

6 Dealing in Disasters

Selling Apocalyptic Interpretations of Disasters in the Sixteenth-Century Low Countries

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Abstract

Sixteenth-century pamphlet sellers made a profit by marketing disasters. This contribution takes a closer look at this activity by focusing on apocalyptic motives and the commercial consequences of putting these themes in the pamphlet. By comparing the reactions to the All Saints Flood (1570) in Dutch and German pamphlets, the article highlights the religious and political contexts of the two regions to explain the different uses of the Apocalypse. In Lutheran regions in Germany, printers chose the Apocalypse as an interpretation, while in Catholic regions disasters were seen as God's punishment. Because of the clear religious choice in Germany (at least after 1555), writers knew exactly what interpretation to put in their disaster pamphlets. In the Low Countries, however, authors focused on God's wrath but, considering the diverse religious landscape, still included apocalyptic notions. In this way, they expanded the possible readership of the pamphlet, resulting in potentially bigger profits.

Keywords

Apocalypse – Low Countries – All Saints Flood – providence – news – pamphlets

When we speak of dealing *with* disasters, we should sometimes also speak of dealing *in* disasters. Sixteenth-century pamphlet sellers certainly made a profit by marketing disasters.¹ Almost immediately after catastrophe

¹ Sara K. Barker, "Newes lately come". European News Books in English Translation', in Sara K. Barker and Brenda M. Hosington (eds), *Renaissance Cultural Crossroads. Translation, Print and Culture in Britain, 1473–1640* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 227–44, at 235.

had struck, broadsheets, pamphlets, and prints could be bought at the local book shop. Although sixteenth-century pamphleteers might have had high-minded motives for publishing their text (warning people about the wrath of God or maybe to arouse compassion in readers), the commercial motivations behind publishing disaster pamphlets should not be forgotten.

This contribution takes a closer look at this activity by focusing on apocalyptic motives and the commercial consequences of putting these themes in the pamphlet's interpretation of the disaster. I do this by contrasting the apocalyptic reactions to disasters in the sixteenth-century Low Countries with the reactions to the same event found in multiple places in the German-speaking parts of the Holy Roman Empire (for the most part, present-day Germany). The latter context has already been heavily studied by multiple scholars. Just as in the Low Countries, these German-speaking regions had a lively pamphlet production. The apocalyptic reaction in these pamphlets was, however, completely different. A possible explanation for this difference lies in the dissimilar commercial possibilities that the apocalyptic interpretation could offer.

In this contribution I will first offer a short historiographic overview of apocalyptic ideas in sixteenth-century Europe, and the Low Countries and the German-speaking parts of the Holy Roman Empire more specifically. Secondly, I will show how Dutch pamphlet writers used the Apocalypse as an explanation for disasters in their pamphlets, contrasting this with how they used the idea of God's providence. Then I will go on to a case study of the All Saints Flood, a flood that hit the North Sea coast in 1570. This will make clear the differences in apocalyptic reactions between German and Dutch pamphlet writers. Lastly, I will try to explain the discrepancies by focusing on the religious and political situations in the two regions. I will argue that Dutch pamphlet sellers had to downplay apocalyptic interpretations for better sales figures, while their German counterparts highlighted the Apocalypse to sell theirs.

State of Research

Research into apocalyptic ideas and reactions in the sixteenth-century Low Countries lags behind the same research done for other parts of Europe. Some smaller case studies have been carried out, but a general overview

is missing.² An interesting case study for this article is the contribution by Bart Ramakers, professor of historical Dutch literature, on apocalyptic ideas in Dutch rhetoricians' plays. Looking at dramatic performances in Catholic Antwerp and Reformed Gouda, he concludes that the Book of Revelation could have been a source of inspiration for both. The sharp divisions that other scholars detect – which I will come back to shortly – are, according to Ramakers's research, not as relevant for the sixteenth-century Low Countries.³

The lack of a good overview might surprise us, since the sixteenth-century Low Countries have many extraordinary features which could advance the scholarship on apocalyptic thinking. The purpose of this article is not to give such a broad overview. It does, however, seek to highlight some of the promising aspects the Low Countries can offer to this field of study. The diversity of the religious landscape of this region and – in the last decades of the century – the freedom of conscience that allowed people to believe what they wanted to believe (with restrictions, because practising was allowed only to Calvinists) make for an entirely different context that resulted in a different way of dealing with apocalyptic thoughts.

