

THE MEDIEVAL LEGEND OF THE LAST ROMAN EMPEROR AND ITS MESSIANIC ORIGIN*

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Long before Christianity established itself as the majority religion of the Roman Empire, Judaism and Christianity developed an interest in the Last Things. This interest is recorded in writings later recognized as canonical (Daniel, 2 Thessalonians ii, Matthew xxiv, Revelation), and in works that never or only sporadically obtained such recognition: apocryphal or pseudepigraphic writings such as Enoch, Ezra or Baruch. To these eschatological texts there was added in the seventh century another apocalypse that, without displacing the earlier material, rapidly made its influence felt in many areas of the medieval world, especially the Byzantine Empire. This was the *Revelation of Pseudo-Methodius*.¹

The Latin version of this text and, to a lesser extent, its Greek model have long been known to scholars; but it was only recently recognized that the Greek text was itself the translation of a Syriac original composed, as I have argued elsewhere, in the latter half of the seventh century in or near Singara in (eastern) Mesopotamia. The complete Syriac text was discovered not long ago by Michael Kmosko in a sixteenth-century Vatican manuscript, Codex Syriacus 58.² The seventh-century Greek translation of this Syriac composition has been rendered not only into Latin but also into Church Slavonic. It thus made its impact on medieval literature, not only on the Latin *Ludus de Antichriste* and on the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, both of the twelfth century, but also on a considerable body of later prophetic literature in the West. In

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¹ Edition and discussion of Latin translation by Ernst Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte und Forschungen*, Halle a. S. 1898 (reprint Turin 1963), pp. 60-96 (cf. 3-59). Edition of Greek versions by V. M. Istrin, *Otkrovenie Mefodiia Patarskago* etc., Chteniiia v Imp. Obshchestvie Istorii i Drevnostei Rossiiskikh pro Moskovskom Universitie 193, Moscow 1897, pp. 1-74 (for philological discussion see *ibid.* 191, Moscow 1897, pp. 5-232). Istrin's edition consists essentially of collations of a small

number of manuscripts. There is now at last available the first critical edition based on the entire manuscript evidence, by Anastasios Lolos, *Die Apokalypse des Ps.-Methodios*, Beiträge zur Klassischen Philologie ed. Ernst Heitsch, Reinhold Merkelbach and Clemens Zintzen, 83, Meisenheim am Glan 1976.

² Two incomplete Syriac versions were discovered much earlier, F. Nau, 'Les Révélationes de Saint Méthode', *Journal Asiatique*, ser. 11, 9, 1917, pp. 415-52. Michael Kmosko, 'Das Rätsel des Pseudo-Methodius', *Byzantion* 6, 1931, pp. 273-96, see also 5, 1929/30, pp. 422-4. I have touched on this discovery and its implications for the date and place of origin of the work in: 'Medieval Apocalypses as Historical Sources', *American Historical Review* 73, 1968, pp. 997-1018, esp. pp. 998f.; 'Byzantium and the Migration of Literary Motifs: The Legend of the Last Roman Emperor', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, n.s. ii, 1971, pp. 47-68, esp. 56-59; 'Pseudo-Methodius and Ethiopia' (in Russian), *Antichnaia Drevnost i Srednie Veka* 10, 1973, pp. 21-27.

the Byzantine Empire the Greek text circulated in various versions falsely attributed, like the Syriac original, to the Church Father Methodius; it also appeared in forms that were simultaneously severely abbreviated and interpolated with more recent material, under the new title, *Visions of Daniel*. It is in these texts that the medieval legend of the Last Roman Emperor in the form that would be influential found its earliest expression.³

Pseudo-Methodius's prediction of a Last Roman Emperor forms the climax of his pamphlet. The Syriac work consists of two parts, the first pseudo-historical and the second the Apocalypse proper. The Last Roman Emperor's career is prophesied in the latter as occurring at the end of the Arab invasions and before the reign of Antichrist. However, the entire first half of the work, with its fantastic summary of world history, is dedicated to proving that the Roman-Byzantine emperors, and notably the Last Roman Emperor, were scions of the royal house of Ethiopia. This fanciful thesis was born during the crisis of the Arab invasions, and expressed the hope that the Byzantine Empire, the natural protector of Christians, would last eternally. Although this thesis was subsequently ignored or adjusted, the author's data on the expected Last Roman Emperor were destined to shape eschatological thought for centuries.

Pseudo-Methodius refers to the Last Roman Emperor throughout as 'King of the Greeks', because according to his historical scheme the Byzantine emperors are descended from the legendary founder of Byzantium and first king of the Greeks, Byz (the ancient hero Byzas). He first mentions him, albeit obliquely, at the end of his demonstration that the kings of Greece, i.e. the rulers of Byzantium, are descended from a Princess Kušet, the eponymous ancestress of the Ethiopian or Kušite royal house. Psalm lxviii, 32 is interpreted to signify the surrender of earthly power by a Byzantine ruler: the Syriac wording is 'Kuš will commit [its] hand [or hands] to God'. Pseudo-Methodius then 'predicts' the Arab invasions, of which he was clearly a near contemporary, and the accompanying suffering they would bring. His description culminates in the triumph of the invaders and their blasphemous boast: 'There is no redeemer [perūqā] for the Christians.'

At this point Pseudo-Methodius finally introduces in unambiguous terms his 'King of the Greeks' who will surrender his earthly power to God and thus become the Last Roman Emperor. The implication is clear: this King will be precisely that Christian 'redeemer' whose very existence Arabs had denied. The King of the Greeks will arise suddenly and set out against the Arabs with great fury; in fact Pseudo-Methodius considers warfare his primary function. He describes the King's onslaught in the language of Psalm lxxviii, 65 in its Syriac guise ('he will be awakened against them like a man who shakes off [the effects of] his wine') and then continues in his own words: 'he will plot against them as if they were dead'—i.e. he regards their defeat as pre-ordained.⁴

The King will attack the Arabs in their homeland from the Sea of the Kušites (the Red Sea) assisted by his 'sons' both in the desert and in the Land of Promise (Palestine). The Arabs will be defeated and subjected to servitude a hundred times more severe than they had inflicted. There will follow a period of peace. Refugees and prisoners will return to their homes, another indication of the King's redemptive function. The Arab lands will be laid

³ See Appendix, p. 14.

