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Revisiting the early Christians on blessedness: In conversation with Willem S. Vorster's work on the makarisms

Author:
Chris L. de Wet[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Chris de Wet,
chris.dewet@up.ac.za

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In this article, I aim to revisit and extend the work of Willem Vorster on blessedness in early Christianity, particularly his analysis of the makarisms in Matthew and Luke. Vorster's insightful examination of Stoic and early Christian views on blessedness offers a framework for understanding the wisdom and apocalyptic themes within these beatitudes. His focus on the wisdom-oriented, ethical focus in Matthew and the apocalyptic, eschatological view in Luke provides a dual lens through which to view early Christian thought on happiness and virtue. While Vorster's analysis is primarily concerned with 1st-century Christian thought, this article extends his framework into the 4th-century, exploring how early Christian thinkers further developed and adapted the makarisms. The reception of these teachings shifted, incorporating more structured and mystical interpretations influenced by the ascetic and monastic movements.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article argues that early Christian readings of the makarisms balanced practical wisdom and mystical insight, embracing their potential for multiple meanings – moral, mystical and eschatological. It concludes by examining how Vorster's approach remains relevant for understanding both early Christian theology and social ethics, emphasising its applicability for contemporary interpretations of Christian moral thought and community life.

Keywords: Willem S. Vorster; markarisms; blessedness; monasticism; spiritual progress.

Introduction

The makarisms in the New Testament, often rendered as 'blessings' or 'beatitudes' (from the Greek word, μακαρισμός), have been central to Christian ethical, spiritual and theological reflection since antiquity. The short expressions of blessing are like an introitus to a musical piece, as Betz (1995:91) writes. Keener (2009:164–165) explains that they adhere even to Graeco-Roman literary conventions when 'warming up' before a poem or speech. Found primarily in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:3–12) and the Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:20–23), these proclamations encapsulate ideals of virtue, reward and divine favour. Their appeal lies in their universality and adaptability, which have allowed them to address diverse contexts, ranging from the persecution of early Christian communities to the ascetic spirituality of later theological traditions, as will be demonstrated. The interpretations of the makarisms by Church Fathers such as Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom, among others, reveal a rich tapestry of meanings, emphasising everything from mystical ascent to practical communal ethics.

Willem Vorster's scholarship provides a vital lens for examining these blessings.[1] His work focussed on the sociohistorical and rhetorical dimensions of biblical texts, with particular attention to how they were shaped by and for their intended audiences. Vorster (1990:38–51) argued that the makarisms functioned as theological and rhetorical constructs, aimed at forming communal identity and inspiring spiritual aspiration within early Christian communities. By emphasising the flexibility of the makarisms, he demonstrated how these texts were reinterpreted and recontextualised to address evolving social, economic and theological concerns. He has mainly

1.It is a distinct honour to write about Professor Willem Vorster and his enduring scholarly legacy. Although I never had the privilege of knowing him personally, I have long felt an intellectual affinity with his work and approach to biblical studies. His influence is keenly felt at the University of South Africa (UNISA), where his writings and the research of his students, who have become my esteemed colleagues, continue to shape academic discourse. Vorster's rigorous yet imaginative engagement with the sociohistorical, rhetorical, and especially hermeneutical dimensions of the biblical text has profoundly impacted the field and has indirectly shaped my own thinking. His ability to situate biblical texts within their historical contexts while exploring their relevance for contemporary audiences remains an enduring model of scholarship. Writing on topics that engage his insights is both a testament to his far-reaching influence and a personal privilege.

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focussed on the nature of the makarisms as wisdom and/or apocalyptic texts. His insights serve as a critical framework for analysing the dynamic interplay between the original settings of the makarisms and their subsequent theological adaptations, as is the wider purpose of this article.

This study thus engages with Vorster's approach by exploring how the interpretations of the makarisms by early Christian authors both align with and diverge from his observations on their nature as wisdom and apocalyptic texts. Vorster's emphasis on the adaptability of the makarisms is particularly relevant to understanding how figures such as Gregory of Nyssa and Chrysostom addressed their distinct audiences. For example, Gregory of Nyssa's mystical readings underscore the makarisms as steps toward divine participation, while Chrysostom's interpretations reflect a pragmatic focus on social ethics and communal life, as I will demonstrate shortly. The diversity of these interpretations illustrates the pliability of the makarisms, as they shifted to address new theological and pastoral priorities.

