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Review of: **J. A HOOVER**, *The Donatist Church in an Apocalyptic Age* (Oxford, 2018),
Oxford Early Christian Studies

A revised version of a PhD dissertation (Baylor University), this book provides a study of apocalypticism in Donatist sources composed in the fourth and fifth centuries in North Africa. The book comprises an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion and two appendices. The first two chapters set the historiographical and literary background to the study of Donatist apocalypticism proper in chapters 3 to 6, which is the core of the book. The two appendices (A and B) deal with side problems: they reject the hypothesis of the Donatist affiliation of the poet Commodian and question the identification of circumcellions as a millenarian movement.

The introduction sets the scope of the book and deals with two main difficulties: the definition of the terms “apocalyptic”, “apocalypticism” and related concepts and the use of appropriate names to designate the opposing sides of the Donatist schism. The author first well underlines that apocalypticism, which should not be sharply distinguished from eschatology (defined as the coherence emerging from apocalyptic motives), can be understood in three related ways: as a literary genre, a theological category and a sociological descriptor. His focus in this book is on the theological definition of apocalypticism, which is defined as the belief in the imminent end, revealed by God, of the struggle between good and evil. This fits well with how Donatist sources envisage apocalypticism and the end of times. The introduction then clarifies why, following the recent view of other scholars like J.J. O’Donnell, the author has chosen to label the rivals of the Donatists, generally named Catholics, as the “Caecilianists” instead. It emphasises that both parties claimed the Catholic title and suggests that the use of an alternative term is needed to avoid the disputed term Catholic and to restore some balance in the debate. However, the use of “Caecilianist” is problematic in several ways. First, the so-called Caecilianists never used such a name for themselves but it is only, and rarely, employed by Donatists to undermine their opponents. On the contrary, Donatists were routinely described as the party of Donatus and willingly accepted such designation. Second, as the book amply demonstrates, Donatists progressively receded as a minority community in North Africa and were not recognised as the legitimate Church not only by their opponents in Africa but also by Christian transmarine churches in the Empire. The term Catholic can be applied effectively to designate any Nicene Christian who did not adhere to the Donatist party in Africa but also more broadly. On the contrary, the term Caecilianist is not relevant outside Africa and only identifies members of the local “anti-Donatist” African community in a way that does not reflect the unity of churches across the Mediterranean Sea. The bibliography at the end of the book shows this ambiguity: only Augustine of Hippo, Optatus of Milevis and Possidius of Calama are described as “Caecilianist” authors, while other fourth- and fifth-century Catholic writers, even Africans like Quodvultdeus of Carthage and Fulgentius of Ruspe, are found in the “Other” category. The terms Catholic and Donatist, despite their polemical nature, reflect the vast majority of available sources and the history of the schism.

The first chapter discusses how Donatist apocalypticism has been viewed in late antiquity and the early middle ages and then from the late nineteenth century onwards. This chapter shows the complexity of studying Donatist apocalypticism, since it has generally been

misrepresented in modern scholarship, often in the footsteps of early anti-Donatist polemicists, primarily Augustine. The objective of the book is precisely to overturn existing paradigms, which see apocalyptic concerns of Donatist sources as an enduring archaic feature of the pre-Constantinian Church, or, following a “socio-economic approach”, as a manifestation of the social struggle of the rural population against oppressive landlords and the imperial government. Following more recent work, which has attempted to deconstruct these views, the author sees Donatist apocalypticism as an important feature of the movement, which however should not be isolated from contemporary sources. This chapter thus provides a useful synthesis of problems in the study of Donatism that go far beyond the theme of the apocalypse. The second chapter studies the significance and main features of apocalypticism in a selection of African sources preceding the schism: Tertullian, the Passion of Perpetua, Cyprian and Lactantius. It offers a background to understand better Donatist sources composed in the following period.

Chapters 3 to 6 focus on Donatist apocalypticism from the beginning of the schism in the early fourth century to the early Vandal period. Chapter 3 mainly explores Donatist martyrdom accounts of the Macarian persecution (here the author could have drawn on a more extensive bibliography, for instance the work of Matteo Dalvit) and argues that apocalyptic features in the description of persecutors are not specific to the Donatists, providing parallels from the *Opus imperfectum in Matthaem* and Hilary of Poitiers.