⁴ *Codex Vaticanus Syriacus* 58, fol. 133^r.

waste and 'all the fury of the wrath of the King of the Greeks will be brought to bear upon those who denied'⁵—a reference perhaps not so much to a general Moslem denial of Christianity as to the Arab taunt about the absence of a Christian 'redeemer'. The author then describes the prosperity and joy following upon the King's great victories: churches and cities will be built and priests freed from paying taxes, 'men will sit down in repose, will eat and drink . . . and will take wives and wives will be given to them' (partly an allusion to Matthew xxiv, 38).

The prophecy concerning his reign is then interrupted by a prediction of an invasion from the north ending in a battle at Joppe in which the enemy is annihilated by an angel. Here the King of the Greeks plays no role and the author may be following a different source (Ezekiel xxxviii f.) for this interlude. At its conclusion the King reappears: 'he will descend and reside in Jerusalem' for ten and a half years until the Son of Perdition (Antichrist) is revealed. 'Immediately the King of the Greeks will ascend Golgotha, will lay his diadem on the Cross, will stretch his two hands to heaven and resign his kingship to God.' Cross and crown will then ascend to heaven 'because the holy Cross on which the Messiah [*mešihā*] was crucified for the redemption [*purqanā*] of all men is a sign that will be seen prior to the [second] coming of our Lord'. The King's action will thus bring the fulfilment of Psalm lxviii, 32 and the King will die. 'And as every leader and all authority and all powers will cease, the Son of Perdition will be revealed.'⁶

Throughout the prediction the Last Roman Emperor is barely a personality; even his death is overshadowed by the ascension of the Cross which precedes and the manifestation of Antichrist that follows it. On the other hand, by referring specifically to the redemptive character of the Messiah's crucifixion Pseudo-Methodius reminds the reader of his underlying thesis that the last King of the Greeks will emulate the redemption by defeating the enemies of the Christians, restoring the prosperity that had prevailed prior to the Flood (note the allusion to Matthew xxiv, 38), removing the *raison d'être* for the continuation of earthly authority and thus making the world ready for the Second Coming and the Kingdom of God.

So much for the Syriac text. The translations elaborate on it or adapt it to different historical circumstances, but provide no new information about the Last Emperor that might derive from the tradition behind the original.⁷ It is true that some relatively late Greek apocalyptic texts, such as the *Andreas Salos Apocalypse* (tenth century?) and the *Oracles of Leo* (twelfth century) may do so; however, as it is uncertain whether these rulers were ever considered

⁵ *Cod. Vat. Syr.* 58, fol. 134^r.

⁶ *Cod. Vat. Syr.* 58, fols. 134^v–5^r.

⁷ In the Greek texts the emergence and activity of the Last Roman Emperor is increasingly surrounded by a miraculous aura. For example, the prediction that the Last Emperor 'would plot against them [Arabs] as if they were dead' is translated as follows: 'whom men considered as if he were dead' (δν ἐλογίζοντο ὡς νεκρὸν ὄντα) (ed. Istrin, pp. 40f. = ed. Lolos, pp. 122, 55–124, 1). This translation, which is syn-

tactically possible, quite distorted the Syriac author's meaning, probably unintentionally, and inaugurated a belief, at Byzantium as well as in Slavic and Western Europe, in a future ruler who would not die or who would return from death, a belief incidentally, behind the legends that surrounded Frederick II Hohenstaufen and his grandfather Frederick I Barbarossa. To underline the miraculous emergence of the Last Roman Emperor the same translator added the further qualification that men considered the Emperor good

last emperors, i.e. emperors who surrendered their power to God, it will be preferable to omit this material.⁸

In considering the origins of the legend, it is instructive to examine first the Biblical proof texts adduced by the Syriac Pseudo-Methodius.⁹ In the section dealing with the career of the King of the Greeks, only two Biblical texts are explicitly quoted. The first is in the description of the peace and prosperity of the Last Emperor's reign.¹⁰ The words 'eat and drink, men will take wives and wives will be given to them' are a fairly literal citation from Jesus's answer to the disciples' question: 'what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?' In the Gospels (Matt. xxiv, 38; Luke xvii, 26) his answer refers to his own Second Coming but Pseudo-Methodius, surprisingly, applies it to an earlier stage in the eschatological drama, the reign of the last King of the Greeks. The second is Psalm lxviii, 32, identified as 'the saying of the blessed David'.¹¹ It is quoted and commented upon repeatedly throughout Pseudo-Methodius's treatise, because of the alleged Ethiopian ancestry of the Byzantine emperors.

There are two less overt Biblical allusions. When the King of the Greeks is first introduced, Pseudo-Methodius speaks of him in the language of Psalm lxxviii, 65 which in the Syriac Bible runs as follows:

The Lord was aroused . . . like a man who shakes off [the effects of] his wine.

Pseudo-Methodius, once more surprisingly, wished to apply this text to the future last King. Consequently he omitted 'the Lord', transformed a statement of past fact into a prophecy and added a reference to the Arab enemies of the last King:

He [i.e. the King of the Greeks] will be aroused against them [the Arabs] like a man who shakes off [the effects of] his wine.¹²

The second occurs after the prophecy of the last King's death:

for nothing (ἐξ οὐδεν χρησιμεύων), thus throwing into even bolder relief the astonishing energy and efficiency displayed by the victorious Emperor (there may here be an allusion to Septuagint (53, 2) and its suffering servant who 'was despised and not considered' (ἡτιμώσθη καὶ οὐκ ἐλογίσθη)). Several Greek *Visions of Daniel* achieve a similar effect by attributing the Emperor's selection to divine intervention or by stating that 'his name was small' (*Visio Danielis* attributed to John Chrysostom ed. A. Vasiliev, *Anecdota Graeco-Byzantina*, Moscow 1893, p. 36, 20 = *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca*, 3rd edn. by F. Halkin, *Subsidia Hagiographica* 8, Brussels 1957 (henceforth abbreviated *BHG*) 1871.) Other texts add additional detail about the Emperor's battle or battles against the Arabs and introduce Western allies (*Visio Danielis*, ed. Vasiliev, p. 39, 31 = *BHG* 1872). These texts transform the Syriac King of the Greeks into an Emperor (Boadeús) for the benefit of

Byzantine readers accustomed to the official terminology, into an 'Emperor of the Greeks and Romans' or an 'Emperor of the Romans' alone (ed. Istrin, pp. 40, 1; 41, 9; 42, 1 etc. = ed. Lolos, pp. 122, 55; 124, 66; 124, 68 etc.). hence his conventional designation by modern scholars unfamiliar with the unpublished Syriac text as the Last Roman Emperor.

