

# **Women's Apocalypses: Apocalypse, Utopia and Feminist Dystopian Fiction**

Béracha Meijer  
5561744  
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Supervisor: dr. Eric Ottenheijm  
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## Introduction

In the last few years, dystopian literature and especially feminist dystopian literature seem to have risen in popularity. In America, this revival is often connected to recent political events. For example, Octavia E. Butler's depiction of a right-wing politician who claims to "make America great again" is hailed as a prescient vision in *The New Yorker* (Agguire), and pictures of American women attending protests dressed in the red robes of Margaret Atwood's *Handmaids* circulate the internet (Hauser). Besides the popularity of feminist dystopian classics like that of Atwood and Butler, there have also been several new feminist dystopian narratives in the last few years, such as Naomi Alderman's *The Power*. It seems that, in times of perceived crisis, people tend to read and write stories that imagine the end of life as we know it.

Naturally, imagining endings is not a new phenomenon in literature. Frank Kermode already noted this in *The Sense of an Ending*, in which he argues that the biblical apocalyptic writers already attempted to create a consonance between beginning, middle and end in their depictions of the end of the world. According to Kermode, imagining endings is thus a human propensity which manifests itself through fiction and helps people to "project ourselves...past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle" (8). Accordingly, imagining endings provides consolation by imposing a form on time and on history, so that the "simple chronicity" of the ticking of a clock (tick-tick) becomes a plot which consists of a genesis and an apocalypse (tick-tock) (45).

Although Kermode provides a convincing argument, the function of apocalypse and the imagination of endings in general seems to be manifold and more complicated. The word "apocalypse" is usually associated with the end of the world in our everyday speech, but originally means "unveiling" or "revelation." The term was first used in the Book of Revelation, and came to designate a literary genre of Jewish and Christian texts which do not only depict the end of the world, but also reveal an alternative reality through which human suffering will eventually be relieved. Apocalyptic texts were often written in situations of distress, such as the persecution by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the case of the Book of Daniel. In such contexts, apocalypses can fulfil a consolatory function, as the imagination of future salvation might put present discomfort in a different perspective. Nevertheless, besides consolation, apocalyptic texts can also function as social critique, or as an exhortation to persist in the face of oppression.

As a genre that has long been considered to be the lowbrow of biblical literature (Pippin 5), apocalypses have not always been received with much enthusiasm. Robert Alter considers

apocalypse immoral and greatly inferior to Jewish prophecy, as the apocalypses imply that humans have no control over what will happen (64). Feminist scholars like Tina Pippin have especially emphasized the violence and misogyny that is inherent in apocalyptic texts like Revelation. According to her, Revelation's New Jerusalem is not utopian. Naturally, the notion of utopia is highly subjective, since what is perceived as a utopia by some is a dystopia to others. This is especially true for apocalyptic texts, as there is a clear distinction between the faithful and the wicked, those who will enter the Kingdom of God and those who will suffer for eternity. Nevertheless, whether the content of apocalypses is utopian or not, apocalypse seems to be strongly related to the utopian tradition, as both imagine either utopian or dystopian alternative realities that can put present circumstances in a different perspective.

Contemporary utopian and dystopian fiction, including that of feminist writers, continues to engage with the biblical apocalypse, for example intertextually through allusions and apocalyptic motifs, but also in terms of function. Although the question of function might be vague, as it is subjective and dependent on context, it seems important to reflect on the role texts might fulfil in society. Like apocalypses, contemporary feminist fiction can be considered as consolation in contexts of oppression, as a social critique of the present ruling order, or as a tool to engender human action. Even though contemporary works of fiction might be predominantly pessimistic, they often present a possibility of a utopian alternative reality in their dystopian worlds. Religion seems to be an important theme in feminist dystopian fiction, in which it often functions as a source of oppression, as well as hope or resistance. Similarly, while some aspects of biblical apocalypse seem to be criticized, apocalyptic motifs are also employed to imagine a dystopian or utopian alternative reality which can function as a social critique or as a source of empowerment. In order to properly analyze the engagement between apocalypse and feminist dystopia, both the religious and the literary traditions should be taken into account. Besides giving an insight in the development of the genres of apocalypse and utopia and their relation to each other, such an analysis might give new perspectives on the role of religion and apocalypse in feminism and the utopian tradition.

Accordingly, the research question of this thesis is: What is the relation between the genre of biblical apocalypse and feminist dystopia in terms of motifs and possible functions, and how can these genres inform each other to offer new insights on the relation between gender, religion and utopianism in our present age?

Before going into the discussion of apocalypse in contemporary literature, the roots of apocalypse and its development must be understood. The first chapter of this thesis will give a short overview of the scholarly debate on the apocalyptic genre, which includes a discussion

of its development and its most important motifs and possible functions. In order to give some examples of this in a specific text, the discussion will then follow onto the Book of Revelation. Besides discussing the apocalyptic motifs and functions of Revelation, the critical reception of Revelation by feminist scholars will also be touched upon.

Although there is no consensus on whether Revelation is utopian or dystopian from a feminist perspective, the genre of apocalypse does share characteristics with the utopian tradition, as will be shown in the second chapter. Besides reflecting on both the similarities and differences between apocalypse and utopia, this chapter will discuss the role of utopia and apocalypse in contemporary literature.

Finally, the third chapter will discuss the role of apocalypse and its motifs and possible functions in feminist dystopian fiction, namely *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, the *Parable*-series by Octavia E. Butler, and *The Power* by Naomi Alderman. Although the large number of novels that are discussed also limits the possibility to expose the role of apocalypse in an exhaustive manner, it seems necessary to present a discussion that shows diversity in female voices. Additionally, a larger corpus can exemplify the diversity of both form and content of contemporary narratives that engage with apocalypse so that the genres can be productively compared. In order to narrow down the analysis, the discussion of the aforementioned texts will mainly revolve around the themes of resistance, messianism and reversal.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, any citations from the Bible will be from the KJV, since this is also the translation that is used in most of the novels that are discussed.

## Chapter 1: The Apocalyptic Genre

### 1.1 The Development of the Genre

The Greek word *apokalypsis* (“unveiling” or “revelation”) was first used in the Book of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse of John, which is the last book of the New Testament. Later, the word came to designate a literary genre which consists of a range of Jewish and Christian texts, of which the earliest are found in the Book of Enoch and dated around the fourth or third century B.C.E. (Crawford 326). Traces of the apocalyptic genre can be attested much earlier in history, however. Certain motifs and patterns that are common in apocalyptic literature already occur in the traditions of the ancient Near East, in which literary predictive texts were not uncommon (Crawford 319). The most important motif might be the “combat myth,” which can be found in various cultures in the Near East and entails a pattern in which forces of goodness triumph over forces of evil or chaos (Collins “From Prophecy” 129). This mythic pattern was taken over in Israel and adapted to celebrate the triumph of God. More specifically, the post-exilic prophets used this pattern and projected it into the future to evoke the eschatological judgement of God. These prophetic eschatological visions are often called “proto-apocalyptic” and served as source material for the authors of apocalyptic texts, who reinterpreted the prophetic predictions in light of their own times (Collins “From Prophecy” 130; Crawford 322). Similar to the prophetic texts, apocalyptic texts use mythological imagery and motifs like the creation of a new heaven and earth (Collins, “From Prophecy” 134). Nevertheless, even though there is a continuity in the symbolic visions of the prophets and apocalyptic literature, the oldest Jewish apocalypses in the Books of Enoch must be understood as a “new kind of literature,” according to Collins (“From Prophecy” 145-146).<sup>2</sup>

The apocalyptic worldview was expressed in the genre of apocalypse, which eventually crystallized into a more or less standard framework (Crawford 322). Even though there is still

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<sup>2</sup> Unlike prophetic literature, apocalypses depict visionaries who have actual access to the supernatural world and envision eschatological judgement beyond death. The “auditory reception” of the prophets thusly developed into a “quest for broader understanding” in apocalyptic literature, which is more focused on other-worldly speculations about the future (Collins *Imagination* 15, 22). Collins argues that the impact of Hellenism on the Near East has distinctly influenced the development of the earliest apocalypses of Enoch and Daniel, since these texts draw on a variety of different sources, including prophetic literature, Greek and Persian traditions (Collins, “From Prophecy” 146). Accordingly, traditional biblical motifs and cultural motifs like mythic imagery were rearranged into a “new, eschatologically charged vision of reality” (Crawford 322). Apocalypticism is then not a mere subdivision of prophecy, but a novel phenomenon in ancient Judaism which stands in stark contrast with the traditional, covenantal worldview (Collins “Apocalyptic Literature” 7-8).

much debate about a definition of the genre, the definition posed by the SBL Genres Project in 1979 seems most widely used. This study characterizes apocalypse as

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 “Apocalyptic Literature” 2)

