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# Vedere Dio: le apocalissi giudaiche e protocristiane (IV sec. a.C.-II sec. d.C.)

Luca Arcari, *Vedere Dio: le apocalissi giudaiche e protocristiane (IV sec. a.C.-II sec. d.C.)*. Frecce, 291. Roma: Carocci Editore, 2020. Pp. 442. ISBN 9788843098507 €39,00.

## Review by

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Since the emergence in the 1990s of the interdisciplinary area known as the Cognitive Science of Religion, phenomena as diverse as vision, trance, dreaming, and daydreaming have begun to be investigated by religious studies scholars on an entirely new basis. Though we are still far from being able to speak of a real cognitive turn, cognitive methods and theories have found a fertile ground of application also in the study of the ancient world, particularly in the protean field of biblical studies, where we are witnessing growing interest in what are now commonly defined as “religiously altered states of consciousness” or “religiously interpreted states of consciousness.”<sup>[1]</sup> This book takes advantage of this wide stream of studies, and aspires to provide a first comprehensive overview of early Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature from the vantage point of visionary experiences. The author is first and foremost a historian of religions with an expertise in Second Temple Judaism, which makes his book particularly attractive to those who blame cognitive-based analyses for their frequent lack of a contextually sensitive approach.

The volume consists of eight extensive chapters preceded by a brief introduction and followed by an epilogue, a bibliography, and a final index of authors. In the introduction, and more substantially in the first chapter (“Apocalypses between experience and culture”), Arcari sets out the main methodological and theoretical assumptions that will guide his analysis, accompanying them with lucid remarks on the current state of scholarship. His ambitious goal is “to read early Jewish and Christian revelatory texts . . . as points of conjunction . . . where psychotropic experiences, interpreted as of direct contact with the divine, become communicative tools continuously shaped and reshaped by culture specialists” (13). The challenge, therefore, is not only to consider visionary texts as “mirrors, however opaque or deformed,” of actual experiences, but also to illuminate their functioning as discursive machines, through which the social agents identifiable as their “prosumers” (scribes who were used to produce *and* consume visionary texts) triggered processes of reinvention and re-appropriation of lived experiences. Relying upon Pierre Bourdieu’s analytical idiolect and looking at the visionary mechanism as both a “structured” and “structuring” device,

the author suggests that, while the visionary experiences we find described in these texts are culturally construed and therefore depend on the specificities of their cultural matrix, they can also be viewed as attempts at manipulating and modifying those same specificities. In other words, what Arcari wants to underline is the cognitive, emotional, and social value of these ancient visionary accounts, namely the fact that such texts could function as formidable tools for organizing the world as well as instruments for propaganda, aimed at constructing religious identities which were in competition but also in dialogue with each other.

One key concept that Arcari draws from the toolkit of cognitive studies is that of psychotropy, which entails the distinction between teletropic devices, whereby one's state of mind is altered by external agents, and autotropic devices, whereby it is the subject involved in the visionary experience that alters their own inner chemistry. The texts we are dealing with often report of visionaries who claim to have encountered an extraordinary sphere of reality, either alone or in the company of others, in an informal context or during ritual gatherings, after using "psychotropic devices" that may consist in practices like fasting, sexual abstinence, prayer or prolonged meditation. But the aspect that Arcari is interested in highlighting is the psychotropic quality associated with the communication of visions: these can be delivered orally, written down and then handed over to be copied, or read to a wider audience. In any case, it is writing that turns a visionary account into an actual visionary text; it is still writing that allows it to be handed over and further manipulated.

The next two chapters, probably the most insightful of the book, are thus dedicated to (re)describe this dual process: "From experience to writing, from writing to experience" and "Apocalypses between textualization and scripturalization." In both chapters, Arcari does not hesitate to speak of "visionary re-enactments" or "reactivations." It is not always clear how such re-enactments are to be distinguished from common redactional processes or intertextual dynamics that can also be found in other types of texts. But the idea is compelling. It is certainly undeniable that texts normally classified as apocalypses show a strong correlation between writing and the practice of access to the "otherworld." Moreover, textuality has long been identified among the structural constituents of ancient apocalypses. One only has to think of the pseudepigraphic self-portrait of Enoch as a scribe in the Enochic corpus, or of the final scene in the Apocalypse of Ezra where we read of Ezra being commanded to transcribe ninety-four books, seventy of which are to be transmitted exclusively to the "wise" among the people. To get closer to what Arcari intends as textualization, however, the best example is probably offered by an early Christian apocalypse. In the final part of the second vision recounted in the Shepherd of Hermas, the author and main character is asked by a heavenly figure to make two copies out of a "little book" (Gr. *biblaridion*, significantly the same term as we find in Revelation 10:2). We are also told that Hermas ended up copying the book "letter by letter," because he was "unable to distinguish the syllables" (2.1.3–4). The detail is usually interpreted as a way to certify that Hermas' copy was made true to the original. Yet it is the iconic value assigned to the heavenly booklet that should draw our attention: according to Arcari, the very command to produce a copy of

the object should be considered as part of the visionary experience, with the book playing the role of a psychotropic agent. The manipulative nature of writing is also at the heart of what he labels as scripturalization, whose complex dynamics are illuminated from exemplary contexts of textual transmission (late antique Egypt, Carolingian France, the Old Slavonic milieu) as well as from the analysis of diverse techniques of transmission, such as translation, rewriting, or the reinsertion of visionary texts into collections of writings.