The international research into apocalyptic thinking took off with the publication of Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium. Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (1957). In this work Cohn presents the idea that apocalyptic thinking was mostly used by rebellious groups to justify their actions. One example he gives is the Münster rebellion by the Anabaptists.⁴ Since the publication of his book, others have

2 For some smaller case studies, see C.P.M. Burger, 'Eindtijdverwachting aan het einde van de vijftiende eeuw en bij Maarten Luther' in Willemien Otten and Gerard Rouwhorst (eds), *Het einde nabij? Toekomstverwachting en de angst voor het oordeel in de geschiedenis van het christendom* (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 1999), 181–98; Willem Frijhoff, 'Katholieke toekomstverwachting ten tijde van de Republiek. Structuur, en grondlijnen tot een interpretatie', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 98 (1983), 430–60; Willem Frijhoff, 'Het Gelders Antichrist-tractaat (1524) en zijn auteur', *Archief voor de geschiedenis van de katholieke kerk in Nederland* 28 (1986), 192–217; Peter Nissen, "Onse salicheit is seer nabi getreden". Toekomst- en eindtijdverwachtingen in het Nederlandse doperdom', in Otten and Rouwhorst, *Het einde nabij?*, 215–24. Huib Zegwaart noted this lack of a general study of the subject by Dutch scholars in Bible studies: 'Apocalyptiek. Overzicht van een verwaarloosd gebied in het Nederlandse bijbelonderzoek', in Cornelis Houtman and L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte (eds), *Joden, christenen en hun Schrift. Een bundel opstellen aangeboden bij het afscheid van C.J. den Heyer* (Baarn: VBK Media, 2001), 130–46.

3 Bart A.M. Ramakers, 'Apocalyptiek op de planken. Twee rederijkersspelen over het Boek Openbaring', *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 66 (1992), 187–223.

4 Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium. Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (1957; 2nd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 281–86. Michael Driedger criticised Cohn's study of the Anabaptists because Cohn used sources written

shown that this idea no longer holds. Bernard McGinn, for example, shows that the social history of apocalyptic thinking cannot be reduced to one group. He identifies apocalyptic ideas in all parts of society: from rich to poor and from the powerful to the powerless.⁵

With the assertion about specific groups using the Apocalypse superseded, researchers have tried to find other explanations for sudden bursts of apocalyptic thinking. One suggestion was that periods of crises and disaster led to apocalyptic fervour. This idea was nuanced almost immediately by researchers pointing out that the same crisis was dealt with differently by different people. A crisis alone does not sufficiently explain the rise of apocalyptic thinking.⁶ Still, even recent studies sometimes equate crisis situations with apocalyptic feelings.⁷

International research into apocalyptic thinking, including the apocalyptic interpretations of disasters (the focus of the present article), has concentrated particularly on the German-speaking lands in the sixteenth century. Robin Barnes, Volker Leppin, and Philip Soergel all argue that apocalyptic thinking and the interpretation of disasters as signs of the End Times took hold within Lutheranism in particular.⁸ Barnes took this idea one step further by proposing that the Apocalypse could be used by confessional groups to strengthen the differences between the confessions in an almost polemical way. According to Barnes, Lutherans were the most fervent advocates of an approaching Apocalypse, while Catholics did not truly believe in this idea. Barnes positioned the Calvinist religion somewhere in between.⁹

In this article I will come back to these last two trends: apocalyptic thinking (not) resulting from crisis and using apocalyptic ideas polemically. By

by enemies of the Anabaptists: Michael Driedger, 'Thinking Inside the Cages. Norman Cohn, Anabaptist Münster, and Polemically Inspired Assumptions about Apocalyptic Violence', *Nova Religio* 21 (2018), 38–62.

5 Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End. Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 3–4.

6 Volker Leppin, *Antichrist und jüngster Tag. Das Profil apokalyptischer Flugschriftenpublizistik im deutschen Luthertum 1548–1618* (Heidelberg: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1999), 161; McGinn, *Visions of the End*, 31.

7 Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Religion, War, Famine and Death in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

8 Philip Soergel, 'Die Wahrnehmung der Endzeit in monströsen Anfängen', in Hartmut Lehmann and Anne-Charlott Trepp (eds), *Im Zeichen der Krise. Religiosität im Europa des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 33–52, at 33; Robin B. Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis. Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 2; Volker Leppin, *Antichrist und jüngster Tag*.

9 Robin B. Barnes, 'Varieties of Apocalyptic Experience in Reformation Europe', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 33: 2 (2002), 261–74.

focusing on a different religious and political context, I will try to add more body to existing scholarship. My sources, pamphlets written on disasters and portents, do not allow me to go into depth on what people thought the Apocalypse would be. They do offer a view on how apocalyptic words and concepts (such as the Day of Judgement and the Lord's Day) could be used to help present the author's or publisher's point.¹⁰

Apocalyptic Reactions in Dutch Disaster Pamphlets

The number of apocalyptic reactions to disasters in Dutch pamphlets in the sixteenth century is limited. Out of the eighty-three disaster pamphlets I collected, thirty-one mention something of an apocalyptic nature. These mentions range from biblical references to quick citations of apocalyptic words. Most of the time, the passages are very short and consist of merely a few words. Contemporaries reading them could easily ignore or overlook them. It is only because of the many associations and connotations that these words could truly stand out. They could call to mind the sermons of the priest or pastor about the Day of Judgement¹¹, or the depictions of the Apocalypse.¹² In these cases, a few words on the Apocalypse could make people aware of the signs that would inevitably show up when the Last Days would be near. However, these words did nothing for others who had not listened to a Doomsday priest or pastor and had not looked at depictions of the End Times. The beauty of these short mentions is that they targeted those readers who already carried the mental baggage of apocalyptic thinking, while others could easily filter them out.

