist faith in the North had been comprehensively repudiated by mainstream Baptism. Thomas Grantham's verdict on Tillam spoke for that mainstream; if it was harsh, it was also not without point, for his energy and zeal had not always been accompanied by equal doses of wisdom and his biblical literalism had fed controversy, both within the Baptist community and without. Tillam, he judged, was "that prodigious Apostate, who insted of promoting Truth in an amicable way, made it odious in the Eyes of all Men, by the foolish Niceties wherewith he had incumbred it, together with his Jewish ceremonies."⁹⁵

NOTES

¹ On the case of the False Jew, see T. Weld, et. al., *A False Jew* (London, 1653); *The Converted Jew or the Substance of the Declaration and Confession by Joseph ben Israel* (Gateshead, 1653); *The Counterfeit Jew* (Newcastle, 1653); *A List of Some of the Grand Blasphemers and Blasphemies* (London, 1654). The quotation is from *A False Jew*, p. 4 (second pagination).

² There are two general surveys of the Baptists in the North, both in need of revision. D. Douglas, *History of the Baptist Churches in the North of England* (London, 1846) and F. G. Little and E. T. F. Walker, *The Story of the Northern Baptists* (Newcastle, 1945). See also A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London, 1947) and especially J. F. McGregor, "The Baptists: Fount of All Heresy" in J. F. McGregor and B. Reay, *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 23–63 for a general overview of the growth of Baptist congregations.

³ On Lilburne, see R. Howell, *Puritans and Radicals in North England* (Lanham, 1984), chap. 11. For Hobson, see W. T. Whitley, "The Rev. Colonel Paul Hobson" in *Baptist Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 5 (1939), pp. 307–10 and R. L. Greaves and R. Zaller, *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals in the Seventeenth Century* (Brighton, 1982–4), s.v. Hobson, Paul.

⁴ On the dates of his stay in Newcastle, see Howell, *Puritans and Radicals*, pp. 198–9, note 12.

⁵ T. Gumble, *The Life of General Monck Duke of Albemarle* (London, 1671) pp. 80–81, 206.

⁶ Douglas, *Baptist Churches in the North*, p. 5.

⁷ On Gower, see Greaves and Zaller, *Biographical Dictionary*, s.v. Gower, Thomas.

⁸ The dedication of his first book to Colonel

George Twistleton, governor of Denbigh and the comment that it "had its spring and first appearance under your command" might, however, suggest a military connection. T. Tillam, *The Two Witnesses* (London, 1651), sig. A3.

⁹ Little and Walker, *Northern Baptists*, p. 7.

¹⁰ Douglas, *Baptist Churches in the North*, p. 6; E. B. Underhill, ed., *Records of the Churches of Christ Gathered at Fenstanton, Warboys and Hexham 1644–1720*, Hanserd Knollys Society, vol. 9 (London, 1854), p. 293.

¹¹ Underhill, *Records of the Churches of Christ*, p. 289.

¹² J. J. Goadby, *Bye-Paths in Baptist History* (London, 1871), p. 22.

¹³ W. T. Whitley, *A History of British Baptists* (London, 1932), p. 81.

¹⁴ T. Tillam, *Banners of Love displayed over the Church of Christ* (London, 1654), p. 8.

¹⁵ The suggestion is made in Greaves and Zaller, *Biographical Dictionary*, s.v. Tillam, Thomas.

¹⁶ Tillam, *The Two Witnesses*, p. 7.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, sigs. A4–A4v.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 130–131.

²⁰ On the lectureship see Douglas, *Baptist Churches in the North*, p. 8.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 10.

²² J. Nickolls, *Original Letters and Papers of State Addressed to Oliver Cromwell* (London, 1743), p. 81.

²³ W. H. D. Longstaffe, ed., *Memoirs of the Life of Mr. Ambrose Barnes*, Surtees Society vol. 50 (Durham, 1867), p. 150 and note.

²⁴ On women and radical religion, see K. V. Thomas, "Women and the Civil War Sects" in T.

Aston, ed., *Crisis in Europe 1560–1660* (New York, 1967), pp. 332–357 and C. Cross, “‘He-Goats before the Flocks’: A Note on the Part Played by Women in the Founding of Some Civil War Churches” in G. J. Cuming and D. Baker, eds., *Popular Belief and Practice*, Studies in Church History vol. 8 (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 195–202. For the Baptist position, see McGregor, “The Baptists”, p. 47ff.

²⁵ Underhill, *Records of the Churches of Christ*, pp. 290–291.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 290.

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 291, 293, 307–8, 311–13, 317–18, 325–6, 327–31.

²⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 303–4.

²⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 306, 309.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 314.

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 315.

³² *ibid.*, p. 322.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 352.

³⁴ McGregor, “The Baptists”, p. 25.

³⁵ J. Stalham, *Vindiciae Redemptionis* (London, 1647), sig. A4v.

³⁶ Underhill, *Records of the Churches of Christ*, p. 305.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Tillam, *Banners of Love displayed*, sig. A2.