However, while Vorster's focus on the sapiential and apocalyptic aspects of the makarisms is invaluable, this essay will attempt to push the discussion further into the later Christian centuries. Vorster's sociohistorical lens often foregrounds the communal and ethical dimensions of the makarisms mostly in the 1st-century, potentially limiting the scope of what he calls 'early Christians'. By broadening the scope of blessedness in early Christianity, the essay aims to build on and develop Vorster's insights, presenting a more comprehensive picture of how the makarisms operated within early Christian thought not only limited to the 1st-century.

Through a detailed engagement with Vorster's work and its application to early Christian interpretations in the later centuries, especially the 4th-century, this article seeks to explore how the makarisms have functioned as theological, ethical and rhetorical tools across different contexts, asking especially whether they functioned as wisdom texts or, as Vorster calls it, 'entrance requirements', or apocalyptic statements. By comparing the theological nuances and rhetorical strategies of early Christian interpreters with Vorster's insights, this analysis will demonstrate the enduring adaptability of the makarisms and their capacity to speak to the needs of both their original and subsequent audiences. In doing so, it highlights their role as bridges between the ethical teachings of Jesus and the lived realities of Christian communities across time.

Willem Vorster's approach to blessedness and the makarisms in early Christianity: Insights from 'Stoics and Early Christianity on Blessedness' (1990)

In his chapter, 'Stoics and Early Christians on Blessedness', Vorster (1990:38–51) offers a nuanced exploration of the concepts of blessedness and happiness [εὐδαιμονία, μακαρισμός], on the meaning of μακάριος, (see Betz 1995:92–93; France 2007:160–161) in Stoicism and early Christianity, with particular attention, in the latter case, to the New Testament and its socio-religious contexts. Published in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (1990), this essay situates early Christian teachings on blessedness within the broader Greco-Roman and Jewish frameworks of thought. Vorster avoids simplistic comparisons between Stoic and Christian perspectives, instead reading both traditions on their own terms and within their unique symbolic universes – he does, at the end, provide a telling and illustrative list of parallel statements between some Stoics and the New Testament (Vorster 1990:49–50). By doing so, he not only highlights the distinctiveness of early Christian discourse on blessedness but also underscores its role in shaping the worldview and behaviour of early Christian communities. His essay focusses particularly on the makarisms (or beatitudes) in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which serve as a vital lens for understanding how early Christians conceptualised happiness and blessedness. Vorster makes several crucial observations about the nature and function of these statements, and his analysis significantly enhances our understanding of early Christian teachings as a discourse aimed at regulating bodies, behaviour and communal identity.

Vorster (1990:44–45) begins by asserting that any discussion of blessedness and happiness must account for the underlying symbolic universe in which such concepts are embedded. For the Stoics, happiness [εὐδαιμονία] was deeply tied to the rational order of the cosmos and the individual's ability to align with that order through virtue and reason. In contrast, early Christian notions of blessedness, as expressed in the makarisms, emerge from a radically different symbolic universe(s) shaped by the event and teachings of Jesus. Vorster (1990:45) argues that the arrival of Jesus inaugurated a new worldview – or even multiple worldviews – among his followers. This reconfiguration of reality, profoundly influenced how early Christians understood human flourishing and divine favour. For Vorster (1990:45–46), the makarisms are not abstract philosophical principles but concrete expressions of a new way of being in the world, one that challenges prevailing socio-economic and religious norms. By tying blessedness to symbolic universes, Vorster emphasises that happiness in early Christianity is not an isolated concept but part of a broader theological and ethical framework. It reflects, especially in Luke, a transformed understanding of reality where the marginalised, the poor and the persecuted are uniquely blessed, overturning conventional hierarchies of honour and status. This perspective aligns with the broader narrative of the Gospels, where Jesus's teachings consistently subvert traditional values and power structures (see also Keener 2009:163–170).

