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IN APOCALYPTIC TEXTS, IS IT POSSIBLE TO
DISTINGUISH GENUINE FIRST HAND EXPERIENCE FROM
WHAT IS AN EXPECTED PART OF THE GENRE?

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**IN APOCALYPTIC TEXTS, IS IT POSSIBLE TO
DISTINGUISH GENUINE FIRST HAND EXPERIENCE FROM WHAT IS
AN EXPECTED PART OF THE GENRE?¹**

To deal properly with the question asked, we should start by taking a close look at evidence for and against the apocalyptic seers' experiences as first hand (i.e. authentic) or not.

As supportive evidence for the preparatory processes and the visions thereafter acquired being true, we must bear in mind, as a first reason, the strangeness of some apocalyptic passages regarding preparation for visionary experiences - they look so odd that they do not fit in what one would normally expect in Second Temple Jewish literature. Remarkable among those are the four passages in 4Ezra where the seer experiences altered states of consciousness apparently as a consequence of the ingestion of mind altering substances; the episode of the long sleep of Abimelech in 4Br 5, although not to be credited to drugs or any special practice in the text is remarkably strange among evidence consulted and Second Temple Jewish literature. Tales such as the heavenly voyages in the Enoch books (1En, 2En and 3En), although far from uncommon in later Judaism are not a usual part of the Pentateuch, Prophets or Writings. In short, for those strange tales to appear in Jewish apocalyptic texts makes them less probable

¹ For the sake of objectivity I have not included a bibliography in this essay, since it would be a partial repetition of bibliographies already offered in the first and second essays of this examination, and I should refer the readers to these. Biblical quotations have followed the RSV and those of the Pseudepigrapha Charlesworth's edition.



as a fraud - it would make little sense to insert stories or passages that do nothing to reassure existing practices and beliefs of a more "orthodox" outlook; being the apocalyptic seers so openly conscious of their relation to the Pentateuch and the prophets, a deliberate emulation of Paganism makes little sense here.

Secondly, the practices described in apocalyptic texts as inducing altered states of consciousness (ASC) are effective indeed - i.e. that fasting, continuous prayer, recitation of formulae or the ingestion of drugs can in fact lead to experiences like the ones described by the seers. The greatest amount of instances of continuous fasting is to be found at 2Br, with a series of visions attached to them. The repeating of formulae is especially important in 3En (e.g. 8:1; 13, 14), one apocalyptic text particularly close to *Merkavah* mysticism (itself attaching great importance to the repeating of formulae as an ASC-inducer²). For chemical inducement a few remarkable examples are to be found in 4Ezra, although we do not even know if the seer really underwent any kind of ASC, much less if he effectively took any drug; but plants present in Europe and the Middle East could well have been the ASC-inducers of 4Ezra, namely henbane or hemp, alone or mixed with wine³. In short, the apocalyptic writers may not have undergone the ASC-inducing practices described, but if so they are describing true and possible effects of those same practices.

In the third place, most of the visions we are dealing with here are awake experiences - by comparison, examples

² Cf. Philip Alexander's introduction to 3En in: James Charlesworth (ed.) (1983-1985). *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. New York: Doubleday (2 volumes). Vol.1, p.232 ff.

³ This mixture is not present in 4Ezra 14, but can be inferred from Persian sources describing similar processes.



of dream visions in the texts examined were much rarer. This means that deliberate induction to visions is a real possibility for the apocalyptic seers; while dreams were widely respected in Antiquity as a means of revelation, the seer would have much less control over them (at least no more than we have now; of course in the seer's perspective dreams are God-granted and a full part of the process, but not necessarily so for the modern observer)⁴. Further examples of night visions that can be dreams induced by the seer's continuous preparation can be seen e.g. in 2Br 21:1-3 - where, among other information, we are told that many thoughts were received by the seer at sunset, a possible indication of sleep taking hold of him and of further visionary experiences.