The content of the revelatory messages can be further divided in the category of the “historical apocalypse,” which uncovers history and its end, and “otherworldly journeys,” which reveal secrets about heaven. Even though strictly speaking, Revelation is the only apocalypse of the New Testament, there are apocalyptic elements throughout the NT, for example in the so-called “Little Apocalypse” of the Synoptic Gospels, in which Jesus warns his followers that they will suffer tribulation before the arrival of the Son of Man and God’s kingdom. From the viewpoint of Collins’ definition, the messianic and eschatological predictions in the Gospels might be called apocalyptic, but are not apocalypses because they lack several typical apocalyptic elements (Collins 168). While Collins’ definition is useful to generally identify the biblical apocalypse as a distinctive genre, it may also be deemed too narrow.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 Setting and Function of the Genre

An important issue in scholarly debate is the social setting and function of the apocalyptic genre. For a long time, it was assumed that apocalyptic literature was written in response to oppression, in order to console its readers or hearers (Crawford 326). As a result, apocalyptic texts have been defined as resistance literature or literature written for the purpose of “exhortation and consolation” (Hellholm in Collins *Imagination* 29). Such a claim can be supported with the earliest apocalypses of Enoch and Daniel. Collins interprets those as a

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<sup>3</sup> As is the case for genre studies as a whole, Collins’ approach of “definition and classification” has the tendency to overlook the individuality of the text (Newsom in Collins “Apocalyptic Literature” 2). This is especially important with regard to apocalypses, as they are varied in terms of content as well as form, and are often indebted to multiple genres at the same time. Additionally, Collins’ definition might be too narrow, in that it overlooks relations to prior and later visionary Jewish literature like Sweeney notes (n.p.). Other points of criticism are mostly concerned with the fact that the definition does not account for setting and function, which many scholars consider essential to apocalypses (Crawford 325).

product of their time, in which the authors must have felt “relatively deprived” as a result of the impact of Hellenistic culture (Collins “From Prophecy” 147). For example, the Book of Daniel, which narrates the visions of Daniel, a Jew who is in Babylonian exile, is generally interpreted as a pseudepigraphical text that reached out to other Jews in the context of persecution by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Like Stratton argues, James Scott’s notion of the “hidden transcript” might explain how apocalyptic texts can serve to secretly undermine Roman authority and comfort those who are suffering through an imagined release from oppression (56-57). While the apocalyptic authors were unable to openly criticize the hegemony of Roman culture, these fantasies of reversal and retribution could covertly challenge or undermine the ruling power without having to fear reprisals.

Nevertheless, whereas a context of oppression might be convincing with regard to Daniel and other early apocalypses, not all apocalypses have been written under such circumstances (Crawford 327).<sup>4</sup> The same counts for the function of apocalyptic genre; even though subversion of authority and consolation of the oppressed are possible functions of apocalypses, there are also examples of parodying usage of the apocalyptic genre, or what McGinn called “imperial apocalypticism,” in which the prophesied eschatology actually reinforces imperial power instead of empowering the oppressed (Collins “Apocalyptic Literature” 6). In general, the function of a text is highly subjective and can change depending on the context in which it circulates. The genre of apocalypse thusly cannot be restricted to a specific setting or function, even though some social contexts and functions are more typical than others. According to Collins, the “illocutionary functions” of exhortation and consolation can be generally maintained as all apocalypses seem to address some kind of underlying problem (*Imagination* 29). Most important, however, is that such problems are addressed from a distinctive apocalyptic perspective, which Collins calls “the apocalyptic technique”: problems are not only viewed in light of social or historical circumstances, but rather in light of a supernatural world and imminent eschatological judgement. Such a view of the future might inspire reassurance in the fact that the course of human history is predetermined and will inevitably culminate in God’s victory. In this sense, apocalyptic texts can provide an

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<sup>4</sup> The idea that all apocalyptic literature should have a common sociological starting point, or *Sitz-im-Leben*, is common in the tradition of biblical form criticism, but has been much criticized (Collins *Apocalyptic Imagination* 21). Knierim, for example, has argued that setting cannot be perceived as a factor that constitutes genre (Collins *Apocalyptic Imagination* 21). There is not enough evidence to clearly determine the setting of all of the texts that are considered apocalyptic, and even if there was, it seems that the social settings of apocalyptic texts are all very different.



imaginative resolution of conflicts or situations of distress. The allusive and symbolic quality of the apocalyptic language, which actively appeal to the reader's imagination and emotions, greatly contributes to this.<sup>5</sup>

### 1.3 Apocalyptic Motifs

Although apocalyptic literature is varied in terms of content, there are a few motifs that are fairly consistent. Apocalyptic texts are usually dualistic, in the sense that they depict a struggle between forces of good and evil, in which the forces of goodness inevitably overcome (Crawford 332). According to DiTommaso, the historical resolution of good and evil is the primary function of apocalyptic eschatology (Crawford 332). Such a resolution is frequently depicted in a decisive eschatological war which resolves contemporary and past struggles and eventually culminates in the reconstruction of a New Jerusalem, which is usually represented as a heavenly city or an earthly city with defensive features such as high walls (Crawford 333).

The apocalypse is usually accompanied by symbolic signs, which can be either cosmic or historical, such as the persecution of believers or the fall of Rome (Crawford 345). Eventually, apocalyptic narratives depict a dramatic reversal of fortune through divine intervention. The messiah is an important motif, especially since the first century C.E., and takes various forms, for example as a king or warlord who fulfils judicial functions on the Day of Judgement or as a prophet (Crawford 332). Christian apocalyptic writings usually revolve around the second coming of Christ (Crawford 345). Jewish as well as Christian apocalypses may predict an earthly reign of the messiah, for example the millennium in Revelation. The resurrection of the dead and final judgement, after which humans are either punished or rewarded, are particularly important for apocalyptic texts, as is also argued by Collins. Martyrs are especially rewarded according to apocalypses. In Daniel 10-12, for example, the martyrs who persist in times of persecution are promised to "shine like stars in the resurrection" (Collins *Apocalyptic* 171, 175; Dan. 12:3). Accordingly, with these motifs, present suffering might be resolved in light of the revelation of an alternative reality (Crawford 333).

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<sup>5</sup> In *Crisis and Catharsis*, Yarbrow Collins argues that Revelation can have a "cathartic effect" as it intensifies feelings of fear and aggression through its artful plots and symbolic language, which are subsequently imaginatively released in a way that provides a sense of detachment and control with regard to situations of distress in real life.

#### 1.4 The Book of Revelation

Seeing that the genre of apocalyptic literature is extremely varied in both form and content, it seems useful to take an exemplary apocalyptic text to be able to give some specific examples of motifs, symbolism and interpretations, as well as an insight in what an apocalyptic text can mean in a contemporary context.<sup>6</sup> As already said, Revelation is known by the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which is the first word of the book and therefore taken as its title, as is common for biblical texts. The book was probably written during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (81 to 96 C.E.; Fiorenza 17). It combines three literary genres: the epistolary, the apocalyptic and the prophetic genre. Different from other Jewish and Christian apocalypses in which pseudepigraphy is a common feature, Revelation claims the authority of Jesus Christ, who sent an angel to John to reveal the things “which must shortly come to pass” (Rev. 1:1). The narrative starts with an epistolary, in which John narrates what should be written to the seven churches of Asia minor. The churches are praised for their persistent faith in times of tribulation or admonished for their behaviour, for example their accommodation of Roman practices (Koester 269). After this, it is suggested that John has ascended to heaven, where he stands before the throne of God (Rev. 4:1; Koester 366). A scroll that is secured with seven seals is presented and opened by the Lamb, after which a series of prophetic visions follow. Like the before-mentioned “combat myth,” Revelation depicts a struggle between good and evil, in which current enemies are portrayed as monsters (Yarbro Collins “Apocalyptic Themes” 124). Evil figures like the Beast and the Whore of Babylon are eventually violently defeated by God and his heavenly armies. The narrative is infested with visions of violence and destruction, but eventually culminates in the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. The New Jerusalem descends from heaven, and God will finally be with humanity, while there will be “no more pain: for all the former things are passed away” (Rev. 21:2-4).

Revelation is more than a simple battle between God and evil, however. As is common for apocalyptic literature, the text is abundant with symbolism and historical references which are directed to the audience and socio-historical situation of its time. For example, many scholars have pointed out that the city of Babylon can be interpreted as a representation of Rome. The city is represented as a woman in the figure of the Whore of Babylon, whose name

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<sup>6</sup> Even though it should be noted that there has often been an unjust focus on the canonical apocalypses of Daniel and Revelation in scholarly discussion of the apocalyptic genre, Revelation will still be the main focus for this thesis. It is one of the most influential apocalyptic texts in the apocalyptic imagination of Western culture and also seems most relevant for the analysis of contemporary literature in this thesis.

is said to be a “mystery” (Yarbro Collins *Crisis* 57; Rev. 17:5). She sits on the seven-headed monster like she sits on the seven mountains (Rev. 17:9), which most likely refer to the seven hills of Rome, the city which “rules over the kings of the earth” (Rev. 17:18). Similarly, the Beast can also be interpreted as a reference to the Roman imperial rule; sometimes the Beast refers to a kingdom, and at other times it refers to a king which seems to be the Emperor Nero (Yarbro Collins *Crisis* 59). In this way, it becomes clear that Revelation undermines or challenges Roman imperialism through the imagined destruction of Rome.<sup>7</sup> Even though the text was probably not written in a context of widespread persecution of Christians, Yarbro Collins and Fiorenza argue that the text does respond to a crisis.<sup>8</sup> There were most likely feelings of frustration and disempowerment, as there was a significant dissonance between John’s vision of the kingdom of God and the environment that he lived in, which was determined by the Roman imperial cult (Yarbro Collins *Crisis* 106). Besides, the memory of the fairly recent persecution of Christians by Nero was most likely still present in the Christian community (Fiorenza 127).

