



John Ball and the 'Peasants' Revolt'

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Introduction

John Ball (d. 1381) was a priest who is best remembered for having a central role in the English uprisings of the summer of 1381 popularly known today as the 'Peasants' Revolt.' Ball's preaching was an integral part of the rebels' ideology—at least according to the main earliest sources—and in critical scholarship it is sometimes labelled 'millenarian,' 'apocalyptic,' or 'eschatological' in the sense that he and his supporters envisaged imminent and dramatic social and political upheaval. While we inevitably have to speculate about some of the details, some of which are discussed below, a general outline of Ball's teaching can be given. Ball was understood to have believed that the summer of 1381 was the appointed time for the rebels to enact the divine plan to bring about their liberty through the violent transformation of England with particular reference to the eschatological parable of the Wheat and Tares in Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43. For Ball, the problem that needed rectifying was that the ecclesiastical and political elites were maintaining their wealth through, and at the expense of, the peasants and lower orders. He taught that the majority of the elites needed to be removed or eliminated and a new (or revived) order put in its place, with Ball as the leader of the church in England. Ball was said to have looked to Adam and Eve to critique the invention of serfdom, justify the upheaval of the hierarchies of his time, and to point to an imminent future with fairer representation and redistribution of power and resources. He seems to have stressed the labour involved in the making of the bread of the Eucharist and tied it in with ideas about imminent liberation and freedom. This anticipated future was modelled on the earliest church, a time when all things would be held in common (Acts of the Apostles 2:44–45; 4:32–35). It is likely that Ball believed in expectations about an ideal Christian king who should or would bring peace, justice, and a chastened church to England. There is some evidence that Ball and the rebels of 1381 thought that the youthful Richard II fitted this role. These ideas are not as elaborate or extensive as other medieval apocalyptic or millenarian schema but, collectively, there is enough evidence to suggest that Ball should be seen as a popular figure who used inherited apocalyptic and millenarian ideas.

The Life of John Ball

There is not much known about the details of Ball's life prior to 1381 or when and where he was born, though there have been speculative attempts to reconstruct his early years in Essex (Bird and Stephenson

1976; Bird 1981; 1987; Barker 2014, 426–27; cf. Palmer 1993, 156–57). It was claimed by chroniclers that Ball was a follower of John Wycliffe (d. 1384) and the Lollards, but such claims were polemical, aimed at discrediting both, and reveal some awareness of the artificiality of the connection. For instance, one chronicler claimed that just as John the Baptist was the precursor to Christ, so Ball was to Wycliffe and thus Ball ‘prepared the way for him [Wycliffe] in people’s minds, and it is said that he subverted the beliefs of many with his teaching’ (Knighton, *Chronicle* 242–43). From letters attributed to Ball around the time of the 1381 uprising (Knighton, *Chronicle* 220–25; Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 548–49; Dobson 1983, 380–83), we can make firmer claims. It seems that he was a priest connected to St Mary’s, York (typically thought to be St Mary’s Abbey or an associate church) who later moved or returned to Colchester. After his move to Essex, we have clear evidence for some of his notorious activities as an itinerant lower clergyman. In February 1364, Edward III had allowed Ball special protection after Ball feared physical harm from his enemies, but the king revoked such protection upon learning that Ball ‘wandered from place to place preaching articles contrary to the faith of the church to the peril of his soul and the souls of others, especially of laymen’ (*Calendar of the Patent Rolls: Edward III*, Vol. XII, 1912, 470).

Ball was known for preaching in or around public markets, cemeteries, streets, and fields. Precisely what aspects of his pre-1381 preaching were deemed heretical is not clear but it was generally understood to have involved, as one hostile chronicler put it, ‘the things which he knew would please the common people, disparaging men of the Church as well as secular lords, and so won the good will of the commons rather than approval before God’ (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 544–45). Ball’s provocative preaching meant that he was regularly in trouble with church authorities, particularly Simon Sudbury who was the Archbishop of Canterbury by the time of the 1381 uprising. As early as October 1364, Sudbury (then Bishop of London) excommunicated Ball for his ongoing activities. In December 1376 further reference was made to Ball’s excommunication under Sudbury (now Archbishop of Canterbury) ‘for his manifest contumacy’ and Essex clergy were commissioned to bring Ball before the sheriff of Essex to account for his actions against the church (*Calendar of the Patent Rolls: Edward III*, Vol. XVI, 1916, 415). In April 1381, just weeks before the uprising, Sudbury implied that Ball was among the ‘false prophets,’ denounced his ideas as heretical and poisonous, claimed his views went against apostolic and church authority, and noted his elusiveness (which may have reflected local and popular support) by comparing him to a fox evading a hunter (Wilkins 1737, 152).