In general, there were three different places in the pamphlets where people could encounter these words: the title page, the preface, or other accompanying text and in the running text. Combinations were possible as well. All three locations bring with them different effects on the reading experience. A reference on the title page guides the reader into the work and therefore stands out, while a mention in the running text could more easily be overlooked.

10 Thomas Long, 'Revising the Revelation. Early Modern Appropriations of Medieval Apocalypticism', in Michael A. Ryan (ed.), *A Companion to Premodern Apocalypse* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 378–425.

11 e.g. *Dagboek van Cornelis en Philip van Campene*, ed. Frans de Potter (Ghent: Annoot-Braeckman, 1870), 370.

12 e.g. the famous woodcut series by the artist Albrecht Dürer from 1498. See *Die Apokalyps. Faksimile der Deutschen Urausgabe von 1498. 'Die Heimlich Offenbarung Johannis'*, ed. Ludwig Grote (Munich: Prestel, 1970).

The title page was one place where writers or publishers could easily add an apocalyptic note. Many title pages, whether from a disaster pamphlet or not, included some citations of biblical origin or important lessons from church fathers, saints, or other eminent (religious) figures. Apocalyptic title pages mostly fell back on the common apocalyptic biblical texts, especially on the prophetic elements in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.¹³ Jan de Coster, a Louvain member of a chamber of rhetoric, published a poem on the floods that had hit his city in 1573. On the title page, he included a poetic rendering of the gospel of Luke 21:

Everyone fears the Lord as he begins to strike
 All that are on earth, because all kinds of
 Signs will be seen, in stars, sun and moon,
 And in the flood of waters on the land.¹⁴

According to de Coster, the floods were forebodings of the Day of the Lord. Yet, in the running text, the Apocalypse is never mentioned again. The poem on the title page seems to serve merely as an advertisement to promote the sale of the pamphlet.

In addition to the title page, the preface or other accompanying text (or paratext¹⁵) could also provide an apocalyptic framing of the event. However, I did not find any cases of an author dealing with the Apocalypse at length in their prefaces. At most, they limited themselves to a couple of words or a single sentence to get the warning message across. Sentences like 'God, make sure that we will be prepared for the coming of the Lord' or 'our poor people, for whom the end of the world has arrived' are scattered throughout the prefaces and included without any context or explanation.¹⁶

13 For an overview of biblical books with apocalyptic features, see Stephen L. Cook, *The Apocalyptic Literature* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003).

14 Jan de Coster (also known as Jan Stroosnijder), *Warachtighe ende wonderlijcke beschrijvinghe die gheschiedt sijn tot Lueven*, ed. Gilbert Huybens, *Memorabilia Lovaniensia* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013). The text in Dutch reads:

Elck vrees den Heere als hy beghint te slane,
 Al die in aertrijck sijt, want menigherande
 Teecken salmen sien, in sterren sonne en mane,
 En in den vloet der wateren binnen den lande.

15 Gerard Genette, *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1–2.

16 *Wonderlijcke niemaren uut Calabren gepropheteert* (Gouda: Jan Zas Hoenz, voor P.S., 1587). The text in Dutch reads: 'God maeck dat wy moghen bereyt zijn tegen de toecomste des Heeren'. *Wonderlicke nieuwe tijdinghe ... vande ... teecken ... in ... Gendt* (Dordrecht: Peeter Verhaghen,

Other accompanying text also framed the readers' experience. Take, for example, the following poem that accompanied a pamphlet about a wondrous birth in Purmerend in 1599:

Give up your sins, move away from evil
 Always remember the Day of the Lord
 As Matthew xxiii does show
 No matter how noble, how rich, or how highborn, no one will escape
 God's judgement will come, swiftly and unforeseen
 Like a thief in the night
 So watch and pray, all you people
 That you may suffice before your heavenly father
 Oh, there will be seen such despair
 Like it was ever thought or seen on earth
 Those who did well and virtuous
 Will go with Him in the eternal bliss¹⁷

After this poem, the main text of the news pamphlet began. The message (move away from sins, because the Day of Judgement is approaching) would still be ringing in the readers' ears while reading about a wondrous birth in Purmerend. Clearly, the author saw this event as a sign of the coming Apocalypse, underlining the point of the poem.

1587). The text in Dutch reads: 'ons arme menschen, op welcke het eynde der werelt ghecomen is'.
 17 Een mirakel ende geschiedenisse hoe dat binnen de stadt Purmurent ... geboren is een kint
 (Antwerp: s.pub., 1599).

