



HYSTASPES, ORACLES OF

HYSTASPES, ORACLES OF (Gk. *Khrēseis Hystaspou*), a collection of prophecies ascribed to Vištāspa, the patron and follower of Zarathustra, whom the Middle Iranian and part of the ancient tradition also identified with Darius's father (J. Bidez and F. Cumont, I, p. 215, n. 3). The text of the work is not extant, except for resumés in Greek and Latin, attributable to the Oracles if they mention the name Hystaspes and contain prophetic material. The Greek title of the work is only used in the work *Theosophy*.

The following texts refer to Hystaspes and may thus be quoted with confidence as excerpts from the oracles of Hystaspes:

(1) Justin Martyr (ca. 150 C.E.), *Apology* I, 20, 1 (ed. J. K. Th. von Otto, p. 62; cf. Bidez and Cumont, II, p. 361), Greek: "And both the Sibyl and Hystaspes have said that the extermination of the corrupt will happen by fire."

(2) Clement of Alexandria (ca. 190 C.E.), *Stromata* VI, 5, 1 (ed. O. Stählin, p. 453; cf. Bidez and Cumont, II, pp. 362-63), Greek, quoting an apocryphal speech by Paul: "Grasp also the Hellenic books, recognize the Sibyl more perfectly . . . , and grasp and read Hystaspes, and you will find the Son of God described much more distinctly and clearly, and how against Christ many kings will fight, hating him and those who bear his name, and his followers, and the suffering [of Christ] and his coming."

(3) Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* (written between 305 and 310 C.E.) VII, 15, 19 (ed. S. Brandt, p. 634; cf. Bidez and Cumont, II, pp. 366-68), Latin:



“Hystaspes, too, who was a very old king of the Medes (after whom a river was named, which is now called Hydaspes), has handed down to the memory of his successors a wonderful dream interpreted by a prophesying lad: the Roman empire and its name will be removed from the face of the earth. Long before that Trojan race came into being, this was foreseen.”

(4) Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* VII, 18, 2 (ed. S. Brandt, p. 640; cf. Bidez and Cumont, II, pp. 370-71), Latin: “For Hystaspes, whom I mentioned above, maintains, after having described the injustice of this last century, that the pious and faithful, once they are separated from the wrongdoers, will raise their hands to the sky with tears and lamentations and beseech the fidelity of Jupiter (*fidem Jovis*). And Jupiter will look upon the earth and hear the voices of the people and exterminate the godless ones.”

(5) Excerpt from the *Theosophy* (attributed to Aristokritos; cf. Kurt von Fritz in Pauly-Wissowa, *RE*, 2nd line, 10th half-vol., Stuttgart 1934, cols. 2252-53), a work anonymously handed down from the late 5th century (ed. H. Erbse, 1941, p. 167, ll. 12-14, sec. 2; cf. Bidez and Cumont, II, pp. 363-64), Greek: “In the fourth (or eleventh) [chapter] he mentions the oracles of a certain Hystaspes (*Khrēseis Hystaspou*), who, as he said, was an extremely pious king of the Persians or Chaldeans and therefore received the revelation of the divine mysteries about the incarnation of the Savior.”

In addition, the above-mentioned work of Lactantius, as well as his *Epitome* (after 315 C.E.), contain further passages of a more comprehensive kind, which are assumed, though with less certainty, to stem from the oracles of Hystaspes (cf. L. Kroenen, “Manichaean Apocalypticism at the Crossroads of Iranian, Egyptian, Jewish and Christian Thought,” in *Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis*, ed. L. Cirillo and A. Roselli, Cosenza, Italy, 1986, p. 310, n. 79). Thus Geo Widengren defined the section *Divinae Institutiones* VII, 17, 9-11 as part of the oracles (1965, p. 201); and David Flusser defined VII, 15, 19-18, 3a and 19, 2-8 as parts of the oracle (Flusser, pp. 24-29). An even broader framework is drawn by Cumont (VII, 14, 7-26, the entire text from the creation of the world to victory over the Antichrist, Cumont, p. 70; see also Kippenberg, pp. 71-72). In these sections Lactantius confirms text no. 3, concerning the imminent decline of the Roman empire, from which there would issue ten kingdoms. These are vanquished by a powerful king from the north, who will establish a reign of tyranny on earth and make a torment of people’s lives. In addition there will be earthquakes, floods, plagues, poor harvests, famines, and other natural disasters. A Great Prophet then appears and warns and educates humanity



