

Standing on the Edge of the Abyss: A Postmodern Apocalyptic Spirituality*

Tina Pippin

"The Apocalypse is the way the world looks after the ego has disappeared" (Northrop Frye 1982:138).

Sit back, but not comfortably, and watch the enactment of the end of the world. Your guide is the seer who calls himself John. He is going to take you through his visions of the future: the storming of the earth and its powers by the powers of heaven. The fates of the sinful and the righteous and the destruction of the old earth and the creation of the new are all presented as flesh and blood reality. This journey is not for the squeamish. There is war, rape, cannibalism, burning flesh, martyrdom, the burning of the earth, the terrorizing by seven-headed beasts, and the dead coming back to life. Your seat is conveniently placed at the edge of the bottomless pit, the abyss of chaos. But look around—there is a heavenly liturgy and a wedding feast and a beautiful city of hope. John is telling you what your choices are. He is telling you what you have to do to reach utopia. John has the wisdom of the end time: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book" (Apoc 22:18-19). Any questions?

The New Testament vision of the apocalypse is a fast, scary, cathartic, and hopeful narrative. I want to approach the concept of

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the Apocalypse as a spiritual resource by approaching the abyss, the bottomless pit, in the text. The narrative motivates the reader to choose the way of heaven through using wisdom to discern the signs of the times, especially the political powers. I want to do a postmodern reading of the concepts of wisdom and the abyss in the Apocalypse by taking a postmodern turn in this journey of the end time.

The abyss is a fantastic poetic, postmodern space. But traditionally the abyss represents the hell to be avoided at all costs. All the enemies, those evil and dangerous political powers that oppress the earth, have been thrown into the abyss, which is an especially good reason to avoid the void. In the Tanak (Gen 1) the abyss is the ocean surrounding the land and also the chaos out of which the world was created. Abyss has an alternate meaning of "intellectual or spiritual profundity"; the dark night of the soul which leads to enlightenment. Parker Palmer uncovers this idea in his discussion about the political meaning of apocalypse: "So apocalypse *may* not be an end but a new beginning, a time when we are invited into the power of the spiritual life. Whether it *will* be a new beginning depends on our understanding of spiritual truth and our capacity to follow its call" (1984:23-24). I contend that traditional (and dominant) readings of the Apocalypse are patriarchal and limit the use of the text as a spiritual resource to a male vision of the end of time, the worship of the throne (phallus), and the distortion and destruction of goddess-based religion and women's power. A rereading of/into the abyss and of Wisdom (Sophia) in the Apocalypse leads to some new interaction with and questioning of the past and the future.

Emphasis on Wisdom and wisdom traditions is a frequent theme in feminist theology. Rosemary Radford Ruether explains: "It is in the hands of Holy Wisdom to forge out of our finite struggle for truth and being for everlasting life. Our agnosticism about what this means is then the expression of our faith, our trust that Holy Wisdom will give transcendent meaning to our work, which is bounded by space and time" (1983:258).¹ By focusing on Sophia the creative process is tapped.

1. Charlene Spretnak (1991:8) uses wisdom traditions from different religions (Buddhism, Native American, neo-paganism, and monotheism) in her postmodern reading. She states: "Because of the resilience of the wisdom traditions, which have survived the rise and fall of countless empires and ideologies, we have the opportunity to reclaim and renew the kinds of sensibilities with which we might cultivate awareness of the sacred process of the unfolding of the person, the or-

Rather than continuing to relate unquestionably to the total ecocide and genocide of the Apocalypse, a reclaiming of Sophia provides a different wisdom about the impending end of the world.

Poet Denise Levertov (1987:59) expresses the anxiety of relying on patriarchal wisdom in a poem entitled, "The Sun Going down upon Our Wrath":

Get wisdom, get understanding, saith
the ancient. But he believed
there is nothing new under the sun,
his future
rolled away in great coils forever
into the generations.
Among conies the grass
grew again
and among bones.
And the bones would rise.

