

Jewish Apocalyptic Literature in the Armenian Tradition

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When we examine studies of the apocalyptic literature, we are always amazed by the range of works and types of writings that are included in this category. Thirty-five years ago, the Society of Biblical Literature held a series of meetings on the genre apocalypse, and the results of this research were embodied in No. 14 of the journal *Semeia*, edited by John J. Collins.¹ Collins has been one of the most indefatigable workers at the apocalyptic literature in the last decades and in this volume he produced a definition of "apocalypse" which reads as follows:

"Apocalypse" is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.²

It will readily be observed by anyone consulting *Semeia* 14 that this definition took into account an analysis of literature claimed to be apocalyptic from many Ancient Near Eastern cultures (Jewish, Early Christian, Gnostic, Greek and Latin, Rabbinic literature and mysticism, and Persian). Its focus on Jewish material dealt chiefly with documents written before ca. 120 CE.

¹ Collins 1979.

² Collins 1979, 9 and 22.

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After the time of the Hadrianic revolt, the writing of apocalypses ceased among the Jews for several hundred years. Or, to put it more accurately, if there were apocalypses written by Jews between the events of Hadrian's time and mid-first millennium or the Arab conquest of the Near East, such works have not survived other than a few fragments cited in Rabbinic literature. Jewish apocalypses of the second part of the first millennium CE share certain features caused *inter alia* by a process of partial overlap, and very many of those elements distinctive of Jewish apocalypses of this period are also found in contemporaneous Christian texts. Thus, for example, works connected with Daniel are found in Hebrew (from the Cairo Geniza), in Greek (the so-called Diegesis of Daniel), and in Armenian ("The Seventh Vision of Daniel"), in Arabic and so forth. Our commission, however, is to discuss the earlier Jewish texts, and so we will pass to the (somewhat oddly-dubbed) "classical" Jewish apocalypses, which are in fact those works by which the genre was defined in the modern discourse. For, although Collins drew on analyses of many apocalypses in different traditions of the Ancient Near East, the organizing categories were drawn from the Bible and particularly from the two apocalypses contained by the Bible – Daniel in the Old Testament and Revelation or the Apocalypse of John in the New.

In 1952, in his book *Old Testament Apocalyptic*, Stanley Bryce Frost discusses all the quite numerous passages in the Hebrew Bible that served as a basis or sources for various apocalyptic conceptions. Such are the eschatological passages of Isaiah 24-28, Ezekiel 38-39 and others. Yet these passages, although they contain many of the building blocks from which

apocalyptic literature was constructed, lack the systematic literary and conceptual structures that characterize Jewish apocalypses of the last three centuries BCE and the first century CE.

Apocalypses, a name drawn from the name of the Book of Revelation, i.e., Ἀποκαλύψεις Ἰωάννου, involves the revelation of secrets of time (eschatology) and of place (cosmology) usually by means of a heavenly mediator or mystagogue, often called "angelus interpres". Typical of apocalyptic literature as distinct from its predecessor, prophecy (in this we take a clear stance on a contentious subject) is the reintroduction of the mythical dimensions of time and place. The action does not happen only in this world and in this time, but it is viewed as taking place beyond this world and beyond this time. Thus, there are heavenly ascents of the seer, the narrative of his visions of the denizens of the heavens, or of the underworld, and revelations about the course of history and of the events at the end of time and their heavenly dimension.

Jewish Apocalypses in Armenian

Certain of the Jewish apocalypses were translated into Armenian, in our view some of them in the fifth century, at the time of (and perhaps as part of) the translation of the biblical and associated writings into Armenian. The demonstrably oldest known Armenian version of a Jewish apocalypse is 4 Ezra, which appears in Armenian biblical manuscripts usually entitled Գիրք Եզրա Էրրորդ or, in the Miscellany of Mxit'ar Ayrivanec'i (M1500), Եզր Սաղաթիել. The Armenian version of this work is of considerable interest, since the author

of Agathangelos (mid-fifth century) knows it.³ The Armenian version of 4 Ezra is important also because it contains rewritings and expansions that are not found in other versions of this popular work. Moreover, we can show by examination of features of its translation practice that many of these rewritings and expansions were made in Greek and they express very distinct theological ideas. Thus, the Armenian version of 4 Ezra is a reflection of a clear reworking of the original text. It shows, by the way, some connections with (presumably) the Greek text lying behind the Arabic 2 (Gildemeister) translation of 4 Ezra.⁴ A critical edition, translation, textual commentary on and concordance of this work have been published.⁵

