THE BOOK OF DANIEL AND ITS SOCIAL SETTING

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1. A QUESTION OF METHOD

In his recent book the late Norman Cohn, to my knowledge one of the few scholars who wrote an all-embracing history of apocalyptic ideas and their relation to sectarian groups, writes negatively:

The authors of the Book of Daniel and of the Enochic writings certainly thought of themselves as men set apart by God, endowed with a wisdom not available to ordinary mortals, the only ones to understand the past and to foresee the future.... Yet there is no convincing evidence that they were sectarians in the sense of belonging to an identifiable group.

But with regard to an appropriate interpretation, the historical method requires identifiable groups pertaining to themes, motifs and notions found in apocalyptic writings. And it is indeed a "question of method" how to relate those motifs to data about conventicles and parties of the Second Temple Period. Despite the no less negative assumptions by Lester Grabbe, who has underscored that there "is no necessary connection between apocalypses and apocalyptic communities" and that "much work on the sociological level has heretofore been circular," no modern scholar who asks historical questions can ignore the social environment of apocalyptic

3 L. Grabbe, "The Social Setting of Early Jewish Apocalypticism," JSP 4 (1989) 27–47, who seeks to show that it is too simplistic to approach the phenomenon of apocalypticism from the "apocalypses" alone.
literature. Precisely the more we know the social world of biblical writings—including apocalyptic ones—the more we can determine the historical circumstances of these ancient books. Notwithstanding solemn declarations to the contrary, the sociological approach is a major tool for the historical-critical investigation of apocalyptic texts.

Despite their obvious mythological language and otherworldly placements and eschatological orientation towards a transcendent sphere, the apocalyptic writings of the Second Temple Period provoke questions of social setting. In my view this is for two reasons: first, the recent debate of how to define “apocalypses” in terms of genre still incorporates the insights of classical Form Criticism. Accordingly, each genre arises in and is appropriate for its use in a particular situation. Second, the scholarly distinction between “apocalypse” (as a literary genre), “apocalypticism” (as a religio-social movement), and “apocalyptic eschatology” (as a religious perspective), frequently used to distinguish literary evidence from a broader movement, calls for further knowledge about the circles that composed and/or transmitted apocalyptic ideas and ideologies. Some of these “apocalyptic communities” died in late antiquity—for example, the Qumran community. Others survived

