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APOCALYPTIC GROUPS AND SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED CONTEXTS

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the theory that apocalyptic texts originated in, and reflect the convictions and activities of socially disadvantaged groups on the margins of society. After a brief introduction to the nature of this understanding of apocalyptic groups, the article investigates the issue in more depth by analysing an essay on Revelation written by D.H. Lawrence as concrete example of this theory from a non-scholarly perspective, followed by various scholarly readings of apocalyptic groups. In a following section, it analyses various formal, literary, hermeneutical and topical themes questioning the validity of this approach as well as research insights that revealed major weaknesses in this understanding. The article then concludes with an investigation of material that, ironically, indicates that apocalypses generally reflect a learned hermeneutical movement wishing to discover the ongoing relevance of sacred traditions in new situations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Apocalyptic literature as the literary outcomes of apocalypticism as social discourse was, and often still is not an attractive subject in scholarly research and, for that matter, also in religious discourse in general. One reason why these texts are being ignored, neglected or maligned is because they are often associated with marginal groups on the fringes of society producing and nurturing such inaccessible, vengeful and agonistic

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literature claiming to contain divinely inspired revelations[1] about the future destruction of society and the world.[2] They are regarded as degrading religion and revelation with mythical speculations about journeys of a visionary through heavenly spheres. This is viewed as promoting mystical experiences, in which a human being experiences ecstatic visions of the divine heavenly throne and is described as being given divine status, thus obfuscating the distinction between the divine and human spheres. These ostensible esoteric, escapist and world-denying convictions reveal that their social location is characterised by political frustrations, anti-social behaviour,[3] and lack of ethical engagement,[4] especially in a socio-political

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1   Wilson (2002:57-58) indicated how apocalypticism became neglected, because Christianity, having emerged as an accepted religion, opposed its claim of having received direct revelation. This claim threatened the stability of religious communities, in which religious leaders mediated revelation. This was true of Judaism whose powerful interpreters of the Law also opposed apocalypses. Stone (1984:436) also noted that some apocalypses of the Second Temple period fell out of favour with Jewish readers, probably because of their "sectarian" features and because of anti-eschatological reactions against groups who perpetrated revolts and wars. A telling example of this neglect is that apocalypses simply disappeared in many places and times. So comprehensive was this loss, that some original versions are still not available. Many of them were preserved only in some canonical collections (for example, Ethiopian, Armenian) and then in translations of the original.

2   Koch (1970:62-64) also drew attention to deeply ingrained prejudices against apocalyptic texts in Biblical scholarship. Koch (1970) gave *Ratlos vor der Apokalyptik. Eine Streitschrift über ein vernachlässigtes Gebiet der Bibelwissenschaft und die schädlichen Auswirkungen auf Theologie und Philosophie* as title to his provocative and ground-breaking work that initiated interest in, and research of apocalypses in Christian contexts. Willis (2014:149-157) offers a succinct overview of the negative influence of some well-known and influential scholars in the twentieth century (for example, Gunkel, Von Rad, Cross and Hanson). Especially influential in overcoming such prejudices, was the research of the towering figure of Scholem (for example, 1995) who played a seminal role in the rediscovery of apocalypses in Jewish research. Schäfer (1999:3) pointed out how Scholem moved the study of mysticism to the "very core of Jewish studies", so that a new interest in the mystical dimension of Judaism arose "out of forgotten books and manuscripts, out of the prejudices of the intellectual leaders of a Jewish world which had submitted itself to the rationalism of Christian (Protestant Christian) spirituality".

3   Willis (2014:155) noted how the escapist nature of apocalyptic groups is linked with political disillusionments of the early postexilic period.

4   Cf. Schmithals (1973:35ff., 81ff.); Hofheinz (2009:3-6); Lampe (1981:89-91). Scholars increasingly rejected the position that apocalypses lacked ethics, pointing to their emphasis on paranesis, their repeated calls to holiness, to obedience to the law and divine precepts, both in the lives of individuals and

sense.[5] These readings regard both author and audience as intellectually less gifted people (if not misfits) from the lower echelons of society sharing a similar low social standing. Their works reflect deprivation because of harsh, oppressive contexts (McCloud & Mirola 2009:14).

In the case of Jewish apocalypses, for example, they were regarded as representative of a degenerative phase in Judaism when foreign influences intruded on, and compromised the "ethically-oriented monotheism" of Biblical prophets.[6]

The discoveries of apocalyptic texts at Qumran[7] and Nag Hammadi strengthened the impression that apocalyptic texts were popular among such marginal, sectarian or non-mainstream movements. All this strengthens the negative image of apocalypticism as the discourse of marginal, powerless groups that harbour hateful or superficial thoughts towards their powerful opponents or dissenting compatriots.

It is striking that these apocalyptic movements and their literature were shunned also because of their revolutionary potential. They motivated apocalyptic groups to resort to social violence.[8] This reputation was

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communities. Revelation, for example, is regarded as clearly ethical, because it enlightens believers how to deal with an oppressive state and often calls to holiness, whilst 4 Ezra discusses the ongoing situation of a community after trauma as the result of disobedience to the law.

5   Cf. Oswalt (1981:289-302) and many others. One should not, however, generalise. Oswalt (1981:289) pointed out that the importance of apocalyptic literature was recognised before Käsemann's work, especially in British scholarship such as that of Charles (1913, in collaboration with various experts). In addition, in German scholarship, important work was done on apocalyptic texts that were then being given more attention (for example, Kautsch 1900).

