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Co-producing the End. The Use of Jewish Exegesis in Paul Alvar's Apocalyptic Interpretation of Islam



The seven-headed dragon gives its power to the beast (Apocalypse 13:11–12). Image from an 11th-century Iberian manuscript containing the commentary on the Apocalypse by Beatus of Liébana (Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, MS Vit.14.2, fol. 191v).

With the Islamic conquests of territories belonging to the Byzantine Empire and of several "Roman-barbaric" kingdoms, a number of apocalyptic, exegetical, and heresiological texts began to circulate that portrayed the religion of these conquerors, the "Ishmaelites", as diabolical, and their prophet, Muhammad, as the Antichrist. In mid-8th century, for instance, John of Damascus, in the final chapter of his treatise *On Heresies*, devoted to the Ishmaelites, identifies in this heresy and its "false Prophet" the precursor of the Antichrist; moreover, in the 9th-century *Apocalypse of Daniel*, of Egyptian provenance, the figure of the enemy appears to refer to the Prophet himself (see Potestà–Rizzi 2012).

In the Latin context, one of the texts that develops this idea is the *Indiculus luminosus* ("The Little Luminous Book"), written by the theologian Paul Alvar in the Emirate of Córdoba – a work discussed in a previous *Source in the Spotlight*. Among the text's various polemical aims is the attempt to demonstrate to fellow Christians who are attracted by the Ishmaelites that their Prophet is indeed the Antichrist announced in the Scriptures. For this reason, Alvar devotes the second part of the *Indiculus* to an exegetical analysis of all the scriptural passages that speak of the Antichrist, as well as of the various monstrous creatures, such as the Leviathan or the many-horned beast in the

Book of Daniel, which Christians interpreted as referring to the same figure. His aim is to demonstrate that these passages, in fact, pointed precisely to Muhammad (see Sorber 2020).

Alvar's method draws primarily on earlier Christian exegetes, seeking to demonstrate that their interpretations support his own reading. However, in one passage of the *Indiculus*, the author turns to another exegetical tradition. While interpreting a verse from the Book of Daniel (7:25), which announces an impious king who rules for "a time, times, and half a time," he cites some late-antique exegetes, such as Jerome and Isidore of Seville. These authors connect the passage with the Antichrist, but offer different interpretations of how this reference should be understood. For this reason, Alvar chooses to appeal to other commentators:

> *Should it be asked why the divine word did not simply say "three and a half years," instead of making use of this phrase in an obscure way, it is because it is accustomed to sow diverse meaning in the hearts of the doctors. For a year has four "times," and yet one year is itself referred to as "time," as are fifty or a hundred years, and shorter and longer periods; hours, days, months, and years are all designated by the word "time." The Hebrews took one "time" to be seventy years in accordance with the passage: "The days of our years are seventy years" [...]. Guided by this sort of interpretation, the Hebrews assign the "time, times, and half a time" in this passage – that is, 245 years – to the people of the Ishmaelites. They trust, on the basis of this rather audacious utterance, that upon the completion of this period, the kingdom of the Ishmaelites is to come to an end. Accordingly, in this year – the 854th year since the incarnation of the Lord, that is, the current era 892, which is the 240th lunar year of the Arabs – 229 solar years are calculated as having passed; thus, out of the original total [of 245], only sixteen solar years remain.*

(Paul Alvar, *Indiculus luminosus* 21, tr. Wolf 2023, slightly modified)

Earlier in his work, Alvar noted that the Scriptures often contain passages formulated in a general way that give rise to debates among Christian commentators. In this way, the Scriptures allow authors to propose interpretations that are not necessarily contradictory, but require harmonization. The reference to "time, times, and half a time" in Daniel, however, had not received a consistent interpretation among Christian authors, who didn't identify a figure to whom this expression could clearly be applied. But Jewish exegesis, Alvar tells us, demonstrates that it clearly refers to Muhammad and his dominion over Christian territories.

Indeed, after emphasizing the polysemy of the Latin term *tempus*, which may mean "year" but also "months," "days," "seasons," etc., Alvar states that the Jews understand this word to signify "seventy years", drawing on a passage from the Book of Psalms 90(89):10. For this reason, he explains, it is the Jews themselves who apply Daniel 7:25 to the dominion of the "Ishmaelites," an interpretation that the author describes as rather "audacious," alluding to Matthew 24:36, which discourages attempts to calculate the date of the end times.