As a fourth favourable argument, it would be reasonable to think that an experience where lots of detail are given regarding its location and specific sensorial data (if the seer got dumb, or prostrated, or thirsty etc.) is more likely to be true than one about which only the vaguest hints are given. Of course this is no decisive issue - in Antiquity as now we can have fictional works, which bear great and deliberate resemblance to actual happenings and locations - but the comparison with Paul's experiences would be a most useful one here. The amount of detail and retelling the apostle gives about them makes it very

⁴ There is the possibility, both for the seer and for the ordinary man that dreams can be determined by awake experiences - and in some passages are explicitly so, as we shall see below. The distance between rational awake experiences and oniric ones could be very fluid for apocalyptic seers although it still looks more reasonable to think that the seer would have more control of an awake experience than of dream-like ones. Cf. Ithamar Gruenwald. *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism: Studies in Apocalypticism, Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1988. P.i ff.



unlikely that we are facing a fraud; unfortunately, one of the problems of this investigation is that rarely - if ever - we have a set of visions where a complete picture is given in apocalyptic texts. In the start of the research I divided the corpus examined in 12 basic categories (if the vision was awake or asleep, if there were fasting, prayer or chemical inducement present, if there was any angel or spirit guiding the process, if sexual abstinence was an issue, if the place of the vision is given, if a special place is required, if there was any special use of the senses, and lastly whether the vision was mostly vocal or visual).

These categories as related to apocalyptic texts have been dealt with elsewhere in another essay, but it must be said that no given passage fulfilled all of the requirements, and few had more than 3 simultaneous precise items of information given. Some of the passages where a greater amount of information is given are 4Ezra 3:1-5 (we can tell that at the same time the seer is asleep, his spirit was agitated, he claims to be in Babylon and that he prayed); in 9:23-29 the seer is awake, eating a possible ASC-inducer, praying, in the Ardat field and having a basically vocal experience); in a much more difficult text to date as the *Greek Apocalypse of Ezra* 1 we can still know that the seer was asleep, at home, fasting and praying, in a basically vocal experience; 1En 13:6-10 tells us that we are facing an asleep vision, with praying, at the river Dan (this place being a requirement), in a mostly visual experience. 2Br would offer many detailed passages regarding the visionary process - 5:5-7, 6:2, 26, 38, 48:25 and 47-48:1 being quite complete; even more so is 2Br 21:1-3; in it we know that the seer is awake, fasting, praying,



in a special place and feeling no thirst or hunger when he should, in a mostly visual experience.

The volume of detail present especially in 4Ezra and 2Br is by no means conclusive, but should be considered as favourable evidence of the experiences being authentic.

As a fifth argument, the similarity to Pagan practices, when it occurs, could be regarded as favourable evidence to the authenticity of the experiences: it makes little sense to think of a Jewish or Christian writer deliberately imitating Pagan rituals and practices, specially after the big reaction against Hellenization in the Maccabbean Revolt⁵. This is remarkable in 4Ezra and adds to the first argument for the authenticity of the experiences, namely their odd character, but seems less common in the majority of the texts examined which do not usually display any striking resemblance to Paganism⁶. Texts which deal with heavenly journeys such as the Enoch books pose the questions of the far from clear relations between Jewish and Pagan Gnosticism.

Vegetarianism poses a problem in both ways, for and against the authenticity of the experiences. If vegetarian practices are to be related to mind cleansing we would have a picture similar to Pagan practices such as

⁵ The appropriation of a Pagan figure as the Sibyl by Jews or Christians, for propaganda purposes, is an altogether different matter - this practice, as occurs in the Sibylline Oracles, ends up transforming a Pagan figure into a character acceptable to Jews and Christians, not the other way round. The use of Pagan oracles or prophets to "confirm" Christian revelation (such as what Lactance does with Hystaspes) does not fall in the category of appropriation of practices, either, but tries instead to show how even Pagan can testify to the truth of a doctrine that is alien to them.

⁶ The issue of resemblances to Pagan practices was apparently more remarkable in terms of chemical inducement which can possibly be related to specific diets; this I have discussed in the case of 4Ezra although, after concluding the essay, I came across references to similar practices in much later literature, namely *Merkavah* texts which at the present stage I could not go into, with special reference to the "Responsum to Hai Gaon". Cf. Alexander, *op.cit.*



Pythagoreanism; but they can also be related to *kashrut* laws and be simply intended to avoid defilement (as we can see in Dn 1). It is a difficult issue to take into account as an argument because the seer can complicate matters by putting together the physical well-being together with the assumed *kashrut* following, as in Dn 1:12-18:

1:12. Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. [...] 1:15. At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's rich food. [...] 1:17. As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all letters and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.