The text in Dutch reads:

Staet van sonden af, van t'quaet wilt keeren
 Sijt altijt denckende op den dach des Heeren
 Soo ons Mattheus xxiii doet verstaen
 Hoe edel, hoe rijc, hoe stam niemant falt ontgaen
 Gods oordeel sal comen so haest en onverhoet
 Ghelijck een dief inder nacht doet
 Dus waect en bidt ghy menschen allegaer
 Dat ghy mocht volstaen voor u hemelschen vaer
 Och daer sal alsdan sulcken druc geschien
 Als het op aerden oyt was gedacht ende ghesien
 Die dan goet ghedaen hebben ende deucht
 Sullen met hem gaen in de eeuwighe vreucht

Interestingly, this is the only example in my corpus where the approaching Apocalypse also has a positive ring (those who did well will go to paradise). Compare with Charles Zika, 'Disaster, Apocalypse, Emotions and Time in Sixteenth-Century Pamphlets', in Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika (eds), *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400–1700* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 69–90, at 76.

Title pages and prefaces serve to guide the reader into the text, but what if the apocalyptic notion was put right inside the text? In the case of a pamphlet on earthquakes in Italy, the writer put the following words into the mouth of the narrator: 'I believe for sure that I have seen a likeness of the final day of judgement'.¹⁸ The function of this kind of apocalyptic text is unclear. It could be to focus the attention of the reader or to make them aware that they are still dealing with divine happenings and not with mere natural events. Yet, these instances are of such a short nature and left so completely unexplained that they could be easily overlooked or ignored unless the reader was already attuned to them.

All in all, the apocalyptic reactions to disasters in Dutch pamphlets are limited. What stands out the most is that the cases in which there are some forms of apocalyptic expectancy are very concise. The readers had to make up their own minds on what to think about these threatening words and sentences. As we will see in the example below, Dutch pamphlets deal with God's providence and the disaster as a punishment for sins differently. There the interpretation is explained further using examples from history and the Bible. In German disaster pamphlets, the roles are reversed: the Apocalypse is given much room, while God's punishment is dealt with only briefly.

Case Study: All Saints Flood 1570

Let us explore this difference by looking in detail at the All Saints Flood of 1570 and its pamphlets. On the first of November, this flood hit the Low Countries but also the coast of northwestern Germany and Denmark. Storm surges caused dykes to break and water to flow over the land. It resulted in damage, dead cattle, and, above all, many human lives lost. The disaster also struck at a critical time: the Iconoclastic Fury had just swept through the Low Countries; the Duke of Alba had arrived in the Low Countries and tried to issue a new tax ('de tiende penning'); Alba used his Council of Troubles (also known as Council of Blood) to prosecute and execute heretics. All in all, the Netherlands were in a state of war, chaos, and insecurity. The flood only made things worse.

Despite the disastrous timing of the flood and the wave of destruction it caused, only one printed Dutch pamphlet remains that goes into detail

18 *Vander verschrickelijcker aertbevinghen in de stadt van Scharbarien* (Antwerp: Mattheus Crom, 1542). The text in Dutch reads: 'Ick gheloove sekerlijcken dat ick wel een gelijkenisse vanden uutersten dach des oordeels ghesien hebbe'.

about what occurred on that horrible day. In a poem the Calvinist writer Johan Fruytiers told his readers all about the damage that happened in every corner of the Low Countries and even further away (he also discussed Hamburg and Denmark).¹⁹ Fruytiers had experienced the flood, while staying in exile in Emden, in the very northwest of present-day Germany. Afterwards, he collected information from all over the Low Countries and put it together in a lengthy poem. The poem therefore mostly deals with numbers of casualties, dead cattle, damaged buildings, and other rather factual information. In the preface, on the other hand, Fruytiers offered his readers an interpretation of why this flood had struck the Low Countries.

Without any doubt, this flood was a punishment from God. That was the sole reason for Fruytiers to write his pamphlet: 'that is how this little book of mine began, to show us the wondrous punishment from God'.²⁰ By telling people about the disaster and how it had been a punishment, he wanted to leave a message that served as an 'admonition, lesson, and warning'.²¹ The preface is used to further explain this warning by adding examples from history, comparisons with biblical stories, and other current events that showed God's anger. In this introduction, Fruytiers, for the most part, dealt with the disaster as a punishment from God.

There are, however, some minor elements in the pamphlet that pointed towards an apocalyptic explanation. On the title page, Fruytiers included two biblical citations:

Habakkuk 3.8–9

The Lord has proven his anger in the flood; his grimness in the water, his wrath in the sea and he divided the currents in the land.

Luke 21.26

The sea and the water flood will roar, and the people will vanish because of fear and expectation of things that will happen to the world.²²

19 Johan Fruytiers, *Corte Beschrijvinghe vanden ellendighen ende seer beclaghelicken watervloet* ([Emden]: s.pub., 1571).

20 Ibid. The text in Dutch reads: 'Soo is dan dit cleyne boecxken van my begonst, op dat het ons de wonderbaerlijcke straffe Godes voorstelle'.