According to Alvar, the Jewish interpretation of Daniel 7:25 indicates that the followers of Muhammad will rule 245 years. At the end of this periodthe impious ruler would be defeated. At this point, by calculating the correspondences between the Christian calendar and the Arab lunar year (240 lunar years corresponds to 229 solar years), the author concludes that, according to the Jewish interpretation, only sixteen years remain before the end of Islamic dominion and the final confrontation with the Antichrist. For this reason, the author ultimately concludes that Daniel, in his prophecy, was referring

precisely to Muhammad and his followers, and that the Prophet must therefore be identified with the Antichrist.

In this passage the appeal to Jewish exegesis constitutes the central element of his argument, even allowing him to resolve the debates among earlier Christian exegetes. As Kenneth Baxter Wolf has recently noted, “it is not clear to which Jewish commentators Alvar is referring” (Wolf 2023, 154). The fact that, according to the Cordoban writer, these Jewish exegetes interpret this passage as announcing the end of Ishmaelite rule suggests that he is not invoking “the Jews” in a generic sense, but is instead referring to specific authors or interpretive circles, likely active in his own time, or at least operating within the context of Islamic rule – perhaps even in al-Andalus itself. Whereas elsewhere he appeals to Jewish authority in more general terms, often mediated through earlier Christian exegetes such as Jerome, here his formulation appears more precise, pointing to identifiable interpreters who, on the basis of Daniel’s prophecy, had calculated the duration of Islamic dominion and its approaching end.

Calculations of the arrival of the Apocalypse were not uncommon in the Iberian context of this period. A few years earlier, Beatus of Liébana had declared in his *Commentary on the Apocalypse* that fourteen years remained before the beginning of the “sixth age” (in the year 800), though without any reference to Jewish exegesis and Islamic rule (see Bosseman 2021). Such a connection appears, however, in the *Chronica Prophetica*, whose author, an Asturian writer of the second half of the 9th century, claims that the dominion of the Saracens in Spain would last 170 years and come to an end in 884 – thus envisaging an “end” of a more local character.

Compared with these examples, however, the interpretation proposed by Paul Alvar appears more elaborate, insofar as it draws on Jewish exegesis in order to “co-produce” the idea of the end of times and the defeat of the Antichrist. His appeal to Jewish exegesis raises further questions about the function of such references in Christian polemical writing. Rather than simply attesting the circulation of shared interpretive traditions, his argument may also reflect a strategy of appropriation: to adopt Anna Abulafia’s formulation (2011), Jewish exegetes are mobilized “in service of” Christian polemical claims, effectively placed at the disposal of an attack upon the Ishmaelites. From this perspective, Alvar appears to situate Jews and Christians in al-Andalus on the same side, both reflecting on the end of an “oppressive” dominion. Although in other works, such as his letters to the convert Bodo/Elezarus, Alvar adopts a markedly anti-Jewish stance, in several passages of the *Indiculus luminosus*, where the primary target is Islam, Judaism is instead mobilized in support of Christian argumentation. In this respect, it is particularly noteworthy that Alvar also posits a convergence in the temporal framework shared by Jews and Christians. This convergence is all the more striking when contrasted with other Late Antique and Early Medieval contexts, in which the calculation of time and the identification of specific chronological markers often served to distinguish and separate religious communities, especially in early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism (see Kattan Gribetz 2020, 92-134), whereas here they provide a shared framework for articulating the “end” across religious boundaries.

Moreover, this process of “co-producing the end” involves not only Christians and Jews, but also the “Ishmaelites”. Alvar says that his calculation is based on a Jewish interpretation of the passage, adapted to a Christian polemical context, yet it also takes into account the Islamic calendar. In this sense, the end he predicts emerges from a form of co-production, relying on different interpretive traditions and chronological systems – those of Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. This source is therefore relevant because it shows how different exegetical traditions and date systems could intersect in the relations between religious groups. In this case, Alvar draws on Jewish exegesis to

reinforce his Christian polemic and reveals that these interpretative traditions circulated between various religious contexts.

Further Reading

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