By the time of the 1381 uprisings, the chroniclers give us more details of Ball’s preaching. Despite the claims in the chronicles that Ball was released from prison in Maidstone and was active at Blackheath, there is the possibility he was the same ‘John Ball’ sprung from prison in Bishop’s Stortford on 11 June and therefore not active around London and the south east at that time, as Andrew Prescott has outlined (Prescott 1984, 303–4). Wherever Ball may have been at the time of the London uprising of June 1381, his teaching was said to have a significant influence on the rebels and its presentation is theologically consistent across the chronicles. Echoing the Gospels (Matthew 11:7–8; Luke 7:24–25; 16:19–31), Ball’s critiques of the social, economic, political, and religious order concerned lords in fine clothing, dwelling in luxurious houses, and consuming good food and drink. By contrast, the lower orders were in poor cloth, living off the chaff and water, and working in the fields through wind and rain which was for the benefit of the lords, helping them to ‘keep and maintain their estates’ (Froissart, *Chroniques* 10.96). Ball was said to have wanted a dramatic restructuring of the church in England which involved getting ‘rid of all the lords, archbishops, bishops, abbots and priors, as well as most of the monks and canons so that there should be no bishop in England except for one archbishop, namely himself’ (*Anonimale Chronicle* 137), a view

echoed in other accounts (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 546–49; Knighton, *Chronicle* 210–11).

1381 Uprisings

Ball became famous as the theological voice of discontent among the rebels in the summer of 1381, particularly in the uprisings associated with south-east England. The rebels were not restricted to peasants and among their ranks were, for instance, local officials, artisans, urban dwellers, and escaped prisoners. It is regularly pointed out that the 1381 uprising was one involving unambiguous economic and class resentments and this context is important for understanding Ball's ideas. The decades following the Black Death of 1348/49 saw significant social and economic upheaval. With nearly half the population of Europe wiped out, labourers could take advantage of the labour shortage and different opportunities. In one response, Parliament (Statute of Labourers, 1351) tried to cap wages, restrict mobility, and keep serfs tied to the land which in turn generated resentment and further tensions. The ongoing costly wars with France, and the taxes required to fund them, exacerbated tensions, particularly as there was not sufficient protection for communities vulnerable to coastal raids. Three new taxes introduced between 1377 and 1380 only intensified the problems, most famously the coercive techniques involved in the 1380 poll tax.

In the uprising that followed, Ball was soon associated (in memory at least) with the most recognised part of the revolt in Essex and Kent and with leaders such as Wat Tyler. On Thursday 13 June 1381—the feast of Corpus Christi—rebels from the south east arrived in London and swelled their ranks with Londoners and newly released prisoners. Though there were exceptions, it seems that the rebels were generally disciplined and deliberately selected political, economic, legal, and ecclesiastical targets. The rebels negotiated with Richard II and made demands such as the end of serfdom, the pardon of criminals, and the removal or execution of royal advisors. Some rebels even got into the Tower of London and decapitated leading figures of the realm, including Simon Sudbury. Richard had accepted some key rebel demands, but Tyler and the Kentish rebels pushed further still, including for a radical reshaping of the legal system, aristocracy, and the church which would be overseen by the king and one bishop. In the confusion that followed, Tyler was fatally wounded, and Richard was able to pacify the rebels. In the subsequent re-establishment of authority, Ball was captured in Coventry, tried in St Albans in mid-July, and hanged, drawn and quartered with his four parts sent to four cities.

Ball's Apocalyptic Theology

As suggested above, Ball's preaching ought to be labelled 'eschatological,' 'apocalyptic,' or 'millenarian' in the sense that he and his supporters envisaged imminent and dramatic social and political upheaval (e.g., Dobson 1983, 19–20; Hilton 1973, 223; Dunn 2004, 79; Crossley 2020), though [Cohn](#) (1970, 198–204) pushed the case further than the evidence permits (cf. Green 1992, 182, 186). We can best see Ball as a theological voice of the uprisings in his most famous sermon which, it was claimed (correctly or not), was delivered at Blackheath on 12 June 1381 (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 546–47). Here Ball was said to have used the story of Adam and Eve to point to social structures at the beginning of human history in order to critique the present and anticipate and provoke an imminent replacement of the social and political order. Ball's most famous saying (though similar sayings were known) opened the sermon: 'Whan

Adam dalf, and Eve span/Wo was panne a gentilman?" ('When Adam dug and Even span, who was then a gentleman?'). In this presentation of Ball, Adam and Eve were active when there was no serfdom and so serfdom was understood to be a later human invention created for the service of lordly power. While this saying is regularly associated with radical egalitarianism, some qualifications should be made. The saying still worked with the assumption that Ball would fill the major ecclesiastical role in the future and there was likely a further assumption that a popular hierarchy would be put in place in order to dispense justice where the lords had been seen to fail (cf. Froissart, *Chroniques* 10.111).