⁸ Cf. Lennart Rydén, 'The Andreas Salos Apocalypse etc.', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 28, 1974, pp. 198-261, esp. pp. 202, 21 - 203, 58 (= *BHG* 117d); *Oracula Leonis*, in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 107, 1130-58. When only the Greek text and derived versions were known, other origins were proposed.

⁹ Cf. for example Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, pp. 53-55 (Pseudo-Methodius probably a Syrian but influenced by Persian ideas).

¹⁰ *Cod. Vat. Syr.* 58, fol. 133^v.

¹¹ *Cod. Vat. Syr.* 58, fols. 126^r, 126^v, 135^v.

¹² *Cod. Vat. Syr.* 58, fol. 133^r.

Thereupon every leader and all authority and all powers will be brought to nought.¹³

This is an almost literal borrowing from 1 Corinthians xv, 24, but with the verb changed from active to passive to allow it to refer to the King of the Greeks. The text originally described Christ's role when 'he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power'. Pseudo-Methodius had already alluded to this verse in a passage prior to the section on the King of the Greeks, and described it as 'apostolic'.¹⁴ There it is combined in a variety of ways with references to 2 Thessalonians ii, 7. St. Paul warned his correspondents not to be alarmed by rumours of the coming end and reassured them by a somewhat obscure allusion to a factor or element restraining the Man of Lawlessness or the Mystery of Lawlessness. This restraint would have to be 'out of the way' before the end could come; in the language of the Greek original and of the Syriac New Testament as used by Pseudo-Methodius, it would have to be 'taken out of the middle' (*ἐκ μέσου γένηται, nestegel men mesa'tā*). Pseudo-Methodius understood the 'restraining' force to be the Roman Empire, as indeed did many early exegetes, and the process of taking it 'out of the middle' to signify the surrender of his power by the last King of the Greeks. 2 Thessalonians ii, 7, therefore, may be added to the list of Pseudo-Methodius's Biblical proof texts for the Last Roman Emperor.

That is all. It is apparent that these texts explain only a small part of Pseudo-Methodius's data on the Last Roman Emperor. How does he know that the Last Roman Emperor will attack the Arabs from the direction of the Red Sea? It could be argued that this was a simple inference from the notion of a Byzantine emperor wishing to attack the Arab homeland. However, such an answer only raises the more fundamental question: why is Pseudo-Methodius so certain that the Last Roman Emperor will wage war in the first place and that he will be so dramatically successful? How does Pseudo-Methodius know that the Last Emperor will, after his victories, go to Jerusalem and reside there for many years? This is especially surprising, as the normal place of residence and centre of activities for any late Roman Emperor was Constantinople. Where did Pseudo-Methodius find the information that the surrender of power will occur at Jerusalem, on Mount Golgotha to be precise?

Then there is the fact that Pseudo-Methodius's interpretations of Biblical passages are not the obvious ones: both words and meaning are sometimes changed. By what authority does he dare apply Jesus's prediction about the material prosperity under the risen Christ to the reign of the Last King? Why is he so certain that Psalm lxviii, 32 has an eschatological meaning affecting the Roman Empire and does not rather prophesy a religious conversion of Ethiopia? Eusebius, for example, considered the psalm fulfilled by the conversion of the Ethiopian queen's eunuch by the Apostle Philip, surely a more natural interpretation.¹⁵ Pseudo-Methodius's exegesis seems forced, verging on blasphemy.

¹³ *Cod. Vat. Syr.* 58, fol. 135^v.

¹⁴ *Cod. Vat. Syr.* 58, fols. 126^v–7^r.

¹⁵ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 2, 1, 13, cf. Acts viii, 26. Eusebius depends here on rabbinic inter-

pretations of the psalm; see H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, iii, Munich 1928, p. 417.

There can only be one explanation: Pseudo-Methodius derived few (if any) of his data on the Last Roman Emperor from either Old or New Testament; on the contrary he (or his source or sources) followed a tradition independent of or supplementary to the Bible and relied on Biblical formulations or proof texts only for confirmation. What were his sources and their tradition?

In a vague way it has long been recognized that the medieval concept of a Last Roman Emperor had its roots, at least partially, in Jewish Messianism.¹⁶ What has not been clearly realized, however, is that not only isolated details of the concept but most of its essential characteristics reproduce Late Jewish hopes for a national liberator, a Messiah. The Syriac Pseudo-Methodius, by providing the original wording of the prophecy and localizing it within the Syriac context allows the point to be demonstrated with a considerable degree of confidence. Jewish Messianism was based on prophetic ideas contained in the canonical Old Testament but found its explicit formulation in extra-canonical works composed under the threat from Seleucid rulers or under Roman domination.¹⁷ This circumstance explains the scarcity of Old Testament proof texts in the Byzantine Legend of the Last Roman Emperor: it was related only slightly and indirectly to the Bible.

To begin with a negative point, the shadowy character of the Last Roman Emperor (his lack of a name, and any physical attributes) is paralleled in the Jewish Messiah: he does not bear a personal name, is individually indistinct, and it is his functions as national deliverer and just native ruler that are stressed.¹⁸ Just as the Syriac Pseudo-Methodius calls the Last Roman Emperor King (of the Greeks) or Redeemer, so the Jewish sources designate the expected national ruler: King, Redeemer (*goel*), Anointed (King).¹⁹ The use of the term Redeemer is particularly noteworthy. The Hebrew word *ge'uloh* was used by the rabbis and on the coinage of Bar Kokhba as a technical term for the Messianic liberation of the Holy Land from foreign, especially from Roman, domination.²⁰ Its reappearance in Pseudo-Methodius to denote the expected liberation of Christendom from Arab occupation is therefore entirely fitting.