6   Wilson (2002:57) notes that apocalyptic groups were seen to represent a regression into less exalted pre-prophetic modes of religious experience. Lampe (1981:68) quotes Gressmann's remarks that apocalyptists were weak dwarfs who lived off the past. Gressmann, for example, regarded post-Biblical Judaism as having been transformed into an otherworldly religion, comprising the synagogue, canon, resurrection and retaliation, supranaturalism, and apocalypticism (Gerdmar 2009:165). Gerdmar discusses Gressmann's insights and his ambivalent attitude towards Jews, but suggests that his convictions were more a result of his Christian belief rather than of an anti-Semitic attitude.

7   On Qumran as an apocalyptic community, cf. Martinez (1998:180-196); Cook (1995:6).

8   Gruesome information of apocalyptic movements explains the negative attitude towards apocalypticism. One example was the fifteenth-century Hussite Taborites from Bohemia who argued that they were living in the times of the Antichrist, which demanded from them to kill unbelievers as enemies of

recently intensified because of the apocalyptic fervour of terrorist groups with their expectations of paradisiacal rewards for martyrs who sacrifice themselves through violent actions. Equally negative in its consequences for understanding apocalyptic texts is the popular Left Behind literature about the so-called rapture that promotes bizarre speculations about end-time battles based on highly arbitrary readings of Biblical apocalypses. These speculations, which represent a serious threat to political stability in strategic Middle Eastern locations, are often regarded as the preferred religious texts of fanatical, minority groups on the fringes of society (Rossing 2005).

2.   POPULAR AND SCHOLARLY READINGS

The apprehension of scholars about apocalyptic literature as potentially dangerous products of sectarian, socially disadvantaged groups can be illustrated by scholarly and popular interpretations of the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. The following section offers specific examples of interpretations that were summarised in the previous section, and provides pertinent references to the work of specialists in the field of apocalyptic studies.

2.1 Popular readings

A most notable example was the work of the well-known British novelist, D.H. Lawrence, who wrote a famous essay on Revelation in 1932 (published posthumously and, in this instance, cited in its 2002 re-edition) in which he (2002:41) spoke of the vulgar, bleak and destructive character of Revelation. He draws attention to how its language is indicative of the social location of its author and readers. Though appreciative of some parts, he lambasted the book for its

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Christ. They pronounced a curse on anyone who was not willing to shed the blood of such people, especially after the return of Christ did not materialise as they predicted. "'Every believer must wash his hands in that blood.' The preachers themselves joined eagerly in the killing, for 'every priest may lawfully pursue, wound and kill sinners'", as Cohn (1970:212) notes. Cf. also Newport (2000:17) and, more extensively, Kaminsky (2004:342). For the immense social implications of this movement, cf. Kaminsky (2004:338) who notes how these groups despised traditional teachings, church rituals, and even "vain" university education. Priests were not to earn property, avoid traditions, and wear grey clothing with beards and unshaven heads. For apocalyptic violence by right-wing groups in the United States, cf. Olson (2004:188). For an excellent general discussion of the violent implications of millenarian movements, cf. Abrams (1984:352).

> … utterly unpoetic and arbitrary imagery, some of it really ugly, like
> all the wadings in blood, and the rider's shirt dipped in blood and the
> people washed in the blood of the Lamb (Lawrence [1932] 2002:62).

According to Lawrence, this language speaks of John's passionate, mystic hatred of his society and his own socially disadvantaged position. It became "the grand phraseology and imagery of the nonconformist chapels, all the Bethels of England and America, and all the Salvation armies" (Lawrence [1932] 2002:62). Lawrence thus locates the book and its later readers within a counter-cultural setting, in which a minority group expresses its criticism of the dominant, powerful segment in an intensely hateful and vengeful manner.

He pitches these disadvantaged groups against their hated, despised opponents who are also the rich and the wealthy. He argues that the masses, as the poor, used Revelation with delight "to bring their enemies down to utter destruction and discomfiture, while they themselves rise up to grandeur" (Lawrence [1932] 2002:63). Lawrence views apocalypses as agonistic literature, permeated by anti-social behaviour. Their language and theology are the result of privileging themselves as the elect and positioning themselves as the righteous, whilst the opponents are vilified and demonised. Groups such as these resonated well with John's theology: They could only be happy in paradise if they knew their enemies were suffering in hell.

Lawrence is explicit about groups that he thought read Revelation. They are, he writes contemptuously, the coal miners of his days. Revelation's denunciation of rulers and the whore is "entirely sympathetic to a Tuesday evening congregation of colliers and colliers' wives, on a black winter night, in the great barn-like Pentecost chapel" (Lawrence [1932] 2002:62). But they are not unique to his time. For Lawrence, the link between apocalyptic thought and the masses transcends place and time. Such apocalyptic thought represents the typical mind-set of a social class. The name of the whore (Mystery, Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth), "thrill the old colliers today as they thrilled the Scotch Puritan peasants and the more ferocious of the Christians" (Lawrence [1932] 2002:62).

The lower class readers of Revelation are, in his eyes, also characterised by their stupidity, especially in their inability to fathom what true religion is. Revelation with its "huge denunciation of kings and Rulers, and of the whore that sitteth upon the waters" is "rampant", in "all ages down" among "uneducated people" (Lawrence [1932] 2002:62). They are unable to recognise higher forms of religion. They deviate from the peak of what Lawrence regards as true religion. They have a "popular, dark, unkind and

weak religion, a second-rate form of second-rate minds like that of John of Patmos" permeated by self-glorification and eternal power (Lawrence [1932] 2002:66), which is different from the "thoughtful", gentle, strong religion of Jesus (Lawrence [1932] 2002:64). Apocalyptic thought, therefore, reflects stupidity and irrationality. People who are more informed, educated and rational have other interests than self-glorifying vengeance.