Indeed, contrary to some dubious claims by one chronicler (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 435, 498–99), it seems likely that Ball and the rebels assumed that the youthful Richard II would fulfil the role of the just king (Froissart, *Chroniques* 10.96, 102, 111, 118; *Anonimale Chronicle* 137–138, 144; Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 420–23), presumably alongside the leadership and localised 'kings' of the uprisings (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 490–510). The target of much of the rebels' anger in and around London was advisors thought to be unscrupulously misleading the king rather than the king himself. The myth of the ideal and just king was an old tradition which gained some authority from the Bible. Additionally, medieval eschatological thought, transmitted through texts such as the *Tiburtine Sibyl* and the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, inherited popular [prophecies](#) about a final Christian emperor who would deal with enemies and bring justice and prosperity (Cohn 1970, 31–35, 71–74; Shoemaker 2015). It is not clear whether such prophecies had a direct influence on the rebels of 1381. However, William Langland's roughly contemporary *Piers Plowman* did have an often-unintentional influence on the rebels and includes a discussion of the idea of a Davidic ruler and a Christian king who would bring peace and justice (*Piers Plowman* B.3.259–325). Langland may have been at odds with Ball and the rebels over how to realise such a vision, and what a chastened church might look like, but there may have been a shared general hope for an ideal Christian king.

It is commonly argued that assumptions about an idealised new order may explain the timing of the rebels' arrival in London on the feast of Corpus Christi (Thursday 13 June 1381). This feast was the celebration of the Eucharist and the body of Christ which in turn had implications for understanding the cohesion (or otherwise) of the social body. As Margaret Aston showed, such celebrations would have involved ideas about liberation and the exodus from Egypt which were understood to foreshadow the crucifixion and Christian freedom for all (Aston 1994, 19–21). While we might speculate about what Ball could have said in a Corpus Christi sermon or how ideas of sacrifice, community, and freedom may have chimed with the material and ideological interests of the rebels, such eucharistic ideas seem to be present in a cryptic letter attributed to Ball which combined ideas of breadmaking and Christ's death (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 548–49). There we learn that 'John Miller' (John Miller, probably a coded or generic name for someone who worked with bread) has 'ground small, small, small; The King of Heaven's Son shall ransom all'). A similar combination of the labour of breadmaking and salvation is found in a letter attributed to 'Jakke Mylner' (Jack Miller) which was possibly written by Ball using a generic pseudonym (Knighton, *Chronicle* 222–23). As Aston noted, the language of 'bread of life,' grain, flour, grinding, and milling in relation to Christ and salvation would have been known from sermons, matins, poems, and plays relating to Corpus Christi (Aston 1994, 26–33). The eucharistic understandings 'from below' in the letters associated with Ball may reveal an alternative, united social body through reference to everyday labour, much like Ball's understanding of Adam and Eve and their shared duties.

Elsewhere in a letter attributed to Ball, the language of labour was used, possibly as a coded call to arms

as he bid 'Peres Ploughman go to his werk,' while the Jack Miller letter is found in the context of a story about a rebel leader called 'Thomas Baker.' Indeed, there is further evidence that Ball and the rebels saw the uprising as the apocalyptic moment when their alternative vision of society would come to fruition. In the letters attributed to Ball, there is a cryptic greeting accompanied by a claim about Ball ringing a bell which may be a reference to church bells signalling that the moment had arrived for the rebels to act (Pettitt 1984, 6-7). Recalling the language of John's Gospel, the letters also claim that 'now is tyme,' including the time to stand together in truth and that truth will help the rebels' cause. These references to time and truth have close linguistic connections with the application of eschatological language in John's Gospel (e.g., John 4:23; 5:25; 8:31-32), further supporting the claim that the cryptic message was one about the appointed time for dramatic social transformation (Crossley 2020, 33-35). There is a less cryptic reference to the apocalyptic moment in the presentation of Ball's sermon at Blackheath. Ball was said to have proclaimed that God 'had now given them the time during which they could put off the yoke of their long servitude' and that 'if they wished, and rejoice in the liberty they had long desired' (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 546-47). As all this indicates, there was not a strong emphasis on an expected divine intervention in history (if any at all). Instead, the emphasis was more on how human activity and organisation could implement the divine plan.

