

The Christianization of Ezra¹

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When studying the Christianization of Ezra, one needs to consider II Esdras, a text based loosely on the canonical Ezra, but which does not appear in the Hebrew Bible. The three sections of II Esdras are referred to by scholars as 4 Ezra (II Esdras 3-14), 5 Ezra (II Esdras 1-2), and 6 Ezra (II Esdras 15-16). 4 Ezra is a Jewish work, written at the end of the first century. The Christian additions, 5 and 6 Ezra, were added later at the head and tail of 4 Ezra. 5 Ezra was likely written in the second quarter of the 2nd century, after the Bar Kokhba revolt, when the Christian image of the Messiah was still in flux, and when the notion of the Christian as a “third race,” neither Jew nor Gentile, was emerging.² Dating 6 Ezra is more complicated.

The Tail: 6 Ezra, the Conclusion of II Esdras

Whereas 4 Ezra was clearly written by a Jew, and 5 Ezra by a Christian, the identity of 6 Ezra’s author is not so clear. There are references to “my people” (15:1, 10, 16:40), “my elect” (15:21, 16:73, 74), and “my chosen” (15:53, 56), but it is uncertain whether this refers to Jews or to Christians who have appropriated the title. 6 Ezra relates a warning given by God against the unbelievers (15:4) and against the sinners who spill innocent and righteous blood (15:8). God states that “my people” are being led like a flock to the slaughter in the land of Egypt (15:10) and that he himself will bring them out and destroy all its land (15:11). Moreover, just as “the kings of the earth” do to “my elect,” so will he do to these sinners (15:21). He will hand over to death all who sin against him and do not observe his commandments (15:24-26).

These two chapters describe impending wars, bloodshed, destruction, and death in Babylon and Asia, Egypt and Syria (16:1), followed by famine for those who remain alive. These are the punishments for the sinful “kings of the earth” who persecute “my elect.” This may refer to the edicts of the Roman emperors Decius (249-251) and Valerian (253-259). Decius ordered everyone to sacrifice to the Roman gods, an order rigorously enforced by local commissioners.³ Compliant persons received a certificate that they had obeyed the order. Executions followed for those unwilling to comply. Pope Fabian was among the first to be killed, on January 20, 250.⁴

¹Taken from Chapter 6 of my book **Ezra and the Law**, with the permission of the publisher, the University of South Carolina Press.

²Fried **Ezra** 88-93.

³Fox **Pagans and Christians** 450.

⁴Southern **The Roman Empire** 74-75.

The persecutions lapsed for a few years after Decius's death, but resumed under Valerian. In 257-258, Valerian and Gallienus, his son and co-regent, sent letters to all the provincial governors ordering that bishops and elders of the Christian churches be punished and that no Christians be allowed to hold a meeting or enter a cemetery. A second letter ordered death, exile, or forced labor for Christians of various classes.⁵ This likely forms the backdrop of the cries for vengeance that we read in 6 Ezra. Since Jews were exempt from these laws, the author would have been a Christian.

One passage has been noted as a key to the book's date:⁶

[**6 Ezra 15:28-33**] For God knows all who sin against him; therefore he will hand them over to death and slaughter. Already calamities have come upon the whole earth, and you shall remain in them; God will not deliver you, because you have sinned against him. See the terrifying sight appearing from the east! The nations of the dragons of Arabia shall come out with many chariots, and from the day that they set out, their hissing shall spread over the earth, so that all who hear them will fear and tremble. The Carmonians, raging in wrath, shall go forth from the forest, and with great power they shall come and engage them in battle, devastating a portion of the land of the Assyrians with their teeth. And after that the dragons, remembering their nature, shall become still stronger; and when they combine in great power and turn to pursue them [the Assyrians], then these [the pursued] shall be disorganized and silenced by their [the dragons'] power, and shall turn and flee. And in the land of the Assyrians a waylayer shall lurk to ambush and devour one of them, and fear and trembling shall come upon their army, and indecision upon their kings.

According to von Gutschmid,⁷ this refers to the battles between Odenathus of Palmyra and Shapur I, the Sassanid (Persian) king, between 260 and 267. To him, the dragons of Arabia refer to Odenathus, since he was called "Prince of the Saracens [Arabs]" by the 6th century historians Procopius and Malalas. The Carmonians represented the Sassanid king Shapur I. Carmania or Carmonia (Kermān) lay east of the Persian province of Fars, on the Gulf of Oman, and was among the first provinces that Ardashir, Shapur's father, captured in his rebellion against the Parthians in 224.