¹⁶ Franz Kampers, *Die deutsche Kaiseridee in Prophetie und Sage*, Munich 1896, *passim*, esp. the first sections of the part entitled: 'Sage und Prophetien von einem Messias Kaiser der Endzeit'.

¹⁷ Standard works on Late Jewish Messianism: Paul Volz, *Die Eschatologie der Jüdischen Gemeinde im Neutestamentlichen Zeitalter*, Tübingen 1934 (reprint Hildesheim 1966); Emil Schürer, *Geschichte des Jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi*, 4th edn., ii, Leipzig 1907, pp. 579-651; Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums in Späthellenistischen Zeitalter*, 3rd edn. by Hugo Gressmann, Tübingen 1926 (reprint 1966), pp. 202-89.

¹⁸ Volz, *Eschatologie*, p. 186 ('wenig Fleisch und Blut'); Bousset, *Religion*, p. 222 ('ganz nebensächlich und schattenhaft innerhalb des Zukunftsgemäldes'). Intellectual and moral rather than physical attributes stressed: Volz,

Eschatologie, pp. 221-3. Messiah's victories over the nations: Volz, *Eschatologie*, pp. 212f.; Schürer, *Geschichte*, ii, pp. 621-3; Bousset, *Religion*, pp. 218-20, 228f.

¹⁹ Designations of Messiah: Volz, *Eschatologie* pp. 52, 173f., 216; Schürer, *Geschichte*, ii, p. 613; Bousset, *Religion*, pp. 227f.

²⁰ H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, pp. 860ff.; Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, ed. by G. Vermes and Fergus Millar, i [the only volume of this new English edition published so far], Edinburgh 1973, pp. 545, 606; especially useful Martin Hengel, *Die Zeloten*, Leiden-Cologne 1961, pp. 120-3; also Shimon Applebaum, 'The Zealots: The Case for Revaluation', *Journal of Roman Studies*, lxi, 1971, pp. 155-70, esp. pp. 161f.

What seems at first sight an exception to the lack of individuality in Pseudo-Methodius's Emperor, the reference to 'sons', assisting in his military operations, should not be taken in the literal sense but as indicating 'counsellors' or 'companions'—in Syriac the two meanings are differentiated merely by one vowel sign (if the text indicates vowels at all).²¹ Pseudo-Methodius thus here refers to military aides, allies or troops of the Last Roman Emperor, just as the Apocalypse of Ezra (4 Ezra vii, 28; xiii, 52) knows of 'those who are with him [Messiah]' or his 'companions' and as Enoch xlv, 3 writes of the Messiah surrounded by his 'Elect'.²²

One striking feature of the Syriac account is that the King of the Greeks emerges 'all of a sudden' at the point when the political and military fortunes of the 'Romans' have reached their nadir and when the Arab enemy imperils the very Empire. Similarly, the suddenness of the Messiah's appearance is stated explicitly (though infrequently) in the Jewish sources, as is the notion that just before his appearance the warfare of the nations against Israel will be threatening the very existence of the people and its capital. In both cases, he arrives in the hour of direst need and his primary function is victorious combat against a powerful foreign enemy of another faith.²³

The Messianic model also explains the Last Roman Emperor's ten and a half years of residence at Jerusalem and the surrender of his power in that city after his victories. When Pseudo-Methodius wrote, Roman emperors regularly resided at Constantinople and a complex ideology had been built around that capital. One would expect an author so loyal to Byzantium to locate there the act of surrender. He does not, because it seems he is again following Late Jewish traditions about a Messiah whose activities were naturally centred on Mount Zion. The same traditions explain why, in the description of the warfare of the Emperor and his 'sons', Pseudo-Methodius lays particular stress on the liberation of Palestine from its Arab occupants and even refers to it as the Promised Land, a term of course of special meaning to Jews.²⁴ Furthermore, Pseudo-Methodius's Last Roman Emperor ushers in a period of unprecedented peace, abundance, joy and human fertility, just like the Jewish Messiah.²⁵

A particularly revealing aspect of the structural similarity of the Syriac Legend to the Jewish model is the place assigned by Pseudo-Methodius to the Last Roman Emperor in the series of eschatological events. In the Syriac work the reign of the Last King of the Greeks is framed between a previous time of unprecedented tribulation by a foreign foe and the subsequent Second Coming. Pseudo-Methodius imagines it as a period in which the King and his people enjoy all sorts of divine blessings that at times border on the miraculous, but still form part of human history during which familiar,

²¹ *bar malkā* means 'son of the king', *bar melkā* 'counsellor'.

²² Volz, *Eschatologie*, p. 210.

²³ Suddenness of Messiah's emergence: Volz, *Eschatologie*, pp. 210f.; Schürer, *Geschichte*, ii, p. 620. Warfare of the nations against Israel and Jerusalem: Volz, *Eschatologie*, pp. 147–63 ('die letzte böse Zeit'), esp. pp. 157f., cf. p. 158: 'Wenn die Not am

grössten ist, dann kommt das Ende'; Schürer, *Geschichte*, ii, p. 609 ('Letzte Drangsal und Verwirrung').

²⁴ On Jerusalem and Palestine as the *foci* of the Messiah's activities: Volz, *Eschatologie*, pp. 212–14; Schürer, *Geschichte*, ii, p. 629.