> Of the positive side of Christianity, the peace of meditation and the joy of unselfish service, the rest from ambition and the pleasure of knowledge, we find nothing in the Apocalypse (Lawrence [1932] 2002:73).

Lawrence's exegesis, as an example of the effective history of Revelation in a non-technical context,[9] cannot be criticised on the grounds that he, ironically, was an unenlightened (!) author who lacked knowledge of Biblical scholarship. He was a thoughtful reader of the text. He provided useful insights into the negative outcomes of agonistic thought in apocalypses.[10]

One notes in his comments his own classist prejudices about religious groups in his own industrialised Britain of the early twentieth century, which he also projects on Revelation as text. They are, however, not so different from general attitudes among contemporary researchers of apocalypticism. His analysis is, for example, close to their distinction between prophecy as the higher, elevated religion of educated groups, and apocalypses as the inferior, degraded religion in texts of later, less privileged groups. His emphasis on election also resonates with scholarly research that points out how apocalyptic groups claimed a special status as elect of God and, therefore, a key role in the running of the world (Wilson 2002:58).[11] In addition, one also recognises in his remarks the general apprehension for Revelation's ambiguous, inaccessible language, but, most of all, the use of the deprivation theory that depicted apocalypticism as the outcome of social disadvantage.

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9   Newport (2000:3) helpfully points out how, other than in *Auslegungsgeschichte* (the history of interpretation) and *Forschungsgeschichte* (the history of research), *Wirkungsgeschichte* (effective history) comprises both a pre-critical (or non-critical) and a critical phase. Early interpreters of Revelation such as Newton, Gill, Wesley and Priestly belong to the earlier phase (in which the text "was assumed to be of supernatural origin, faultless and timeless in message."

10   For the contribution of agonistic thinking to the formation of post-Kantian German philosophy, cf. Abrams (1984:346).

11   Collins (1984:37), for example, notes that words such as "chosen" and "righteous" are stereotypical designations in the Enoch literature.

Lawrence was no exception, though, in his negative comments on Revelation's social setting, as the following analysis of scholarly views will reveal.[12]

2.2 Scholarly readings

Scholars who argued that apocalyptic texts emanated from socially disadvantaged groups often used sophisticated insights, theories and models to outline their positions. This approach presented the general negative attitude towards apocalyptic groups in theoretically grounded form and manner.

Biblical scholarship in the twentieth century, influenced by the sociology of knowledge (developed by Mannheim) and applying deprivation theory, portrayed apocalyptic groups of Biblical times as holding on to utopias that tended to destroy the present realities in which they existed (cf. McCloud & Mirola 2009:13-14; Cook 1995:1-18). As utopian cults, existing on the fringes of society, they separated from, and existed in conflict with mainstream Judaism or Christianity. Their visionary, ecstatic texts with their pessimism and their contra-cultural nature indicate how they lost touch with reality. Key elements that drove their negativity were said to be their *Naherwartung*, dualism and esoteric teaching.[13] Their utopian world view with its destructive attitude towards the existing world stood in contrast and tension with the ideologies of their powerful and elitist opponents that shored up the realities of the existing power structures (Polanski 2001:15-16).

The social deprivation of apocalyptic groups was, furthermore, often understood in terms of class, social standing or material status (McCloud & Mirola 2009:13). Twentieth-century social scientific studies, under the influence of Weber's and Troeltsch's church-sect classification, portrayed

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12 In the same period as Lawrence, Charles (1920:xviii) wrote that the final editor of Revelation was

> … apparently a Jew of the dispersion, a better Grecian than his master, but otherwise a person profoundly stupid and ignorant; a narrow fanatic and celibate, not quite loyal to his trust as editor; an arch-heretic, though, owing to his stupidity, probably an unconscious one.

Charles was, though, not always so negative towards the contents of Revelation and its author. He (Charles 1920:xliv) described the author of the rest of the book as a great spiritual genius, a man of profound insight and the widest sympathies. For Charles, at least, apocalypses were not necessarily to be associated with lack of education and insight.

13 This sectarian perspective on apocalyptic groups was strengthened when they were compared with the teachings of the Qumran community (cf., for example, Stegemann 1983).

apocalyptic millennialist groups as belonging to lower classes who found their *raison d'être* in their refusal to compromise with the privileged elite.[14] In this way, a binary opposition was created between the lower and upper echelons of society.

Not all scholars were negative about this low status of apocalyptic groups. Niebuhr (1929), following Troeltsch, regarded these groups from the lower strata of society as the really creative religious movements.[15] As the disinherited, dispossessed, the needy and the poor, whose needs were ignored, they withdrew from the middle class. Because of their strong ethics and firm beliefs, they became established churches. Their neglect of the poor among them started the formation of yet another sect. The point is, however, that even Niebuhr accepted, without a second thought, that socially deprived groups produced apocalypses.

One recognises various aspects of this negative attitude in other research of well-known scholars. The German scholar, Vielhauer, for example, following the influential work of Plöger,[16] remarked that apocalypses are rooted in eschatologically driven and inspired groups that were marginalised by the theocracy and thus fated to an existence as conventicles, that is as secret groups meeting for religious purposes (Cook 1995:7). He also argued that their strong mythological contents represented a world-denying remythologising[17] of the more ethical prophetic literature with its more realistic concern for this world.[18] In their difficult, challenging and bleak post-exilic context, the apocalyptic authors, belonging to, and articulating the concerns of powerless, "world-weary" minorities, lost touch with reality. Scholars could point to possible examples of such groups. The vast majority

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14 For an overview of classical studies on religion and class, cf. McCloud & Mirola (2009; esp. 3-8 and 12-14). For similar social analyses, cf. Cooke (1995:8-9). He draws attention to the work of Hanson who found a "brooding minority" behind every apocalyptic movement.