Although von Gutschmid's dating may be correct, his reasons may not be. First, recently discovered inscriptions show Odenathus to have been the grandson of one Vaballathus Nabor and the son of one Hairan.⁸ From these names we can conclude that he was of Aramean, not Arab, descent. Second, the hissing dragons and their chariots likely refer to the Sassanid Persians themselves, not Palmyra. According to Ammianus Marcellinus (c325-391), Ardashir, the son of Sassan, founder of the Sassanid Empire, went to war "surrounded by dragons, woven out of purple thread and bound to the golden and jeweled tops of spears, with wide mouths open to the breeze and hence hissing as if roused by anger."⁹

⁵Fox **Pagans 455**.

⁶Bergren **Sixth Ezra** 15-165, 103-115.

⁷Gutschmid **Apokalypse** 1-81; see also Bergren **Sixth** 116-132.

⁸Stoneman **Palmyra** 77; Teixidor **Palmyra** 181.

⁹Stoneman **Palmyra** 92

In fact, the Persian Empire included Arabs even from the beginning of the conquest by Cyrus the Great. The satrapy Maka of the Achaemenid Empire is listed in the Behistun inscription among those kingdoms already subject to Darius when he first claimed the throne (DB 1:6). It was included in the later Parthian and Sassanian Empires as Mazun, and corresponds to modern Bahrain, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates, plus the northern half of Oman.¹⁰ The “nations of the dragons of Arabia” (15:29) must then refer to the Sassanid Persians of Fars and Mazun, and the Carmonians of the forest must also have been part of the Sassanid Empire, fighting alongside the Persian dragons, and not against them.

The land of Assyria that the Persian forces are said to have devastated is the upper Euphrates valley, taken from Rome by Ardashir. In 241 Ardashir died, leaving the empire to his son Shapur I, who after a series of battles extended the Sassanid Empire north to the Caucasus, east to Kandahar, Sogdiana, and Tashkent, and west to Syria and even to Cappadocia. From Shapur’s inscription at Naqsh-e-Rustam, we have a description of his first campaign against Rome in 244 and a reference to the death of the Roman emperor Gordian III in battle:

When at first we had become established in the empire, Gordian Caesar raised in all of the Roman Empire a force from the Goth and German realms, and marched on Babylonia [Assuristan] against the Empire of Iran and against us. On the border of Babylonia at Misikhe a great frontal battle occurred. Gordian Caesar was killed and the Roman force was destroyed. And the Romans made Philip, Caesar. Then Philip Caesar came to us for terms, and to ransom their lives, gave us 500,000 denars, and became tributary to us. And for this reason we have renamed Misikhe “Peroz-Shapur” [Shapur bursts out].

Shapur’s second campaign, probably in the early 250s, is described in the same inscription. The Persians reached the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and marched up into Armenia and Cappadocia.

And Caesar lied again and did wrong to Armenia. Then we attacked the Roman Empire and annihilated a Barbarlssos a Roman force of 60,000, Syria and the environs of Syria we burned, ruined, and pillaged all. In this one campaign we conquered of the Roman Empire fortresses and towns: [town list] a total of 37 towns with surrounding villages.

This assault into Asia Minor is reflected in the oracle against Asia that is described in 6 Ezra as participating in Rome’s deceitful acts (called Babylon in these post-70 texts):

[6 Ezra 15:46] And you, Asia, who share in the splendor of Babylon and the glory of her person, [47] Woe to you, miserable wretch! For you have made yourself like her; you have decked out your daughters for prostitution to please and glory in your lovers, who have always lusted after you. [48] You have imitated the hateful one in all her deeds and devices. Therefore God says, [49] I will send evils upon you: widowhood, poverty, famine, sword, and pestilence, bringing ruin to your houses, bringing destruction and death.

The evils predicted for Asia here are a description of Shapur’s onslaught into Armenia and Cappadocia.

¹⁰Bosworth ARAB 201-203

Shapur's description of his third campaign notes the capture of the emperor Valerian himself in 259:

In the third campaign, when we attacked Carrhae and Urhai [Edessa] and were besieging Carrhae and Edessa, Valerian Caesar marched against us. He had with him a force of 70,000 . . . And beyond Carrhae and Edessa we had a great battle with Valerian Caesar. We made prisoner ourselves with our own hands Valerian Caesar and the others, chiefs of that army, the praetorian prefect, senators; we made all prisoners and deported them to Persia. And Syria and Cappadocia we burned, pillaged, and ruined.