²⁵ Volz, *Eschatologie*, pp. 214–17; Schürer, *Geschichte*, ii, p. 631; Bousset, *Religion*, pp. 240–2.

institutions (kingship, warfare, Jerusalem, Palestine, etc.) continue to exist. It is neatly distinguished from the next stage when all these institutions will end and the Kingdom of Heaven be established in its place. Now in Jewish sources, both rabbinic and apocalyptic, from shortly before our era and more clearly after A.D. 150, there appears the notion of a period of national salvation under a Messiah falling between the present and the age to come. The Messianic period is variously evaluated: some texts for example stress its similarity to the present era, others to the age to come. This Jewish concept of an intermediate dispensation—a *Zwischenreich*—then formed the basis for a millenarian hope, expressed in the New Testament (especially Revelation xx, 2–5) and in patristic writings. Christian millenarianism took over from Judaism the expectation of a blissful earthly reign of the Messiah in the company of his saints and gave it, from a different source, the duration of a thousand years. The Jewish tripartite scheme—this age, Messianic rule, world to come—was an attempt to combine the older hope for national salvation with a universal concept that also developed in Late Judaism of a blessed future for all mankind under a transcendent Messiah.²⁶ Pseudo-Methodius shows the same pattern—this world, reign of the Last Roman Emperor, Kingdom of God—where the Emperor's rule culminating in his surrender at Jerusalem of kingship to God takes the place of the Jewish Messianic kingdom.

Thus many of the features of the Byzantine legend of the Last Emperor reflect Jewish traditions of the Anointed King who would redeem his people. Other aspects are obviously Christian: the allusions to the New Testament, the role of Golgotha and the Cross. The idea of a victorious and prosperous earthly reign of finite duration under a great monarch is certainly Jewish, but the Emperor's vivid gesture of surrender, and his imperial paraphernalia (diadem, etc.) must be Christian in inspiration, influenced partly by 1 Corinthians xv, 24. The amalgam of Jewish and Christian elements is thus found not merely in details of the legend, but in its basic constituents.

There is one further feature, explicable in terms neither of Jewish Messianism nor of the New Testament nor indeed of the mainstream of Christian thought. This was the notion that the last earthly ruler would be Roman, one of the most surprising (and historically influential) aspects of the legend.

It is the Byzantine counterpart of a Jewish Messiah whose function was to liberate Jews from their foreign masters. Pseudo-Methodius's Last Roman Emperor is also difficult to reconcile with the teachings of the Church. It is true that the expectation of a Messianic rule preceding the Second Coming, a *Zwischenreich*, was accepted at least in some quarters of the Early Church and underlies for example St. Paul's notion (1 Corinthians xv, 24), prominently cited by Pseudo-Methodius, of a future surrender of kingship to God and of an end of all earthly authority. St. Paul was of Jewish origin, as was probably the last redactor of the canonical *Revelation of John* in which Christian martyrs are expected to rule jointly with the Messiah for a thousand years. One difference between this early Christian expectation and Pseudo-Methodius's Legend is that in the former the Messiah is a spiritual king of Israel, namely Christ,

²⁶ Volz, *Eschatologie*, pp. 71–77, 211f.; Bousset, *Religion*, pp. 286–9.

while according to Pseudo-Methodius he will be temporal and Roman. An even more basic difference is that, in so far as Christian teaching accepted the notion of a temporary Messianic kingdom on earth, the Messiah was identical with Jesus Christ who would return at the Second Coming. In Pseudo-Methodius's tract, on the other hand, and in the entire dependent Byzantine tradition, the Messianic ruler whose career and life were to end with the abdication on Mount Golgotha was human, a Roman emperor, and thus quite distinct from the Messiah or Christ who would return. It is another instance of what to modern eyes seems an illegitimate appropriation on behalf of a human ruler of prophecies and concepts that in the New Testament had referred to Jesus Christ.

How can one explain the genesis of this strange conglomerate of Late Jewish, Early Christian and unorthodox views. In particular, how can one account for the re-emergence in Christianity of so much Jewish material at this late date and in this particular area? In demonstrating Pseudo-Methodius's borrowing I have been able to operate on the relatively solid basis of scriptural citations and of similarities in ideas and terminology. The explanation must, however, be speculative principally because little is known of the person of Pseudo-Methodius and of the intellectual and cultural circles of the Syriac-speaking Church.

Two possibilities suggest themselves. One is that Pseudo-Methodius (or one of his sources) infused Judaic elements into an essentially Christian tradition. If this occurred, whoever was responsible cannot have derived the Jewish elements exclusively from the canonical Bible, for the author knows a great deal more about Jewish Messianism than can be found there. If he re-judaized a Christian tradition, he must therefore have had access to an extra-canonical Messianic tradition, literary or oral, preserved by Jewish or Christian communities in Mesopotamia into early Arab times.

The alternative and simpler explanation is that Pseudo-Methodius belonged to a Christian community with an exceptional link to Late Judaism. In either case one must conclude that the origin of the Legend cannot be understood without assuming that in Mesopotamia a tradition embodying Jewish Messianic expectations survived in some form into the latter seventh century.

The question arises: is it possible to define the date and religious orientation of the bearers of this tradition? Only the outline of a possible answer will be sketched here. At the outset the two most radical deviations of the Legend as told by Pseudo-Methodius from Jewish Messianism should be emphasized: the transformation of Jewish King into Roman Emperor, and the role of Golgotha and the Cross at Jerusalem. After the extinction of the Jewish state under Vespasian and Titus (A.D. 68-70) and the suppression of the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-135), repeated overtures made by Christian thinkers to Roman authorities were accompanied by growing Christian hostility to Judaism.²⁷ Beginning with Irenaeus, almost all the Church Fathers see in the Roman

²⁷ Wilhelm Bousset, *Der Antichrist in der Überlieferung des Judentums, des Neuen Testaments und der Alten Kirche. Ein Beitrag zur Auslegung der Apokalypse*, Göttingen 1895, pp.

85f.; cf. W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church. A Study of Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus*, Oxford 1965, pp. 258f. and *passim*.