In order to speak out against the dominating Roman order and to criticize those who have affiliated themselves with the Roman imperial cult, Revelation depicts a struggle between those who remain loyal to Jesus and those who have succumbed to the powers of Roman imperialism (Stratton 63). Nevertheless, humans are not involved militarily, but rather conquer the beast “in a penultimate way through faithful witness,” as long as they will resist to succumb to false teachings (Koester 763-64). Violence is brought upon the unfaithful through divine intervention. Like Stratton illustrates, the military and judicial violence of Revelation “mimic strategies of Roman domination, similarly employing threats of spectacular violence to intimidate and coerce obedience” (63). For example, in Rev. 19, Christ appears as a heavenly emperor who leads the “armies of heaven” (Rev. 19:14). He “judges and wages war,” is named “King of Kings” and wears a royal robe which is “dipped in blood” (Rev. 19:11-16; Stratton 63). In this way, Roman military imagery is used to illustrate that Jesus will inevitably bring

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<sup>7</sup> This is not the only possible function of Revelation. Besides resisting the Roman imperial rule, the text addresses disputes within the Christian community, such as the accommodation of Roman practices or the complacency of wealth (Koester 85-86). The opening chapters of the text already illustrate that the text addresses several kinds of readers, of which some are rebuked and others are encouraged. In this way, it is also impossible to attribute one specific function to Revelation (Koester 107).

<sup>8</sup> It was long thought that Revelation was written in response to Domitian’s persecution of Christians, just like the Book of Daniel is assumed to be a response to the persecution of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Nevertheless, scholars have challenged this claim because there is not enough evidence to assume that there was widespread persecution of Christians under Domitian’s reign (Yarbro Collins *Crisis* 69).

justice and vengeance. In terms of judicial violence, the eschatological judgment of God also resembles that of the Roman imperial cult. God is depicted as a Roman emperor who sits on his throne and decides over the fortunes of the dead from what is written in his books (Rev. 20:11-12). Stratton likens Revelation's depictions of eschatological judgment to Roman judiciary practices in which "preventive spectacles" of torture and violence were used to intimidate and coerce subordinates (65).

By strategically using imagery that is reminiscent of Roman emperors, Revelation emphasizes the majesty of Jesus, who is to lead an empire that will surpass that of Rome. This borrowing of Roman techniques of intimidation and control can thusly challenge or subvert the authority of Rome. Nevertheless, like Stratton emphasizes, it also reinscribes those violent techniques, so that God's divine power similarly becomes one of domination and oppression.<sup>9</sup> While some scholars argue that the divine violence of Revelation is legitimized because it fights against colonial power, Tina Pippin states that the destruction of the Roman Empire only makes place for a new system of domination which requires "total obedience" (*Apocalyptic xi*). Even though Revelation might reveal a glimpse of salvation, it primarily concerns itself with the violent destruction of sinners and women so that heaven is "almost an afterthought" (*Apocalyptic 4*). The critical commentary of scholars like Pippin points to the ethical dilemma that is inherent in the violent images of Revelation. Can a text be truly liberating when it imagines a mere reversal of fortunes, in which the Other, no matter how evil, will burn perpetually in the lakes of fire? And more importantly, is such a text still meaningful or utopian for readers today?

### 1.5 The Apocalypse from a Feminist Perspective

Such questions have been prevalent in biblical scholarship on Revelation, especially from the perspective of feminist theology. For example, feminist biblical scholars have pointed out the male gaze that is inherent in the dualism of Revelation, in which women are identified as either the "good woman" or "the whore" (Fiorenza 13). Female power is violently repressed, as is exemplified by the Whore of Babylon, while the "good" women of Revelation are passive and powerless. The evil female figures, Jezebel and the Whore of Babylon, come to their end in horrible ways,<sup>10</sup> and even the "good" women of Revelation are not entirely safe in the text of

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<sup>9</sup> This is especially ambiguous since Christianity became the usurper of Roman power, so that the apocalyptic enemy of Revelation, Rome, eventually became the symbol of Christianity (Keller 42).

<sup>10</sup> Jezebel is punished for her unwillingness to repent as she is cast "on a bed of suffering" and her children are murdered (2:20-23). Furthermore, the Whore is overcome by plagues of death, mourning

Revelation. The pregnant woman clothed with the sun of Rev. 12 is chased away into the wilderness by the Dragon, while the Bride, who symbolizes New Jerusalem, is entered by 144.000 virginal men, which Pippin interprets as “mass-intercourse” (*Apocalyptic* 121). The misogynist female stereotyping and depictions of violence against women makes Revelation an “apocalypse of women,” according to Pippin (“Revelation” 110).

Whereas Pippin is primarily concerned with resisting and deconstructing the Apocalypse, other feminist scholars have argued for a reconstructionist approach. According to Fiorenza, a focus on the misogynist language of Revelation involves the danger of magnifying androcentric conceptions of the text so that it merely reinforces misogyny as its primary meaning (14). In order to reclaim the text for a female audience, it is important to understand language as dynamic and dependent on social context. In this way, Revelation must be understood in the “conventional” language of its time in which whoring and fornication were common metaphors for idolatry, and Israel and Jerusalem were frequently depicted in bridal or maternal imagery (Fiorenza 14). Accordingly, the text can be reconstructed from a broader feminist perspective in which a wide range of socio-political issues like classism, racism, sexism and colonialism intersect (14). The Book of Revelation can then be potentially liberating for many people even today, as it can engender resistance and harbour utopian hopes in similar rhetorical situations that “cry out for justice” (138).<sup>11</sup> Revelation is then not necessarily understood as a hope for violent revenge, but rather as a promise of justice and liberation.

In sum, the role of Revelation in contemporary society is very complex. The Apocalypse seems to be both subversive and conservative (Pippin *Apocalyptic* 9), as well as both utopian and dystopian. As is the case with any text, the multiplicity of its meanings is endless and lies primarily in the hands of its readers. Nevertheless, in spite of Revelation’s warning that no one should add or take away words from its prophecy (Rev. 22:18-19), apocalypses have been continually written and rewritten throughout history. Women have greatly contributed to this too, especially in the last few decades, and have given new interpretations of the utopian and dystopian visions of apocalypse.

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and famine, while the onlookers in heaven shout “Hallelujah!” as “the smoke from her goes up forever and ever” (19:1-3).

<sup>11</sup> Fiorenza for example mentions Martin Luther King, who used the language of Revelation in his *Letter to Birmingham Jail* to emphasize the possible political meanings of Christian theology (11).

## Chapter 2: Apocalypse and/as Utopianism

As should be clear by now, it is very much dependent on your point of view whether an apocalypse is utopian or dystopian. Although utopia and dystopia are usually considered to be polar opposites, the distinction tends to be less clear in reality. Like Margaret Atwood remarks in an essay: “scratch the surface a little, and...you see something more like a yin and yang pattern; within each utopia, a concealed dystopia; within each dystopia, a hidden utopia (“Cartographies” n.p.). Nevertheless, as a mode of literature which imagines alternative realities that can provide consolation, critique the ruling order and engender human action in situations of injustice, the biblical apocalypse seems to be very much related to utopian thinking. In this way, the biblical apocalypse might be seen as a form of utopianism.

### 2.1 Apocalypse and Utopia

The birth of utopia is usually connected to the invention of the word by Thomas More in his *Utopia*, which was published in 1516. In More’s novel, the word refers to the unknown paradisiacal island that is described by the Portuguese sailor Raphael Hythloday. “Utopia” was a neologism, consisting of the Greek *ouk* and *topos*, meaning “no place”. Nevertheless, another word was also invented in the novel, namely eutopia: “the good place” (Vieira 4-5). Through these closely related neologisms, the word “utopia” is generally understood as a pun which reveals the tension in imagining better versions of this world: utopia is the good place that does not exist, and perhaps cannot exist. Nowadays, utopia has come to refer to texts that were written before More, as well as a long tradition of thought which searches for “alternative solutions to reality” through the means of the imagination (Vieira 5).