with miraculous devices, which prove quite successful; but there then arises another king from Syria, who kills the prophet. However, the prophet rises on the third day and goes to heaven. The new king turns out to be a false prophet, who demands divine adulation, destroys the temple of God, and wants to persecute the righteous people. The righteous escape to a mountain, on which the tyrant imprisons them. They pray to God, who sends them a Great King from heaven (in whom Lactantius apparently saw Christ; see Colpe, 1994, col. 1078). The Great King liberates the righteous and subjects their persecutors to fire and the sword. The tyrannical king alone escapes and still causes many feuds, until he is put in chains and punished (or, according to Lactantius's *Epitome*, burnt). Highly significant from the point of view of the history of religion is Lactantius's remark that, once the righteous had implored God's assistance, "God would hear them and send the Great King from heaven (*regem magnum de caelo*), who would snatch them away and free them and ruin all the godless ones by fire and sword." (*Divinae Institutiones* VII, 17, 11; ed. Brandt, 1890, p. 640).

It is, however, by no means certain that all the apocalyptic events described in these parts were actually mentioned in the Hystaspes oracles (Colpe, 1994, col. 1073). Lactantius himself ends his long account with the words: "That these things will happen was announced by all prophets inspired by God, and by the seers (*vates*) driven by the demons" (*Divinae Institutiones* VII, 18, 1). When one compares this statement to the preceding remarks, they appear to be a compilation of different sources rather than an excerpt from a single work.

In addition, there are ancient traditions which mention Hystaspes without necessarily dealing with his oracles, such as the statement of Johannes Lydus that the Chaldeans and Egyptians of the period of Zoroaster and Hystaspes had adopted the seven-day week from the number of the planets (*De Mensibus* II, 14; cf. Bidez and Cumont, II, p. 363).

It is not easy to obtain a definite picture about the Hystaspes oracles from these data, even if we acknowledge the fact that the work included several prophecies with different contents. What is obvious is the juxtaposition of explicitly Christian (nos. 2, 5) and non-Christian or neutral (nos. 1, 3, 4) statements. Ernst Kuhn is probably the only scholar to have given unequivocal support to a Christian origin of the oracles. (Cf. "A Zoroastrian Prophecy in Christian Garb," in *Festgruss an Rudolf von Roth*, Stuttgart, 1893, pp. 217-21, esp. p. 217: "I assume that these prophecies of Hystaspes go back to a rather early period and serve the obvious purpose of recruiting followers for rising



Christianity among the Mazda worshippers influenced by Hellenistic culture.”) All other investigations lead to the assumption of a Christian rearrangement of a non-Christian collection of oracles, in which the precise “heathen” proportion is problematic:

(1) The Jewish thesis. Emil Schürer (*Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi* III, 4th ed., Leipzig, 1909, pp. 592-95) and Adolf von Harnack (*Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* I, 2, Leipzig, 1958, p. 863, sec. 81) assumed a Jewish origin. This assumption was supported by David Flusser through a comparison with the *Revelation of John* and through details which have parallels in the Jewish tradition (Flusser, pp. 12-75). However, he also acknowledged that this Jewish work contained a non-ascertainable proportion of Zoroastrian traditions (Flusser, pp. 15, 19, 35, 39).

(2) The Iranian thesis. This hypothesis was most clearly developed by Émile Benveniste: the Hystaspes oracles were based on an Iranian **Vištāsp-Nāmak*, which was closely related to the lost Avestic source of the Middle Persian *Bahman Yašt* (q.v.) and the *Ayādgār ī jāmāspīg* (q.v.; Benveniste, 1932, pp. 376-77). Widengren has adopted this theory as a possible explanation (1965, p. 200, n. 2; cf. also Widengren, 1983, pp. 87-88, esp. n. 45) and has repeatedly emphasized the Zoroastrian origin of the Hystaspes oracles. John R. Hinnells calls the oracles “a genuine Iranian—specifically Zoroastrian—work” but does not make use of Benveniste’s theory, with which he is familiar (Hinnells, p. 146).