21 Ibid. The text in Dutch reads: 'Tot vermaninghe, leere ende waerschouwinghe'.

22 Ibid. The text in Dutch with references to the Bible reads:

Habbacuc 3.8-9: De Heere heft syn gramschap in den vloet, syn grimmicheyt in het water, synen toorn einder Zee bewesen, ende de stroomen in het lant verdeylt.

Luce 21.26: De zee ende watervloet sal brieschen, ende de menschen sullen verdwynen door de vreese ende verwachtinghe der dinghen die der werelt overcomen sullen'.

Not only are both verses well chosen for dealing with an overflowing of water; they are also apocalyptic in nature. Habakkuk 3 tells of the prophetic dream Habakkuk had in which he saw God coming down to earth, causing all kinds of disaster and wiping away entire nations but saving an elected few. The verses of the gospel of Luke are concerned with the return of Jesus to earth in the final days. Again, the world will experience disasters and people will be full of fear. The message on the front page of Fruytiers's work was clear: the flood should be seen as a sign of the coming Day of Judgement.

In the preface this apocalyptic interpretation pops up two more times. At the very beginning, Fruytiers called the flood one of many 'harbingers of the coming of His son Jesus Christ'.²³ Later on, the flood is the 'biggest warning for the Last Day'.²⁴ Even though these instances imply that Fruytiers thought this interpretation to be important, he gave no further explanation on how this flood was a clear sign of the Apocalypse. In contrast with his other interpretation of the disaster as a punishment from God, he gave no biblical examples, no historical comparisons, and no other current signs to strengthen his argument about the disaster as a harbinger of the Apocalypse.

It might be that these two interpretations (punishment or Apocalypse) followed naturally from each other. Church historian and theologian Volker Leppin, in his work *Antichrist und Jüngster Tag* (1999), explains the connection between Apocalypse and providence in two ways.²⁵ On the one hand, the two interpretations should be seen as different when looking at them from a theological perspective. Church officials definitely made a distinction between a 'normal' punishment and the all-encompassing Apocalypse. On the other hand, for most lay people the division was not that strict. And according to Leppin, for the average person, the difference between dying because of the disasters of the Apocalypse or because of disasters as punishment was not that important. The more important aspect was death itself.

Although Leppin makes a valid point, I believe it is striking that the balance between the two interpretations shifts when looking at different regions. For German pamphlets, this balance was completely reversed: the Apocalypse got most of the attention, while the disaster as punishment was dealt with only briefly. A couple of German pamphlets, also dealing with the All Saints Flood, will clarify this.

23 Ibid. The text in Dutch reads: 'voorboden der toecoemsten synes Soons Jesu Christi'.

24 Ibid. The text in Dutch reads: 'aldergrootste waerschouwinghe des joncxsten daghes'.

25 This paragraph is based on Leppin, *Antichrist und Jüngster Tag*.

At least four German-language disaster pamphlets were published after this flood. Each of them mentions the punishing God. The anonymous pamphlet *Warhafftige doch erschreckenliche beschreybung der gewlichen Wassernot* ('True but Terrifying Description of the Gruesome Flood', 1570) first calls the flood a 'punishment from God'.²⁶ Immediately after, the writer compared the flood to the Deluge and a major part of the text deals with an explanation of the disaster as a 'sign of the Day of Judgement'.²⁷ Like Fruytiers, this author used both the Apocalypse and the idea of a punishing God in interpreting the flood. However, the balance is reversed: this time, the Apocalypse demands most of the reader's attention.

Most tellingly, where Fruytiers used contemporary signs and disasters to show that God was angry, the German authors used the same signs to point to the nearness of the Last Days. The German broadsheet *Warhafftige doch Grewliche und Erschröckenliche Geschicht* ('True but Horrible and Terrifying History', 1570) offers a nice example:

When had the world suffered more from water, since the Deluge? The same applies to earthquakes, which ruin entire cities and villages, the same applies to the horrible signs in the sun and the moon, comets, and other horrible signs, the same applies to rains of grain and blood that we saw this year. Also war, the shedding of blood, also severe sickness, pestilence, and other corrupt air, together with severe inflation and bad foods; from all these signs the world now sees the Last Days must be near.²⁸

Earthquakes, pestilence, signs in the sun and moon: all were omens of the Last Days to this author.

Also, where Fruytiers put apocalyptic, biblical texts on his title page without any explanation, the German authors gave ample room to the

26 *Warhafftige doch erschreckenliche beschreybung der gewlichen Wassernot* (Augsburg: Michael Manger, 1570). The text in German reads: 'ein Straff Gottes'.

27 *Warhafftige doch erschreckenliche beschreybung*. The text in German reads: 'zeychen vor dem Jüngsten Tag'.