The presentation of the Blackheath sermon attributed to Ball provides an indication of the violent actions this moment would entail:

*He therefore urged them to be men of courage, and out of love for their virtuous fathers who had tilled their land, and pulled up and cut down the noxious weeds which usually choke the crops, to make haste themselves at that present time to do the same. They must do this first, by killing the most powerful lords of the realm, then by slaying the lawyers, justiciars, and jurors of the land, and finally, by weeding out from their land any that they knew would in the future be harmful to the commonwealth. Thus they would in the end gain peace for themselves and security for the future, if after removing the magnates, there was equal freedom between them, and they each enjoyed the same nobility, equal dignity, and similar power. (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 546-47)*

There is a likely allusion here to the parable of the Wheat and the Tares in Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, a text regularly used to understand notions of heresy (Aston 1993, 93; Crossley 2020, 35-36), including against Ball himself (Shirley 1858, 272-74; cf. Wilkins 1737, 152). The parable in Matthew's Gospel talks about an enemy sowing weeds among the good seed and sorting and destroying the good weeds from the bad. The explanation in the gospel is that the Son of Man sows the good seed and the good seed represents the children of the kingdom. Similarly, the devil sows the bad and the weeds are the children of the devil. Fittingly, the parable has an eschatological conclusion whereby the harvesting is the end of age and the angels will remove causes of sin and the evildoers. Ball's application of this parable to justify the violent transformation of England is clear enough.

This context might also help us understand a curious sentiment attributed to Ball: 'no one was fit for the kingdom of God who had not been born in wedlock' (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 544-45). There may be more to this than just a moral conservatism as it was presented as part of a summary of Ball's preaching over the years which otherwise focused on obvious socio-economic reversals and denunciations of the elites. A comparison with *Piers Plowman* (B.9) and the Lollard Richard Wyche suggests that Ball's saying

was also part of his critique of the church hierarchy (Justice 1994, 104–11; Crossley 2020, 30–33). According to such arguments, chaos and disorder were linked to those deemed to have troublesome parents and having been improperly conceived, including being born out of wedlock. Comparisons were made with biblical figures such as Cain but with one eye on the present, not least troublesome bishops and priests who were not likely to be saved. The context of the saying in the presentation of Ball's preaching—with its plan for clergy not to exploit those poorer than them—likewise points in this anticlerical direction.

Ball looked to a future of communally shared possessions and distribution according to need, probably based on the example of the early church (Acts of the Apostles 2:44–45; 4:32–35). He was said to have preached that things were 'not well to pass in England, nor shall do till everything be common.' This would be a time when there would be no serfdom, no greater lords, and no exploitation of peasant labour because 'all come from one father and one mother, Adam and Eve' (Froissart, *Chroniques* 10.96; cf. *Anonimale Chronicle* 137). Debates about the meaning of 'all things in common' were well established by 1381 (Cohn 1970, 200–201) and, for Ball, this hope for a new England was most obviously connected with the calls for liberty from serfdom and greater access to the resources of the land (Crossley 2020, 36–40). It is probably to be connected with rebel demands presented in one account of the meeting of Tyler and Richard II, namely that 'all game, whether in waters or in parks and woods should become common to all, so that everywhere in the realm, in rivers and fishponds, and woods and forests, they might take the wild beasts, and hunt the hare in the fields, and do many other such things without restraint' (Knighton, *Chronicle* 218–19).

Sources

There are occasional references to Ball in legal and ecclesiastical documents but the main sources for his apocalyptic ideas come from the major chroniclers of the time, particularly those of Thomas Walsingham, Henry Knighton, and Jean Froissart, as well as the *Anonimale Chronicle* and the *Westminster Chronicle*, all of which are conveniently collected in Dobson (1983). Critical editions and version in the original languages are given in the **References**. While partly dependent on eyewitness testimony, the chroniclers should be used with caution as they are hostile towards Ball and the rebels, embellish details, and sometimes contradict one another. Nevertheless, they provide a generally coherent account of the revolt and Ball's theology, even if we cannot claim with any certainty to have the words uttered by Ball himself or accuracy as to his precise whereabouts in the spring and summer of 1381.

Walsingham and Knighton provide us with coded letters from 1381 (Knighton, *Chronicle* 220–25; Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 548–49; Dobson 1983, 380–83) which might even have been written by Ball himself (or people with shared interests), and with likely allusions to (among other things) the Bible and William Langland's contemporaneous work, *Piers Plowman*, both of which were and are important for understanding the apocalyptic beliefs of Ball and the rebels. Walsingham published a letter that he claimed was discovered in the tunic of a rebel and which Ball was said to have admitted to writing, along with other letters. The letters presented by Knighton are different from that presented by Walsingham, though there are clear thematic and linguistic similarities and have Ball explicitly identifying himself.

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