The fact that a visionary account can generate an emotional response such as to induce a psychotropic experience is the focus of the next four chapters, which are mainly devoted to map the otherworld described by early apocalypses. A first section (“Imaginary times”) dwells on the different representations of time. This includes discussion of the pseudepigraphic masks adopted in the texts, which may paradigmatically refer to the mythical time of the origins (Enoch, Abraham, Moses) or to traumatic moments in Israel’s past (Baruch, Ezra). A further aspect he explores are the reasons why Jesus’ followers would decide to produce apocalypses. Then we turn from the problem of time to the problem of space (“Imaginary spaces and places”): in this latter case, the topics discussed include the image of heavens as a temple; the construction of imaginary geographies; the role assigned to mountains, deserts, and cities; the visions of Jerusalem; and the spatial dimensions of the “kingdom of God.”

The otherworld is not only to be seen as a territory of exploration for the visionary, it is also a source of knowledge, and what guarantees the authenticity of the transmitted knowledge. The next chapter of the book (“Knowing the otherworld”) is thus devoted to illuminate such cognitive dimensions of the visionary accounts. Special attention is paid to the “visionary epistemologies” of Jesus’ followers, with separate sub-sections devoted to individual texts. But the picture would not be complete without a chapter (“Agents of the otherworld”) consecrated to otherworldly figures and characters, including angels and other superhuman agents, accounting for the ways in which a game of mirroring between this world and the other can lead both to enhancing the authority of the ideal recipients of the texts and to demonizing their earthly adversaries.

The concluding section of the book (“From texts to contexts,” 315–370) offers an overall assessment of the analysis and arranges its results in a diachronic key. The chapter begins with a critical discussion of some recent attempts to contextualize apocalyptic groups and texts within the broader framework of Second Temple Judaism. In this respect, Arcari is skeptical of any paradigm based on the history and evolution of ideas. As an alternative, he engages in a sort of bird’s eye view through the generative contexts of the individual texts he has hitherto examined. Not everything is convincing in the resulting portrait of the “visionary networks” of early Judaism and early Christianity, but the main merit of the analysis lies in its proposal of a heuristic model. In such a wide-ranging work, it would also be astonishing to find oneself in full agreement with all the points of the reconstruction. If only for that reason, I would like to reserve the final space of this review for a few general critical remarks.

At the beginning of the book, Arcari declares his intention to step aside from any debate on the definition of the literary genre “apocalypse” in favor of a more elastic understanding of the term: “An apocalypse is any account of a revelatory kind which exhibits a wholly shaped descriptive structure, entirely aimed at showing aspects, elements, and figures of the otherworld” (27). The reference to the otherworld in this statement may sound puzzling if we think of the classic distinction between apocalypses with or without an otherworldly journey.<sup>[2]</sup> But the ambiguity disappears as soon as we consider how vision of the otherworld is always implied in the works, since an otherworldly agent is indicated as the source of otherwise inaccessible knowledge. Having said this, however, one may wonder what difference it makes to refuse any “sharp distinction between prophecy and apocalypse” (26), if in the end all the texts to be scrutinized belong to the genre “apocalypse” anyway. From this point of view, one could reproach the author for not having dealt thoroughly with the problem of Jewish Sibylline literature, which would have allowed comparison with other modes of visionary communication in antiquity and other phenomena of re-appropriation of pseudepigraphic masks. If it is true that the Sibylline Oracles cannot be considered as apocalypses, it is also true that they present themselves as visionary accounts, that their pseudepigraphic attribution assigns a higher status to the visionary, and that they imply dynamics of spatiality and temporality in many respects analogous to those analyzed by Arcari.

The analysis would also have benefited from engagement with the old proposal of Jonathan Z. Smith, namely to consider the production of apocalypses as an essentially scribal and learned phenomenon based on a “relentless quest” for paradigms and patterns.<sup>[3]</sup> This is an insight that might have permitted Arcari to nuance his description of both textualization and scripturalization, as well as to better emphasize the innovative scope of his model. Incidentally, it is also surprising not to find, in an Italian book, any reference to the work of Ernesto De Martino, who dedicated fundamental pages to the understanding of apocalyptic texts “between experience and culture.”<sup>[4]</sup>

These final remarks do not undermine the originality of Arcari’s contribution. The book is a stimulating attempt to apply a cognitive paradigm to the analysis of Jewish and Christian apocalypses, and in this sense, it fully responds to the goal of providing a methodologically oriented overview of current research on a variegated corpus of texts, while paving the way for a renewed understanding. The size of the book and its many technicalities perhaps do not make it suitable for a general audience, yet any reader concerned with the topic of “visionary practices” in antiquity will undoubtedly find an admirable synthesis of some central debates and valuable insights for the future of studies.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> Following the categorization proposed by Alan F. Segal, *Life after Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2004) 322–350.

[2] See now John J. Collins, “The Genre Apocalypse Reconsidered,” *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 20/1 (2016) 21–40; and the critical observations (moving from Arcari’s book) in E. Norelli, “Apocalisse come genere: un dibattito ancora attuale?” *Rivista di Storia del Cristianesimo* 17/1 (2020) 3–58 at 40–48.

[3] Jonathan Z. Smith, “Wisdom and Apocalyptic” [1975], in *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1978) 67–87.

[4] See Ernesto De Martino, *La fine del mondo. Contributo all’analisi delle apocalissi culturali* (Torino: Einaudi, 1977; rev. ed. 2019).

[5] The book is nicely produced and I could not detect any major typos. A more careful editing, however, would have allowed the author to avoid the redundant use of expressions such as “a ciò si unisca” and “nel prosiegua,” which abound throughout the text. I would also recommend the correction of what can be read on p. 384, n. 1, regarding the etymology of the English word “prosumer,” which contradicts what the author himself correctly points out on p. 15, as well as the conceptual oversight on p. 178, where Arcari speaks of the “historical Jesus” but clearly intends to refer to the “earthly Jesus” (as can also be understood from p. 183, with reference to the same text; and from pp. 173, 228, and 242 with reference to other texts).