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# The Apocalyptic Imagination and Climate Change

## 1 Introduction

Apocalypticism is *en vogue* again and the connection between apocalypticism and climate change is not only original but also highly relevant.<sup>1</sup> Throughout history and culture apocalyptic literature has many times emerged and re-emerged in times of political and social crises, often marking changes in the mindset of people unnoticed by the official historical records.<sup>2</sup> And indeed, also changes in the climate have always been part of the apocalyptic imagery. When dealing with issues of a global scale, apocalypticism is not used to talk about small things and politically carefully negotiated steps like every-day politics; instead, it tends to put things in a world embracing perspective and likes to envision dramatic changes of a cosmic nature; this is what the apocalypse is made of. Therefore, to see the interest in apocalypticism re-emerge in our times, whether in the Bible, literature, film, popular culture,<sup>3</sup> or theology,<sup>4</sup> could point to possible tectonic shifts in society and to changes in the mindset of people;<sup>5</sup> it is therefore reason enough to take it seriously. But let us begin with the history.

### 1.1 History and Reception

As most scholars agree,<sup>6</sup> apocalypticism begins in the Hebrew Bible and is related to prophecy. It finds its first climax in the Book of Daniel and the

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1 On apocalypticism, see, for example, Siegemund (2018) and Oegema (forthcoming).

2 See Körtner (1988).

3 See DiTommaso (2014).

4 See the Encyclical Letter “*Laudato Si*” of the Holy Father Francis on “Care for our Common Home.”

5 Just before traveling to Aachen to attend the conference on November 15–16, 2018, there were several demonstrations in various countries such as Canada, Germany, and Belgium, against climate change. Since then, many more demonstrations have taken place under the leadership and inspiration of Greta Thunberg. Also, David McMillan, Frederic Morin, and Meredith Erickson published a cookbook which is titled *Surviving the Apocalypse: Another Cookbook of Sorts* (2018).

6 Examples are Lücke, Reuss, Hilgenfeld, Gunkel, Mowinckel, Collins, Hanson, Rowland, among others. See also the history of research in Schmidt (1976).

Maccabean Revolt in 167–164 BCE, and their common resistance against the Syrian oppression. During the Greco-Roman period apocalypticism dominated the sectarian movement associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as the Jesus movement, influenced the Bar Kockba Revolt, until Rabbinic Judaism began to transform its more radical elements into a more general messianic hope for the future. It is a dominant feature of the New Testament and the Early Church, influenced John the Baptist, Jesus of Nazareth and the Apostle Paul, and especially the Revelation of John and its resistance against the Roman Empire. It continued in the many later Judeo-Christian apocalyptic traditions that found their way in Late Antiquity, in the Qur'an, and the Middle Ages, even until today.<sup>7</sup> However, presently it is mostly used as a rather general term for everything “apocalyptic” with a doomsday scenario, often also combined with huge natural catastrophes, and popularized in movies and on the internet. It is therefore important to define what we are talking about.

## 1.2 Definition of “Apocalypticism”

Whereas there is no consensus on how to define “apocalypticism,” the term “apocalyptic imagination” was coined by John J. Collins, author and editor of many books about apocalypticism (Collins 1979, 1999). Collins has spearheaded research into apocalypticism since the 1970s, originally in response to a booklet by Klaus Koch *Ratlos vor der Apokalypstik* from 1970.<sup>8</sup> Whereas this was a small booklet, it led to a very productive period of research that until today does not seem to have come to an end. It marked the rediscovery of the relevance of apocalypticism and was written in a period in modern history, which also saw a growing interest in social and anti-war protests, student revolts, liberation theology, feminism, and indeed also in climate change. It was a time of industrialization and capitalism that had no mercy for the planet; there was pollution everywhere. And it was the time of the report of the Club of Rome published in 1975 on the state of our planet. I am not saying that there is a direct connection between all of these phenomena, especially between the rediscovery of apocalypticism and climate change. However, I do believe that it was no coincidence that this all happened at the same time. One aspect of apocalypticism, as I will

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<sup>7</sup> See Oegema (1999; 2001; 2003a; 2003b; 2008; 2012a; 2012b; 2013c).

<sup>8</sup> Whereas the term “apocalypticism” and its German equivalent “Apokalypstik” refer more to a phenomenon, mindset or worldview, the expression “apocalyptic imagination” tries to describe the creative process behind it, and “apocalypse” is the actual literary genre, in which both are mostly found.

explain later, is namely its sensitivity to reflect on or represent the *Zeitgeist* or mindset of an epoch, whether in antiquity or in modern times.