In *Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, Krishan Kumar argues that the roots of the modern utopia lie in ancient Greece and Christianity. Although Kumar considers the modern utopia of More to be distinctively different from any of its precursors, he argues that it nevertheless inherited many classical and Christian themes.<sup>12</sup> Even so, religion has a fundamentally contradictory relation to the notion of utopia, according to Kumar. The other-worldly interest of religion,

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<sup>12</sup> Kumar argues that the classical and Christian roots were essential for the development of the modern utopia (19-20). According to him, the “the modern western utopia ... is the only utopia” (3). Although there seems to be a significant relation between classical and Christian heritage and Western utopian literature, research on non-Western literature in for example Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Japanese and Chinese cultures shows that utopianism is not exclusively Western, but a universal phenomenon. See, for example: Bagchi, Dutton.

which usually manifests itself in the notion of paradise, is oppositional to the this-worldly concern of utopia (*Utopia* 10). Although the notion of paradise can provide a sense of hope for a future beyond death, attempting to create a paradise on earth without the intervention of God would be “impiety or arrogance” (Kumar *Utopia* 11). Nevertheless, Kumar also notes that there are some exceptions, as there are also examples in which paradise was actively pursued on earth.<sup>13</sup> The highpoint of Christian utopianism is millennialism, which has the Book of Revelation as its most influential text (*Utopia* 13-14). The millennium, in which Christ reigns the earth together with the saints for a thousand years, led to social movements whose members lived as if the Second Coming was imminent. In this way, the millennium connects earthly and heavenly worlds, as it can be understood as a glimpse of paradise on earth. This is not yet utopia, according to Kumar, but nevertheless millennialism can be seen as the unique instance in which religion and utopia overlapped (*Utopia* 17).<sup>14</sup>

Although apocalypse can be considered a form of utopianism, there are some differences between apocalypse and modern notions of utopia in the tradition of More. It is already in the ironic etymology of the word “utopia” that the tension of the modern utopia with the earlier religious texts becomes clear. The paradisiacal and heavenly worlds in Judaism and Christianity are not necessarily considered non-places by religious readers; they are worlds which exist in the here and now and only await to be “revealed” by prophets and visionaries, or by Jesus himself at the end of human history. Like Zamora notes, the kingdom of God is understood as “potentially present, despite its metaphoric spatial projection in the future New

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<sup>13</sup> During the Middle Ages, many Christian thinkers believed that paradise was an earthly place which could actually be searched for (Kumar 11). Additionally, the neo-Platonic idea of human perfectibility, which was adopted by the fifth-century monk Pelagius in his attack on original sin, also counters the “orthodox” idea that human beings are subject to sin and evil and thusly unable to improve their lives or societies (Kumar 13).

<sup>14</sup> Although Kumar makes an important connection between utopianism and apocalypse, his claim that religion and utopia are necessarily contradictory seems to be exaggerated. Kumar already notes that Jewish prophecy is strongly this-worldly (14) and also acknowledges that Christianity has examples of this-worldly concerns (n. 13), but nevertheless seems to focus on religion’s otherworldly concerns. Although it is true that religion has an other-worldly dimension which often lacks in utopian literature, millennialism might not be the sole instance in which religion and utopia overlapped. For example, as was discussed in chapter 1, Jewish and Christian apocalypses address this-worldly problems such as oppression, and might call for human action like resistance or revolt (Chapter 1). While this might still be different from establishing paradise on earth, it is important to note that Judaism and Christianity might be more concerned with actively improving life on earth than Kumar seems to suggest. Furthermore, although Kumar explicitly refrains from defining utopia, his understanding of utopia seems to be primarily based on the function of engendering human action, which might be too narrow considering the many other functions that utopias can fulfil (see §2.2).

Jerusalem” (17). In contrast, the modern utopia in the tradition of More is mostly focused on a future perfect world on this earth, which can be built through human action. Nevertheless, the relation between religion and utopia might not necessarily be as contradictory as Kumar claims (n. 13). Additionally, whether apocalypse and utopia should be necessarily distinguished from one another depends on the employed definition of utopia. Ruth Levitas, for example, has argued for a definition of utopia as “the expression of the desire for a different, better way of living” (9). This is an analytical definition of utopia that would take into account variations in terms of content, form and function. Although the function of utopia as a catalyst for change has been deemed essential by thinkers like Bauman and Bloch, Levitas considers it only one of the many possible functions (208). She identifies compensation, critique and change as the main functions of utopia (208).

The definition of utopia as a desire for a better life, as well as the identified functions of compensation, critique and change, apply well to apocalypses. In light of the first part of this thesis, apocalyptic texts can be called compensatory because they can provide an imaginative resolution in situations of distress. They can also function as a critique of the ruling order, such as the Roman imperial rule, or as an internal critique of fellow Jews or Christians. Lastly, apocalyptic texts can also engender human action as they may exhort to keep the commandments or resist false teachings, like in Revelation. They might also engender human action in contemporary contexts of oppression, such as racism, like Fiorenza argues. From this perspective, the functions of apocalypse and utopia indeed seem to overlap. Although the distinctive form and content of biblical apocalypses can be generally identified and set apart from the utopian tradition, the imagination of alternative realities as an expression of desire for a better way of being seems to be a constant factor in both apocalypses and utopian literature.

## 2.2 The Secular Apocalypse

Whereas in the biblical apocalypses, salvation is found in divine intervention, many contemporary apocalyptic narratives seem to be less concerned with depicting utopian solutions. This seems to be connected to a larger trend in literature, in which eutopian visions of the future diminish, while the genre of dystopian literature continues to flourish.<sup>15</sup> In our everyday speech, apocalypse has become synonymous with the end of the world, which is often accompanied by images of cataclysm and doom. Like Kumar notes, the Jewish and Christian

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<sup>15</sup> Whereas eutopias depict societies that are considerably better than the one in which the reader lives, dystopias depict societies that are intended to be considerably worse (Claeys 1-2).



apocalyptic narratives originally predicted endings as well as new beginnings, whereas modern apocalyptic thought “proclaims endings without beginnings” (“Ends” 561). Natural disasters, nuclear destruction and cybernetic revolts are all common themes in contemporary depictions of the future, while solutions for these apocalyptic problems often fail to be provided. Even if solutions are proposed, these rarely come from divine sources. In this sense, it might not come as a surprise that many biblical scholars and theologians have kept their distance from secular approaches to the apocalyptic worldview. The undifferentiated use of the term “apocalyptic” for any depiction of the end of the world has led scholars to primarily focus on the differences between the biblical and the so-called secular apocalypse.<sup>16</sup> Although it might be necessary to note that not all contemporary depictions of the end of the world are necessarily apocalyptic in the biblical sense of the word, any attempt to indicate a degree of apocalypticism would assume that this can be normatively judged. In light of Chapter 1, this would mean harking back to an origin that is generally identifiable, but manifold and even elusive at times. Rather than applying a normative approach to contemporary apocalyptic literature, it seems useful to aim for a nuanced reading of these texts which allows for complexity. Like Robinson notes, a “perspectivist” approach might be necessary, with which we can see texts as “apocalyptic *and* anti-apocalyptic *and* not apocalyptic at all” (386). Ultimately, the question of this thesis is not whether contemporary dystopian literature is apocalyptic in a strictly biblical sense of the word, but rather whether these genres can be compared with each other and engage with each other in a meaningful way.

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<sup>16</sup> Theologian Amos Wilder, for example, considers modern apocalyptic to be unmoored from theology and therefore unable to engage with “the deep issues of life and creation” (DiTommaso 481). DiTommaso does not consider the modern apocalyptic as an issue of the biblical versus the secular, but rather one which concerns the depth of engagement with apocalypticism as a specific worldview that holds certain propositions about space and time (481).

### Chapter 3: Apocalypse and Feminist Dystopia

The novels that are discussed in this thesis are diverse in terms of form and content; it is a selection in which dystopia, science fiction, feminism, Afrofuturism, and post-apocalypticism come together. All novels imagine alternative versions of history or depict visions of the future, and they all address gender imbalances, although they do so from very different perspectives. Accordingly, these works place themselves in a long and diverse tradition of feminist utopianism. The genre of feminist utopianism might be said to go back as far as the middle ages<sup>17</sup> and includes works from all over the world. Like Johns has argued, feminist utopianism has generally distinguished itself from the mainstream tradition because it is usually more pragmatic and process-oriented instead of focused on a blue-print model (Johns “Feminism” 177-178). Nevertheless, like all other forms of utopianism, feminist utopianism has also become largely dominated by dystopian visions of the future (Kumar “Ends” 550). Rather than traditional dystopias, however, the novels that are discussed in this thesis might be called critical dystopias, as they are open-ended and still harbour the possibility of a utopian solution, even if this is not narrated in the novel.<sup>18</sup> While all novels employ apocalyptic motifs, they also seem to be similar to apocalypses with regard to function. The ways in which these novels engage with apocalypse is extensive, so in order to narrow down the analysis, there will be a focus on the themes of resistance, messianism and reversal.