As a sixth and last argument supportive of the authenticity of first hand experiences, it could well be that the preparatory practices did actually take place, but the texts were written and later came down to posterity heavily disguised in traditional forms (one possible explanation for the choosing of pseudepigraphy). This is no proof of first hand experiences but does not discard them: the fact that the apocalyptic writers went on to enlarge Sinaitic revelation would fit very well with this traditional "disguise" of contemporary, actual mystical experiences.

Arguments against first hand experience being present in Jewish apocalyptic texts are the following. There is a repetition of practices, claims and preparations that strongly suggests a literary *topos*, first of all praying. This is further enhanced by some inducers appearing out of place, such as Ezra's praying in 4Ezra 9:26-29. In this passage, God commands the seer to pray (a standard device in terms of preparation for visions, and doubtless



effective as ASC-inducer); what makes the command look artificial is that the seer does not "pray to the Most High continually" before getting the vision, as was ordered. He fulfills the rest of the commands - fasts, lays on the field etc. but only *after* this is that he comes to talk to God (a prayer, in fact). It is reasonable to think that the device of praying to get the vision was expected from consumers of apocalyptic texts, and therefore must be present in the passage; the fact that praying is, in practical terms as ASC-inducer, useless in this passage makes it suspicious as authentic experience in the text.

Other examples of the same kind of commands and practices could be found at the universality of the demand for fasting, composing a second reason; although fasting is in itself a real ASC-inducing practice, it appears so often that it makes one suspicious of the authenticity of the practice. The number of days fasted is sometimes astonishing and deliberately referring to traditional pictures (e.g. the fasting of Ezra for 70 weeks in GrEzra 1:3, as related to the fasts in 4Ezra and 2Br), but may well be a conventional rounded number that does not deny a true feasible fasting behind it.

As a third reason against the experiences being first hand, we again have vegetarian practices. The problem of vegetarianism was discussed above as evidence supportive of the experiences as authentic and first hand; it could be used as counter evidence too, if we are to understand it not as a cleansing device but as plain *kashrut* compliance. In this case, episodes like the ones described in Dn have their case weakened; *kashrut* eating was not devised as an ecstatic practice, and if Daniel or Ezra get visions while obeying it, it should be understood as a consequence of their piety - which in itself comprises *kashrut*. Being this



universal among Jews, the seers who practice it can be stating their case as reinforcement of their piety, not evoking an actual cause-effect relationship. This is particularly the case in the difficult passage of MartIs 2:7-11; Isaiah, seeing the iniquity in the land goes away and, with his companions, they

[...] withdrew and dwelt in the mountain. All of them were clothed in sackcloth [another standard feature to express grief], and all of them were prophets [...] and they had nothing to eat except wild herbs (which) they gathered from the mountain, and when they had cooked (them), they ate (them) with Isaiah the prophet [...]

It is not clear at all whether Isaiah and the prophets eat the plants as a preparatory device or just to avoid defilement (the latter being more reasonable to support, since we do not have any clear statement that it was because of the eating of the plants that any prodigious deed followed).

A fourth argument could be that evidence supportive of the authenticity of the experiences, namely the amount of detail given, could also be used as an argument against them since we have so few complete descriptions: were we to have many more highly detailed preparatory processes as we have e.g. in Daniel, 4Ezra or 2Br and the nature of the experiences could be more deeply investigated.

Finally, a fifth argument would be that, being most of the texts examined of pseudepigraphical authorship (the major exception being Rev), it seems logically impossible to consider as "first hand" experiences that are ascribed to someone else. Again we could turn to Paul's experiences for a useful comparison: the amount of information he gives and his willingness to interpret what happened to him



composes a much more complex picture than any of the texts examined (again, with the possible exception of John of Patmos). But here we are dealing with true first hand experiences⁷, and not with pseudepigraphy; of course, could a full identification of the apocalyptic writer and the chosen pseudepigraphic author be established we would have a much different picture, but this is not the case. As the investigation stands now, pseudepigraphy would be a logical impediment to ascertaining first hand experiences to apocalyptic texts. To all the uncertainties involving any claims of authenticity, the attribution of the experiences to someone else makes investigation into the validity of the mystical experiences of the apocalyptic texts much more difficult.