The crisis and hope offered by apocalyptic literature stirs the imagination—from the violence of war to the peace of the realm of the divine. A headline in *The New York Times* (January 3, 1993) read, "From Creation to Apocalypse in 76 Hours Flat."² The Society for Secular Armageddonism is proclaiming "pre-apocalyptic stress syndrome." Seeking the presence of the divine in the face of apocalypse is difficult. How do we "face apocalypse"? And how do we know what to do in the face of apocalypse? One starting point is with the biblical text and with facing the Apocalypse of John and its "wisdom"—scanning its heaven and peering into its abyss—going from creation to apocalypse to creation to apocalypse to creation—the endless end of the world.

ganic community, the Great Family of All Beings, and the cosmic whole. In the absence of such orientation, many lives may well become focused by default on becoming the Number One consumers in the global shopping mall, while many other lives will continue to be shaped by hunger and privation."

2. The article discussed a marathon reading of the Bible in a Washington, D.C. church. The pastor comments, "I'd be happy if people simply got literary pleasure out of this, or a lesson in ethics. . . . It's not like we're overburdened by morality these days. Especially in Washington."

Apocalyptic Wisdom: Discerning the End of Time

The tension between chaos and creation is central in the Apocalypse of John. This tension and the resulting ethical dualism call the hearers/readers of the book to patient endurance and testimony. The connection of wisdom traditions in the Mediterranean (especially North Africa) and in Mesopotamia (manticism) with apocalyptic is found by scholars in the context of the ethical. The value system and the ethical demands of choosing good over evil are at stake. The point is not to find an evolutionary link of prophecy to wisdom to apocalyptic, but there are connections between apocalyptic and wisdom in the Apocalypse of John.

Jonathan Z. Smith makes the connection between wisdom and apocalyptic by examining the *Babyloniaka* of Berossus, a priest of Marduk (290–280 B.C.E.) (1975:132). Smith is interested in the author of this text, a priestly scribe of an elite, well-educated class. Of these mantic scribes Smith notes, "They hypostatized the scribe and scribal activities in the figure of Divine Wisdom. They speculated about hidden heavenly tablets, about creation by divine word, about the beginning and the end and thereby claimed to possess the secrets of creation" (1975:135).³ Thus, two main "influences" of the wisdom tradition (which can also be said about the prophetic) are the role of the seer/sage and the passage of time (beginnings and endings).

The seer of the Apocalypse of John claims wisdom—the knowledge of the mysteries of the heavens as revealed to him. John is told to "write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches" (Apoc 1:11). John fearfully faces the mysteries and reports (accurately, of course) what he sees. According to Kurt Rudolph, "wisdom was originally a practical matter, namely 'insight' into certain connections existing in human life and in the world and modes of behavior derived from this insight and put into the service of instruction and education. . . . A person's wisdom depends on what he or she has seen and thereby come to know" (1987:393). In the Apocalypse seeing (and hearing) is believing, and believing is seeing (and hearing). Experienc-

3. On the wisdom sage as mantic scribe (and the work of the scribe as a cultic activity), see P. R. Davies (1989:260ff). Davies uses 1 Enoch, Daniel, and Ben Sira as Jewish examples. Davies states, "The plausible *Sitz im Leben* for this erudite yet speculative discourse is an intellectual one. . . ." (265). See also John Collins (1990).

ing the secrets of the end is more than cathartic; ethical action is required once one "sees" and "knows" and "hears." The wise have sight (and at least one ear to hear) and will triumph; fools are blind and deaf and will fall.