These conquests of Shapur deep into what had been Roman territory, culminating in the ignominious defeat of the vaunted Roman army and the capture of the emperor himself, must have thrilled Christians (and Jews) everywhere and sparked within them the certain knowledge of God's justice.

The rest of 6 Ezra predicts the fall of Rome:

[6 **Ezra 15:34**] See the clouds from the east, and from the north to the south! Their appearance is exceedingly threatening, full of wrath and storm. [35] They shall clash against one another and shall pour out a heavy tempest on the earth, and their own tempest; there shall be blood from the sword as high as a horse's belly . . . [40] Great and mighty clouds, full of wrath and tempest, shall rise and destroy all the earth and its inhabitants, and shall pour out upon every high and lofty place a terrible tempest, [41] fire and hail and flying swords and floods of water, so that all the fields and streams shall be filled with the abundance of those waters. [42] They shall destroy cities and walls, mountains and hills, trees of the forests, grass of the meadows, and their grain.

Most important is the last verse of this passage (15:43), which states: "They shall go on steadily to Babylon and blot it out." Babylon is the code word for Rome in Jewish and Christian texts after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70. In the following chapter, we have this anticipation that the Sassanid armies will march up to Rome itself and destroy it; that God will avenge his people:

[6 **Ezra 16:8**] The Lord God sends calamities, and who will drive them away? [9] Fire will go forth from his wrath, and who is there to quench it?[10] He will flash lightning, and who will not be afraid? He will thunder, and who will not be terrified? [11] The Lord will threaten, and who will not be utterly shattered at his presence? [12] The earth and its foundations quake, the sea is churned up from the depths, and its waves and the fish with them shall be troubled at the presence of the Lord and the glory of his power. [13] For his right hand that bends the bow is strong, and his arrows that he shoots are sharp, and when they are shot to the ends of the world will not miss once.

This was not to be. In 267 Odenathus of Palmyra pushed the Sassanids back to the Tigris, where they remained. We can thus agree about the date of 6 Ezra and fix it to between 259, the year of Valerian's capture, and 267, the year of Shapur I's defeat: the brief period during which hope still bloomed for God's justice and Rome's demise. Thus it was added about a century after the addition of 5 Ezra.

It is difficult to say why the author of 6 Ezra chose to append his two chapters to 4 Ezra, except that it may reflect the prediction in 4 Ezra of the demise of Rome . . .

. . . though this prediction itself is not repeated in 6 Ezra:

[4 **Ezra 5:1**]. Now concerning the signs: Lo, the days are coming when those who inhabit the earth shall be seized with great terror, and the way of truth shall be hidden, and the land shall be barren of faith. [2] Unrighteousness shall be increased beyond what you yourself see, and beyond what you have heard of formerly. [3] And the land that you now see ruling shall be a trackless waste, and people shall see it desolate. [4] But if the Most High grants that you live, you shall see it thrown into confusion after the third period, and the sun shall suddenly begin to shine at night, and the moon during the day. [5] Blood shall drip from wood, and the stone shall utter its voice; the peoples shall be troubled, and the stars shall fall. [6] And one shall reign whom those who inhabit the earth do not expect, and the birds shall fly away together.

The possibility of Rome's imminent destruction has made other views of God's justice irrelevant. The author assumes that the evil empire will receive its just reward right here on earth, in the present time, and in the present place.

Other Christian Writings About Ezra

In addition to 5 and 6 Ezra, other Christian works took up and incorporated the character of Ezra. The Greek *Apocalypse of Ezra*, a Christian work of the Byzantine Apocalyptic tradition, was written in Greek sometime between the 4th and 9th centuries.¹¹ *The Vision of the Blessed Ezra* is also a Christian work, written sometime between the 4th and the end of the 6th centuries. Other Christian texts based on Ezra are: *The Questions of Ezra*, *The Apocalypse of Sedrach* (150-300), the Syriac *Apocalypse of Ezra* (an anti-Moslem text, so 7th century at earliest) and the Ethiopic *Apocalypse of Ezra* (another anti-Moslem text).

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¹¹Stone **Metamorphosis 5**