Chapter 4 focuses on Donatist sources written from the 363 to 411 (mostly known thanks to the detailed refutations provided by Augustine of Hippo) and is probably the strongest chapter of the book. It first effectively demonstrates, nuancing recent work that downplays Donatist parochialism (notably that of M. Tilley), that “mainstream” Donatism clearly rejected (and was rejected by) transmarine churches, seen as accomplices of the persecution. It shows that, because of the Macarian persecution and their progressive isolation, and to counter polemical arguments requiring them to seek unity with the Catholics, “mainstream” Donatists like Parmenian, Fortunius and Cresconius gradually developed an eschatology of the “remnant” Church. They argued that Scripture predicted the spread of the Church throughout the world, then widespread apostasy, followed by the persecution of the few remaining faithful in North Africa (identified as the Donatists), before the end of the world would unfold. Donatists lived persecution as proof that they were the chosen ones fulfilling the predictions of Scripture and interpreted their reduction to a minority Church as a warning to the coming of the end of times. The author here well highlights a specific feature of Donatist apocalypticism (despite the existence of similar themes in other persecuted communities): the idea of the downfall of the Church before the end of times, in contrast to the more positive Eusebian narrative of the gradual triumph of Christianity. This chapter clearly shows the impact of the history of the schism on the development of a specific eschatology and the sophistication and dynamism of Donatist theology. It provides a compelling explanation of the persistence, on a conceptual and theological level, of a dynamic Donatist community despite significant oppression, through the acceptance of political defeat and the development of an elaborated eschatology capable of countering Augustine’s polemical attacks.

Chapter 5 then shows that this “mainstream” Donatism was only one strand among Donatist apocalypticism. It focuses on Tyconius’ peculiar eschatology, developed in reaction to the “remnant” ecclesiology. The author convincingly argues, bringing together the *Liber*

regularum and the reconstructed text of the *Expositio apocalypseos*, that Tyconius' eschatology is not immanent but rather traditional and in line with pre-Macarian Donatism. It interprets the schism in a personal and intermediary way, not as the end itself, but as a first episode before apostasy reaches the whole church and the end comes.

Finally, Chapter 6 shows the enduring importance and variety of apocalyptic discourse in Donatist sources after 411. It considers the Viennese corpus of sixty sermons discovered and identified as Donatist by F. Leroy in the 1990s (among which, however, only sermon 39 is openly Donatist), the views of Gaudentius through Augustine's refutation, the writing of the Donatist Fulgentius, again through its Pseudo-Augustinian refutation, and the fifth-century Donatist compendium published by R. Rouse and C. McNelis, focusing in particular on the various recensions of the *Liber genealogus*. The persistence of the "mainstream" Donatist apocalyptic model is clear in Gaudentius and the *Liber genealogus*, while Fulgentius provides a peculiar interpretation of Revelation 17, 1-7, identifying the multitude of waters and the prostitute as references to the Catholics and their baptism. The *Liber genealogus* provided a basic apocalyptic chronology, paralleled in other sources like Quodvultdeus of Carthage and Victor of Vita. This chapter gives a useful and clear synthesis of lesser-known sources of Donatist apocalypticism. It might have proven useful here to examine how the new situation brought by the Vandal conquest affected apocalyptic thought beyond the Donatists, as now both Catholics and Donatists were facing persecution and no immediate hope of recovery.

The nuanced conclusion to the book emphasises the main points made: against the depiction of Donatism as a fanatic and archaic apocalyptic movement, the author shows that interest in apocalypticism is not specific to the Donatists. Nevertheless, apocalypticism provided a powerful tool to address the difficult situation that they faced. Donatist eschatology was dynamic and developed in different directions. More broadly, the author sees his study as a contribution to the development of a nuanced picture of Donatism (or even "Donatisms"), as a religious movement that was part of a wider world and full of internal complexities.

In summary, this is a commendable, well-written and learned book, which offers a comprehensive introduction to Donatist apocalypticism and more broadly helps rewriting a more accurate history of Donatism. As a whole, the book perhaps puts too much weight on the discussion of previous scholarship on Donatism rather than fully exploiting the innovative views developed on the internal diversity and evolving nature of the evidence and on apocalypticism as a shared culture. As this review suggests, readers interested in the originality and importance of Donatist apocalypticism will find particularly useful studies in chapters 3 to 6 (p. 98-208). These chapters could have provided the basis for a broader study of late antique apocalypticism comparing Donatist and other apocalyptic texts, which would have strengthened the broader conclusions of the book.

If this book leaves the reader looking for more, this is due to the skill of the author who well demonstrates the importance of Donatist texts for our understanding of late antique Christianity more broadly.

Matthieu PIGNOT