Empire the power 'restraining' the Antichrist and the end of the world. From this even Tertullian, normally hostile to Rome, occasionally advises prayer for Roman 'emperors, for the entire order of the Empire and for Roman institutions'. A century later, Lactantius expressed himself similarly. Correspondingly, the Antichrist was often expected to be Jewish.²⁸ In addition, as their Judaic origins, together with the memory of an independent Jewish state and of the Temple, receded further into the past, as Christians came to think of Jews as isolated congregations living in the Dispersion within a foreign environment, and as Christianity came to conceive of a missionary purpose in the Roman world, the expectation of the rule of a Messianic King of Israel may have seemed more and more incongruous. The conversion of Constantine, in particular, must have served as a catalyst for the substitution of a powerful Roman Emperor for the nebulous King of the Jews in Christian eschatology; this would be an instance of apocalyptic *translatio imperii*, a procedure later used many times in response to the political rise and fall of kingdoms and empires.²⁹

Along the same lines, the localization on Mount Golgotha of the Last Emperor's act of surrender and deposition of the diadem points towards a date no earlier than the fourth century. Pseudo-Methodius predicts:

And immediately when the Son of Perdition [Antichrist] will be revealed, then the King of the Greeks will go up and come to Golgotha and the Holy Cross will be erected in the place where it was set up when it carried Christ (*mešihā*). And the King of the Greeks will place his diadem on top of (or: before) the Holy Cross and will stretch out his hands to heaven etc.³⁰

From this it is clear that the author was aware that Christ's Cross had not been standing on Golgotha continuously since the day of the Crucifixion. But it is uncertain whether Pseudo-Methodius expected the Cross to be restored only in the age of the Last Emperor, i.e. at the end of time (as seems more natural) or at some earlier date for the Emperor to find on the day of his surrender and death.

The Legend of the Finding of the Cross is associated with the Emperor Constantine's mother, Helen, and the building of the Constantinian complex on the site of the Holy Sepulchre. It is possible that the relic stood again on Golgotha in the 340s; at any rate, it is shown as part of the complex in the apse mosaic of S. Pudenziana in Rome, completed in or after 391.³¹ Thus

²⁸ Bousset, *Antichrist*, pp. 16, 77-79 (where the passages from Tertullian and Lactantius are cited).

²⁹ Many examples in Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages. A Study in Joachimism*, Oxford 1969, esp. parts iii and iv.

³⁰ *Cod. Vat. Syr.* 58, fol. 135^r.

³¹ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, iii, pp. 26ff. On the buildings surrounding the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem, see particularly: Kenneth J. Conant and Glanville Downey, 'The Original Buildings at the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem', *Speculum*, xxxi, 1956, pp. 1-48 (on Calvary and its Cross, pp. 5-7; the article includes reconstructions where the Cross is clearly visible, see plates viii, x and xi); Ch. Coillat, *The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem*, The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy 1972, London 1974, esp. p. 50; Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, Penguin Books, rev. edn. (paperback), 1975, pp. 62-65, 77f. For S. Pudenziana, see W. Oakeshott, *The Mosaics of Rome from the 3rd to the 14th Centuries*, London 1967.

regardless of the particular time when Pseudo-Methodius thought that the Cross would be restored, the prominent role that he assigns to both Golgotha and the relic can hardly have been conceived before the reign of Constantine the Great.

Even more difficult than the date is the definition of the milieu in which the Legend arose. That Pseudo-Methodius had access to circles linked to Judaism is shown not only by his data on the Last Roman Emperor but also by the sources used in other portions of his tract. For the early history of the world he depended heavily and for a large part literally, on a Syriac source of the sixth century, the *Cave of Treasures*, which in turn was based on pre-Christian Jewish materials.³² Similarly, Syriac intermediaries may be responsible for his statement that at the time of Vespasian's conquest of Judaea, the Hebrews no longer possessed 'these exalted and most excellent things, priesthood and prophecy and kingship'. This may go back to a tradition preserved by Josephus according to which the Jewish King John I Hyrcanus (135/4-104 B.C.) 'was esteemed by God worthy of the three greatest [things]: the government of his nation, the dignity of the high priesthood and the power of prophecy'.³³

The history of the Syriac-speaking churches from the fourth to the seventh centuries is obscure. It is generally agreed, however, that the Christian congregations in Sassanid Persia, cut off as they were from their co-religionists beyond the frontiers, proved largely immune to the hellenizing theology of Christian thinkers in the Roman Empire and remained under the influence of Judaism longer and more profoundly than elsewhere.³⁴ There are many uncertainties even over the origin of the early Syriac translation of the Old Testament, the *Peshitta*, but there is consensus that it was imbued with Judaism if not actually Jewish in origin.³⁵ Down to the fourth century Judaeo-Christian groups of heretical Ebionites maintained themselves in Transjordan, at Beroea in Syria and in Babylonia; their influence on the ideas and ritual precepts of Mohammed and Early Islam has been convincingly demonstrated,³⁶ though they may seem a rather improbable channel of transmission for the Last Emperor Legend. More important in this respect

³² Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, pp. 10-17. On the *Cave of Treasures* see I. Ortiz de Urbina, *Patrologia Syriaca*, 2nd edn., Rome 1965, pp. 95f.

³³ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, xiii, 10.7, section 299.

³⁴ J. Labourt, *Le Christianisme dans l'empire perse sous la dynastie sassanide*, Paris 1904, p. 35: 'La confession de la foi de l'église persane est indépendante des formules helléniques contemporaines'; Urbina, *Patrologia Syriaca*, p. 15: 'Christianismus in Persia ab ideologia hellenizante occidentaliū segregata, potius influxui traditionum iudaicarum submissus est.'

³⁵ See e.g. H. B. Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, rev. by R. R. Otley, reprint, New York 1968, p. 112; Robert H.

Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, New York and London 1941, pp. 120f.; Urbina, *Patrologia Syriaca*, p. 224; Sidney Jellicoe, *The Septuagint and Modern Study*, Oxford 1968, pp. 246f.