John Gammie (1990:497) focused on this relationship of "prudentialism to apocalypticism" which developed from a concern for family and king (Proverbs) to include divine election and warnings against idolatry (Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon). Gammie also incorporates Leo Perdue's work with Victor Turner's theory of liminality, noting that wisdom literature focuses on crisis periods or turning points (1990:483).⁴ In Turner's studies, through the liminal experience the community participates in a ritual of role reversals, but liminality also refers to crossing individual thresholds in life, such as the entry into adulthood. Apocalyptic literature operates in a liminal zone, representing the ultimate and final crisis of the person and the universe. The Apocalypse crosses *the* major threshold—of the end of the world and the creation of God's new order. Anyone who disrupts God's order (and the final "communitas") is destroyed. Social deviants (Jezebel, the Whore, the Beast, any unbelievers, to name a few) are considered dangerous. In the apocalyptic liminal zone the abyss is the "final" place of those who are impure. The "ritual process" (to borrow from Turner) is set by God in the Apocalypse. Anyone who refuses to play by God's rules is out. And the seer wants the Christian community to know and understand these rules.

"These are the words" begins each of the letters to the seven churches. Wisdom is given through the words and by the Word, the Son of Man, "who holds the seven stars in his right hand" (Apoc 2:1), "the first and last, who was dead and came to life" (2:8), "who has the sharp two-edged sword" (2:12), "who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze" (2:18); "who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars" (3:1), "the holy one, the true one" (3:7), and "the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation" (3:14). The description of the Son of Man in 1:13-16 is amplified and expanded throughout these messages to the seven churches. The angels announce, John reports, and Jesus Christ (bloody lamb, sword-wielding savior) gives testimony with his awesome and terrifying presence (1:1-2). The words are from Jesus through intermediaries

4. See Leo G. Perdue (1981).

(twenty-four elders, angels, an eagle, and John). These words have power over both believer and unbeliever and over all the earth. The authority behind the words is God.

In the Apocalypse of John there are four major passages associated with wisdom influences: 5:12 and 7:12 (both are hymns), and 13:18 and 17:9. In these passages wisdom is specifically discussed. From discussions of these sections I want to move into a broader discussion of the interfacing of wisdom and apocalyptic in the text through the concepts of ethics, the threat (or threat as perceived by different parties), the Goddess Sophia, and chaos (the abyss) and creation (the New Jerusalem).

Apocalypse 5:12 and 7:12: Hymns to the Throne of Wisdom

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with a full voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Apoc 5:11-12). And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows" (Apoc 7:11-14).

In these hymns from the heavenly liturgy God and the Lamb are the ones worthy to receive wisdom. Wisdom dwells with God. The throne and the heavenly choir of elders, angels, and four living creatures sing praises on the bestowing of wisdom and other attributes on the Lamb and the one who sits on the throne. Thus, the Lamb and God possess wisdom, and wisdom in turn comes from the throne. The throne is the place of highest wisdom.⁵ Power, might, wealth, bless-

5. Elizabeth Johnson notes that "the more transcendent is God's wisdom, and the more it is hidden in heavenly mysteries, the more the author locates hope for meaningful life in the disjunctive future" (1989:207). On the throne as central see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1991:120): "Revelation's central theological query is: To whom does the earth belong? Who is the ruler of this world? The book's

ing, and honor are heaped onto God by the heavenly choir. The choir chants the truth. Participating in wisdom becomes a cultic activity. Heaven is a poetic (and musical) place.

From the throne God is a divine judge. God's actions throughout the narrative are defended. God's involvement in the suffering of the world is justified in the Apocalypse. James Crenshaw relates that "in wisdom thought, creation functions primarily as defense of divine justice" (1976:27). Since God is destroying the evil powers in the process of destroying the earth, God's actions are justified. The tension between destruction (chaos) and creation is heightened by this judgment.

The agents of revelation are the ones who speak (or sing) in the Apocalypse. In 7:13 one of the twenty-four elders poses a question to the seer. John defers to the heavenly authority with his reply, "Sir, you are the one who knows" (7:14). The authority of the ones in the inner circle of heaven nearest the throne of God is emphasized. If one is to possess wisdom, one must imitate the wise ones nearest the throne (the elders singing praise to God; the martyrs under the altar; the two witnesses; Jesus the slain Lamb).