15 Niebuhr (1957:28-9). Cf. McCloud & Mirola (2009:5). The poor, who are neglected in a church, fashion a new type of Christianity that corresponds to their needs. They rise in the economic scale under the influence of religious discipline, and, in the midst of a freshly acquired cultural respectability, neglect the new poor who succeed them on the lower plane. For a recent discussion along these lines, cf. Douhat (1984). Interesting examples are mentioned from the Franciscans to the Jesuits. These groups seemed cult-like to their critics, but they revitalised the Catholic Church. The same is true of charismatic visionaries in an American context.

16 For a full discussion of Plöger, cf. Cooke (1995:6-7).

17 For Bultmann's position on apocalyptic, cf. Olson (2004:193).

18 Cf. Sturm (1989:21), referring to Wellhausen and Duhm who regarded Jewish literature in this way.

of scholars (for example, Cross, Hanson and Millar) suggested a concrete social location when they argued that a post-exilic group of visionaries opposed the rebuilding of the temple by taking over the visions of Deutero-Isaiah, Haggai and Zechariah to produce their own texts.[19] Not only was the notion of "visionaries", but also the dismal post-exilic conditions indicative of their understanding of apocalypses as representing degeneration and deprivation. This long-standing prejudice against apocalypses as dependent on prophetic literature, but not living up to its standards, was firmly entrenched from earliest times in modern scholarship. For example, one of the founders of modern apocalyptic research, Lücke, described apocalyptic as not quite a degeneration of the prophetic spirit, but as close to becoming that and often indeed was like that ("Die Apokalyptik ist an und für sich nog keine Entartung des prophetischen Geistes, aber sie ist nahe daran, es zu werden, und ist es oft gewesen", Lücke 1832:26).

Duhm (1922:460) echoed this when he wrote that with apocalypses the seed of prophecy was not sown in good soil: "Der Same, den die Prophetie ausgestreut hatte, ist in kein gutes Erdreich geraten".

Sometimes one would find some positive remarks about these groups. Von Rad (1965:303-305) contributed new insights into apocalyptic texts when he linked them with wisdom literature and drew attention to their interest in knowledge. But, in general, he remained apprehensive about the contents of apocalypses, which, despite its affinities with wisdom literature, did not quite reach the same level. He viewed apocalypses as devoid of theology, as dualistic and deterministic and, therefore, as theologically inferior to wisdom and prophecy (Sturm 1989:21). In this instance, apocalyptic thought was conceptualised as the literary product of marginalised, sectarian groups that deviated from the more elevated nature of mainstream religion. This remained an important understanding, reiterated by Schmithals (1973:136), who also spoke of apocalyptic authors as (failed) heirs of the prophetic movement that existed as conventicles with a sect mentality on the fringes and lower social levels of the Jewish community.[20]

This association of apocalypticism with socially disadvantaged readers is still alive and well. It is found among later, quite enlightened exegetes such as Schüssler-Fiorenza (1991:7), who wrote about present-day readers of Revelation: "In contrast to mainline churches and theology, 'Bible-believing' Christians, who often belong to socially disadvantaged

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19   On the relationship of prophetic and apocalyptic texts, cf. Polanski (2001:14); Oswalt (1981; esp. 294).
20   Cooke (1995:10-11) mentions more examples of similar readings.

and alienated minority groups, give Revelation pride of place in preaching and life."

She also points to its contents and its perceived sense of oppression and persecution by a powerful dominant group. She refers to those who use Revelation to predict the future, or, other "oppressed and disadvantaged Christians" who read Revelation contextually as a "political-religious typology that speaks to their own situation" and as a "prophetic indictment of exploitation and oppression as well as its sustaining vision of justice". Despite the appreciation for its sense of justice, this view still tends towards understanding apocalypticism as a fringe phenomenon, reflecting the deprivation of their readers.

3.   CHALLENGING THE SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED PERSPECTIVE ON APOCALYPSES

The previous discussion provides a general understanding of apocalypses that is being challenged by new insights into, and trends in scholarship. I shall specifically mention the following matters that have been raised by previous research and mooted in new scholarship.

3.1 Formal and literary considerations

Recent research shows that it is more difficult to reconstruct social settings than is often suggested by existing scholarship. An important reason is the paucity of information (Collins 1984:39-40; Stone 1984:434) that allows limited insight into social realities behind texts. It is even more complicated in the case of apocalypses because of their pseudonymous nature. Apocalypses lack historical and social specificity, because their authors deliberately wanted to conceal their own situation and create the impression that their books originated in a much earlier time. In order to authorise and legitimise their books, they wrote under a pseudonym in the name of an ancient, well-known figure or sage. They avoided any explicit references to their own situation. As a result, only implicit information can be used to try and determine their social setting. It is, therefore, difficult to reconstruct social realia, and, even more, to delineate the complexities that often characterise social settings.[21]

Social analysis of apocalypses is further complicated by the literary and composite nature of apocalypses. Apocalypses are notoriously complex.

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21 Historical surveys in apocalypses are used for such reconstruction. The authors usually discussed the course of history up to their own times. But this seldom yields reliable, concrete information, especially regarding their social setting.