³⁶ Judaeo-Christian communities in Transjordan and at Beroea: Hans J. Schoeps, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums*, Tübingen 1949, pp. 270-6; Marcel Simon, *Vetus Israel. Étude sur les relations entre Chrétiens et Juifs dans l'empire Romain*, 2nd edn., Paris 1964, pp. 368-88, esp. pp. 380-2; in Babylonia in the 3rd and 4th centuries: Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, vol. III. *From Shapur I to Shapur II*, Studia Post-Biblica xii, Leiden 1968, pp. 12-16; Judaeo-Christian influences on Mohammed and Early Islam: Schoeps, pp. 334-42.

would have been the large and flourishing Jewish settlements in Babylonia and northern Mesopotamia; the royal house of Adiabene beyond the Tigris had been converted to Judaism around the middle of the first century. It is true that in Mesopotamia, where Pseudo-Methodius wrote, most Jewish colonies were situated along the northern trade route linking Zeugma on the Euphrates via Edessa, Amida and Nisibis with the Tigris valley.³⁷ However, the *Life of St. Abd al-Masih*, composed during the last quarter of the eighth century but narrating the short life of a Jewish child supposedly converted to Christianity and killed in 391, knew of Jewish families living 'in the region of the city of Singara' and of the boy's father as their 'head and leader'.³⁸ It is, therefore, entirely plausible that Pseudo-Methodius's Jewish ideas owe something to the colony resident there at some period between the fourth and eighth centuries.

Furthermore, one of the earliest fathers of the northern Mesopotamian Church, Aphrahat, who died shortly after 345, directed several of his *Demonstrations* against the religion of local Jews. The magnitude and intensity of his literary effort bears witness to the appeal that Jewish rites and ideas had for members of Christian congregations in the area.³⁹ One Jewish claim that Aphrahat specifically refutes is that 'it is still certain for Israel to be gathered together' which makes clear that his Jewish neighbours expected to be recalled from the Dispersion to the Promised Land by an act of divine 'redemption'⁴⁰—a concept which played a key role in Pseudo-Methodius's Christian apocalypse. Thus for the Syriac churches of northern Mesopotamia, Judaeo-Christian and Jewish communities may have been the channels through which Jewish Messianism reached the author of the *Cave of Treasures* in the sixth century and Pseudo-Methodius in the seventh.

My last observation is designed to appraise my results in the light of the

³⁷ J. B. Segal, 'The Jews of Northern Mesopotamia before the Rise of Islam', *Studies in the Bible presented to Professor M. H. Segal* etc., Jerusalem 1964, pp. 32*-63*, esp. 35*.

³⁸ Syriac version ed. J. Corluy, *Analecta Bollandiana*, v, 1886, pp. 5-52. Arab (Karshuni) version ed. P. Peeters, *ibid.*, xlv, 1926, pp. 270-341. Peeters showed that the Syriac original is lost and that the Arab version is closer to the original than the published Syriac text. Date: Peeters, p. 289. The two passages cited in the text, *ibid.*, p. 294: *fi bilādi mādīnati singār* and *ra's wamuqqadam*. See also Segal (n. 37 above), pp. 55*-57*. Whether it reflects conditions around Singara in the late 4th or late 8th centuries or some period between is unclear, yet 'the region of the city of Singara' was probably the precise area in which Pseudo-Methodius wrote.

³⁹ On Aphrahat see Labourt, *Christianisme dans l'empire perse*, pp. 31-39; Urbina, *Patrologia Syriaca*, pp. 46-51; Jacob Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism. The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth Century Iran*, *Studia Post-*

Biblica xix, Leiden 1971.

⁴⁰ Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism*, gives a full English translation of *Demonstration* xix, pp. 84-96. I cite section 8 (p. 90): 'Hear then, my beloved, I shall show you that Israel was saved (*elḥpereq*) two times, once from Egypt, the second time from Babylonia. . . . Now if they were destined to be gathered together and redeemed (*wenelḥparqūn*), why did Isaiah (xi:11) say that the Lord would stretch out his hand a second time and acquire the remnant of his people that remained? If there is still [to be] salvation (*pūrqaṇā*) for them, Isaiah should have said, "God will stretch out his hand a third time to possess the remnant of his people," and not say "a second time".' I have checked J. Parisot's edition of the Syriac text (*Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes*, *Patrologia Syriaca*, vol. i, pt. 1, Paris 1894, pp. 868f.) and found, as indicated in the parentheses, that even where Neusner translates 'saved' and 'salvation', Aphrahat used forms derived from the root *prq*, 'to redeem'.

later influence of the Byzantine Legend in the West. The expectation of a period of Christ's rule on earth together with his saints, most clearly expressed in the *Revelation of John*, had caused this book to face reservations, criticism and opposition, especially in the Syriac-speaking Church where it was not translated until the seventh century.⁴¹ In the West, at the end of the fourth century, the Donatist commentator Ticonius gave the book a strictly spiritual interpretation and rejected all historical exegesis. In particular, he took Christ's thousand years of earthly rule (Rev. xx, 4-6) to refer to the duration of the Church. Ticonius was followed by St. Augustine whose domination over early medieval thought led Bousset to remark that:

His [Ticonius's] interpretation turned out to be of historic significance, as it were, inasmuch as because of it the Latin Church broke with all chiliastic tendencies and with all realistic eschatology.⁴²

For Bousset Joachim of Fiore's teaching of a third age of the Holy Spirit, in the sense of 'a period of earthly tranquillity and peace in which Christ would reappear in person' marks the rebirth of chiliasm in the twelfth century.⁴³ This often repeated claim is true for the history of the exegesis of *Revelation*.⁴⁴ If, however, one casts the net wider, to include works of popular imagination and religiosity, and accepts that Pseudo-Methodius's text and its later elaboration is based on Jewish Messianic expectations, then it appears that in spite of theological reservations towards the *Revelation*, in both East and West the hope for a period of earthly bliss survived in the guise of the Legend of the Last Roman Emperor. Popular longing for an earthly solution to the problems of foreign domination, warfare and poverty proved stronger than the inclination of theologians to insist on the essential sinfulness of worldly existence. The laity's expectation of a Last Roman Emperor served as substitute for the rule on earth of Christ and his saints prior to the Second Coming.⁴⁵ These longings for terrestrial satisfaction were strong in the medieval West; for while

⁴¹ Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis*, 6th edn., Göttingen 1906 (reprint 1966), pp. 19-31; Urbina, *Patrologia Syriaca*, p. 161.