#### 3.1 Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)

Margaret Atwood (1939) is a Canadian writer and poet. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is probably her best-known work, and depicts a world in which Christian fundamentalism has taken control of America. Although the novel is usually described as dystopian, it can also be called post-apocalyptic; it does not portray the literal end of the world, but rather tells a story of survival after an end. In light of the feared demise of civilization as a result of growing infertility due to pollution, a group of fundamentalist Christians who call themselves the Sons of Jacob have taken control of society. America is now called Gilead, a theocratic state which

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<sup>17</sup> Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1404-5; Johns “Feminism” 181).

<sup>18</sup> Tom Moylan has distinguished between anti-utopian works, such as *Nineteen Eighty-four* and *Brave New World*, and the so-called critical dystopia. Whereas the anti-utopia holds on to the pessimistic idea that there is no salvation for our dystopian worlds, critical dystopias still contain some eutopian elements. According to Moylan, critical dystopias criticize the ruling systems, are often open-ended, they resist closure and thusly maintain “utopian possibilities” (Moylan *Scraps* 199).

enforces a system of surrogacy inspired by the story of Rachel and Bilhah (Gen. 30:1-3). So-called Handmaids, like the protagonist Offred, are trained in the Red Centre and are forced to bear children for the elite couples, the Commanders and their Wives. If they do not succeed, they will be sent to the Colonies to clean up radioactive waste. The words of Rachel in Genesis, “Give me children, or else I die” (Gen. 30:1), thusly get a whole new meaning in Atwood’s novel, as women are literally “saved by childbearing” under present circumstances (Tim. 1:15; Atwood 233). Although the horrific vision of religious oppression and the novel’s satirizing tone towards religion provide reasons to regard the novel as religious criticism, the role of religion seems more complicated than this. Under the horrifying circumstances in which Offred finds herself, she continues to search for hope in small acts of resistance, which manifest themselves in language, storytelling, as well as in religion.

### 3.1.1 Apocalypse of the Oppressors and the Oppressed

The theme of apocalypse is barely commented upon in scholarly discussion of *The Handmaid’s Tale*; nevertheless, it seems to function on different levels in the narrative. On a societal level, the sudden intervention in the worsening conditions of America through the establishment of Gilead can be seen as apocalyptic, as it is perceived as a holy war which is supposed to lead to a utopian new order. However, the elite do not await the apocalyptic intervention of God, but have taken matters in their own hands, which corresponds with their claim that: “God is a national resource” (225). Military language and imagery are abundant in Gilead. The news shows the developments at the front where army ranks like the “Angels of the Apocalypse” and the “Angels of Light” are continually blessed by victories (92-93). Besides the actual military events in the ongoing wars, the duty of the Handmaids is also described in military language. Bearing children has become risky as there are only few healthy babies born under the present climatic circumstances. “It’s a risk you’re taking, but you are the shock troops, you will march out in advance, into dangerous territory. The greater the risk the greater the glory” (122-123).<sup>19</sup>

The idea of the Handmaids as military troops emphasizes both the sacrificial and communal aspect of their duty. Although the present generation of Handmaids has to make many sacrifices, these are counterbalanced with promises for the future which includes the paradisiacal “goal of a little garden for each” woman (172). The red robes of the Handmaids,

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<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Offred describes a birth in military imagery as “a bugle, a call to arms, like a wall falling...we are no longer single” (135).

which are the “colour of blood” (18), also symbolize sacrifice. Offred describes herself as “some fairytale figure in a red cloak...A Sister, dipped in blood” (19). This alludes to Revelation, in which Jesus is depicted as the slaughtered Lamb as well as the heavenly warrior who is similarly dressed in a robe “dipped in blood” (Rev. 19:13), which recalls his self-sacrifice (Koester 755).

Nevertheless, in *The Handmaid's Tale* there seem to be several dimensions of apocalypse. On a societal level, the establishment of Gilead could be seen as an apocalyptic event, as it involves a holy war in which both men and women (are forced to) make sacrifices in order to establish a utopian society in which human civilization can be preserved. Much more important, however, is the personal apocalypse of the protagonist of the novel. Offred does not believe that the present circumstances are concurrent with the will of God (204), and therefore continues to profess her belief in resistance.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, like Larson notes, *The Handmaid's Tale's* “caricature” of apocalypse shows how Revelation has been used throughout history “by oppressors and oppressed groups alike” (43).

### 3.1.2 Language as Resistance

Although in Gilead the Bible is continually used as a source of oppression, it can also be seen as a tool of subversion (Christou 410-411). Reading is forbidden and the Bible is locked away carefully as it is considered “an incendiary device” (98). Offred continually makes clear that the regime of Gilead utilizes religion for their own purposes, as biblical passages are made up or misattributed.<sup>21</sup> In her own private version of the Lord's Prayer, Offred expresses her belief that present circumstances cannot be God's will. Although God remains absent throughout the novel, matters of theodicy and the potential consoling nature of religion in circumstances of oppression are addressed several times. Offred remarks that in “reduced circumstances you

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<sup>20</sup> Offred's role in the resistance is ambiguous, however, as she refrains from being involved in the underground resistance movement and is therefore primarily an onlooker, which often results in complicity. Offred's role especially contrasts with that of her shopping partner Ofglen, who is an active member of the resistance and dies like a martyr, as she committed suicide before she could betray anyone else. Offred is no messianic figure, but instead leaves acts of sacrifice to others: “She has died that I may live” (298). Nevertheless, although Offred does not actively participate the resistance movement, Offred's use language and storytelling might be seen as a form of resistance.

<sup>21</sup> Offred is sure that they made up a part of the Beatitudes, but there is no way of checking (100). Additionally, the regime legitimizes ideas by claiming their biblical authority, such as Marx' slogan “From each according to his abilities...” which is attributed to St. Paul. Through the Christian discourse of the past which Offred seems to have memorized, she is able to discern the regime's misreadings of the Bible.

have to believe all kinds of things” (115). No matter whether it is in spite of, or because of present circumstances, she continues to hope for another place, which sometimes takes religious forms.

Besides Offred’s private prayer, which might already indicate a private act of resistance through language, the novel shows how language can function as a communal act of resistance against oppression. The language that is used secretly among the Handmaids is reminiscent of the resistance in biblical apocalyptic texts which can also function as subversion and consolation like Scott’s hidden transcripts. For example, Offred remarks that “the whispering of obscenities, about those in power...reduces them to a common denominator where they can be dealt with” (234). The abundant use of jokes and obscenities by Offred seems to undermine authority and function as consolation. Language thusly becomes potentially “self-liberating,” like Hogsette also notes (263). Besides, the “secret language” of other Handmaids’ crimes, which shows “what we might be capable of, after all” (287), strengthens a communal belief in resistance. This implies that stories that depict women as powerful agents can also serve as a form of empowerment. Similarly, biblical apocalypses might empower certain Jewish and Christian communities by depicting what they might be capable of with God on their side.

The most important example of resistance through language is probably the sentence which Offred finds scratched in the cupboard in her room, which was supposedly left there by the former Offred who committed suicide: “*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.*” Offred considers the phrase to be a forbidden message, left there especially for her, although she cannot decipher it. She interprets it in different ways throughout the novel, as a prayer and as a command, until she finally finds out from the Commander that it is merely a joke, a mock-Latin phrase from when he was a schoolboy, which was supposed to mean: “Don’t let the bastards grind you down.” The multiplicity of meanings that this phrase accumulates points to the possibility of resistance that is inherent within language, as institutionalized meanings can be subverted. Additionally, the phrase shows that hope and resistance can be passed on, which is also what seems to motivate Offred to tell her story. “Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are” (279). In this way, the very act of telling a story becomes an act of hope, as it assumes that it will be read by someone in the future (Stein 278).

Perhaps, this is also a way in which biblical apocalypses can be understood. Like Offred’s narrative, biblical apocalypses can be interpreted as a speech act which provides reassurance in the idea that it might be read or heard by a certain audience. Accordingly, biblical apocalypses might evoke a sense of identity which can persist in the face of oppression or unwelcome influence from outside, as is the case in Revelation. More important for the

discussion of apocalypse, however, might be the speech act which calls into existence an alternative reality. Collins argues that it might be difficult to separate “visionary experience” from the activity of writing highly symbolic and imaginative literature, such as apocalypses (*Imagination* 28). In this sense, writing can also be considered a religious action, through which an alternative reality can be evoked which is present in the here and now.