28 Daniel Holtzmann, *Warhafftige, doch gewliche und erschreckenliche Geschicht, so geschehen ist zu Antdorff* (Augsburg: Hans Moser, [1570]). The text in German reads: 'Wann hat die Welt vor mehr solche Wasser erlitten, seydt der Sündfluß? Deßgleichen auch Erdbidem, darinne gantze Stett und Dörffer verfallen, deßgleichen erschrockliche gesicht am Sonn unnd Mon, Cometen, auch andere schrockliche Zaichen, deßgleichen auch Koren und Blütregnen, wie diß Jar gesehen ist worden. Darzü auch Krieg, Blüt vergiessen, auch schwere Kranckheiten, Pestilentz, unnd andere verderbende Suchten, sampt schwerer Thewrung und spröder Narung, an denen Zaichen allen, der Welt abnemung unnd letstes End, wel zu spüren ist'. I have interpreted 'Thewrung' as *Teuerung*, meaning inflation, and 'Narung' as *Nahrung*, meaning food.

different prophetic Bible texts and especially to the apocalyptic passages in the gospels. The anonymous pamphlet *Jammerliche und erschröckliche Zeittung auß Niderland* ('Wretched and Terrifying Tidings from the Low Countries', 1570) concludes with an elaborate account in which the author summarised the most important points regarding the Final Days from the gospels of Matthew, Luke, and Mark.²⁹ Reading this summary at the end of the news about a terrible flood, the reader could not deny the similarities between their own times and the prophecies of the Evangelists.

In short, the difference between the Dutch printed reaction and its German counterparts is striking. The German pamphlets devote much more room to the Apocalypse, while they deal with the disaster as punishment only briefly. In the Low Countries, this balance is completely reversed, with ample room for the idea of punishment while the Apocalypse comes up rarely and, even then, only briefly. To find an explanation, we need to look at the political and religious context of the regions in which these texts were produced.

Explaining the Difference

An obvious reason could be the difference in religious backgrounds of the authors of these pamphlets. After all, Barnes and others already pointed out that the three main Christian denominations in the sixteenth century (Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism) all dealt with the Apocalypse differently. However, for the Dutch pamphlets, not much difference can be found. Calvinists wrote most Dutch pamphlets with apocalyptic notions, but authors of other denominations are certainly also present.³⁰ There is no clear difference between the Dutch disaster pamphlets written from different religious backgrounds: all of them contain short apocalyptic notions but do not explain those notions in any detail. In short, for the Dutch disaster pamphlets, the religious affiliation of the author is no indication of whether a pamphlet uses the Apocalypse, just as Ramakers showed for the plays of the chambers of rhetoric.

We should also question the view that the denomination of the writer mattered to the reader of the pamphlet. Not only are most pamphlets

29 *Jammerliche und erschröckliche Zeittung, auß Niderland* (s.l.: s.pub., [1570]).

30 In my corpus, thirty-one pamphlets contain apocalyptic notions. Of those thirty-one, ten have a Calvinist background, four Catholic, four Lutheran, one Mennonite, five more generally Protestant, and ten remain unclear. These religious backgrounds are determined by looking at the religious background of the author and/or the printer.

anonymous and the identity of the author unknown to the reader; it is also hard to recognise their confessional affiliation in most pamphlets. Notwithstanding that some disaster pamphlets were indeed written with confessional polemic in mind, many others were much more neutral in their description of the event.³¹ In those cases, readers from many confessional backgrounds could read the pamphlet without regard for the confessional background of the author. Take, for example, the reader Godevaert van Haecht, a Lutheran inhabitant of Antwerp. He noted down in his chronicle that he read Fruytiers's pamphlet of the All Saints Flood. He even copied large parts of it into his text. Clearly, he had no trouble with the disaster pamphlet, even though it was written by someone of an opposing denomination. He might not even have known that Fruytiers had Calvinistic sympathies. Authors and publishers may have even downplayed the confessional polemic for their own benefit. By keeping the purport of a pamphlet more neutral and choosing an interpretation that fitted all confessional backgrounds, they maximised their potential readership and therefore their potential profit.

For example, printer Cornelis Claesz. from Amsterdam was a fervent supporter of the Calvinist religion. His pamphlets, on the other hand, do not reveal this denomination. A disaster pamphlet he produced on floods in England in 1607 included some apocalyptic notions, even though Calvinism in its early stages was not known for its Apocalypticism.³² By including these notions, Claesz. could sell his pamphlet to people outside of his own confessional circle.³³ Why, then, did Dutch authors use the Apocalypse only as a side note, while their German counterparts devoted entire paragraphs to it?

Another possible explanation for this difference lies in the religious and political constellations in these regions from the second half of the sixteenth century onwards. In the Holy Roman Empire, it was established during the Peace of Augsburg (1555) that the ruler of every territory decided their own religion. The choice was, however, limited: they could choose between Catholicism and Lutheranism. Only from 1648 onwards was Calvinism one

31 On polemical use of disaster pamphlets in the Dutch context, see Raingard Esser, 'Fear of Water and Floods in the Low Countries', in William G. Naphy and Penny Roberts (eds), *Fear in Early Modern Society* (New York: Manchester University Press: 1997), 62–77; Marieke van Egeraat and Hanneke van Asperen, "Wat dat sy ons bedien". Walvisstrandingen in pamflet en prent rond 1600', *Jaarboek de zeventiende eeuw* (2020), 119–37.