Furthermore, one is also to imitate the seer, John, by respecting the visions and seeking to understand God's revelation. John obediently follows the instructions from the heavenly guides. In Apocalypse 10:8-11 when the angel asks John to eat the scroll, he eats. John reports: "So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter" (10:10).⁶ The act begins a new wave of prophesy, as it does for the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 2:8-3:3). So John chews, grinds with his teeth, swallows, and digests the scroll. Lips, mouth, teeth, tongue, stomach, and bowels are all involved in the eating process. John's desire to know all the heavenly secrets leads to a bit of indigestion. Tibor Fabriny notes that the act of swallowing notes absorption or incorporation: "The reader is absorbed by the vision and recreated by it" (1992:76-77) just as John is. This is inspired eating.

central theological symbol is therefore the *throne*, signifying either divine and liberating or demonic and death-dealing power."

6. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza states that the bitter scroll symbolizes death (1991:76).

Apocalypse 13:18: The Threat of Monsters

This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six (Apoc 13:18).

The monster in the Apocalypse is the political state. Rather than worshipping the Son of Man, the whole earth worships the monsters (13:4). The dragon and the beast of the earth and the beast of the sea are like the four beasts of Daniel 7; here the different national powers are combined into one imperial power with different forms. To discern who the beast is requires wisdom, since most of the inhabitants of the earth follow the beast blindly, marking their foreheads or right hands as slaves (13:16).

The number of the beast who rises out of the earth is 666. The believers are to calculate this number so that they know which person is represented. This use of *sophia* is linked to "the specific Christian-apocalyptic sense of esoteric knowledge" (Wilckens 1971:524).⁷ The number of the beast remains a mystery, although valiant efforts have been made to decipher the code.⁸ John is telling secrets and revealing mysteries, and "anyone with understanding" will know how to live in the world before the eschaton. The sets of opposites—the Son of Man/Lamb with the Beast; the Bride and the Woman Clothed with the Sun with the Whore and the Jezebel—lead the believers to see the different ethical choices. There is also a "confusion of values" (Camp 1985:117-18).⁹ The beasts are hypnotic, and the Whore of Babylon is amazingly seductive. She also has a name of mystery on her forehead, "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations" (Apoc 17:5). The Bride is also seductive, in a different way, of course.

The results of following the beasts or the Lamb are made clear. The threat of the earthly political (and economic) power is great until

7. Wilckens states that in 13:18 and 17:8-18 *sophia* "is the knowledge which is reserved for Christian confessors and which enables them to perceive the true meaning and ramifications of the events which were taking place on earth in their day" (1971:524).

8. Paul Boyer (1992:chapter 8) traces the manifestations of 666 in popular culture and the interpretations by conservative Christian groups. The main focus is on the political situation in the Middle East and the European Common Market.

9. Camp is referring to the language in Proverbs 1-9 and the use of seductive feminine imagery for the strange woman.

its overthrow. But the threat of death at the hands of the earthly power is not as great as the threat of chaos. God's threat is bigger. Those who do or follow evil will eventually (very soon) meet the judgment of God. Only those who are not confused but understand the mysteries as explained by John can be counted as insiders in the "utopia of wisdom," a place where everyone shares the special wisdom. All war, death, and famine has ended, and all the enemies have perished. The wisdom of the empire is in tension with God's wisdom throughout the Apocalypse. The two thrones compete for the allegiance of humanity. As Claudia Camp notes concerning Ben Sira: "This sage addresses an educated, well-to-do, but—as far as political, economic, and social matters are concerned—persistently threatened audience" (1990:198). By enacting all these different threats in the narrative, the Apocalypse becomes motivational rhetoric.

