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**"ZOROASTRIAN APOCALYPTIC AND HELLENISTIC  
POLITICAL PROPAGANDA"**

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**"ZOROASTRIANISM AND THE LEVANT"**

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HIS / UnB



Resumo / abstract

It is well known that in the centuries before and after the beginning of the Christian Era the apocalyptic literary genre was flourishing. As part of this, a number of oracles in Greek, Latin and Zoroastrian sources have survived to the present. My paper proposes to discuss the interaction between Zoroastrianism and Hellenistic oracles and their possible use in political propaganda. In particular, I shall argue that the so-called *Oracle of Hystaspes*, which only survives in quotations by five different Classical authors, was used in anti-Roman propaganda at the time of Mithridates VI Eupator, king of Pontus, and can therefore be dated back to at least the second century before the Christian era.



## Zoroastrian apocalyptic and Hellenistic Political Propaganda

### Divisions in themes with apocalyptic overtones

#### 1. Justin Martyr

*The Sibyl and Hystaspes have given out that this whole system of incorruptibles shall be destroyed by fire<sup>1</sup>.  
[...]*

#### 2. Aristokritos (in: *Theosophy*, preserved in later references from the 9<sup>th</sup> century the latest)

*In the fourth place [Aristokritos] adduces the oracles of a certain Hystaspes, king of the Persians or Chaldeans, a man of most distinguished birth (he says) and hence a receiver of a revelation of divine mysteries concerning the Saviour's incarnation; at the end of the book he set down a very abbreviated chronology from Adam until the days of Zeno, in which he asserts that the fulfilment would take place after the completion of 6,000 years; for, he says, it is written (Ps 89:4) that a thousand years are with the Lord as one day; in six days God made the universe and rested on the seventh. After the passing of 6,000 years, which are counted as equivalent to six, everything ought to come to a halt<sup>2</sup>.*

#### 3. Lactantius

*Hystaspes also, who was a very ancient king of the Medes, from whom the river which is now called Hydaspes received its name, handed down to the memory of posterity a wonderful dream upon the interpretation of a boy who uttered divinations, announcing, long before the Trojan nation, that the Roman empire and name would be taken*

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<sup>1</sup> *Apologia* 1:20. Written between CE 147 and 161, as it was addressed to Roman emperors comprising Antoninus Pius on one end, and Lucius Verus on the other. Here as in the following examples I have based myself on Hinnells' article translations, checked against originals when necessary.

<sup>2</sup> C. fifth century A.D. The translation follows Franz Cumont and Joseph Bidez. *Les mages hellénisés. Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d'après la tradition grecque*. Paris: Belles Lettres, 2007. II, P.363.



from the world<sup>3</sup>.

[...]

For Hystaspes, whom I have named above, having described the iniquity of this last age, says that the pious and faithful, being separated from the wicked, will stretch forth their hands to heaven with weeping and mourning, and will implore the protection of Jupiter; that Jupiter will look down to the earth, and hear the voices of men, and will destroy the wicked. All these things are true except one, that he attributed to Jupiter those things which God will do. This in fact was suppressed by the deceit of the demons, viz. that at that time the Son of God would be sent by the Father, to destroy all the wicked and set free the pious<sup>4</sup>.

[...]

Wherefore since all these things are true and certain, being foretold by the unanimous annunciation of all the prophets, since Trismegistus, Hystaspes, and the Sibyls have all foretold the same things, it cannot be doubted that all hope of life and salvation rests solely in the worship of God<sup>5</sup>.

## Parallels in propagandistic themes

Now, basically two issues are to be taken into account when dealing with the OH while trying to push its possible dating to the time and events related to Mithridates VI Eupator: political propaganda and Zoroastrical theological issues.

First, let us take a look at Aquilius' execution description:

### **Appian** "Mithridatic Wars" 12.21

Finally, at Pergamon, Mithridates poured molten gold down his [Aquillius'] throat, thus rebuking the Romans for their bribe-taking.

<sup>3</sup> *Divine Institutions* 7.15. Written between 303 and 311 CE; Lactantius was born in North Africa and lived before 303 (birth-date uncertain) and died after 326 CE (also uncertain).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.18.

<sup>5</sup> *Epitome of the Divine Institutions*, 73. Written after the *Divine Institutions*, maybe a little later, but they display a deeper knowledge of Christian texts.