They reflect a hermeneutical exercise that incorporates, reworks and reinterprets older traditions or other apocalypses. It is common knowledge that 1 Enoch comprises at least five different apocalypses and that 4 Ezra is preceded and concluded by Christian additions. Different social contexts are, therefore, involved in the various parts of these composite texts. This makes the reconstruction of "a" social context of social deprived groups even more questionable and hypothetical.

A third matter has to do with the literary decisions that are made in the exegesis of texts: A reconstruction of a social setting for Daniel will depend, to a large extent, on whether one reads Daniel with or without its narrative parts (Albertz 2002:173), for example, or on how one understands its composition. Albertz (2002:179) argued that the book contains two apocalypses (2-7 and 1:8-12), both of which need to be taken into account to locate its social setting. The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of Revelation, where the selection of a framework for the book could lead to a very different understanding of its social location.[22] The outcomes of social analyses are thus determined by the assumptions, methods and theories with which individual scholars approach the texts.

In the fourth instance, impeding a social reconstruction is the fact that little is known about the original communities that wrote or transmitted apocalypses, because the transmission history of apocalyptic texts is shrouded in darkness. Existing manuscripts were preserved and transmitted by later groups from very different times and locations. For a long time, for example, 1 Enoch was available solely in Ethiopic translations. It was only in the twentieth century that texts in the original language were discovered at Qumran (Stone 1984:433).

It is, therefore, important to underline that social location is hard to prove in the case of apocalypses. As a result, proposals have, and always will have a preliminary and hypothetical character.

3.2 Hermeneutical considerations

Social analysis of texts is also determined and, consequently, complicated by the lenses through which they are read, especially because such lenses may distort the outcomes. The lenses are not *per se* the issue, given that there is no "neutral" reading of texts. More important is the kind of lenses that are being used. Lenses should be appropriate to the text being read. The following will illustrate the issue under discussion.

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22 Scholars often distinguish between Rev. 1-3 and the visionary parts in Rev. 4-22. The latter is then read on its own, as if it has little to do with the first part.

3.2.1 Complexity

The understanding of apocalypses in terms of a binary model that speaks of adversarial relationships between two groups has been discussed extensively in contemporary research. Scholars, who link apocalypses with social disadvantaged groups, assume without reservation that the contents of apocalypses favour such a binary model. Abrams (1984:345-346), for example, drew attention to this polarity as a key motif of apocalypses such as Revelation, but evaluates these texts negatively because of their social consequences. Abrams thus calls for an awareness of the distortions inherent in a binary mind-set. Revelation, he writes,

> … has fostered a dubious heritage of reductive historical thinking in terms of absolute antitheses without the possibility of nuance, distinction, or mediation. Complex social, political, and moral issues are reduced to the two available categories of good and bad, right and wrong, the righteous and the wicked (Abrams 1984:346).

A narrow, pernicious mindset, allegedly found in Revelation, has had devastating consequences on later readers, by times creating

> a collective paranoia, religious or racial or national, which has manifested itself in Crusades, sacred wars, pogroms, witch-hunts, or other attempts to achieve, by annihilating the massed forces of evil, a final solution (Abrams 1984:346).

Staly (2004:195) also advised against

> a dualistic, determinate hermeneutic of adversarial response, an "us against them" mentality that tends to replicate the problematical binarisms of apocalyptic rather than moving beyond them to a more broadly-based literary indeterminacy and ethical pluralism.

The texts often seem to contain insights that ignore nuances and complexities.

There are, however, questions to be asked about the scholarly application of a binary model to apocalypses, especially in terms of determining social location. When Staly warns against the dualistic hermeneutic of adversarial response and Abrams points out the problem of polarity, it begs the question as to what they mean by the term "dualistic". It is striking that some serious questions are being asked about this notion. Wright (1992:252-256) is one of a growing number of researchers who drew attention to the need to be clear about its meaning,

and who question a dualistic interpretation of apocalypses.[23] Thompson (1990) makes an interesting contribution, arguing that Revelation does not speak of opposition between Christians and their opponents, but rather of transformation. Thompson insists that there is no absolute, metaphysical dualism in Revelation, its theology and in the mind-set of the author. John assists the faith community to cope with their situation as a minority with its own values by taking up a critical stance toward Asian society and the empire. This has consequences for determining their social location. Thompson (1990:192) finds no evidence that "Asian Christians (were) a beleaguered, oppressed minority, living as separatists in an isolated ghetto. Christians, for the most part, lived alongside their non-Christian neighbors, sharing peacefully in urban Asian life."

Though one could raise a number of questions about Thompson's analysis, it shows increasing apprehension about imposing unqualified notions such as dualism on apocalyptic groups, but it also illustrates the nature of tentative reconstructions of social settings.

Such clarification about a notion such as dualism is indeed necessary, because it allows for a more nuanced understanding of apocalypses and their social location. Whilst it goes without saying that there are indeed, as pointed out earlier, reductive tendencies and perspectives present in apocalypses, the question is how one should weigh this duality and reduction. Some researchers emphasise that social contexts, within which apocalypses originated and to which they belong, are more complex and diverse. Collins (1984:38) notes, for example, that Hanson's well-known division of groups within the post-exilic community is by no means a constant factor in those and later times. He (1984:38) also notes that, though Qumran's literature, (possibly) Enoch texts and (maybe) Daniel may be regarded as conventicle-like texts, it is not the case with 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch. He remarks, "The 'conventicle' theory of apocalypticism is at best an unwarranted generalization". Such differences question the reductive and distorted models that are imposed on apocalyptic groups.