32 Barnes, 'Varieties', 269; *Een warachtich verhael van de schrickelicke springh-vloedt in het Landtschap van Summerset* (Amsterdam: Cornelis Claesz, 1607).

33 Bert Hofman, *Liedekens vol gheestich confoort. Een bijdrage tot de kennis van de zestiende-eeuwse Schrijftuurlijke lyriek* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1993), 154.

of the options.³⁴ This meant that, at least on paper, the religious situation in each territory was very clear. Inhabitants knew what was expected of them: Catholic ritual or Lutheran prayer.

A consequence for the authors and publishers of disaster pamphlets was that they could single out one specific disaster interpretation, dictated by the established confession. In Lutheran regions the Apocalypse was a beloved theme, whereas in Catholic districts the wrath of God was much more popular. In Strasbourg, for example, printer Thiebold Berger published *Warhaffte und erbermliche neue Zeitung von dem erschrecklichen Feuerzeichen und Erdbidem* ('True and Pitiful New Tidings about the Terrifying Fire Sign and Earthquake') in 1584. It dealt with an earthquake that surprised the city of Bern. The title page is adorned with a warning message from the gospel of Matthew. The actual text begins with factual news but is immediately followed by an interpretation: the natural signs that had happened in the last couple of months, including this earthquake, should be seen as 'special signs and harbingers of great misfortune ... and all kinds of sadness, especially also the nearing Last Day'.³⁵ This apocalyptic message fitted well in the Lutheran context of Strasbourg.

In Catholic areas of the Holy Roman Empire, the Apocalypse got little or no mention in the disaster pamphlets. In Munich, for example, Catholic printer Adam Berg published two such pamphlets: one broadsheet about a famine in 'Reussen und Littau', places in present-day Lithuania, in 1573 and another on a flood near Munich in 1582.³⁶ In both publications the idea of the disaster as punishment prevails. The events should be seen as signs of an angry God. The Last Days are mentioned once in the flood pamphlet, but only to compare the contemporary events to the events that would take place during the Apocalypse. Nowhere is it indicated that the contemporary events should also be seen as precursors of the Apocalypse. In this Catholic city, it was more advantageous to point towards sins than to the Day of Judgement.

34 Violet Soen, 'From the Interim of Augsburg until the Treaty of Augsburg (1548–1555)', in A. Melloni (ed.), *Martin Luther. A Christian Between Reforms and Modernity (1517–2017)* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 548–64, at 548.

35 *Warhaffte und erbermliche neue Zeitung von dem erschrecklichen Feuerzeichen und Erdbidem* (Strasbourg: Thiebold Berger, 1584). The text in German reads: 'sondere Zeichen und vorbotten künstigen grossen onglücks, ..., und allerley jamers, sonderlich auch des nahenden Jüngsten tags'.

36 *Ein erschreckenliche doch warhafftige graüsame Hüngers nott, und Pestilenzliche blag, so im Landt Reissen unnd Luttau fürgangen im 1573 Jar* (Munich: Adam Berg, 1573); *Wahrhafftige und erschroeckliche Zeitung von dem grausamlichen waetter und schauwr* (Munich: Adam Berg, 1582). For more information on the Catholic printer of this pamphlet, see Josef Benzing, 'Berg (Montanus), Adam', in *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 2 (1955), 72–73, <https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd103140522.html> (accessed 3 April 2023).

In the Low Countries, the religious and political situation was completely different. In these areas, no definite decision was made as to the accepted confession. Only with the signing of the Union of Utrecht (1579) did the northern provinces agree that there would be freedom of conscience. In reality this meant that everyone was allowed to believe what they wanted, but not everyone was allowed to practise their confession openly. The Calvinists were the only ones who could have public ceremonies and church services. Their religion, Calvinism, became the state-sponsored confession. Other confessions were, however, not forbidden, resulting in a very diverse confessional landscape. In the southern parts of the Netherlands, the situation remained unclear for quite some time. The cities, and especially Antwerp, had been strongholds of Protestantism, but the fall of Antwerp in 1585 and Alexander Farnese's demand that all Protestants leave the city within four years' time or convert to Catholicism caused an exodus of adherents of the new confessions. From that moment on, the Southern Netherlands were predominantly Catholic. Furthermore, the Counter-Reformation ensured that the Catholic faith regained its former glory.³⁷

As a result, for authors and publishers the news market in the Low Countries was, at least until 1585, unclear and unstable. After 1585 the confessional landscape in the northern provinces remained diverse, while in the Southern Netherlands printers had to cater to a Catholic market. To enlarge the potential readership, it could be profitable to keep the interpretation of a disaster widely accessible. Since all religions supported the idea of God's wrath, but only Lutherans were fervent adherents to the Apocalypse, it was common business logic to mostly maintain the idea of punishment. A handful of references to apocalypticism were enough to interest a Lutheran reader while not scaring away Calvinists or Catholics.