Collins himself focuses both on the genre “apocalypse,” as researched and outlined in the thematic Journal *Semeia* 14 of 1979 (Collins 1979), and the question what the characteristics are of the genre. This marks one direction, which research into apocalypticism has taken, namely a more literary one. There are other approaches as well, but for now it is worth quoting his definition of the genre “apocalypse,” as it has defined much of later scholarship, albeit mostly of a literary and historical character:

A genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world. (Collins 1979: 9)

A definition was nevertheless necessary, as apocalyptic literature as a whole let alone something even more vague like the phenomenon “apocalypticism” is difficult to grasp. For one, it is surely not limited to the Hebrew Bible, but is found in many ancient near Eastern cultures and also beyond. However, as to date there is no consensus on a definition of apocalypticism, there exist different levels or approaches to study it, whether as a genre, as an historical phenomenon, or as a world view, and there is also the question of its social relevance and relation to other worldviews, philosophical, and theological ones. Sometimes it seems best just to identify its key aspects instead of trying to come to a definition (as I will do this at the end of this article).<sup>9</sup>

This is partly due to the inter-cultural and cross-historical nature of it. Apocalypticism is found in Judaism, Christianity and Islam as well as in Greek, Roman and Egyptian ancient cultures, but also, for example in early modern Maya culture, in Hinduism, in popular Hollywood movies and in twentieth-century Japan.<sup>10</sup> In other words, to get a sense of the connections between the study of apocalypticism and worldviews, it is worth to have a brief look at its history of research. Coming from there we can then better define its present-day relevance, especially in light of climate change.

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<sup>9</sup> See on this also the excellent article by Patrick Becker and Steffen Jöris (2016).

<sup>10</sup> See some of the other articles in this volume.

## 2 History of Research

According to the histories of research of Joachim M. Schmidt (1976) and John J. Collins (1979, 1999, 2007) the academic study of apocalypticism found its origin in the investigations of the Book of Daniel and the Revelation of John and reached its first culmination in the concise overviews of Friedrich Lücke, Eduard Reuss and Adolf Hilgenfeld in the early nineteenth century. It developed further into the history of literature as well as in the religion- and tradition-historical approaches or models of explanations of the twentieth century (Gunkel 1895 and Mowinckel; Collins 1979, 1999, 2007; Hanson 1979, Rowland 1982). However, some of the early overviews can still be of importance today, if they are adapted to and incorporated with newer discoveries and methodological innovations from the Dead Sea Scrolls to sociological approaches (see Cook 1995).

### 2.1 The History of Literature: Approach I

Joachim Schmidt differentiates in his 1967 *Habilitationsschrift* “Die jüdische Apokalyptik” (Schmidt 1976) on the history of research of Jewish apocalypticism between the so-called older and younger phase of the history of literature models of explanation (called phases I and II). What one can learn from this approach is that the definition of the genre “apocalypse” always comes with a description of its religious contents as well as with efforts to date the various stages of the genre. However, in a comparison with prophecy, apocalypticism has often received the less favorable characteristics. As for a modern definition of both prophecy and apocalypticism, it is important to point at the work of Paul Hanson (1979) and the influence it has had on recent scholarship. Hanson defines apocalypticism in terms of visionary movement, eschatological perspective and symbolic universe, rivalry groups and contradictions between hopes and experiences, in order to distinguish it from prophecy. Behind the distinction is the supposition that prophecy has an historical worldview and apocalypticism a mythological one. Even if this distinction recently has been questioned by, for example, Lester Grabbe (see Grabbe and Haak 2003) and even if one would rephrase it differently, there is still much to be said about it. Apocalypticism has a strong mythological contents and appeal.

## 2.2 The Religion and Tradition: Historical Approach

The religion and tradition-historical model of explanation of apocalypticism as developed since the end of the nineteenth century is summarized by Schmidt as follows:

With the use of the tradition historical approach Gunkel has sharply opposed prophecy ad apocalypticism. The theological importance, which he gave to the latter, may explain the sharpness of his judgment. But there are several objections to be made against his argumentation, which by no means has lost its actuality. Above all and despite his efforts of a historical understanding of apocalypticism he has not given the aforementioned opposition any differentiation. [ . . . ] On the other hand Gunkel has been led by the image of the ideal prophet. Because for him prophecy was the summit of Israelite history of religion anyways, compared to prophecy's creative genius apocalypticism had to take upon it a contrasting role [ . . . ]. (Schmidt 1979: 249)

In the work of Hermann Gunkel, we see that prophecy and apocalypticism are treated as two totally different and contrasting intellectual modes, which mutual opposition is defined foremost on the basis of its theological characterization. As for the tradition- and redaction-history, one should not overlook that many older and newer commentaries on both the prophecies and the apocalypses use these methods as a (or the only) bridge between the actual text, the various stages of its development and their respective historical situations. Partly behind this may be an aversion of and opposition to apocalypticism in Protestant theology since Martin Luther, to which the upheavals of the Reformation and the 30-year war, especially also the Anabaptist and their New Jerusalem in Münster may have contributed not a little. Similar reactions can be observed in the case of Bar Kochba and the Rabbinic aversion against everything radical apocalyptic and militant in the second century CE and the same with Sabbatai Zevi in the seventeenth century.