A central question in Vorster's (1990:46–48) essay is whether the makarisms should be classified as wisdom literature or apocalyptic writings. This distinction is crucial because wisdom and apocalyptic traditions rest on fundamentally different worldviews and thus offer divergent visions of happiness and human flourishing. In the wisdom tradition,

happiness is often tied to moral conduct, practical living and adherence to divine law – or, 'entrance requirements' (Vorster 1990:46). It emphasises present-life consequences and the cultivation of virtues that lead to a well-ordered life. In contrast, apocalyptic writings focus on eschatological hope and the ultimate vindication of the righteous in the afterlife or a future divine order. Happiness here is often deferred, tied to the fulfilment of God's promises in a new age.

Vorster's analysis suggests that the makarisms straddle these two traditions, reflecting the diversity of early Christian thought from its inception in the 1st-century. He (1990:46–47) notes that Jesus's statements about blessedness can be read as 'entrance requirements' with a focus on ethical conduct in the present life (a wisdom perspective) or as 'eschatological blessings' with a focus on the afterlife (an apocalyptic perspective). This duality mirrors the broader tension in early Christianity between the 'already' and the 'not yet' of the kingdom of God. While Vorster locates this latter perspective in the Gospel of Luke, he concedes that apocalyptic thinking permeated early Christian thought (yet, see esp. still Sim 1996 on Matthew's apocalyptic eschatology). Similarly, France (2007:164–169) notes that Matthew's version of the makarisms are highly eschatologically focussed. Vorster's exploration of this tension is particularly illuminating. He argues that understanding the makarisms requires a nuanced approach that recognises the interplay between these two worldviews. This insight not only enriches our understanding of the makarisms but also sheds light on the complex theological landscape of early Christianity, where diverse traditions coexisted and interacted. Like Vorster, Betz (1995) also nuances the interconnectedness of apocalyptic statements and moral imperatives:

> The implications of the Beatitudes as present pronouncements are, however, even more complex. Strictly speaking, they should be pronounced by the divine judge in the afterlife, as verdicts at the eschatological judgment. Spoken in the present they reveal a message that belongs to the future of persons for whose eternal salvation this message is decisive. One must also distinguish the beatitude from a promise. While the promise assures one about something one commonly knows and expects, the beatitude reveals a fact commonly unknown or unexpected. Even if such a fact was known in a general way, for the person receiving the message it constitutes a new revelation. (p. 96)

Vorster's analysis of the makarisms in Luke and Matthew further underscores the diversity of early Christian thought on blessedness. He highlights significant differences in how these two Gospels present Jesus's teachings. According to Vorster (1990:48), Luke's makarisms reflect a preferential option for the poor and marginalised. Luke emphasises material and social realities, portraying blessedness as a reversal of the current socio-economic order (see also Betz 1995:109–113). For example, the makarisms in Luke 6:20–23 directly address the poor, the hungry and the weeping, promising them future vindication and joy (see also Daley 2024:73). This focus aligns with Luke's broader concern for social justice and the liberation of the oppressed. In contrast, Matthew's makarisms are more ethicised, reflecting the influence of Jewish wisdom literature and religious traditions. Matthew emphasises 'heavenly conduct on earth', presenting the makarisms as paraenetic goals that guide ethical behaviour. For example, the makarisms in Matthew 5:3–12 highlight virtues such as meekness, mercy and purity of heart, framing them as 'entrance requirements' for participation in the Kingdom of Heaven.[2] In a recent study on the makarisms, Daley (2024:73) argues that these statements are solely focussed on the construction of ideal discipleship: 'Jesus' beatitudes serve as a call to cultivate kingdom-oriented dispositions for those who would be his [*ideal disciples*].' Yet, he too recognises the apocalyptic edge of the makarisms especially in Luke (Daley 2024:73–74).

Vorster (1990:48–49) argues that these differences reflect the distinct theological and pastoral concerns of the two evangelists. Matthew, writing for a predominantly Jewish-Christian audience, emphasises the continuity of Jesus's teachings with Jewish law and wisdom. Luke, writing for a more diverse audience, focusses on the transformative social implications of Jesus's message. Together, these perspectives illustrate the richness and diversity of early Christian discourse on blessedness.