For Offred, this alternative reality initially seems to be the resistance, which she believes in like “there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light” (115).<sup>22</sup> The resistance consists of “whisperings” and “revelations,” and “does not seem as if it ought to be the true shape of the world” (212). Later in Offred’s narrative, the alternative reality she believes in becomes more abstract, as it becomes the place where she will tell her story to the implied “you” of the novel, “in the future or in Heaven or in prison or underground, some other place. What they have in common is that they’re not here” (279). Offred thusly connects the idea of an alternative reality or utopia to a place where her story will be heard. As becomes clear in the “Historical Notes” of the novel, an academic reflection on Offred’s narrative, it is ambiguous whether this “other place” in which Offred’s narrative is eventually heard is actually utopian. It seems that academics approach Offred’s story in an overly objective and scientific way, which overlooks the emotional dimension and constructed nature of her story (Hogsette 265). Additionally, the fact that these academics were responsible for the transcription and rearrangement of Offred’s narrative begs the question whether it is really Offred’s story we are reading, or whether it is merely her story appropriated in male discourse (Hogsette 265). The “Historical Notes” seem to be a narrative device that invites the reader to reflect on the implications of interpretation (Hogsette 277), which might result in indirect practices of oppression in contemporary contexts. Accordingly, language is presented as an important source of power in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which can function as oppression as well as resistance. Similar to the biblical apocalypses, language can be used as a tool of subversion

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<sup>22</sup> This ambiguity between light and darkness in relation to the resistance is only one example of the ways in which Atwood’s novel continually deconstructs oppositions like light and darkness, good and evil and victim and onlooker. In this way, *The Handmaid’s Tale* seems to subvert the dualism of apocalypse. This is especially evident in the final scene of Offred’s narrative, in which she is taken away by either the Gileadean regime or the resistance; Offred’s narrative ambiguously concludes with: “Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing...And so I step up, into the darkness within, or else the light.” (307). The final scene is especially abundant with apocalyptic motifs and imagery and could provide an interesting starting point in a more exhaustive literary analysis of apocalypse in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

or a source of empowerment or hope as it evokes a reader and an alternative reality through its speech acts.

### 3.2 Messianism in *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998)

Octavia E. Butler (1947-2006) was an African-American science-fiction writer whose works address issues such as racism, slavery, classism and sexism. Her work has often been called Afrofuturistic, a term which is usually credited to Mark Dery, who describes it as speculative fiction which addresses African-American themes and dilemmas in the context of the technoculture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Yaszek 41-42). Butler was raised in a Baptist household, and religion is often an important theme in her work.<sup>23</sup> The *Parable*-series is often called post-apocalyptic, as it narrates a story of survival after an end. Butler's dystopian America is primarily narrated through the perspective of Lauren Oya Olamina, whose experiences are written down in diary-form, starting in the year 2024. Lauren grows up in the remnants of Robledo, one of the many walled cities in America which have been built to keep out the poor and criminal. The walls have started to lose their effect, however, as the streets are littered with dead bodies, and threats of violence and death are constant. Under the present circumstances, Lauren can no longer believe in the Christian faith preached by her father, which centers around the belief in divine intervention. Lauren starts a religion of her own, Earthseed, and articulates her religious ideas into poetry. While Earthseed is initially focused on survival, led by the belief that "God is Change," it also looks toward a long-term solution, as it eventually intends to leave this decaying world behind in order to seek a better life on other planets, which Lauren believes might "break the old cycle" of empire and war that humanity got stuck in (*Talents* 358). Since Lauren functions as a strong leader who guides her community through the urban wilderness and might save the whole of humanity from apocalyptic destruction, she might be seen as a messiah-like figure.

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<sup>23</sup> In her fiction, Butler often interweaves religious references with science-fiction in order to "question the political and spiritual value of marginalized bodies" which have often been determined by religion (Hampton 85). Although Butler criticizes religion in this way, she also notes the importance of religion within African-American culture, as it has often served as a means of survival and a way to strengthen a sense of community (Hampton 88). A similar view on religion can be discerned in Butler's novels, such as the *Parable*-series.

### 3.2.1 Prophecy and Messianism

In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren initially seems to be an apocalyptic prophet, who notices the signs of destruction and the coming end. She can't help but "seeing—collecting" the general misery of the street poor (*Sower* 11). Fires, murder, rape, drug-abuse, natural disasters and attacks by wild animals slowly become part of everyday life. In contrast to the adults in her close environment, who persist in their belief that divine intervention or messianic politicians will save them, Lauren notes that something must be done, because "our world is coming to an end" (*Sower* 62). In order to prevent Robledo from becoming like Jericho (*Sower* 55) people have to prepare for the worst by reading, studying and working hard; above all, they have to realize that they have the agency to bring about change. With these ideas in mind, Lauren starts to develop her own religion, Earthseed, which has "God is Change" as its central tenet.<sup>24</sup> Lauren encourages social activism and individual responsibility in Earthseed, which counters the faith of Lauren's father, who is a Baptist minister. According to Tweedy, Lauren substitutes her father's other-worldly faith and its "politics of victimization" with the this-worldly concerns of Earthseed and its focus on social agency (n.p.). Lauren refuses to believe in a God like the one in the book of Job, whom she compares to a "powerful man, playing with his toys" (*Sower* 16). Instead of being a victim of God, Earthseed attempts to find comfort and power in the idea that God can be actively shaped (*Sower* 220).<sup>25</sup>

The destruction of Robledo marks a significant break in Lauren's narrative. After her family is violently killed and her house is raided and burned, Lauren travels north. Her journey starts in a group of three, but many people join along the way which is partly due to the efforts of Lauren who continues to save strangers like a "Good Samaritan" (*Sower* 202).<sup>26</sup> As Lauren

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<sup>24</sup> Earthseed seems to be inspired by a variety of different sources, like New Age and Darwinism (Wanzo; Johns "Darwinian Apocalypse"). Tweedy, on the other hand, argues that African-American spirituality and theology are essential to Earthseed, as it similarly perceives of God as an "agent of social change" who fights against injustice and desires the liberation of the oppressed (n.p.).

<sup>25</sup> "A victim of God may, / Through learning adaption, / Become a partner of God, / A victim of God may, / Through forethought and planning, / Become a shaper of God. / Or a victim of God may, / Through shortsightedness and fear, / Remain God's victim, / God's plaything, / God's prey." (*Sower* 31)

<sup>26</sup> Lauren's good deeds are explained by her "hyperempathy," a disorder she inherited from her mother's drug-abuse, which causes her to feel both the pain and the pleasure of people around her. While being a "sharer" makes her more vulnerable than others, Lauren also notes that her disorder might make the world into a better place. The fact that Lauren's messianic deeds are mainly explained by a genetic mutation nevertheless gives a pessimistic view on the human ability to do selfless good deeds or express empathy in times of oppression and destruction. Butler's views on biological determinism, which seem



leads her community to survival, teaches them about her religion, and intends to save the whole of humankind by leaving the earth, Lauren might be seen as a messiah as well as an apocalyptic prophet. Lauren's small community embraces difference, as people from all races, ethnicities and ages are gathered together. The group's journey on the American roads is dangerous, but their chances of survival are enhanced by being united. Their first community, Acorn, is eventually founded on the remains of the family house of Lauren's partner, Bankole. The concluding paragraphs of the novel narrate the symbolic planting of trees on the graves of Bankole's family members, which gains additional significance in light of the "Parable of the Sower" with which the novel concludes (Luke 8:5-8). Like Jesus, Lauren sows her teachings, some of which may survive and bear fruit and some of which may not. Earthseed's focus on adapting to changing circumstances, including suffering and death, enables people to grow something even from the worst of experiences. In the context of Butler's novel, the biblical parable seems to imply that Earthseed, like the seeds sowed in the parable, cannot grow without any help (Jos 418). In order to reach a better state of existence, people will have to work hard.

The first part of the second novel, *Parable of the Talents*, shows that hard work and education can indeed lead to better living conditions, as Acorn has grown into a small-scale utopia. The Acorn-community divides work equally and continues to be defined by diversity and inclusion. Besides, the school and the church are not only the same building, but "the same institution" (*Talents* 389). Nevertheless, their utopia does not last long, as Acorn is eventually attacked and taken over by Christian fundamentalists who persecute and enslave without hesitation, while the new president who claimed to "make America great again" turns a blind eye. Earthseed is considered heathen by the so-called Crusaders, and so Lauren loses her husband, who is murdered, and her daughter, who is taken away and placed in a Christian foster family. After escaping from her enslavement, Lauren soon resumes her religious duty to spread Earthseed. Her daughter, Asha Vere, who also narrates part of the second novel, blames her mother for choosing her religion rather than her own daughter. Although Lauren has used her talents to lead and speak in an optimal way, her sense of duty has also pushed her to make sacrifices at the expense of her family.<sup>27</sup>

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to imply that violence and abuse of power are biologically coded, have often been addressed by critics (Johns 406).

<sup>27</sup> Asha Vere's point of view provides a wholly different perspective on Lauren and her endeavors, as she starts the novel by saying that: "They'll make a God of her [Lauren]. I think that would please her" (*Talents* 1). Additionally, she criticizes her mother's religion, which has by then become a "wealthy sect," for spending effort and large amounts of money on "nonsense" while on earth people still deal with poverty, disease and suffering (380). In this way, Lauren's criticism that traditional religions are

The *Parable of the Talents* concludes with Lauren who, as an 81-year old woman, watches the first ship fly off into space. The fact that Lauren stays behind despite all she has suffered emphasizes the sacrificial aspect of her actions. Tweedy likens Lauren's role to that of Moses, as she does not actually enter the "Promised Land" but rather dedicates her labor to her followers and their progeny (n.p.). Although Lauren preaches a faith that differs from Christianity in many respects, the biblical parables, Lauren's prediction of the coming end, her "revelation" of a new faith, and her goals to save humankind in times of apocalyptic destruction, invite the reader to draw connections between Lauren and prophetic and messianic figures like John of Patmos, Jesus and Moses.