More examples provide a fuller picture. Other more diverse portraits are provided of apocalyptic groups. Lampe (1981), for example, does not speak of one apocalyptic setting only, but distinguishes between at least two types of apocalyptic groups. Whilst some groups supported a violent response to those who oppressed them, others followed a non-violent route. Intellectuals represent this non-violent, individualistic type, heavily influenced by wisdom. They differ from the priestly type that was willing to

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23 See the discussion in Pennington (2007:331-333) and Anderson (2014:299), who distinguish temporal, spatial, cosmic and ethical dualism in an attempt to come to a more nuanced use of this term.

support their claims with the sword. History thus confirms that people with an apocalyptic mind-set can respond violently to times of crisis, whilst others do not. In the words of Albertz (2002:174), an increasing number of scholars are distinguishing between "several apocalyptic groups who pursued different goals and came from different backgrounds".

A closer reading of Revelation reveals its complex social setting. This is, first, true of the interior situation within the faith community. In the seven churches (Rev. 2-3), there are good, evil and even lukewarm groups. The letter is not about "the" church as conventicle or sect against oppressors. The opponents of the author are also complex. They include socio-political adversaries, Jewish groups, and (wealthy, influential) members of the church. This complex picture stands in clear contrast with an analysis such as that of Farmer (1997:143) who writes that readers of Revelation stood under Jewish attack, were despised by their gentile neighbours, and suffered under internal divisions: "The Christians, generally poor and disenfranchised themselves, probably sympathized with the poor in these conflicts, which again brought them into confrontation with the authorities."

One of the most recent investigations of Revelation proves how tentative the model of poor believers against wealthy opponents is. Mathews (2013:217) deviates in a major way from this type of interpretation. He, in fact, turns it on its head. He describes Revelation as an attempt to warn the community against seeking affluence "in order to find some sense of false security and establish their self-sufficiency" (cf. Rev. 3:17). The author negates, for the present, the luxurious living of some of his readers/hearers and aligns them with the wicked (Mathews 2013:222). Focusing on altering their attitude to wealth, he advises them to withdraw from the present economic system and find their wealth in Christ. In making such a radical choice, they show their commitment to God rather than to wealth. In doing so, they opt for a marginal existence. This analysis offers the proposition that Revelation is not the result of deprivation or social marginalisation. It is their apocalyptic faith that leads them to opt for a marginal existence – which means offering a critique of, and distancing themselves from an existing prosperous lifestyle. Their marginal lifestyle does not lead them to embrace apocalyptic thought. The opposite is true.

This interpretation of Mathews questions deprivation theory in more than one way. It offers a different perspective on the status of the community, on the existence/place of wealthy people in the community, and on what a marginal existence means. Moreover, Mathews' approach questions a binary model that reconstructs a disadvantaged, deprived faith community *vis-à-vis* powerful oppressors. This model simply does not fit the text. His research shows that Revelation suggests more complex relationships

than a common bond of poverty. Not all are deprived, because the community includes wealthy members, as text pronouncements such as Revelation 3:17 indicate.[24] This alone would be enough reason to question reading the book in terms of social deprivation.

All this is not only true of Revelation, but also valid of other apocalypses. Albertz (2002:171-3) provides revealing insights from contemporary research on this matter. Some scholars associate Daniel and his group, for example, with the Hasidim of the Books of Maccabees and some with the opponents of the Hasidim – the cultic and wisdom circles of Jerusalem. Others link it with learned scribal, urban upper-class groups; with well-educated, upper-class mantic wisdom groups; with returning exiles, or with wandering prophets of scribal learning and mystical experiences. This illustrates not only the hypothetical nature of social reconstructions,[25] but also the many possible (mutually exclusive, in some instances) groups with which apocalyptic texts can be associated.

One could approach this from the opposite direction – that is, by using contemporary models to understand apocalyptic groups from Biblical times. Social analyses of modern trends point to diverse social locations and complex social structures of apocalyptic groups. Apocalyptic thought is used in many social contexts and is at home in a huge variety of settings. Countless adaptations of apocalyptic thought are made, for example, in religious and secular art and in political nationalism, as Vondung (1993:207-225) noted.[26]

3.2.2 Crisis literature

Equally informative for a proper hermeneutical approach to the social location of apocalypses is the research that has been done on apocalypses as crisis literature. Apocalyptic groups have been associated with crises that made them feel marginalised and oppressed by their

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24 For a quite different perspective on the role of wealth in Revelation and its community, cf. Royalty (1998).

25 The hypothetical nature of social reconstructions does not mean that they should be abandoned. They should be evaluated not only in terms of their ability to explain the text adequately and exhaustively, but also in terms of social realties that existed in antiquity (to avoid anachronistic outcomes).

26 Unzählige Adaptationen apokalyptischer Vorstellungen entweder religiöser Art, wie zum Beispiel der mittelalterliche Chiliasmus, oder auch säkularisierter Art (sei es die kommunistische apokalyptische Vision Marx oder auf der anderen Seite der apokalyptisch geprägte politische Nationalismus der Deutschen zur Zeit Napoleons oder Hitlers) belegen deren Gebrauchs- und Mißbrauchswert für politische und religiöse Machtzwecke.

powerful oppressors.[27] In theses crises, they are supposedly longing for their liberation that will take place with the imminent destruction of this world that will be replaced by a new order. This research is informed by analyses of contemporary apocalyptic and millenarian groups and, once again, leans heavily on deprivation theory. Hofheinz (2009:2) thus stresses the link between apocalypses and crises when he, for example, points out how, in contemporary secular contexts, such a crisis is linked with military, ecological and economical upheavals. It reflects anxiety about the explosion of numbers, climate change and the nuclear threat.