The threat is part of the ethical variable of the perception of the situation, according to ethicist Glen Stassen. The threat is measured in terms of its "nature, degree, and linkage with other elements" (Stassen 1980:68). The perception of the threat from different ethical players is important. John sees the imperial threat differently than some of the seven churches (e.g., the Nicolaitans). The imperial power perceives yet a different threat—from colonials who are rebellious—to the attack from God's army. The heavenly powers see the threat from the political power and all who make themselves impure by following it. Readers of the Apocalypse have experienced the threat in their own contexts. How the threat is perceived determines both interpretation and action. For example, Daniel Berrigan and Ernesto Cardenal stress the present threat of the imperialistic policies of the United States and urge the radical ethical action of choosing Christ over "Caesar." In the Apocalypse there are threats from many sides (e.g., the imperial power, seductive, evil women, God's judgment), but only one true promise.

Apocalypse 17:9: Sophia Displaced

This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; also, they are seven kings . . . they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of Lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful (Apoc 17:9 and 14).

The great Whore who thinks to herself, "I rule as a queen" (18:7), is discerned and destroyed. The angel gives a detailed explanation of the mystery of the Whore. The believers are called to come out of the Whore and to enter the Bride, the New Jerusalem.¹⁰ Again, the choices are participation in the new creation or in chaos, the destruction of the earth. The Whore is dethroned, as the beast was. The Lamb alone rules in the new heaven and earth.

In Proverbs 1-9, Wisdom as personified as a woman is a counselor, lover, and administrator of divine justice, and she is given the power of indirection, where women's intellect is praised (Camp 1989:274-281). Wisdom is a goddess—a wise goddess who passes her wisdom on to wise men. Wisdom (*sophia*) is Maat,¹¹ Aphrodite, Astarte, the Queen of heaven, and the daughter of the Father God (Gnosticism). By the Apocalypse there is a return to the King God, the King of kings and Lord of lords. Wisdom is displaced from the throne, or at least co-opted into the Son of Man figure and the Woman Clothed with the Sun and the Bride. The Woman Clothed with the Sun is the mother of the Messiah (Mary), and her astrological surroundings of a "moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (12:1) resemble Wisdom. The Bride of the Lamb becomes the city of the New Jerusalem; otherwise she might be a queen and co-monarch. However, in medieval artistic representations the Bride is often crowned as a queen but is known only in relation to her husband.

So what happens to Sophia in the Apocalypse? Is she part of Jesus and God, since wisdom is bestowed upon them? In the first and second century C.E. Jesus is portrayed as Sophia, from the wisdom sayings of Jesus (in Q and Gnostic gospels) to extracanonical apocalyptic literature. The main story line is that Sophia is rejected on earth and returns to heaven. In the Similitudes of Enoch 42:2, "Wisdom went out in order to dwell among the sons of men, but did not find a dwelling; wisdom returned to her place and took her seat in the midst of the angels."¹² Is Sophia the Bride or the Bride and the Spirit (Apoc

10. See the discussion of gender and misogyny in Pippin (1992).

11. The Egyptian goddess Maat "symbolized truth, justice, and order in cosmos and society". . . . This order "existed and is known and with an unbroken confidence in the act-consequence connection. Modesty, uprightness, self-control, subordination, silence, are virtues of the wise." Maat is eventually replaced by the sun god Re (Rudolph 1987:396).

12. See the discussion of Jesus as Sophia in James M. Robinson (1975) and

22:17)? Is the Bride the consort made legitimate? James M. Robinson relates that the Holy Spirit "is feminine in Semitic languages and at times is interchangeable with Sophia" (1975:6). In any event, the powerful Sophia of Proverbs is personified in many figures and thus is disempowered. Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig (1986:50) point to "Sophia's muted status in the New Testament," which certainly is the case in the Apocalypse.