One of Vorster's (1990:47–49) most significant contributions is his argument that the makarisms, as wisdom literature focussed on behaviour, function as a discourse aimed at regulating bodies and behaviour. He situates the makarisms within the broader context of early Christian moral teaching, where the goal is not only to articulate a vision of blessedness but also to shape the lives and practices of believers. Vorster (1990:47–48) notes that the makarisms serve as a form of symbolic boundary-marking, distinguishing the community of believers from the surrounding world. By redefining blessedness in terms of humility, poverty and persecution, the makarisms challenge believers to adopt a counter-cultural way of life that embodies the values of the kingdom of God. This redefinition has profound implications for individual and communal identity, as it requires a reorientation of desires, priorities and relationships; a point which Daley (2024:69–71) also underscores, with reference to the beatitudes' propensity to reshape one's dispositions.

The makarisms also function as a form of social critique, exposing and subverting the injustices of the existing order (see also France 2007:166–167). By declaring the poor and persecuted blessed, they call into question the values of wealth, power and status that dominate the Greco-Roman world. In this sense, the makarisms are not only theological statements but also acts of resistance, asserting an alternative vision of human flourishing that centres on God's justice and mercy. The emphasis on God as the giver of happiness further reinforces the theological and ethical dimensions of this discourse. For Vorster (1990:48–49), the makarisms reflect a theocentric worldview in which human flourishing is ultimately dependent on divine grace and favour – that is, 'God as the giver of happiness' (Vorster 1990:49). The implication of this perspective is that it challenges

2.On Q's use of the makarisms, see Vorster (1990:48); Neyrey (2002:139–158).

autonomous notions of happiness and redirects attention to the relational and communal aspects of blessedness which were very at home in the ancient world.

Vorster's (1990) analysis has significant theoretical implications for understanding early Christian discourse on blessedness. By situating the makarisms within their socio-religious and textual contexts, he demonstrates how these teachings function as a form of social and moral regulation (see also Betz 1995:91–101). This approach resonates with broader theoretical frameworks in religious studies and social theory, particularly those that emphasise the role of discourse in shaping identity and behaviour. From a Foucauldian perspective, the makarisms can be seen as a form of pastoral power that governs the lives of believers by articulating a vision of the good life and prescribing the practices necessary to achieve it. This form of governance is not coercive but operates through the internalisation of values and norms, shaping the subjectivity of believers in ways that align with the kingdom of God.

Vorster's (1990) work also highlights the interplay between theology and ethics in early Christianity. By framing blessedness in terms of both present conduct and future hope, the makarisms create a dynamic tension that motivates ethical action while sustaining eschatological expectation. This dual focus reflects the transformative potential of early Christian teachings, which aim not only to comfort but also to challenge and inspire. Finally, Vorster's emphasis on the diversity of early Christian thought underscores the importance of context in interpreting biblical texts. His analysis of the makarisms in Luke and Matthew reveals how different communities adapted Jesus's teachings to address their unique needs and concerns. This insight invites contemporary readers to approach the New Testament with an awareness of its rich and complex reception history.

Vorster's (1990) analysis on blessedness in early Christianity offers a useful and nuanced exploration of the makarisms in the Gospels, situating them within the broader symbolic universe of early Christianity. By examining the interplay between wisdom and apocalyptic traditions, as well as the distinctive emphases of Luke and Matthew, Vorster sheds light on the diverse ways in which early Christians understood and articulated blessedness. His analysis reveals the makarisms as a discourse with profound theological, ethical and social implications, aimed at regulating bodies and behaviour while fostering a counter-cultural vision of human flourishing. As such, Vorster's work remains a vital resource for scholars seeking to understand the transformative power of early Christian teachings on happiness and blessedness.

Revisiting the early Christians on blessedness: Initial explorations into the later centuries

In this article, I aim to revisit and, in a sense, further develop, Vorster's compelling argument about blessedness in early Christianity by extending the discussion beyond the New Testament and into the first four centuries of Christian thought. By focussing on the reception of the makarisms in early Christian biblical interpretation, my analysis will explore how these statements about blessedness were understood, adapted and developed by later Christian thinkers. A key question to address is whether one particular view of the makarisms – such as the wisdom-oriented, ethical focus seen in Matthew or the eschatological emphasis identified in Luke – became dominant in early Christian interpretation or not. Alternatively, did later readings synthesise or transform these perspectives to suit evolving theological, pastoral or socio-political concerns? This section of the article will provide insights into the symbolic universe, as Vorster (1990:44) calls it, of Christians in the centuries after the New Testament and how their worldview discursively transformed the foundational teachings of Jesus on blessedness.