Subsequently, in the Byzantine period a number of works were composed that centered on the figure of Ezra the seer. These include the *Apocalypses of Esdras* and *Sedrach* in Greek and the *Revelatio beati Esdrae* in Latin.⁶ These works are intriguing in their own right, as developments of 4 Ezra. That apocalypse, written shortly before 100 CE, contains both discussion relating to the fate of the soul or eschatology and political prophecies, in this instance of the end of the Roman Empire. Of these two major types of apocalyptic material, both of which continued to be productive during the Byzantine period, the

³ See Stone, 1979, 35.

⁴ On the various versions of 4 Ezra, see Stone, *Hermeneia*, 1-8.

⁵ Stone 1979.

⁶ Wahl 1977; see also Stone 2006a.

Apocalypses of Esdras and Sedrach and the *Revelatio beati Esdrae* take up only the material relating to the fate of the soul after death. In Armenian there exists a work called *Questions of Ezra* in two recensions. This work has been the object of little scholarly attention though the *editio princeps* of one recension was published by Sargis Yovsĕpianc' in Անկանոն գիրք հին կտակարանաց (*Uncanonical Books of the Old Testament*) at the end of the nineteenth century.⁷ It too deals with the fate of the soul after death and its ascent through the heavenly spheres. The expansions of Armenian 4 Ezra and *Questions of Ezra* stand between 4 Ezra and later traditions.

None of the other well-known Jewish apocalypses such as *1 (Ethiopic) Enoch*, *2 (Syriac) Baruch*, *3 (Greek) Baruch*, etc. survives in an Armenian translation as does 4 Ezra. *Joseph and Asenath*, most likely an early translation, and *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* both occur in Armenian but neither of these works is an apocalypse, though sections of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* relate visions or transmit future prophecies.⁸ There are, however, a number of works in Armenian that claim Jewish origins and which deal with eschatological matters.

Signs of the Judgment

One such work is the *15 Signs of the Judgment*. This work draws on an apocalyptic theme that is already found in *2 Baruch 27*, i.e., that a numbered

⁷ Yovsĕpianc' 1896.

⁸ On apocalyptic segments in works of different genre, see Sanders 1989.

series of portents will precede the Day of Judgment. It is widely known in Europe and vernacular, as well as Latin versions are widespread. I am indebted to the late Archbishop Norayr Bogharian who drew my attention to an Armenian translation of this writing, extant in two copies in the Patriarchal Library in Jerusalem. This work seems to have been translated into Armenian from Latin and, equally, a Hebrew translation from Latin has turned up.⁹ The portents of the day of judgment is a theme found extensively in Second Temple Jewish literature, in Rabbinic sources and in the New Testament, based upon the belief that a series of signs, showing the peaking of evil in nature, disorder and reversal of the order of the world, will precede the end of days. The woes, our text maintains, will be distributed over a period of fifteen days. Such a division (but into 12 parts) is already found in *Syriac Baruch* ch. 27 and a later instance is in *Sefer Eliyyahu*, but its text is corrupt and we cannot determine how many parts were originally enumerated.¹⁰ This idea involves, of course, a belief in a fixed world-order and determinism. It is uncertain how this work got into Armenian and to what extent, if any, it has influenced Armenian thought. It is possible, at least, that this work is of Jewish origin.¹¹

⁹ Stone 1981, 3-68. Hebrew text is on pp. 12-14, 42-49 and also see Yassif 2001, 447-448. An extensive study, which, however, did not know either the Armenian or the Hebrew, is Heist 1952. My attention was drawn to the Hebrew translation by the late David Flusser.

¹⁰ See Stone 1981, 16-17.

¹¹ Stone 1981, 13-17.