(3) The Hellenistic-Oriental thesis. Hans Windisch considered the oracles as a product of Hellenistic-Oriental syncretism connected with “genuine Parsi traditions” (pp. 97-98). Mary Boyce was persuaded by Frantz Grenet to abandon Flusser’s theory (Boyce and Grenet, p. 378, n. 63) and has since adopted a theory which comes close to that of Windisch: “Not only were these [the Oracles of Hystaspes] composed in Greek, but in them Zoroastrian teachings took on a Greek guise” (Boyce and Grenet, p. 380). Here we may incorporate Carsten Colpe’s astute analysis of the oracles: they are most probably the work of “royalist national Iranian magi” whose teachings only coincided with the Zoroastrian tradition on certain points (Colpe, 1994, col. 1068) and were originally bilingual (col. 1067), perhaps even reacting to Iranian apocalypics (col. 1065) and evolving from an anti-Seleucid to an anti-Roman bias (col. 1069). Hans G. Kippenberg (pp. 70-75) arrives at results that are very close to those of Colpe.



Thus the sometimes too controversial discussion about the origin of the Hystaspes oracles leads to the basic area of agreement that Iranian traditions, however their part may be evaluated, have gone into the oracles.

Not only is Hystaspes' name Iranian (Old Avestan Viš-tāspa, OPers. Vištāspa, MPers. *Wištāsp*, NPers. *Goštāsp*; cf. R. G. Kent, "The Name of Hystaspes," *Language* 21, 1945, pp. 55-58). Also his very involvement "in mantic activity" has its basis in Zoroastrian tradition (Boyce and Grenet, p. 378), and an Iranian origin can even be found for the "boy seer" who, according to Lactantius, interpreted the dream of Hystaspes (text no. 3). I do not consider him either as "the youthful Zoroaster" (Boyce and Grenet, p. 378; Benveniste, pp. 377-78), who was apparently 42 years old when he converted *Wištāsp*, or as King Hystaspes himself (cf. Flusser, p. 16), but rather as the young *Jāmāsp*, who, according to the MPers. *Jāmāsp-nāmag*, succeeded Zarathustra as the Mobedān Mobed and Bidaxš (q.v.) of *Wištāsp* (G. Messina, *Libro Apocalittico Persiano Ayātkār i Žāmāspīk* I, Rome, 1939, pp. 32-33, chap. I, 8). In this capacity he predicted to the king the events of the battle against the Chionites (*Ayād-gār ī zarērān*) and told him the secrets of the world and its history up to the eschatological events (*Ayādgār ī jāmāspīg*). We may thus conclude that, like Daniel, he recommended himself to the king by interpreting a prophetic dream.

Further traditions of Zoroastrian or Iranian origin can hardly be certified. They were assumed by Lactantius in apocalyptic texts which are not expressly recognized as parts of the Hystaspes oracles.

To be pointed out here is the appearance of the "Great King from heaven" already referred to, in whom Widengren saw a proof for the Iranian origin of the oracles, since the Great King is mentioned in the Manichean *Sermon of the Great War* (ed. H. J. Polotsky, *Manichäische Homilien*, Stuttgart, 1934, p. 32, l. 20) and in an apocryphal Syrian "Revelation of Zoroaster" (Bidez and Cumont, II, pp. 126-29, esp. p. 127).

The title "Great King" may be assumed to go back to the regular title of Achaemenid kings as "Great Kings" (cf. Flusser, p. 41). However, in traditional Zoroastrian apocalyptic texts the Great King plays no part, and there is as little evidence for Cumont's and Widengren's identification of the Great King with the Iranian god Mithra (Cumont, 1931, pp. 85-86; Widengren, 1965, pp. 202-3; 1983, p. 125) as there is for Hinnell's assumption that the figure in question is Zarathustra's apocalyptic son Soš-yans (Hinnell, p. 144). As for his name in



Manichean eschatology, the latter more probably relied on Jewish-Christian sources, for we know today that the Great King was also mentioned in the *Book of Elxai* and in the pseudo-Clementinian homilies (Flusser, pp. 40-41).