## 2.3 The Theological Approach

Whereas as of lately little attention has been given to a more theological approach of prophetic and apocalyptic literature, this approach used to be dominant at least until one or two generations ago. There may, however, still be some advantage in giving a theological classification of both types of literature in the way they reflect on central religious questions, such as on the origin of evil and the time of redemption. As these theological classifications do not necessarily have to be appropriated by denominational interests or by theological biases, they can very well serve to further elucidate common and distinctive

features. Theological and religiously relevant reflections remain to be relevant as long as society is developing. This growing awareness of the theological relevance of apocalypticism has been very well observed and phrased by John J. Collins:

The growth in appreciation of symbolic and mythological literature has generally led to a more positive assessment of the apocalypses. Apocalyptic imagery is less often viewed as idle speculation but is seen to express an interpretation of historical situations (often political crises) and to shape the human response to those situations [. . .]. In this respect, the existential interpretation of apocalypticism offered by Bultmann and Schmithals is noteworthy, even if it has not always done full justice to the allusiveness of the mythological symbolism. Martin Buber's sweeping condemnation of apocalyptic determinism and of the use of pseudonymity as an evasion of responsibility can now be seen as a misunderstanding of the function of apocalypses. Equally, the view that the apocalyptic use of history is directed only to a calculation of the end-time has been discredited [. . .]. Instead, the apocalyptic reviews of history serve to highlight the short period before the end, which is the actual time of the author, as a period of decision. (Collins 1979: 360–361)

## 2.4 The History of Literature Approach and the Definition of the Genre “Apocalypse” in the Latter Part of the Twentieth Century

Whereas Joachim Schmidt discusses mainly the older German scholarship on apocalypticism, John J. Collins, who has just been quoted, offers an overview of the more recent and especially English-speaking studies. Collins sees in the work of Klaus Koch (1970) and the *Society of Biblical Literature* “*Genres Project*” two important contributions to the modern study of apocalypticism. In the scholarship of Klaus Koch, a differentiation is made between the “apocalypse” as literary genre and “apocalypticism” as historical movement.

Despite the ongoing critique of, for instance, Lester Grabbe, the stage had now been set for a much more detailed study of apocalypses as individual literary products, both concerning their theological contents and their historical and social setting. Apart from other aspects, like the expression “One like a Man”, the use of the Hebrew Bible in the apocalypses, the question of traditional sources and the relation between wisdom and apocalypticism, especially the question of the place of apocalyptic literature in Early Judaism has played an important role. As far as the question of literary genres is concerned, it is important to note that during the past decades also in the study of prophetic literature form criticism has gone through important transitional phases and that the question about the intersection between form and life setting is still an extremely important one.

## 2.5 The Social Setting Approach

After the literary, history or religion, tradition-historical and the newer literary approach of J.J. Collins et al. from the late eighteenth until the middle of the twentieth century a newer approach to apocalypticism was formulated in the efforts to determine its social origins and settings. In his book on *Prophecy and Apocalypticism: The Postexilic Setting* (Cook 1995), Stephen L. Cook offers us his view on some of the so-called proto-apocalyptic texts Ezekiel 38–39; Zechariah 1–8 and Joel and the groups behind them. Contrary to the previous scholarship of Paul Hanson and Otto Plöger, Cook does not believe that the apocalyptic groups are to be found among the socially and economically deprived classes and the marginal and socially alienated figures. Instead, while turning to sociological and anthropological analyses of apocalyptic groups and typologically characterizing them according to their relationship to their own society and to their own or other cultures, apocalypticism may very well have emerged from a wider variety of social matrices and have been under the leadership of many kinds of figures, and thus be much more than the response of a sect to a political crisis. So, instead of apocalypticism being the response of a small sect to a political crisis, apocalypticism may very well have originated from mainstream groups within a society, and instead represent a more universal mindset than a minority opinion.