Enoch in Armenia

One of the most prominent pseudepigraphic visionary authors in Judaism of the Second Temple period is Enoch. The figure of Enoch is ancient, probably going back to early Mesopotamian roots. He became widely revered and was regarded as the author of a number of pseudepigraphic apocalypses including the five documents that constitute the "Ethiopic" *Book of Enoch* and the *Book of the Secrets of Enoch* or Slavonic Enoch. He also played a role in Jewish mystical literature of the first millennium CE.¹² Enoch, the pseudepigraphic visionary author, is generally viewed as a sapiential, scribal figure, connected with astronomy (observe that the number of years of his life according to Gen. 5:24 was 365). He is often associated with the invention of writing.¹³ In Armenian a work called *Vision of Enoch* occurs. It shows little connection with the characteristics of Enoch in Second Temple Period Judaism.¹⁴ Professor Anders Hultgård has studied it and has lectured on connections between the Armenian *Vision of Enoch* and some Iranian religious ideas. In this connection, the possible Iranian origin of some elements of *Questions of Ezra* should also be mentioned.¹⁵ A number of studies have shown Iranian influences in Armenian Christianity, such as in the poem, Տաղ Յարութեան, by Grigor Narekac'i where

¹² See Alexander 1983.

¹³ For a general overview of the Enoch figure, see VanderKam 1984; Reeves 2000.

¹⁴ See Yovsĕp'eanc' 1896, 378-386, Issaverdens 1901, 235-247 and Sarghissian 1898, 133-134.

¹⁵ Stone 1995,

a tradition about the pre-Christian deity Vahagn is merged with one on Christ's entry into Jerusalem.¹⁶

There are, however, some indications that the Armenians also knew Enoch traditions similar in broad lines to those found in the Ethiopic and Slavonic Enoch apocalypses. One of the oldest works in Armenian literature is the *History of the Conversion of Armenia* written by Agathangelos. Within this history is embedded an extensive, fifth-century theological treatise *The Teaching of St. Gregory* and it is here that we shall commence our pursuit of Armenian Enoch.¹⁷ The theological treatise was purportedly pronounced by St. Gregory the Illuminator, who was responsible for the conversion of Armenia.

Agathangelos' Gregory says the following:

§76 Thereafter, as after the sacrament of marriage and Enoch's begetting a son, you raised him to the ranks of the angels, to the lot of immortal joy.¹⁸

Here, none of the distinctive Enoch traditions of *1 Enoch* and *Jubilees* are to be found. There is, however, a tradition in Armenian that Enoch abstained from fruit because Adam and Eve had eaten fruit. Various stories are woven about

¹⁶ An English translation is found in van Lint 1999, 115-17 and Russell 1994.

¹⁷ Thomson 2001.

¹⁸ Cf. Gen. 5.22, 24.

this theme, which occurs in a group of medieval texts and is not related to any source known elsewhere, except in Georgian.¹⁹

Another tradition in Armenian texts, is that Enoch is sometimes confused with Enos.²⁰ Thus, *Abel and other Pieces*, in M10200 says about Enos / Enoch:

4.3 Enos, son of Seth, made the letter(s) and called the planets by name. 4.4 And he prophesied that this world would pass away twice, by water and by fire. And he made two stelae, of bronze and of clay, and he wrote upon them the name of the parts of creation which Adam had called. He said, "If it passes away by water, then the bronze (will) remain, and if by fire, then the fired clay." 4.5 And they were called true sons of God because God loved them, before they fornicated. 4.6 By this writing the vision of Enoch was preserved, he who was transferred to immortality.

Here four traditions are combined. The first is that Enos son of Seth, invented writing and astronomy. This is in accordance with the tradition about Enoch known in the various Enoch texts and here there clearly is a confusion of the two similarly-named individuals. The material written by Enos/Enoch was related to the prophecy of the two stelae, one of bronze and one of clay, already found in Josephus.²¹ This writing, moreover, preserved the true names of the

¹⁹ See Lipscomb 1990, 62-86. See Stone 1992a, 102-104, 110.

²⁰ See Stone 1982, 13, 23, and 85. Lipscomb, 62-68.

²¹ [Jewish Antiquities 1.70-71](#).

animals discovered by Adam and in it was the Vision of Enoch (I presume, not the extant Armenian work). This material in M10200 has a greater familiarity with the type of Enoch traditions known to, say, *Jubilees* than do early Armenian texts, and one wonders how these traditions could have come into Armenian. M10200 is a Miscellany copied in Erzuka in 1624, 1634 and 1666. It contains a rich collection of texts — stories, tales, and apocrypha. Doubtless the fragments, of which the above text is one, were drawn from earlier, probably high medieval, sources. The subject is worthy of further investigation for it seems possible that such materials were introduced from a chronographic tradition or a biblical retelling of some sort, ultimately of Greek or Syriac origin.