Such a lachrymose interpretation of apocalyptic groups also faces serious challenges. Whilst it seems as if apocalypses have some link with crises, it is often difficult to specify their nature with confidence (Collins 1984:38; Stone 1984:433). Recent research, however, stressed that not all apocalypses can be linked with a "real" crisis. In the case of Revelation, for example, the long-standing conviction that it reflects a crisis, during which believers were persecuted by the Roman State, was questioned because of lack of any evidence (Slater 1999:238-239). Even if it may be true that a book such as Daniel and Revelation could indicate an extreme socio-political crisis (Lampe 1981:62-64), other apocalypses such as the earliest parts of 1 Enoch originated prior to the existence of any political persecution, as in Seleucid times during which Daniel originated (Körtner 1988:57). Apocalypses also display a marked interest in material that has little to do with crises, such as theodicy (4 Ezra; 2 Baruch; Stone 1984:433), astronomy, meteorology, gemmology, and other sacred sciences. Such material would refer to calendrical polemics or mystical interests rather than crisis material.

It is reductive, finally, to view ideologies such as apocalypticism as, by necessity, the result of material conditions such as a crisis. Not all crisis situations evoke or create apocalypses. In fact, a group's apocalyptic convictions need not be the result of a crisis, but can bring about a crisis situation.

3.2.3 Class

Equally problematic is to view apocalypticism in terms of class conflict, as if it represents a struggle of the exploited, poor and victimised against the rich (Körtner 1988:57). The poor as class notion is too unstable, varying

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27   Typical of this position are the comments of Slater (1999:243-244) that the author of Revelation wrote to his readers who were a minority group of social outcasts in Asia, under constant attack by the dominant culture, to encourage them to persevere and await divine deliverance.

in time periods, places and contexts.[28] This can be illustrated in terms of the popular conviction that Revelation is the preferred reading material of uninformed, uneducated readers from socially disadvantaged groups, so strongly represented in Lawrence's position (described earlier).

In this instance, the readers as disadvantaged group are understood to be materially and intellectually poor. Recent research has pointed out that there is no simple understanding of who socially disadvantaged people are. The latter react to domination differently, depending on a multiple number of factors such as their gender, education, legal position, and ethnicity. Social disadvantage is, therefore, a multifaceted term, referring to groups or individuals who lack religious, political, judicial, educational, national (ethnic), and economic equality with the rest of society (Friesen 2014:173; Cook 1995:14-18). It would thus be a mistake to reduce such a complicated issue to a matter of material possessions or a lack of education.

The effective history of an apocalypse such as Revelation has shown that its contents did not always reflect an uneducated mind-set, and its reception did not take place only among those lacking intellectual skills. Many educated readers engaged in careful scholarship on Revelation, utilising the established historicist interpretation of Revelation as reflecting on world history and predicting future events. Newport (2000:10-12) provided ample examples of this learned approach by sophisticated readers. He spoke of "the long and prestigious pedigree of this interpretive approach" far beyond those

> … on religious margins or of questionable intellectual ability. Indeed, even such intellectual giants as the noted Oxford academic, Thomas Goodwin (1600-80), and as was noted above, the eminent scientists Sir Isaac Newton and Joseph Priestley, turned their hands to the task of this kind of prophetic interpretation.[29]

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28 McCloud & Mirola (2009:15) illustrate this instability by discussing how class is both material and representational, individual and corporate. It must be studied on multiple levels (McCloud & Mirola 2009:16). In this instance, in a symbiotic relationship class determines religious identities, but religion also constructs class identities, as Weber indicated (McCloud & Mirola 2009:15; cf. 4-5).

29 Newport (2000) offers an informative discussion of the various interpretive traditions. Idealist approaches, for example, read Revelation as a symbolic discussion of the struggle between good and evil (Newport 2000:15); preterism (and historical critical exegesis) argue that the predictions in the book were mostly fulfilled in John's time (with hardly anything left for a distant future), and futurists argue that a small part has been fulfilled, with most still outstanding. Hal Lindsey's work falls into this category.

3.3 Summary

The above discussion as well as social-scientific research of millennial movements indicates that apocalypses are found and used in many social locations. Not all such groups are marginal or alienated.

> Apocalypticism emerges in eras of calm (Haggai; Zechariah 1-8), and in eras of disruption, in stable societies and amid the encounters and clashes of cultures, in peripheral or colonized peoples and in dominating or colonizing powers (Cook 2014:30).

For example, not only socially disadvantaged groups, but also privileged groups used Revelation. In the effective history of its interpretation, the book was at times a useful instrument in the hands of oppressors such as the powerful Protestant majority in eighteenth-century England when they demonised and justified their intolerance and actions against Catholics as their socially disadvantaged victims (Newbury 2000:18).

Social settings are, therefore, more fluid than simplistic scenarios suggest (Polanski 2001:18). It is, as should be borne in mind consistently, also a matter of hypothesising and speculating. As indicated, it "muß vielfach im Bereich bloßer Hypothesen verbleiben".[30]

4.   THE WISE AND THE LEARNED

Finally, a last issue requires attention, because it affects the attempt to determine the social context of apocalypses and simultaneously to extract some information about that context. This information is of special relevance in connection with the theory that apocalyptic groups were socially disadvantaged people who lacked education and operated on the fringes of society.