We must point out, however, that the Manichaean homily did not explicitly acknowledge the identification of the Great King with Christ. On the other hand, Ebn al-Nadim mentions as the subject of the second chapter of Mani's *The Book of Secrets*: "On the testimony of Hystaspes (yst'sf) about ('alā) the friend [i.e., Jesus]," which suggests that Mani knew of a (Jewish h)-Christian version of the Hystaspes oracle (G. Flügel, *Mani, seine Lehre und seine Schriften*, Leipzig, 1862, pp. 72, 102). The Jewish-Christian texts may have used Jewish sources (Flusser, pp. 40-42), and among them there may have been a Jewish version of the Hystaspes oracles.

The narrative framework of the oracles about Hystaspes's prophetic dream which a young boy interprets for him can be of Iranian or Hellenistic origin. The comparison between the Hystaspes oracles, on the one hand, and Zoroastrian apocalypses (e.g., *Bahman Yašt*, *Ayādgār ī jāmāspīg*, the 7th book of the *Dēnkard*, chapters 33 or 34-35 of the *Great Bundahišn*, and *Wizīdagthā ī Zād-sparam*), on the other, do not extend beyond occasional similarities. They do not show any literary continuity. This has been fully expounded by Kippenberg (1978, pp. 73-75) against Hinnells (pp. 134-38). What Justinus says about the annihilation of the perishable ones by fire (text no. 1) may be of Zoroastrian or Stoic origin (cf. Windisch, pp. 26, 83; Cumont, 1931, pp. 86, 93). However, Lactantius's explanations of this subject come closer to the Zoroastrian concept (Boyce and Grenet, p. 379). To be discarded is an obvious Iranism in Lactantius which was quoted by Widengren: "no one will show respect to the dogs" (Brandt, 1890, p. 639, ll. 17-18), i.e., in the evil times of the end of the world (Widengren 1965, p. 201; 1983, p. 122). The correct translation is "no one shall revere hoary locks" (Flusser, p. 27 with n. 52).

The prophecy Lactantius ascribes to the oracles, namely that Jupiter himself will deliver the righteous some day (text no. 4), is, strictly speaking, compatible neither with a Jewish nor with a Christian apocalypse. This has been rightly pointed out by Cumont, but his conclusion was that Lactantius simply did not reveal the name of the savior to us (1931, pp. 84-85).

With consideration of the fact that truly Zoroastrian apocalypses did not spread beyond the limits of the Zoroastrian community, the success of the oracles in the Roman empire, despite their official ban (Windisch, pp. 31-32),



can be put down to their emergence in a Hellenistic environment with Iranian traditions. As for the thesis of a Christian or Jewish origin of the Hystaspes oracles, it comes up against the undeniable fact that, according to Lactantius, Hystaspes attributed the final salvation of the righteous to Jupiter rather than to God or Christ (cf. text no. 4), a fact for which Lactantius blamed him and which could hardly have appeared in a Jewish or Christian text. As a result, Lactantius must have known the Hystaspes oracles directly in an older, Zoroastrian-Hellenistic form (thus already Windisch, pp. 75-79).

Under these circumstances, the history and object of the Hystaspes oracles can be summed up as follows: the work was written in the Hellenistic Near East, in Asia Minor or a neighboring country (in any case not in Alexandria or anywhere in Egypt), in the 2nd or 1st century B.C.E. Perhaps it was a sign of the anti-Roman atmosphere which prevailed during the war of Mithridates VI Eupator of Pontus (ca. 132–63 B.C.E.) against Rome (cf. Windisch, p. 55; Widengren 1965, pp. 199-207). As an apocalypse with political relevance and as a polemic claiming the priority of the most ancient wisdom, it was attributed to the Zoroastrian King Hystaspes and availed itself of Iranian apocalyptic motives, but the existence of an Iranian, i.e., Parthian (?), **Wištāsp-Nāmag* is not attested. So the work must have been written in Greek. Precisely because the oracles were a product of the Hellenistic mind, they succeeded in achieving what the Zoroastrian apocalypses failed to do: they were able to feel at home in the traditions of various nations suffering under Roman sovereignty. A Jewish and a Jewish-Christian version may be assumed, and a Christian adaptation is certain. Side by side, however, there also exists the original Hellenistic version. In its Christian form, the work can only be attested until the late 5th century. In later Christian literature, the related sibyls alone have maintained their place and recognition.

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