Another aspect of Sophia is her antithesis, the Jezebel and the Whore. As in Proverbs 1-9, the counsel of a "strange" woman is dangerous. There is a female threat in the Apocalypse. The sexually aggressive female is the most threatening. Giving in to her seduction leads to death: "and I will strike her children dead" (2:23). Following the dangerous female also leads to the abyss. The abyss or the bottomless pit is female in Greek.¹³ The abyss represents the ultimate chaos. The abyss is the female hell mouth (the vagina with teeth), portrayed by the large mouth of the beast in certain medieval representations. In the Apocalypse of Paul 41 the hell mouth is the place of eternal punishment. The angels with Paul say to each other, "Open the mouth of the well that Paul, God's dearly beloved, may look in, because power has been given him to see all the punishments of the underworld. And the angel said to me: Stand at a distance, for you will not be able to bear the stench of this place." There is fire in this well, like the lake of fire and sulfur ("the second death"—20:14) in the Apocalypse of John. Were the seers expressing castration anxiety? What is the effect of pulling the readers/hearers to the edge of the abyss? Do we nervously peer inside the pit?

Conclusion: The Pit and the Throne

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

especially, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:130-40) on "The Sophia-God of Jesus and the Discipleship of Women" and Cady, Ronan, and Taussig (1986).

13. Camp (1991:29-31) shows that the Strange Woman in Proverbs 1-9 is related to Death and Sheol: "The language of death, shades, and Sheol, which have had its origin in the cult of a goddess (so Blenkinsopp) or some other chthonic deity (so McKane), is transformed in Proverbs to articulate a force—defined here as female—that will ultimately split the religious cosmos of Judaism and Christianity into a dualistic moral system in which women can come out on only one side."

And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Apoc 21:1-2).

All chaos is removed to the "outside" in the Apocalypse—the sea, the dangerous women, the evil monsters, all the unfaithful, and death. A new Eden is created as a new paradise with the tree of life restored.¹⁴ Where is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the wisdom tree? Where is the wise serpent?

The need for wisdom is in the time before the end of time. "Anyone who has an ear to hear" is given the chance to gain wisdom and discernment enough to make the choice for good and against the powers of evil. Both powers are seductive and mysterious. Paradise is the reward for making the wise choice. But where is Wisdom, the female personification and deity, in the Apocalypse? The Goddess both is and is not in the text; that is, she is not present in the form we know from Proverbs 1-9, as the powerful creatrix, teacher, and judge. She is subdued and passive, deferring to the male authorities (Jesus and God). The Queen of Heaven gives birth to the Messiah (the Woman Clothed with the Sun) and later marries the Messiah (the Bride). Her body is laid out (and marked and measured by the seer) as the heavenly city and the New Creation. Wisdom loses her place in the pantheon. She exists in the future world in a different form; or rather, she has been re-formed. Women are placed either in the pit (as spiritually dangerous and impure and therefore needing to be murdered) or on the throne, where they are worshiped for their "spiritual purity" and confined in their roles.

Do you doubt the wisdom of the Apocalypse? Then fall, fall, fall into the abyss,¹⁵ the bottomless pit, the great endless gulf, the void. The fall is unavoidable. You were on the threshold, at the edge of the opening of the mouth. Were you thrown? Or did you get too close to the edge, straining to peer in? You will fall forever, free-fall in eter-

14. Cf. 4 Ezra 8:52: "Because it is for you that paradise is opened, the tree of life is planted, the age to goodness is established and wisdom is perfected beforehand." Anthropologist Bruce Lincoln says that in many cultures the concept of paradise is an inversion of the world: "Of the otherworld, all that can be said is that things there are totally *other*, completely opposed to all of this earth" (1991:29).

15. An alternative meaning of abyss is "intellectual or spiritual profundity."

nal flight. You will be at the opposite end of Heaven, falling further from its salvation with every second. You are in Hell, Sheol, the underworld, the place of darkness, of the dark, dangerous female. You are eternally outside of Heaven, the New Jerusalem, that place of light and material delights, paradise regained. You have found the void, the *tabula rasa*, nothingness, the dark, deep innards of earth. You are in no place (*ou topos*), utopia.

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