## 2.6 The Reception Historical Approach (1990–2008)

During the past two decades a number of studies on apocalypticism have dealt with the history of its reception in antiquity beyond the Second Temple Period. To begin with, *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and in the Near East*, a collection of essays edited by David Hellholm in 1989, is a milestone in research at the end of the twentieth century and represents the papers presented at a colloquium in Uppsala in 1979. Three thematic fields and approaches have been dealt with in this impressive book: 1) the conceptual world of apocalypticism, 2) the literary genre of the apocalypse and 3) the sociology of apocalypticism and the life setting of the apocalypses. At the end of the collection, K. Rudolph emphasizes the following important problematic fields for future research: 1) Jewish-Christian apocalypticism, 2) apocalypticism of primitive and early Christianity, 3) the relation between apocalypticism and Gnosticism, and 4) the influence of Iranian-Zoroastrian tradition on Biblical apocalypticism. For future research he points at the importance of the literary scientific and sociological methods as well as the need of an intensive study of the reception

history of apocalypticism until today. Some of this may be covered in an important follow-up conference in 2021 in Munich.

## 2.7 The Intellectual History Approach

As for the intellectual history approach and especially for the hypothesis of a common apocalyptic worldview, in a collection of articles edited by Gabriele Boccaccini and John J. Collins, *The Early Enoch Literature* from 2007, we find some very useful methodological arguments and criteria of how to compare two different literary corpora, in this case the Books of *1 Enoch* and the Dead Sea Scrolls. The articles in this collection are useful as an analogy to the problem of a relation between prophecy and apocalypticism, as the Dead Sea Scrolls offer many actualizing interpretations of the Prophetic writings and *1 Enoch* is an early representative of Jewish apocalypticism.

However, I want to end this brief history of research to get to the broader question of the intellectual dimension of apocalypticism and the relevance for today. In his book *Weltangst und Weltende: Eine theologische Interpretation der Apokalypik* (1988) or in English *The End of the World: A Theological Interpretation of Apocalypticism* (1995) Ulrich Körtner addresses the issue of apocalyptic anxiety by offering a theological and philosophical evaluation of what we call “apocalyptic.” In particular, Körtner looks at how theology, responding in pastoral sensitivity, should deal with apocalyptic fears and anxieties. He concludes that real meaning and hope for the world is possible only after the world’s inhabitants deal constructively with the stark reality of the world’s end.

In order to reach his hypothesis of a relevance of apocalypticism for theology today, Körtner plows deep through much of twentieth century intellectual history and sees various moments, in which the end of the world was thought of as philosophically and theologically relevant. Reviewed are, for example:

- the *Untergang des Abendlandes*, by philosophers like Oswald Spengler (1918);
- theories about the end of the world from a natural science point of view (see the work of Teilhard de Jardin; 1946);
- the limits of economic growth (Club of Rome, 1975); and
- the atomic catastrophe, etc. (1982).

One cannot separate climate change from these broader trends in society. And obviously Körtner would have included climate change in his book, if he had written it in our days, as the discussion continues.



### 3 The Apocalyptic Worldview

We thus come to the question of the apocalyptic worldview and how to connect ancient apocalypticism with both intellectual history and with modern views about the end of world. When trying to summarize what ancient apocalypticism as a phenomenon (and not so much as a literary genre or a feature of Ancient Jewish literature) is about, the key characteristics of the apocalyptic worldview are according to me as follows.

It consists of a myth of origin with the search for the origin of evil often leading to the concept of “fallen angels” or demons, it often has an ethical and cosmological dualism between good and evil, which can also be personalized in God and Satan, Christ and Antichrist, angels and demons, and it understands time as periodized and eschatological: that it to say unfolding in phases towards a final end. The apocalyptic mindset, which is mostly but not exclusively found in the post-Exilic prophets and apocalyptic authors from Hellenistic and Roman period, sees mankind’s time on earth being limited between creation and eschaton (Urzeit and Endzeit). It derives from this also the understanding of the eschaton as a new creation, in addition to concepts like a messianic age, Golden Age, which exact time can be calculated. The expected end or latter-day turn-around is often coming with the help of a messianic savior figure, human or cosmic.

However, before this a humanly and/or divinely induced catastrophic end precedes the new world. Often finds an emphasis on human sin, caused by fallen angels/demons, who are responsible for the evil in the world throughout history, with good and bad times interchanging in a periodized history dependent on whether people repent or improve their behavior. As for the latter, there is the possibility of repentance, which is found more often in prophetic literature than in apocalyptic literature, which sees the end more often as an unavoidable catastrophic. The latter results in the observation that the apocalyptic worldview is much more pessimistic and often has detailed doomsday scenarios than other worldviews.