As a conclusion to this essay I should say that the answer to the question proposed is no, we cannot be sure whether the experiences described are first hand. However, we must bear in mind that in each case we should look for evidence for or against authenticity in the texts themselves; each one will propose a different picture, some being more stereotypical than others. It should also be noted that apocalyptic was not regarded or consumed by ancient audiences as a genre: this is a quite modern (although useful) definition⁸, which does not exclude the

⁷ Even if some of Paul's letters are not by himself, and some pseudepigraphic works have been written in his name: what we have that can undoubtedly be attributed to him is already enough for the comparison proposed.

⁸ "Apocalyptic" identified as a literary genre has a very recent history, going back no further than the work of Friedrich Lücke in the beginning of the nineteenth century (cf. John J. Collins. *Daniel, with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984. P.1 ff.). Among the ancient who would not regard an apocalypse as structurally different from prophetic texts Josephus stand as a remarkable case; see his appreciation of Daniel in the *Jewish Antiquities* 10.276.



possibility that, although ancient audiences or readers did not recognize apocalyptic as a genre in itself, certain features could be expected from the texts⁹. To take one instance, the role of repetition of formulae is quite important in 3En, but altogether absent in 4Ezra; in both, however, the device of prayer is present and should be individually investigated in each case.

I would also add that the fact that the experiences described are part of a literary *topos* does not mean that they are entirely false: when the seer gives some stereotyped description of a process he is being truthful in a certain way - claiming to be doing what the audience expects, he is fulfilling a religious and social role. This is not synonym to authenticity of first hand experience, however.

Another issue that could weaken the case for the authenticity of the experiences as first hand is the deliberate "re-enacting" of previous seers' episodes. This is particularly so in Rev 10:8-11 with John of Patmos undergoing a similar experience to that of Ezekiel 3:3-4; its detailed similarity makes it less likely, in my view, that we have here an actual description of a mystical experience rather than a willful emulation of a model, although this does not by any means exclude the possibility that John had a mystical experience whose nature we can no longer be sure of, and that he chose to describe it as similar to what is reported by Ezekiel¹⁰. In the same line

⁹ This would be even more difficult to argue in favour of first hand experiences if ancient consumers of apocalyptic literature had in mind more "orthodox" models for the texts - the actual Ezra, Enoch and Baruch among others, or even whole books (as Gn for Jubilees). We would have here an apparent contradiction between the actual characters and the experiences related in the texts, which would turn the choosing of pseudepigraphy more difficult to explain.

¹⁰ In this sense the possibility of possession of the actual seer by the author in whose name the text is written is a very real one,



it can argued that, while we know very little about the conditions under which the apocalyptic texts were composed, it is quite possible that we are dealing with authentic experiences utterly re-written shortly or long after they took place, and that what we now have is but a diluted or enhanced picture of an experience that may eventually have been true and first hand, even if different.

It should also be noted that, while the arguments supportive of the truthfulness of the experiences claimed are very detailed and specific (i.e. for each of the favourable arguments provided above one must look carefully into evidence that does not overlap or lend itself to generalizations), the arguments against the authenticity are broader and thus, qualitatively different. Whereas one would have to look into three or four specific passages to search for chemical inducement (the ones in 4Ezra), it is easy to find everywhere in the apocalyptic texts passages related to e.g. praying as a means of getting visions. The feel of artificiality in the apocalyptic experience is so to speak general, while evidence supportive of first hand experience is to be found individually; the arguments for the authenticity seem to deal with exceptions and the ones against, with general features.

Finally, the fact that what we have in terms of apocalyptic texts is but a sample, big or small, of an amount that we know was once larger does not attest to the authenticity of the experiences neither to their artificiality: it could be reasonable to think that if we had a "complete" collection of the apocalyptic output there should be more detailed references to preparations for

although impossible to prove. Cf. Michael Stone. "Apocalyptic - vision or hallucination?" in: *Selected Studies in Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha with Special Reference to the Armenian Tradition*. Leiden / New York / Kobenhavn / Köln: Brill, 1991. P.428.



visions, but this cannot be taken for granted; and even if we had, the device of pseudepigraphy turns any conclusion related to first hand experiences much more difficult to discern, as discussed above.