### 3.2.2 The *Parables* as Apocalypse

Many scholars have commented on the parallels between Butler's *Parables* and apocalypse, since the dystopian conditions of Butler's depicted world similarly lead to the revelation of an alternative reality as a utopian solution. The violent events that are continually taking place are reminiscent of apocalypse, as they involve similar apocalyptic signs like persecution and natural disaster, but nevertheless do not lead up to any eschatological war or climactic end. Rather than depicting the end of the world, the novels seem to reflect the meaning of apocalypse in its literal sense, as they reveal an alternative reality within this world, as well as a new theology based on the concept of change (Johns "Darwinian" 403). Lauren's revelation does not only point to the importance of social agency, in which education and science might help humankind to either prevent or survive political and ecological disaster, but also serves as a social critique of problems that affect lives in the present world. The series for example depicts modern slavery, drug-abuse, water shortage, and the militarization of public space through the construction of walled communities (Miller 349). The impact of such problems on people of color and on women is especially emphasized in Butler's novels; Lauren for example dresses as a man in order to be able to walk the streets safely, and Robledo seems to be generally neglected as a city because it is "too black" (*Sower* 120). In this way, the novel connects several socio-political issues that result in oppression and seems to present a more intersectional perspective on feminist utopianism and apocalypse.

In contrast to the biblical apocalypse, Butler's *Parables* do not provide any consolation in the form of a supernatural world, since God is generally understood as indifferent and above

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not capable of dealing with the problems of this world, as they are too much focused on heaven and divine intervention, seems to be applicable to *Earthseed* as well.

all, subject to change. The alternative reality that is proposed as a utopia in Butler's novels is "literal, physical" (*Talents* 47). Earthseed does not promise paradise in an afterlife, but rather looks to hard work, challenges and changes as a utopian ideal. Accordingly, those who suffer and die because they adhere to Earthseed are not promised to shine like the stars, like the martyrs in Daniel (Dan. 12:3), but rather make their sacrifices so that a future generation might find their home "among the stars," without any divine intervention. Butler's utopia is very different from that of the biblical apocalypses in this respect, but their function seems similar as these utopias may provide a collective purpose which can unite people.<sup>28</sup> Lauren's criticism of traditional religion nevertheless focuses on the idea that it is too much concerned with the supernatural, while people might also believe in "something that they could make real with their own hands" (*Talents* 179). This view might be nuanced in light of this thesis' discussion of religious utopianism, which does not necessarily exclude human action. Nevertheless, although the novels show that traditional religion can also provide a sense of community and comfort, Lauren believes traditional religions are not realistic or pragmatic enough to adequately improve the living conditions of people who have to deal with issues like racism, poverty, violence and sexism on a daily basis.

### 3.3 Reversal in *The Power* (2016)

*The Power* is a work of speculative fiction published in 2016 by the British writer Naomi Alderman. Religion is a recurring theme in the work of Alderman, who was brought up in an orthodox Jewish family in London. *The Power* explores the idea that women have miraculously gained the ability to emit electricity through their hands, as a result of which gender hierarchies are slowly reversed. The novel follows four main protagonists during the cataclysmic events as a result of this new power, which is received differently all over the world; some see it as an apocalyptic sign, while others consider the new power a genetic mutation. One of the most striking elements in a comparison between *The Power* and the biblical apocalypse is the theme of reversal. Similar to the Book of Revelation, in which the power relations between the early Christian churches and the Roman ruling order are drastically reversed, *The Power* depicts a reversal of gender hierarchies. The story builds up to an eschatological battle that will establish a New Order in which this reversal is eventually realised.

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<sup>28</sup> Lauren notes that, "[w]hen we have no difficult, long-term purpose to strive toward, we fight each other. We destroy ourselves. We have these chaotic, apocalyptic periods of murderous craziness" (*Talents* 179). Although Lauren seems to associate apocalypse with violence among humans, biblical apocalypses can also provide a long-term purpose and might exhort to pacifism as well as revolt.

The reversal of gender hierarchies takes place on many different levels in the novel. Women take powerful positions as politicians and religious leaders all over the world, while men suddenly become the weaker sex. The novel depicts situations in which men are sexually abused, physically mutilated, or generally humiliated while they are subjected to the power of female leaders. The reversal also extends to a metafictional level as the story itself is actually a manuscript written by a male writer, but published pseudonymously under a woman's name. In the epistolary that frames the novel, the implied author Naomi Alderman<sup>29</sup> suggests to Neil Adam Armon, the male author of the manuscript, that he might want to publish under a woman's name in order to escape the dominant gender frames that will immediately consider his work as a part of "men's literature" (338-39).

### 3.3.1 Apocalyptic Reversal

Although reversal extends to several levels of the world in *The Power*, the reversal that is related to religion seems most interesting to discuss in this thesis. Religion is especially an important theme in the storyline of Allie, who develops into an important religious leader. Allie first puts her power to use by killing her abusive adoptive father, after which she flees and is led by a mysterious voice in her head who implores her to "go from here to the place that I will show you" (40), just like God also said to Abram (Gen. 12:1). Allie ends up at a convent, where slowly more and more girls gather to exercise their power. Allie attains a religious status at the convent, where she goes by the pseudonym Mother Eve. Guided by the voice in her head, she becomes the main force behind the transformation of a male-dominated Christianity, which leads to a newfound appreciation of female biblical figures, the rewriting of Scripture and a God that is referred to with female pronouns.<sup>30</sup> Eve is able to heal people by using her power and leads a group of girls into the sea, who are then magically baptized through the perceived touch of God.<sup>31</sup> The group of girls seem to become Eve's disciples, as they spread the word that Eve, who communicates with God, has "secret messages" and healing powers (79). Eve's prophecies of a new land and coming justice are recorded on mobile phones and sent across the world. Nevertheless, although Eve speaks of love and sisterhood among women, those who

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<sup>29</sup> To avoid any confusion, the implied author within the story will be referred to as Naomi in this thesis.

<sup>30</sup> Eve also addresses other religions than Christianity who have forgotten important female leaders, like Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. Rather than trying to convert people, she preaches to engender a change across different religions.

<sup>31</sup> "They all know for a moment that they will die here under the water, they cannot breathe and then when they are lifted up they are reborn... They felt the presence of God around them and among them, and She was glad. And the birds flew above them, calling out in glory for a new dawn" (79).

doubt are condemned (84). The transformation of Christianity thus seems utopian at first, but the dystopia that is hidden under the surface is soon revealed. Eve for example supports the leader of the newly founded republic of women and her plans to start a war. Any war that is needed to ensure the power of women is framed as a holy war and legitimized with the idea that everything would be even worse if men were in power (230). Accordingly, although *The Power* positively depicts women as religious agents who might exert influence on religious tradition and the interpretation of religious texts, the novel also shows that women use religion as a tool of domination and a legitimization of violence.

When Eve finds out that the abuse of her adoptive father during her youth was actually orchestrated by her adoptive mother, she seems to land into a religious crisis. She finds out that the voice was only there to make things simple for her, while in fact there never was a simple choice between good and evil. The voice in her head talks about “another Prophet,” who came to tell that the people wanted a King, which refers to the epigraph of the novel from 1 Sam. 8 in which the Israelites asked Samuel for a King. The voice explains that, despite the warnings that a King would make them into slaves, the people persisted in their wish to be governed, so the voice just gave them what they wanted. “You people like to pretend things are simple even at your own cost” (320). When the voice leaves Eve, she decides to simply give the people what they want, which is simplicity.

...when Mother Eve warns them that the apocalypse is near at hand and only the righteous will be saved, she can call the world to a new order. The end of all flesh is near, because the Earth is filled with violence. Therefore, build an ark. It will be simple. That is all they want. (325)

The allusion to the story of Noah, in which the earth was similarly “filled with violence” (Gen. 6:11), suggests that the coming cataclysm is not one which entails the end of human history, but that it is rather perceived as a chance for the human race to better themselves. People might do it “[d]ifferent this time, better this time. Dismantle the old house and begin again” (328). This seems to be an allusion to Audre Lorde, who stated that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (Lorde 19). This idea is also confirmed by the epistolary between Naomi and Neil which frames the story. Since the same problems that affect women in contemporary society affect men in *The Power*, the novel shows

that although hierarchies might be reversed, society will not improve if power continues to be measured in terms of violence.