We derive these characteristics from an analysis of the multiple examples of the genre “apocalypse,” mainly from antiquity, as they have influenced the later Judeo-Christian tradition, but at the same time we assume that they also reflect elements of a wider ancient apocalyptic worldview, as we also witness it through other apocalypses, from Greek and Roman to Iranian and Egyptian and beyond.

Having said this about the phenomenon “apocalypticism,” we can therefore also open up the possibility of a second dimension to apocalypticism, namely as an intellectual mode of thinking or psychological state of mind. This *Zeitgeist*

of a certain epoch or expression thereof, maybe even a mindset, when stripped off its mythological language reveals a deeper and universal mindset, which could and can easily be adapted in other cultures and periods in history. This way of thinking reflects a deeper sense of universal *Weltangst* and a fear for the near end of this world, a trend that can be nurtured by certain social, economic and political circumstances, and depending on the situation can be actualized or become dormant again, even in our own days. In other words, it may be a dormant “Angst” present in all of us, that can be triggered through catastrophic events into a more global and deeper felt anxiety about the end of the world.

## 4 Relevance for Today

When looking at this universal dimension of apocalypticism as expression of a *Zeitgeist*, one can certainly connect it with the present-day debate about climate change and environmental catastrophes, maybe not as the outcome of what ancient apocalypses had predicted, but as expressions of a broader fear that our planet is nearing its end. This end is obviously scientifically argued for and is not based on mythological concepts, as our worldview is based on scientific facts and arguments.

In particular, we are using a Cartesian and technocratic worldview and methodology instead of apocalyptic and demonological worldview and methodology. We argue on the basis of “cause-effect” and used statistics for all of our claims instead of relying on secret knowledge and magical practices. We have technical, medical, and climate experts instead apocalyptic authors and interpreters of the signs of the times. However, when the mythological worldview is unpacked, a theological approach to “la condition humaine” and postmodernism remains relevant, and it is worth to look at the communalities and shared interests.

## 5 Lessons for Today

My thesis is that when one takes away the mythological character of the apocalyptic language and goes to the heart of its existential and theological message, knowing that its “theology” has always been criticized and sidelined by the established Christian and Jewish theologies, one can certainly still learn a lot from it. I see the following lessons for today:

- 1) When connecting evil and sin to its potentially catastrophic outcomes, as the apocalypses do, one can emphasize the human responsibility for and contribution to global warming and its partly already real and potentially future catastrophic outcomes. Once we acknowledge that it has been caused by us as human beings, we also have to see that it may already have developed its own momentum. Like in the ancient apocalypses, the world seems to be heading towards a catastrophic end that is hard to stop.
- 2) When seeing the opposition of much apocalyptic thinking and apocalyptic movements from the side of the establishment in the history of apocalypticism, one can learn from it how to deal with opposition: we should not therefore give up trying to look for peaceful solutions.
- 3) When seeing the historical perspective, in which many apocalypses understand evil, sin and catastrophe, one can learn from it to also put climate change and catastrophe in an historical perspective: it didn't happen all of a sudden, but was prepared in the past and is due to human inaction heading towards a catastrophe. One can learn from the apocalypses the importance of how previous generations have dealt with catastrophes.
- 4) When seeing the interconnectedness of everything in apocalyptic literature, namely that the sin of the individual and that of the group and that of society at large in the end has consequences for the whole earth, both in good and in bad terms, one can learn from it. One cannot hide and say, as long as I have it good here and now, everything is fine, because in one way or another everything one does has consequences for the rest of humanity.
- 5) This historical perspective also opens up the possibility of real change and the chance for a possibly winning fight against climate change in order to improve the life of future generations on earth. And obviously, here we have to work with statistics and scientific models and not demonology, magic and calculations of the end of days, but see them in historical perspective. And thus, the apocalyptic narrative and discourse teaches us to place things in an historical perspective, see how everything is connected with each other and how expressions of human concerns can function as wake-up calls and signs of hope.
- 6) And what do we do with the apocalyptic expectation of a new heaven and earth, paradise, a messianic age or a Golden Age? Obviously, already now technology offers many improvements of life and the quality of life, both for the individual and society, compared with just one generation ago. Artificial Intelligence may help us manage a more and more complex world, in which we do not have to fantasize about immigrating to Mars, but already in the here and now can improve our life by improving the climate on our own planet.

- 7) And finally, we have a pastoral responsibility as those, who understand and have access to this “higher knowledge” to care for those, who are in despair and sink into anxiety and depression because of the end of everything that now seems to be so near. This is a real and growing problem among young people, anxiety and depression, and maybe it has something to do with doomsday thinking about the end of our planet. And so, my final word is that when we see the apocalyptic dimension of climate change, we have no other choice but to take action.

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