The aforementioned poem by Johan Fruytiers offers an excellent example. For the most part, this Calvinist writer interpreted the disaster as a punishment from God. He does, however, add some minor apocalyptic remarks, which do not line up with his Calvinist faith, since in this confession – at least in the sixteenth-century Low Countries – the Apocalypse was not a popular topic.³⁸ The interpretation of events as direct signs of a nearing Apocalypse could not count on much support. The inclusion of minor apocalyptic remarks, however, meant that readers like the Lutheran Godevaert van Haecht could also read

37 Geert H. Janssen, *The Dutch Revolt and Catholic Exile in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 131–32; Judith Pollmann, *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 143–53.

38 Barnes, 'Varieties', 269.

this interpretation with agreement. By incorporating two different kinds of explanations for the disaster (punishment and Apocalypse), the pamphlet could attract different confessional groups and, therefore, a larger public.

Another example is offered by a pamphlet printed in Antwerp concerning the aforementioned earthquake in Switzerland in 1584. Whereas the author of the German pamphlet printed in Lutheran Strasbourg chose an explicitly apocalyptic interpretation, the Dutch pamphlet printed in Antwerp had to cater to a much more diverse religious landscape. *Waerachtich verhael vande eertbevinghe gheschiet in ... Berne* ('Truthful Story of the Earthquake that Happened in Bern', 1584) reports on the earthquake. The anonymous author had to keep in mind a Protestant as well as a Catholic readership. A citation of Augustine of Hippo, also known as St Augustine, on the front page is therefore meant to lure in Catholics as well as Protestants, since this theologian and philosopher was important to both denominations. The text itself mostly focuses on the wrath of God, with minor remarks on the Last Judgement. In this way the author kept readers from all backgrounds satisfied.

Conclusion

Although the Low Countries in the sixteenth century experienced crisis after crisis (ranging from rebellion, iconoclasm, and war to floods and epidemics), the apocalyptic reaction in Dutch pamphlets remained limited. In many texts the Apocalypse showed up only very briefly or not at all. A much more popular explanation for all these disasters was the wrath of God: He punished the people of the Low Countries for their sinful behaviour. This interpretation was not only more frequently used; it was also used more elaborately. By giving examples from the Bible and from current times, authors gave more weight to this interpretation. This stands in stark contrast with the use of the apocalyptic interpretation. When used, writers mentioned the End of Times only in passing with minor remarks, consisting of only a few words or a single sentence. Ways to do this included biblical citations on the title page, warning remarks in the preface, or apocalyptic utterances in the text itself. The apocalyptic interpretation does not consist of much more than this. This is all the more remarkable when compared to other countries, such as the Holy Roman Empire. In these regions the apocalyptic interpretation was used regularly. Writers elaborated on this interpretation by adding and explaining biblical prophecy and detailing the kinds of signs that were seen every day.

Even when we look at the Holy Roman Empire, the favoured interpretation differed by territory. After 1555 the ruler determined the religion of

the subjects. This meant that the dominant confession was clear, and this determined which interpretation was more acceptable. In Lutheran regions, the Apocalypse became most important, while in Catholic areas the idea of punishment was popular. Authors and printers of pamphlets could easily tailor the interpretation of disasters to the confessional convictions of their public.

In the Low Countries, the confessional and political context was completely different. In these territories no clear choice was made for one confession. Although in the northern provinces Calvinism was the state-sponsored confession, freedom of conscience resulted in a diverse landscape. In the Southern Netherlands, it was only after 1585 that Catholicism regained its hold on the people. For authors and publishers, this meant that they had to cater to a much more diverse confessional reading public if they wanted to sell their pamphlets. Choosing an interpretation that was acceptable to most Christian confessions increased sales figures and could therefore make good business sense. This resulted in pamphlets that elaborate on the idea of punishment rather than the apocalyptic interpretation. Still, the Apocalypse was not ignored completely either. With minor remarks, authors and publishers tried to compromise in order not to scare away Catholics or Calvinists and, at the same time, to keep Lutherans interested as well.

Coming back to Barnes's concept of the Apocalypse as a polemical explanation of disasters, it turns out that this explanation does not fit the Low Countries in the sixteenth century. The diversity of the confessional landscape meant that authors and publishers probably did not choose to use the Apocalypse polemically, because it would scare away potential buyers. By focusing on punishment with only minor apocalyptic notions, they maximised their potential market and therefore their profits. It seems that choosing a specific interpretation of a disaster was not always ideologically bound. It could just as well be about profit, business, and economics. Dealing *in* disasters was as important as dealing *with* disasters.

About the Author

Marieke van Egeraat is a historian interested in news, disasters, and identity formation. From 2018 to 2022, she was a PhD candidate in the NWO-funded Vici project *Dealing with Disasters. The Shaping of Local and National Identities in the Netherlands (1421–1890)*. Within this project, she focused on the sixteenth-century Low Countries and the way providential readings of disasters could be used to strengthen group identities.