Apocrypha related to the biblical corpus

The three apocrypha that are connected with the Armenian biblical corpus, *4 Ezra*, *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and *Joseph and Asenath* seem to be early translations, and may have been part of the fifth-century translation literature. *4 Ezra*, of which we have already talked, certainly was.

There is no doubt today that the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* is a Christian, late second-century [or early third-century](#) work which draws extensively on Jewish sources.²² This work seems to have been translated early into Armenian. The death-bed testament serves in biblical and post-biblical sources as a revelatory context.²³ Visionary elements are woven into the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* drawn partly from ancient Jewish tradition.

²² Hollander and de Jonge 1985, 82-83.

²³ Von Nordheim 1980, 12-144.

Consequently *Testaments* served as a channel for transmission of units of apocalyptic tradition and apocalyptic ideas. It is intriguing, however, that apocalyptic works from among second temple Jewish writings other than 4 Ezra and *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (and their commonly assumed second temple date is in fact inaccurate) were not translated into Armenian. The reason may be that a number of the central works of the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, including several apocalypses, did not long survive in Greek in the Christian era for reasons that are still unclear. Thus we have papyrus fragments and a couple of citations of *The Book of Enoch* in Greek, but no full text; citations from *Jubilees* are found in Greek but the whole text was only transmitted in Ethiopic. The *Book of the Secrets of Enoch* comes to us only in Slavonic. We might argue, therefore, that since these books did not circulate widely or for a long time in Greek, they were not translated into Armenian, for which language the alphabet was invented only in the fifth century. Yet, it is notable that these books are also missing from the Syriac corpus, except for fragments included, for the most part, in the Syriac chronicles. Greek chronographic literature also made quite extensive use of Greek translations of apocalypses, which in antiquity were not actually differentiated from other works of the apocryphal corpus.

Some Themes with Jewish apocalyptic roots

At this juncture, it is worthwhile trying to analyse a number of older themes that reappeared in later Armenian apocalypses and also some that did not. Above we mentioned the extant text, *Fifteen Signs of the Judgement*, which has conceptual roots going back into the Second Temple period and also into

Rabbinic literature. This text may, itself, be Jewish or a Christian composition based on Jewish sources. It is attributed to a Jewish source both in Armenian and in Latin.²⁴

The *Questions of Ezra* relates a narrative of an ascent of the soul to the throne of the deity. The book, basically, like the Greek *Esdras* and *Ezra Apocalypses* and the Latin *Visio* is concerned with the fate of the righteous. The seven-fold ascent of the soul resembles greatly that described in 4 Ezra chapter 7:78-99. Yet, it is intriguing that neither in the expansions of Armenian 4 Ezra nor in the (admittedly incomplete) *Questions of Ezra* is a historical apocalypse developed, even though both the Eagle Vision and the Son of Man vision in 4 Ezra gave ample grounds for this. It should also be remarked that this political aspect of 4 Ezra is explicitly connected with its source text in Daniel 7 (4 Ezra 12:11), and that this type of historical apocalypse is also to be found associated with Daniel in the Armenian *Seventh Vision of Daniel*, the Greek Danielic works, and the fragmentary *hazon Daniel* from the Cairo Geniza and elsewhere.²⁵

Among the Dead Sea Scrolls, fragments of physiognomic literature have been discovered. This branch of divination used the various features of the face in order to characterize a person's moral qualities and traits of character. It was current in the Hellenistic world, and the oldest evidence for it is in Homer and Hippocrates. There is a treatise ascribed to Aristotle dealing with physiognomy,

²⁴ See Stone 1981,13-15.

²⁵ Di Tommaso 2001.

the *Physiognomica*, and the subject is also represented in Islamic and Christian philosophical writing. In the Dead Sea Scrolls physiognomy was used, in accordance with the Dead Sea sect's perception of the world as divided between the sons of light and sons of darkness. It enabled the practitioner to discern how many parts of light or darkness any individual had. None of the "classical" Jewish apocalypses contains physiognomic descriptions, but such occur regularly in later apocalypses. Texts of this sort in Hebrew also occur among the Cairo Geniza manuscripts.²⁶ In particular, physiognomic descriptions of the Anti-Christ are given in many Greek and Armenian apocalypses. These were apparently intended to enable the reader to recognize the Antichrist, whose appearance was one of the events presaging the eschaton. In some texts, similar descriptions of Christ are given. Jean-Marc Rosenstiehl has written a study showing the interrelation of such descriptions in a number of first-millennium compositions.²⁷

In addition to these specific points of contact, which might be multiplied, certain general points of view of the older Jewish apocalyptic literature influenced later Judaism and Christianity, and are expressed in Armenian apocalypses. Thus we have already written briefly of the apocalyptic view of history, seeing the whole course of events from Creation to Eschaton as a single structured, preordained process. Such a view of history enabled the pseudepigraphic apocalyptic writer, allegedly of the ancient period, to focus on

²⁶ Gruenwald 1971, 301-319.