³⁹ Underhill, *Records of the Churches of Christ*, pp. 307–8, 311–13, 317–18.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 317.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 320.

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 320–21.

⁴³ The following account of the episode of the False Jew is based on the versions written by Tillam (*The Converted Jew*; *Banners of Love displayed*) and that written by the clerical quartet of Weld, Hammond, Sydenham, and Durant (*A False Jew*). The tracts contain much identical material.

⁴⁴ Weld et. al., *A False Jew*, p. 7.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 1 (second pagination).

⁴⁶ Tillam, *The Converted Jew*.

⁴⁷ Tillam, *Banners of Love displayed*, p. 5.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁹ Weld et. al., *A False Jew*, p. 11.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, sig. A3v.

⁵¹ Tillam, *Banners of Love displayed*, pp. 1, 37.

⁵² For such fears as a general phenomenon, see R. Clifton, “The Popular Fear of Catholics during the English Revolution,” *Past and Present*, no. 52 (1971), pp. 33–4.

⁵³ Tillam, *Banners of love displayed*, p. 7.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 1.

⁵⁵ Underhill, *Records of the Churches of Christ*, p. 292.

⁵⁶ Tillam, *Banners of Love displayed*, sig. A2, p. 5. Tillam printed Ramsay’s declaration of conversion as it “really” was on pp. 15–22.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 37–42.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶⁰ Weld et al., *A False Jew*, p. 12.

⁶¹ *Cal. S. P. Dom.*, 1653–4, pp. 73, 101, 428.

⁶² *Cal. S. P. Dom.*, 1659–60, p. 572.

⁶³ Underhill, *Records of the Churches of Christ*, pp. 341–2.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 342.

⁶⁵ Nicholls, *Letters and Papers of State*, p. 134.

⁶⁶ T. Birch, ed., *A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe, Esq.* (London, 1741), 3:138.

⁶⁷ On the broader context, see McGregor, “The Baptists”, *passim*.

⁶⁸ P. Hobson, *Fourteen Queries and Ten Absurdities about the Extent of God’s Death* (London, 1655).

⁶⁹ Underhill, *Records of the Churches of Christ*, p. 352.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 339.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 349.

⁷² *ibid.*, p. 352.

⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 291.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 323. On Chamberlen, see Greaves and Zaller, *Biographical Dictionary*, s.v. Chamberlen, Peter and J. W. Thirtle, “Dr. Peter Chamberlen: Pastor, Propagandist and Patentee”, *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, vol. 3 (1912–1913), pp. 176–89.

⁷⁵ Underhill, *Records of the Churches of Christ*, p. 323.

⁷⁶ T. Tillam, *The Fourth Principle of Christian Religion* (London, 1655) p. 60.

⁷⁷ Underhill, *Records of the Churches of Christ*, p. 363.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 295.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ Tillam was in Colchester by late May, 1656. *Cal. S. P. Dom.*, 1655–6, p. 342.

⁸² Underhill, *Records of the Churches of Christ*, pp. 355–6.

⁸³ Payne, “Thomas Tillam”, p. 63; T. Wright, *The History and Topography of the County of Essex* (London, 1836), 1:292–3.

⁸⁴ *Cal. S. P. Dom.*, 1655–6, p. 342.

⁸⁵ T. Tillam, *The Seventh Day Sabbath Sought Out and Celebrated* (London, 1657).

⁸⁶ E. Warren, *The Jews Sabbath Antiquated* (London, 1659). sig. A. 3. Another refutation of Tillam appearing at the same time but not marked by personal attacks on him was G. F., *An Answer to Thomas Tillam's Book called The Seventh Day Sabbath* (London, 1659).

⁸⁷ Warren, *The Jews Sabbath Antiquated*, sig. A4.

⁸⁸ Ives published an account of the debate in the following year. J. Ives, *Saturday no Sabbath* (London, 1659). On the debate see also *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society* vol. 3 (1912-13), p. 246.

⁸⁹ A letter from James Hickes to Secretary Nicholas, 13 June 1660 refers to Tillam being in prison. Since Hickes also forwarded an intercepted

letter intended for Tillam, it is clear the authorities were keeping a close eye on him. *Cal. S. P. Dom.*, 1660-1, p. 50.

⁹⁰ T. Tillam, *The Temple of Lively Stones or the Promised Glory of the Last Days* (London, 1660), "Preface to the faithful".

⁹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 124-5.

⁹² See, for example *Cal. S. P. Dom.*, 1661-2, pp. 71, 79; *Cal. S. P. Dom.*, 1666-7, p. 64.

⁹³ *Cal. S. P. Dom.*, 1661-2, p. 79; *Cal. S. P. Dom.*, 1664-5, pp. 101-2; *Cal. S. P. Dom.*, 1666-7, p. 346; *Cal. S. P. Dom.*, 1667-8, pp. 269, 284, 295, 298, 302. See also Payne, "Thomas Tillam", pp. 65-6.

⁹⁴ *Cal. S. P. Dom.*, 1667-8, p. 269.

⁹⁵ T. Grantham, *Christianismus primitivus* (London, 1678), p. 56.