The focus on the reception of the makarisms offers a rich opportunity to examine the theological, ethical and communal dynamics of early Christianity in its late antique context. Elliott (2019:589–592) has shown how important the makarisms were in early Christian biblical interpretation, and he also showcases the diverse approaches and interpretations to these memorable statements of Jesus. Relying on Elliott's observations, and by tracing how interpretations of these statements evolved in patristic writings, liturgical practices and broader Christian culture, the final section of the study will consider how the early church used the makarisms to shape its vision of ascetic discipline, divine favour and communal identity. Were they primarily read as calls to ethical action, reflections on eschatological hope or as part of a broader ascetic ethos that emerged in late antiquity? Ultimately, the goal is to bring Vorster's insights into conversation with the interpretative strategies and theological priorities of later Christians, offering a fuller understanding of the enduring significance of the makarisms in shaping the Christian worldview during its formative centuries.

Vorster's (1990) approach to the makarisms in the New Testament provides a critical framework for engaging with the nuanced interpretations of these blessings in early Christian thought. While Vorster (1990:46–49) discerns between these two approaches to the makarisms – wisdom and apocalyptic – he recognises that these two views often overlap. This discussion will integrate Vorster's insights with views on the makarisms from the later centuries of Christianity, up to the fourth, highlighting points of convergence and divergence to enrich his interpretative approach.

Vorster maintained that the makarisms were tailored to address the specific conditions of early Christian communities, particularly those under pressure or persecution. This perspective aligns closely with the view that the makarisms in Matthew were intended for a persecuted minority within a larger religious group. For example, Matthew 5:10, 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake', underscores a communal identity forged through shared suffering (Elliott 2019:589). Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata*

4.6.41), for example, links this makarism to the pinnacle of Christian virtue, where the despising of death reflects the culmination of spiritual growth (Elliott 2019:589).

The makarisms, therefore, seem to have played a pivotal role in shaping the notion of *spiritual ascent* within Christian thought, offering a framework for moral and spiritual progression (see, more generally, Caner 2012:588–600). Careful attention was paid not only to the content of the makarisms, but also to their order and development. From their original setting, where they served as an exhortation to distinctiveness for a persecuted community, the makarisms have been understood, as Vorster (1990) has emphasised, as a gateway to the ethical teachings of Jesus. This understanding developed further in the Alexandrian ascetical tradition, where thinkers like Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa traced a sequential moral ascent through the makarisms (Elliott 2019:589–591), beginning with repentance and culminating in the purity of heart necessary for the vision of God. Gregory of Nyssa, in particular, depicted the makarisms as a pathway from penance to perfection, likening them to ascending the slopes of a mountain, each step representing progress toward divine likeness (Elliott 2019:589–590).

By the 4th-century, this framework would have found resonance with the rise of monasticism, as the virtues outlined in the makarisms became associated with a call to higher morality. The idea of monastic development as a process of ascent, or a ladder, was common especially in Syrian monasticism, as seen, for example, in the Syriac *Book of Steps*. Regarding Matthew 5:6, 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled', the *Book of Steps Memra* 3.9 renders 'righteousness' as 'uprightness', in Syriac, *kenuta* (ed. Kitchen 2009):

> There are people who hunger for visible bread and there are people who hunger for righteousness and salvation…. Therefore, they satisfy those who hunger for righteousness and for the solid food and they make all people perfect in Christ. (pp. 53–54)

Uprightness and perfection are two of the crucial monastic virtues in this work and represent two spectra of monastic virtue. In this case, the very language of the makarisms was adopted into early Christian monastic discourse.