### 3.3.2 The Power of Apocalypse

The apocalyptic reversal of *The Power* can also be seen in light of Stratton, who shows that Jewish and Christian apocalypses often imagine a reversal of power hierarchies through the mimicry of the strategies of domination of the Roman ruling order (§1.4). *The Power* shows a similar borrowing of strategies, which creates an estranging effect with regard to present society as it exposes gender hierarchies and patriarchy's strategies of domination.<sup>32</sup> A world in which men are primarily viewed as sex objects and considered inherently weak, indeed underwrites Johns' understanding of utopia as a way of "altering people's perceptions, of making the familiar seem strange" ("Feminism" 175). Nevertheless, *The Power's* reversal also points out that the same systems that serve men may also serve women under certain circumstances. Naomi's remark that a patriarchal order must be more "loving and naturally nurturing" than their present matriarchal society ironically shows that the problem does not lie in any fundamental difference between gender but rather in the way in which humans use power (333). The implied apocalyptic battle and subsequent reversal of gender hierarchies do not result in a truly utopian order because the same systems of oppression still remain. In this way, the biblical apocalypse also becomes undesirable in light of Alderman's novel, as it seems to underwrite Pippin's argument that New Jerusalem is not truly utopian because it continues to be characterized by domination and violence (§1.5).

The novel seems to paint a pessimistic picture of humanity's capacity to change, as the human need for simplification has already plagued civilizations at least since Samuel and a full-blown cataclysm can only lead to an equally unsatisfying reversal of power hierarchies. Additionally, in fragments of the fictional "Book of Eve" it is repeatedly noted that "the shape of power is always the same." The Book employs nature imagery to describe power, for example lightning and trees, which emphasizes the idea that power is both natural and uncontrollable. In this way, it is unclear whether a true change in power structures, other than a mere reversal, is actually possible. Neil's manuscript seems to be the only source of hope in the narrative, as it presents a version of history that is daringly different from dominant stories about the Cataclysm and the history of women in general. In their society, it seems to be

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<sup>32</sup> Like Alderman notes in her article for *The Guardian*, "nothing happens to men in the novel...that is not happening to a woman in our world today" ("Dystopian dreams" n.p.).

controversial to even suggest that there might have been a time when women were not powerful.<sup>33</sup> In his letters to Naomi, Neil emphasizes the idea that the stories we tell influence our identities and subsequently also our ideas of what we are capable of. Like Neil notes: “If we keep on repeating the same old lines about the past when there’s clear evidence that not all civilizations had the same ideas as us...we’re denying that anything can change” (335). In this way, the imagined reality in *The Power* seems to invite readers to reconsider their conceptions of gender and how these are imbedded in language and history. The only possible solution to gender hierarchies and abuse of power seems to be “imagin[ing] ourselves differently” (338). The novel itself might be an example of this, as it depicts women as strong politicians, warriors or religious leaders, who use power in positive as well as negative ways. Accordingly, *The Power* encourages readers to think of women as powerful agents, even though they are aided by their new powers. Although the novel explicitly shows that reversal will not “dismantle the master’s house,” the imagination of an apocalyptic end of patriarchal history might also be interpreted as a tool of empowerment which subverts normative ideas about gender in our present society. In this way, *The Power* does not seem to look towards apocalypse as a goal, because it illustrates the undesirable consequences of reversal, but nevertheless shows that the apocalyptic imagination can function as empowerment and social critique.

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<sup>33</sup> For example, Naomi expresses disbelief at the idea of widespread existence of male soldiers in the past. This mirrors tendencies in history that are still present today, with regard to women. The novel also addresses this through illustrations of archaeological findings, in which a female statue which is currently still named “Dancing Girl” becomes a statue of the “Priestess Queen” (213), and the “Priest King” is named “Serving Boy” (214). Alderman also reflects on this in her “Acknowledgements” (341).

#### Chapter 4: Concluding Remarks

Like the preceding chapter has shown, the way in which contemporary feminist novels engage with notions of the apocalypse is very diverse. When keeping in mind the definition and characteristics of the biblical genre of apocalypse which were laid out in the first chapter of this thesis, it is clear that contemporary novels are in many ways different from the biblical genre. Nevertheless, all of the discussed novels engage with apocalyptic motifs and themes, such as resistance, messianism and reversal, and might also fulfil similar functions in society as narratives that for example criticize the ruling order, engender human action, or provide hope in the imagination of a utopian alternative reality. Due to the limited scope of this thesis, the literary analysis of apocalypse in the discussed works is not as extensive as it might have been. There are many more motifs to be discussed, which could be compared across different religious apocalyptic texts, as well as contemporary literature in different languages and cultures. Even though the relative popularity of feminist dystopian fiction provided an interesting opportunity to narrow down the topic of this thesis, apocalypse might also be an important theme in for example postcolonial or ecocritical literature.

The analysis of feminist dystopian fiction in this thesis shows that apocalyptic motifs are prevalent in the genre. While contemporary writers still seem to draw inspiration from apocalyptic texts and/or the tradition of apocalyptic thought that has emerged from them, apocalypse is also resisted in certain aspects. The discussed novels depict endings in the broad sense of the world, but do not represent any eschatological endings that involve the revelation of a supernatural world. Accordingly, the novels also do not involve other-worldly beings like angels or God, although “the voice” in Alderman’s novel might be ambiguous in this respect. *The Power* seems to question apocalypse by depicting the drastic consequences of reversal, which does not necessarily lead to a utopian world. Butler’s novels on the other hand criticize a passive attitude towards oppression as a result of the belief in divine intervention. Although the novels seem to be pessimistic with regard to humanity’s ability to change the abuse of power, all novels are open-ended and subsequently do not rule out the possibility of future improvement. It seems that feminist dystopian fiction, just like the contemporary utopian tradition as a whole, is more careful in imagining better alternatives for this world when compared to the biblical apocalypses. Although all novels depict or imply the existence of utopian alternative realities, these are never presented as though they are perfect or paradisiacal, as seems to be the case in apocalyptic texts. Nevertheless, the most important difference might be that in feminist dystopia apocalypse is not something that is actively desired. Rather, apocalyptic themes and motifs seem to be utilized as literary devices which



can critique the social order or move people to action so that the apocalyptic events in the portrayed dystopias might still be prevented in our present world.

Divine intervention is also not envisioned as the primary tool for engendering change. *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to point to language and storytelling as a tool for resistance and empowerment. Similar to the biblical apocalypses, Offred's narrative shows how language or writing can function as a speech act which can evoke a future reader and an alternative reality that can provide hope. The apocalyptic reversal of *The Power* also shows the interrelation between power and language, as Neil's manuscript challenges history and rooted conceptions of gender. Besides, the novel illustrates how the imaginative power of apocalypse can function as a source of empowerment, as apocalyptic motifs are employed to depict women as powerful agents. In contrast to the other novels, the *Parables* explicitly address a larger array of socio-political issues besides sexism, such as racism and poverty. Compared to the other novels, they also envision a different approach to the problems of society. Rather than primarily focusing on language, Butler's novels emphasize the need for a pragmatic approach, which focuses on education and hard work. In sum, contemporary feminist dystopias engage with apocalyptic motifs but also differ from apocalypse in many respects, especially with regard to the content of a utopian alternative reality, whether physically present or merely imagined, and the means through which better living conditions might be attained. Nevertheless, in light of the feminist critique of apocalypse (§1.5), contemporary feminist authors seem less concerned with the androcentric use of language and stereotyping in apocalyptic texts like Revelation than with the potential imaginative power of apocalyptic motifs and imagery.

Although religion often seems disregarded in the discussion of feminist literature, it is a very dominant theme in the discussed novels. The novels show how religion and apocalypticism can serve as a source of oppression, but also depict women as religious agents who either transform existing traditions, for example through Offred's Lord's Prayer or Allie's emphasis on female biblical figures, or create new forms of religion on their own. Thus, women are not merely the victims of religious or other forms of oppression but also actors or leaders who can claim their own understandings of religion and religious texts. Although it seems necessary to criticize certain aspects of apocalypse, writers and readers similarly have the agency to reinterpret its meanings in a contemporary context. The discussed feminist novels show that the imaginative power of apocalypse can also be used to strive for other ends than dualism, oppression and violence.

Whether imagining endings or new beginnings is apocalyptic, utopian or dystopian, it seems that the desire for other ways of being is a dominant expression within literature. The

content, forms and functions of this desire are manifold and might discourage to pursue any utopian action at all, since it seems that no world can be universally utopian. Nevertheless, the diversity of the visions and voices that express desire in literature also provides the possibility of learning about different ways of imagining utopia. It seems that a better version of our world can only be reached if difference is acknowledged and seen as a strength, like Audre Lorde has also argued. This would include difference in class, race, gender as well as religion. In her criticism of non-intersectional feminism, Lorde noted that “divide and conquer must become define and empower” (19). Although as a literary form and a tradition of thought, apocalypticism and utopianism have often been associated with the former, contemporary feminist novels show that apocalyptic motifs can be employed to “define and empower” as well. Although the biblical apocalypse should be approached critically, its form allows readers to imagine the end in order to make place for a new beginning, which in feminist fiction is not singular and static but open-ended, diverse and susceptible to change.

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