Now, sources both Persian and non-Persian dealing with similar treatment for the wicked:

Miscellaneous sources	<i>Oracle of Hystaspes</i>
<p><b>Ardā Wirāz Nāmag</b> (AWN)</p> <p>(1) I came to a place, (2) and I saw the souls of several people, who remain in the same position. (3) And I asked the victorious Srosh the pious, and Adar the angel, thus: 'Who are they? and why remain they here?'</p> <p>(4) Srosh the pious, and Adar the angel, said (5) thus: 'They call this place Hamistagan (the ever stationary); (6) and these souls remain in this place till the future body; (7) and they are the souls of those men whose good works and sin were equal. (8) Speak out to the worlds thus: 'Let not avarice and vexation prevent you from doing a very easy work, (9) for every one whose good works are three Srosho-charanam more than his sin goes to heaven; (10) they whose sin is more go to hell; (11) they in whom both are equal remain among these Hamistagan till the future body.' (12) Their punishment is cold, or heat, from the revolution of the atmosphere; and they have no other adversity.'</p>	<p><b>Lactantius</b> <i>Divine Institutions</i> 7.21</p> <p>[...] when He shall have judged the righteous, He will also try them with fire. Then they whose sins shall exceed either in weight or in number shall be scorched by the fire and burnt; but they whom full justice and maturity of virtue have imbued will not perceive that fire.</p>
<p><b>Greater Bundahišn</b></p> <p>(GrBd) 34.16</p> <p>16. During the performance of that renovation of the universe {Frashegird}, those holy men of whom it is written that they are</p>	



living, fifteen men and fifteen damsels will come to the help of Sosians. 17. And as [the dragon] Gô-chihr within the celestial sphere shall fall from the base of the moon on to the earth, the earth shall have such distress as that of a sheep when a wolf tears off its wool. 18. Then fire and Airyaman Yazat will melt the metal which is within the hills and mountains, and it will remain on this earth like a river. 19. And then they will cause all men to pass into that melted metal, and will make them pure; and to him who is righteous, it will so seem in such manner that he is walking in warm milk; and to him who is wicked, it will seem in such manner that he is walking in the world in melted [sic] metal. 20. Then with the greatest affection, shall all men meet together, father and son and brother, and all friends; man will ask man: 'Where wert thou these many years? What was the condition of thy soul? Wert thou righteous or wicked?' 21. When first, the soul shall see the body, it will enquire of it; on the [reply] being uttered, men will unanimously be of one acclaim, and will administer loud praise to Ohrmazd and the beneficent immortals {Amesha Spentas}.

**Zand-i-Wahman Yašt** (ZWY)

6:4; 7:6

The year, month and day [will be] shorter.  
The Sun's rays will be very

**Lactantius** *Divine*

*Institutions* 7.19

Then the middle of heaven shall be laid open in the dead and darkness of the



level and much concealed;  
the Sun will show a  
melancholy sign.

The Moon will change her  
colour, and [there] will be  
melancholy, darkness and  
gloom on earth.

<In the religion it is  
revealed> that the night  
when the kay will be born a  
sign will reach the world, a  
star will fall from the sky.  
When that kay will be born a  
star will reveal a sign,  
{that is, Dādohrmazd said,  
'Month Ābān and the day  
Wād'} the father of that kay  
will <eventually> die <and>  
they will foster <him> among  
the maids of the Šāh. A  
woman will be sovereign'.

night, that the light of the  
descending God may be  
manifest in all the world as  
lightning [...] There shall  
suddenly fall from heaven a  
sword, that the righteous  
may know that the leader of  
the sacred warfare is about  
to descend; and He shall  
descend with a company of  
angels to the middle of the  
earth, and there shall go  
before Him an unquenchable  
fire, and the power of the  
angels shall deliver into  
the hands of the just that  
multitude which has  
surrounded the mountain, and  
they shall be slain from the  
third hour until the  
evening, and blood shall  
flow like a torrent; and all  
his forces being destroyed,  
the wicked one alone shall  
escape, and his power shall  
perish from him.

## Conclusion

The passages of the *Oracle*, especially those from Lactantius, display close resemblance, when not identity, to the theme of Zoroastrian final ordeal by fire. This is evident on the passages displayed on the scheme.

The relation of all this material to the *Oracle* in the form it came down to us is that it came via Christian authors, who might be using a Jewish text disguised as Pagan. This in turn relates to Jewish sibyllina and the theme of Eastern vengeance to Rome, attested by classical authors who do not concern us here. But they definitely offer a comparison to a true ordeal through which Aquilius was forced to pass - and makes one wonder how many at that



day in the theatre in Permamon really believed that Aquilius' was going to be judged, and not simply murdered.