However, interpretations varied. John Chrysostom, for instance, also from Roman Syria originally, emphasised the communal and practical dimensions of the makarisms, rejecting overly spiritualised readings and focussing on their application to everyday life, justice and peace within the Christian community. He explains the broader 'sense' of the makarisms, thus:

> From which point then does He begin? And what kind of foundations of His new polity does He lay for us? Let us listen with strict attention to what is said. For though it was spoken to them, it was written for the sake also of everyone afterwards. And accordingly on this account, though He had His disciples in His mind in His public preaching, yet unto them He limits not His sayings, but applies all His words of blessing without restriction. Thus He said not, 'Blessed are you, if you become poor', but 'Blessed are the poor'. And I may add that even if He had spoken of them [*the actual poor*], the advice would still be common to all. For so, when He says, 'Look! I am with you always, even unto the end of the world' (Mt 28:20), He is discoursing not with them only, but also, [*through them*], with all the world. And in pronouncing them blessed, who are persecuted, and pursued, and suffer all intolerable things; not for them only, but also for all who arrive at the same excellency, He weaves His crown. (John Chrysostom, *Homily on Matthew* 15.2; trans. Prevost 1888 from *NPNF*; slightly revised; *author's own emphasis)*

In this passage, Chrysostom underscores the universal applicability of Jesus's teachings in the makarisms, presenting them as the foundational principles of a new moral and spiritual order. Chrysostom's emphasis on the open-ended phrasing – 'Blessed are the poor' rather than 'Blessed are you, if you become poor' – highlights the inclusive and timeless nature of Jesus' message – it is therefore a practical morality (see, more generally, Mayer 2008:140–158 on poverty in Chrysostom and his time). The blessings are not confined to the immediate audience but are intended for all who embody these virtues, bridging the context of Jesus's original listeners with the broader Christian community throughout history. Chrysostom's reading seems to fit in well with Vorster's category of practical wisdom for the makarisms.

Chrysostom's interpretation carries significant practical implications for moral virtue. By removing any exclusivity from the makarisms, he establishes them as aspirational ideals for every believer, regardless of their social status or temporal context. This universality challenges Christians to internalise these virtues actively, recognising that blessings such as humility, meekness and perseverance under persecution are not static states but lived expressions of moral excellence – essentially, they do seem to function similar to what Vorster (1990:44) calls 'entrance requirements'. Yet, there does seem to be some allusion to an eschatological meaning in addition to the moral. By linking these virtues to the broader promise of Christ's enduring presence, Chrysostom situates the makarisms within the framework of divine support and communal striving for all ages up to the end. The language of the 'crown' woven through shared suffering and moral growth is not an individual achievement but a testament to the collective pursuit of a life aligned with Christ's example. The language of the crown, itself, is eschatological. Thus, Vorster's thesis that the wisdom and eschatological-apocalyptic dimensions of the makarisms intertwine, seems to be quite appropriate in the case of Chrysostom.

Augustine also made the makarisms quite practical, and even applies it psychologically. Commenting on 'Blessed are the peacemakers', (Mt 5:9), Augustine (*Sermon* 53A.12; in ed. Simonetti 2001) writes:

> There is in the inner person a kind of daily quarrel; a praiseworthy battle acts to keep what is better from being overcome by what is worse. The struggle is to keep desire from conquering the mind and to keep lust from conquering wisdom. This is the steadfast peace that you ought to develop in yourself, that what is better in you may be in charge of what is worse. The better part in you, moreover, is that part in which God's image is found. This is

> called the mind, the intellect. There faith burns, there hope is strengthened, there charity is kindled. (p. 88)

In both Chrysostom and Augustine, the emphasis lies on cultivating moral virtue and aligning oneself with divine principles, but they approach this through different frameworks. Chrysostom focusses on the communal and universal implications of Christ's teachings, highlighting how the makarisms transcend the immediate audience to provide a model for all believers striving for moral excellence. Augustine, on the other hand, adopts an introspective lens, examining the internal struggle between the higher and lower aspects of human nature. He frames this 'praiseworthy battle' as the mind's effort to maintain dominion over desire, rooted in the image of God within. While Chrysostom emphasises outward blessings as pathways to moral and spiritual flourishing, Augustine centres on the inner life, where faith, hope and love transform the intellect and guide virtuous action. Together, they underscore a holistic view of virtue that encompasses both the internal cultivation of the soul and the external living of Christ's teachings.