²⁷ Rosenstiehl 1967.

the last generations, passing over the former ones briefly in a *vaticanium ex eventu*. Frequently, later writers focused on the four kingdoms in Daniel 7 and particularly on the specifications of the kings of the fourth kingdom.²⁸ As we said, this was also taken up by 4 Ezra chap. 12:11.²⁹ Teachings of lists of kings, symbolised as beasts, or horns or the like became a standard part of the later apocalyptic repertoire.

A further element which was absorbed and developed was tours of the heavenly and infernal regions. It is old and in the Enochic *Book of the Watchers*, probably dating from the third century B.C.E., Enoch is taken on a tour of the far places of the earth. In chap. 21 he sees the place of punishment of the wicked.³⁰ Our intuition is that, like the descriptions of the Antichrist, the Tours of Hell were not innovations of Byzantine times. Yet, intriguingly, the surviving Jewish apocalypses of the Second Temple period do not preserve a detailed tour of Hell, though the levels of the descent of the soul *ad infernos* is specified in 4 Ezra 7:78-87. The *Esdras*, *Sedrach* and *Revelatio Beati Esdrae* apocalypses share a description of the seer's descent and viewing of the punishments and his intercession on behalf of the souls of the dead.³¹ Cognate descriptions, but chiefly of "hanging punishments", are particularly associated

²⁸ See Irshai 2000.

²⁹ See further Stone forthcoming.

³⁰ Martha Himmelfarb wrote an interesting book on the theme of Tours of Hell, see Himmelfarb 1983.

³¹ On this literature see most recently Stone 2006a, 1.306-320.

with Elijah in a variety of Jewish and Christian sources. This element, which seems to us to have been drawn from a lost apocalypse of Elijah also has roots in the Jerusalem Talmud, and is developed in Hebrew, Latin and other sources.³² It may be regarded as part of the tours of hell material. In Armenian there exist quite a lot of texts that I have collected but not yet read, concerning the tortures of Hell, the unsleeping worm and the fire that does not go out (cf. Isaiah 66:24). It seems not unlikely to me that some of these texts may contain old traditions.

Cosmological interest is expressed in various ways in the Jewish apocalypses. There are ascensions to heaven with descriptions of all the levels of heaven and their inhabitants. Such works as the Slavonic *Book of the Secrets of Enoch* and the Greek *Apocalypse of Baruch* describe the ascent of the seer through the heavens, the creatures to be found there, and in *Slavonic Enoch*, as in many other sources, God's revelation of secret knowledge to the seer. Among the subjects revealed to the seer are, for example, the names and classes of angels and their function. This is a favourite Armenian topic found in a number of texts and the classification of the angels into nine classes (cf. Ps.-Dionysius, *Heavenly Hierarchy*) is not unusual in Armenian sources. Angelology often overlaps with other, esoteric knowledge, related to the heavenly realm.³³

³² Stone and Strugnell 1979. See also Lieberman 1945, 2:249-267.

³³ Stone 1992b; Stone 2006b.

Concluding Remarks

Thus, the pattern of the older Jewish apocalypses and that of the later Armenian ones varies, not because of credal differences, but due to the difference of stress between the different works. Among the challenges facing students of Armenian apocalypses of the Middle Ages is the configuration of knowledge that their authors wish to transmit. The older Jewish material can make a foil against which the different emphases of the Armenian works can be highlighted. There are, moreover, writings belonging to the realm of scholarly and list material that deal with elements of the supernal and infernal worlds.

More has been written, on the whole, concerning the political apocalypses of the Byzantine period. I have, therefore, directed the thrust of these remarks to the less well-known cosmological and speculative dimensions of the Armenian apocalypses. The study of these texts, their roots, functions and transformations will lead us to a more profound understanding of the medieval Armenian world view and its perceptions of the human condition.

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