It has been noted that there is an ambiguity in apocalypses, which indicates a thoughtful and even learned reflection on their relevance and meaning. Although Revelation and other apocalypses addressed particular readers with a specific message, apocalypses often claim a more universal appeal. Revelation, for example, contains much information about its social setting in Revelation 2-3, with its seven letters to Asian communities. Yet, the book moves away from particularity and offers

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30   Hoffmann (1998:63) refers to Schreiner (1973:214-253) who spoke of the "buntes Bild" of apocalypses. Some foundational contents can be extracted from them, "... jedoch die Konturen bisweilen zu verschwimmen drohen und manche, sogar wichtige Züge wie fremd oder nicht zur Grundfarbe passend erscheinen". For other challenges of social analyses, cf. Oswalt (1981:298-300).

a message with a wider, more universal appeal. It does not identify its opponents and is, for example, ambiguous in its presentation of Babylon, the great city, calling it Jerusalem, Sodom and Egypt (Rev. 11:8), as if it wanted to delineate a pattern of response to the gospel that is found in different times and situations.

This paradigmatic communication is presented through the technique of concealment. Though claiming to reveal heavenly secrets about the true reality that exists and endures beyond the present dispensation, its revelations remain ambiguous and concealing, in some instances leaving the reader mystified or perplexed even where explanations of symbols are given (Rev. 17-18). It is as if, in a learned manner, the author wanted to create space for discovering new meanings in different situations. Kermode (1987:385) found that the characterisation in Revelation is true of all apocalypses: the text is deliberately vague or sometimes bewilderingly precise, and what one gets out of it depends, to a large extent, on what one puts in. The work is never out of date; it can be mapped onto almost any set of circumstances, which is why it has had such profound an effect not only on lunatic schismatics, but also on serious political thinkers through the centuries.

This technique of revealing and concealing is an important feature of apocalypses and is a result of its hermeneutical intention: it wishes to understand sacred traditions in the light of new situations, because they reflected the divine will that can never be exhausted in meaning. It is an intricate process involving awareness of, and learned interaction with sacred traditions, but also calculated analysis, interaction and connectedness with concrete situations.[31] The authors of apocalypses reread not only prophecies, but also previous apocalypses, reflecting their flexible nature.[32] The books are, like prophecies (with their unfulfilled sections) and oracles, open to various meanings, to constant reinterpretation and reapplication in later times. That this actually happened is shown, for example, by the textual history of the Ezra apocalypses, which reveals how Christians later on appropriated the original text of Ezra 3-14, expanding it with their additions in Ezra 1-3 and 15-16.

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31 Note how Revelation involves the reader by asking for wisdom to understand the meaning of symbols in Rev. 13:18 and 17:9. This represents a call to readers to participate in the wisdom the book offers.

32 Lebram (1978:192) stressed that apocalypticism was a hermeneutical movement, describing it as "eine mit Hilfe einer bestimmten literarischen Technik vollzogene Deutung der Gegenwartssituation des Verfassers und seiner zeitgenössischen Leser". It is important to investigate his insights further by asking what type of hermeneutical movement it was. For this, one will have to account for its revelatory and mystical nature.

Recently, Najman pointed out that the apocalyptic deployment of figures and themes from prophetic literature was part of a deliberate strategy of inheritance, intended to sustain the relevance of prophecy.[33] Apocalyptic authors attempted to make sense of Judaism as a movement that never succumbed to the destructions of the past, but that also never fully overcame them. Judaism has a self-understanding that the past continued to live in, and inform the present, even after the destruction of the first and second temples, and it did so in such a way that the present could channel and thus re-present the past. Christian apocalypses also share and develop this strategy of inheritance.

All this affords one a glimpse in the social context of apocalypticism. Rather than written by the uneducated and poor for the uneducated and disadvantaged, it is a hermeneutical movement of learned people who sought the hidden meaning of life in changing times. They perceptively detected recurring patterns that provide a paradigm which could be applied to situations analogous to their own and "which assimilate the particular crisis to some event of the past whether historical or mythological" (Collins 1984:40). In this way, they carefully underlined the ongoing relevance of apocalypses and their traditions.

Revelation is not for nothing a well-designed text; it contains many letters, books, revelations, traditions, explanations, and calls to attention and wisdom.[34] This attests to the learned setting to which the text belongs. The author reminds one not only of Daniel,[35] but also of outstanding figures of the past such as Enoch,[36] Moses, Ezra and Baruch, and of the wise groups mentioned in Daniel 11:33, 35.

This information is supported by the interest of apocalypses in astronomy, meteorology, gemmology, and other sacred sciences (Stone 1984:433) that is found as a general interest in many apocalypses. Taken together, it appears that apocalypses originated in groups that were interested in deeper, more profound issues that provided them with insight and wisdom to survive and to live meaningfully in times of adversity, darkness, uncertainty, and insecurity. Though their wisdom did not shy away from harsh confrontation, it is wisdom that emanated from their

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33 Cf. Najman (2014:48) who rightly investigates the continuity between apocalypses and prophecy, questioning the way in which "genre" has been used to classify and separate them.

34 Cf. Lebram (1978:192) who describes the nature of these texts in terms of wisdom literature that offers riddles that need to be explained and that appeal to "the intellectual insight" of readers.

35 Lampe (1981:85-88) aptly describes Daniel's intellectual sharpness.

36 For references to the wise in 1 Enoch, cf. Collins (1984:38).

connectedness with their sacred traditions and that reflected their careful study and appropriation of what they believed embodied the divine will for their situation.

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