Moreover, we also have a mystical side to the makarisms in early Christian discourse. Gregory of Nyssa highlighted the mystical journey of *epektasis*, where the soul perpetually strives toward the infinite, drawing closer to God (Elliott 2019:592). These varied interpretations demonstrate the makarisms' versatility, serving both as a guide for immediate ethical living and as a map for the believer's transformative ascent towards divine union and eschatological culmination.

Thus, the makarisms encapsulate the dynamic interplay between temporal moral action and the ultimate goal of spiritual ascent, ending in eschatological glory, reflecting the richness of their interpretation in early Christian thought.

Vorster's (1990:44–46) emphasis on the rhetorical adaptability of the makarisms offers a lens to understand their varying applications. While the early Alexandrian tradition mapped the makarisms onto a spiritual ascent, Vorster's approach invites us to consider how these teachings might have been rhetorically recontextualised for broader audiences. For instance, John Chrysostom's more literalist approach, which sought to ground the makarisms in the practical realities of communal life, exemplifies such recontextualisation. His interpretation of 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth' (Mt 5:5) as a promise of tangible rewards in this life directly engages with his Antiochene congregation's socio-economic aspirations, contrasting the mystical interpretations of Gregory of Nyssa (Elliott 2019:590–593).

Vorster's (1990:46–48) analysis of makarisms also considers their structural function as a sequence of virtues leading to spiritual or communal wholeness. This resonates with Clement's view, where the makarisms chart a progression from repentance and mourning to the peace of a contented soul. Similarly, Gregory of Nyssa interprets the makarisms as steps on a moral and spiritual ascent, culminating in the vision of God (Elliott 2019:589). Vorster's insight into the rhetorical function of such sequences provides a helpful tool for understanding how the makarisms were employed to construct an aspirational framework for ethical and spiritual growth.

Vorster's (1990:46–49) focus on the social implications of the New Testament teachings finds fertile ground, for example, in the early Christian interpretation of 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' (Mt 5.3). He (1990:47) argued that such teachings often addressed the lived realities of the audience, offering consolation and affirmation to marginalised groups. This observation aligns with Chrysostom's insistence that this makarism applies to all Christians, rich and poor alike, calling for voluntary poverty and redistribution of wealth as a means of creating justice and harmony within the community.

However, Gregory of Nyssa's distinction between involuntary and voluntary poverty adds complexity to this discussion (Elliott 2019:590–591). Vorster's approach highlights the inclusivity of the makarisms, yet Gregory's interpretation introduces a hierarchical element, privileging those who choose poverty as an imitation of Christ's humility. This differentiation challenges the idea of the egalitarian function of the makarisms, suggesting that certain interpretations reinforced social stratifications within the church.

Vorster's observation that the makarisms often held a dual promise of present and future blessings is particularly relevant when analysing the interpretations of 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth' (Mt 5.5). Chrysostom's (*Homily on Matthew* 15.5) rejection of a purely eschatological reading of this makarism in favour of tangible, earthly rewards exemplifies this duality. By contrast, Hilary of Poitiers (*Commentary on Matthew* 5.3; in Elliott 2019:590) and Augustine (*Serm. Dom.* 1.4; in Elliott 2019:590) spiritualise the promise, associating the 'earth' with the resurrected body or eternal life (see esp. Elliott 2019:590). Vorster's emphasis on the adaptability of the makarisms allows for an appreciation of both approaches, showing how the same text could be used to address different audiences and theological concerns.

Gregory of Nyssa's interpretation, which links the 'earth' to the celestial land of the living, adds another dimension (Elliott 2019:590–591). Vorster's framework, while attentive to the rhetorical flexibility of the makarisms, might benefit from a closer analysis of how such interpretations reflect the theological priorities of their interpreters. For instance, Gregory's mystical reading underscores the transformative potential of the virtues, framing the makarisms as a roadmap to divine participation. However, Gregory of Nyssa's eschatological reading, where comfort is seen as participation in the Comforter in the life to come, shifts the focus to an individual's ultimate union with God. Vorster's emphasis on the communal function of the makarisms might not fully account for such mystical interpretations (which, of course, in Vorster's defence, would have been absent in the early days of Christianity as we have in the New Testament),

which prioritise personal spiritual transformation over communal solidarity.