⁴² Bousset, *Offenbarung Johannis*, p. 59.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁴ One of the methods employed by Joachim of Fiore to justify his doctrine of the third *status* of human history was anticipated by the Pseudo-Methodian tradition. It has been shown above (pp. 4-5) that Pseudo-Methodius interpreted passages from the Psalmist (lxxviii, 65) about a past action of 'the Lord', from the evangelists' (Matt. xxiv, 38; Luke xvii, 26) description of conditions at the Second Coming and from St. Paul's prophecy (1 Cor. xv, 24) about the risen Christ's handing over of royal power to refer to the reign of the Last Roman Emperor. This compares to Joachim's method of exegesis as described by Cyprien Baraut

('Joachim de Flore', *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, viii, Paris 1974, pp. 1179-1201, esp. p. 1190): 'Les concepts et les termes utilisés par l'Ecriture, par les Pères de l'Antiquité de du moyen-âge pour décrire la béatitude de l'au-delà sont appliqués par Joachim à l'étape terminale de l'histoire chrétienne dès ici-bas. Cette transposition de l'éternel au temporel, qui pratiquement supprime toute différence entre cette Jérusalem de la terre et la Jérusalem céleste, permet au prophète calabrais d'annoncer l'avènement d'un type de perfection bien plus élevé que celle qui peut être atteinte, selon la doctrine traditionnelle, par l'homme *in via*.'

⁴⁵ At the oral presentation of my paper Professor Donald Weinstein expressed doubt concerning a difference of attitude between theologians and laity. I make the distinction because to the best of my knowledge the Last Roman Emperor is found,

Joachim of Fiore himself had no use for the Legend of the Last Emperor, it was fused with his teachings by the first generation of his disciples and surfaced time and again in later ages to buttress the claims of emperors, kings and popes to universal domination.⁴⁶

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in Byzantine as well as in Western literature prior to the mid-13th century, almost exclusively in works of a popular character (apocalypses, visions, etc.) and not in the writings of theologians. In the West the two exceptions known to me are Anselm, *De Antixio* and Adso of Montier-en-Der's letter to Queen Gerberga *de ortu et tempore Antichristi* (ed. Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, pp. 104-13, esp. p. 110), but this text is an anthology of materials on Antichrist compiled to comfort a distressed individual rather than a formal work of systematic theology. I may, of course, have overlooked mention of the Emperor in more strictly theological writings. I am though encouraged to retain my distinction after reading the fascinating article by Robert E. Lerner that came to my attention after the completion of my paper ('Refreshment of the Saints: The Time after Antichrist as a Station for Earthly Progress in Medieval Thought', *Traditio*, xxxii, 1976, pp.

97-144). Here the author collects and analyses Western expressions—from Jerome to the Late Middle Ages—of the eschatological expectation of a period of earthly bliss. He shows that this tradition represented a genuine alternative to the better known 'pessimistic' view stemming from Augustine and that it was variously formulated by Western theologians even prior to Joachim. It is all the more remarkable and from my point of view significant that none of the theologians representative of this 'optimistic' theology dared reintroduce, against Augustine's authority, a realistic exegesis of Revelations xx, 4-6 and that *a fortiori* the figure of the Last Roman Emperor is even here conspicuously absent.

⁴⁶ Reeves, *Influence of Prophecy*, esp. Part Three, 'Antichrist and Last World Empire'; and my forthcoming article, 'Byzantine Apocalyptic and the Beginnings of Joachimism'.

APPENDIX

'THE LAST' ROMAN EMPEROR IN THE LATIN TEXT OF THE TIBURTINE SIBYL

(see p. 2, n. 3 above)

There is one prophecy of a Last Roman Emperor that may antedate the earliest (Syriac) version of Pseudo-Methodius: the description of his reign in the Latin text of the Tiburtine Sibyl. The extant Greek version of this work does not know the figure of the Last Emperor (see my *Oracle of Baalbek. The Tiburtine Sibyl in Greek Dress*, Dumbarton Oaks Studies 10, 1967, p. 116). The Latin text, however, interpolates a lengthy piece on a 'king of the Romans and Greeks' that concludes with his laying down his royal garb and diadem at Jerusalem and handing over the *regnum Christianorum* to God the Father and Jesus Christ (Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, pp. 185f.). There are some similarities to Pseudo-Methodius: apart from the Last Emperor's abdication at Jerusalem and the general prosperity of his reign, a reference to Psalm lxvii (lxviii) 31 (32) (p. 185, 13 Sackur, see however Sackur's caveat on the different interpretation of the psalmist's words in the two texts, pp. 170f.) and the fusion of Ezekiel's (pp. 38f.) prophecy of the invasion of Gog and Magog with the Alexander legend. The differences, however, are marked. In particular, while the principal function of the Last Roman Emperor in the Latin Sibyl is the conversion of pagans and Jews achieved partially by warlike actions, the Pseudo-Methodian Emperor fights successfully against

Islam. In addition, in the Latin Sibyl the Last Emperor defeats the *spurcissime gentes* of Gog and Magog while in the Syriac tradition this task is discharged by an archangel. It may well be that the Latin translator of the Tiburtine Sibyl relied for his prophecy of the Last Roman Emperor on an earlier form of the Legend composed prior to the Arab invasions of the Fertile Crescent. Indeed, in the *Christian Legend concerning Alexander*, composed in Syriac c. 514/5 (Th. Nöldeke, 'Beiträge zur Geschichte des Alexanderromans', *Denkschriften der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Wien, Phil.-hist. Kl.* 38, 1890, no. V, 1890, p. 31; Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, p. 34) Alexander is said to have predicted two Hunnish invasions and the destruction of the invaders by 'the kingdom of the Greeks which is that of the Romans' (Syriac text translated by Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *The History of Alexander the Great* etc., Cambridge 1889, pp. 144-58, esp. pp. 154f.). After the Moslem invasions it is not difficult to understand why the Arabs should have taken, in the Pseudo-Methodian tradition, the place of pagans, Jews, Gog and Magog and the Huns as the principal enemies of the Last Roman Emperor. Yet even if the Latin Sibyl preserves an earlier form of the Legend, it was the Pseudo-Methodian version, with its emphasis on the Emperor as the conqueror of Islam, that captured the imagination and kindled hopes in the Byzantine Empire, in Western Europe and in the Slavic lands.