In sum, Vorster's approach, which acknowledges diversity and overlap in interpretative frameworks, finds a natural resonance with early Christian thought, where varied perspectives coexisted and enriched theological understanding. Regarding the makarisms, both the wisdom view, emphasising practical virtue and moral formation, and the apocalyptic-eschatological view, focussing on divine fulfilment and cosmic renewal, remained influential in later centuries. These views and discourses evolved, however, and were further nuanced through the teachings of mysticism, spiritual ascent and monasticism, which integrated the moral and eschatological dimensions into practices of inner transformation and communal devotion. This continuity highlights the dynamic interplay between the temporal and eternal in Christian interpretation, reflecting an enduring commitment to comprehending the fullness of the human–divine relationship.

Findings

Vorster's work on the makarisms and blessedness in earliest Christianity, which highlights the diversity and overlap in the interpretation of the makarisms, proves remarkably robust, even when applied to the later centuries of early Christian biblical interpretation. His insistence on the coexistence of different interpretative frameworks – the wisdom-oriented and the apocalyptic-eschatological – aligns well with the trajectory of early Christian thought. As the centuries progressed, these interpretative threads were not only preserved but also expanded upon, finding new expressions in the teachings of mysticism, spiritual ascent and monastic practices. The enduring relevance of Vorster's perspective underscores the richness of the makarisms, as their layered meanings continued to resonate across theological and spiritual developments. There are three important findings to highlight here at the conclusion of this article.

Firstly, in later centuries, particularly within the monastic tradition, *there was a heightened focus on the structure and sequence of the makarisms*. The step-by-step progression of the blessings lent itself to the concept of spiritual ascent, a key theme in monastic spirituality. This view interpreted the makarisms as a guide for personal and communal transformation, where each blessing marked a stage in the journey toward divine communion. The emphasis on spiritual development, rooted in an ordered path of growth, demonstrates how the interpretative framework of the makarisms adapted to meet the spiritual needs of these later communities while maintaining continuity with earlier perspectives.

Secondly, *the mystical dimension of the makarisms became increasingly prominent*. The very language of the blessings, with its evocative and poetic character, opened the door to deeper figurative and mystical interpretations. Early Christians, already accustomed to scriptural frameworks that embraced figurative readings, found in the makarisms a wealth of open-ended possibilities. These ranged from moral guidance to eschatological hope and mystical union with God. The open-endedness of the makarisms' meanings exemplified the theological richness that allowed for a broad spectrum of applications, from individual spiritual practice to communal eschatological expectation.

Thirdly, *a strong practical wisdom element remained central to early Christian readings of the makarisms.* They were not solely viewed as abstract or otherworldly ideals but as real, actionable advice for the life of the soul. This psychological application saw the makarisms as tools for internal transformation, addressing the moral and spiritual state of individuals. Furthermore, they carried significant implications for communal and social ethics, urging believers to embody these virtues in their relationships and societal contexts. This balance between mystical, eschatological and practical interpretations demonstrates the ongoing relevance of Vorster's work, as it captures the dynamic interplay of meanings that persisted throughout early Christian tradition.

In conclusion, the makarisms stand as a testament to the enduring richness and diversity of Christian scriptural interpretation. Vorster's emphasis on the multiplicity of meanings in their interpretation finds affirmation not only in early Christian thought but also in its later developments. Whether viewed through the lens of moral wisdom, mystical ascent or eschatological hope, the makarisms continued to inspire spiritual growth and theological reflection. This layered complexity underscores their timeless value as a foundation for personal and communal transformation in Christian tradition. In light of this, Vorster's work remains profoundly relevant today for understanding the multifaceted nature of early Christian theology and social ethics. His approach to the makarisms not only illuminates their interpretative diversity in the early centuries but also provides a framework for engaging with contemporary questions of moral virtue, spiritual growth and communal responsibility within Christian ethical discourse.

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C.L.d.W. is the sole author of this research article.

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