

The *Tiburtine Sibyl*, the Last Emperor, and the Early Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition

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ALTHOUGH IT NOW STANDS largely forgotten, the *Tiburtine Sibyl* (*Tib. Sib.*) was once one of the most influential and widely read texts in Western Christendom. Ranking high on any list of medieval best sellers, this oracle survives in over 130 known Latin manuscripts, as well as in a Greek version and in an as-yet-unknown number of Arabic, Ethiopic, and Slavonic manuscripts.¹ And while this Sibylline apocalypse is fairly obscure today—even among scholars of late antiquity and Christian apocrypha—for much of the Middle Ages its influence on Christian eschatology easily surpassed that of the canonical Apocalypse, and its broader impact on medieval Christianity was seemingly exceeded only by the Bible and the writings of the church fathers.² But now, most scholars of Christian apocrypha have scarcely even

1. Concerning the Latin manuscripts, see Verhelst, “La préhistoire des conceptions d’Adson,” 99, and now Holdenried, *Sibyl and her Scribes*, 173–221, which includes an inventory of the known manuscripts. The Greek version has been edited in Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*. Regarding the other traditions, see Basset, *La sagesse de Sibylle*; Schleifer, *Erzählung der Sibylle*; Ebied and Young, “Newly Discovered Version”; Ebied and Young, “Unrecorded Arabic Version”; and Gaster, “Sibyl and the Dream.” Concerning possible evidence of an Armenian tradition, see Basset, *La sagesse de Sibylle*, 8; and Schleifer, *Erzählung der Sibylle*, 75.

2. Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 32–33. See also McGinn, “*Teste David cum*

heard of the text. Such dramatic reversals of fortune are of course not uncommon in the history of apocryphal literature, particularly inasmuch as medieval readers valued these extrabiblical traditions for very different reasons than modern scholars. Like *Tib. Sib.*, other such wildly popular apocrypha as the *Apocalypse of the Virgin* and the *Letter from Heaven* spoke powerfully and directly to the hopes and expectations of a medieval audience in a way that often does not translate well for more recent readers.³ Modern scholars, by contrast, tend to favor apocryphal traditions that are both early and express pronounced dissonances—rather than harmony—with the received tradition. Accordingly, like so many other apocrypha whose fame has now faded, *Tib. Sib.* remains banished from the modern canons of apocryphal writings, not even meriting so much as a marginal reference in the major compendia, except only for its appearance as an appendix in the admirably inclusive compilation by Mario Erbetta.⁴ To be sure, Western medievalists have paid this text considerable attention, inasmuch as it deeply influenced medieval religious culture, but in the study of Christian late antiquity and apocryphal literature, it remains largely unknown and unexplored. Yet, for scholars of apocrypha, surely a text that was once as widely influential as this late ancient Sibylline oracle merits far more attention than it has thus far received. Insofar as the study of Christian apocrypha professes to be concerned with the broader phenomenon of apocryphicity, and not just Christian origins, texts such as *Tib. Sib.* and others sharing a similar fate would seem to merit broader inclusion in collections and discussions of Christian apocryphal literature.

Moreover, it is certainly not without note that there was a revival of interest in *Tib. Sib.* and other related texts as recently as the later nineteenth century, in conjunction with the emergence of the Prussian Empire, which some then saw as a successor to the Holy Roman Empire. As Paul Alexander

Sibylla,” 24, 28–29; McGinn, “Oracular Transformations,” 603–605; Olster, “Byzantine Apocalypses,” 51–52; Magdalino, “History of the Future,” 20. Holdenried, *Sibyl and her Scribes* is especially invaluable for its demonstration of *Tib. Sib.*’s influence and popularity in the Middle Ages, particularly for the attention it draws to the importance of traditions beyond just the figure of the Last Emperor. Nevertheless, in making this much needed argument, Holdenried goes a bit too far in seeking to diminish the importance of the Sibyl’s eschatological traditions. While its traditions concerning the life of Christ were certainly more important to medieval Christians than some scholars have recognized, the Sibyl’s prophecies concerning the end times and the Last Emperor were indeed paramount in their influence on medieval eschatology.

3. Concerning the popularity of these two frequently-overlooked traditions, see Bauckham, “Virgin”; Bauckham, “Four Apocalypses,” 332–38; Mimouni, “Apocalypses de la Vierge”; and van Esbroeck, “La lettre sur dimanche.”

4. Erbetta, *Gli Apocriphi del Nuovo Testamento*, 3:527–35.

notes, there was in this context renewed interest especially in the figure of the apocalyptic Last Emperor, who features prominently in *Tib. Sib.*'s eschatological conclusion.⁵ In what was to become a centerpiece of medieval Christian eschatology (both East and West), the Last Emperor was imagined as a ruler who would appear in the end times to restore the Christian Empire's greatness just prior to the second coming of Christ. This future emperor, it was believed, will subdue or convert all of the Christian faith's enemies and opponents and establish righteousness on the earth. Then he will travel to Jerusalem, where he will lay down his crown and imperial garments, yielding sovereignty to God, and thus bringing an end to the Christian Roman Empire and setting in motion the events of the *eschaton*. The conclusion of *Tib. Sib.* preserves the earliest known version of this apocalyptic legend, dating most likely to the later fourth century. Obviously then, this apocryphon is of the utmost importance for understanding the early development of this cornerstone of medieval Christian apocalypticism, and it is largely in this context that *Tib. Sib.* has been studied. Nevertheless, it has yet to be fully appreciated how much this particular text and the broader tradition of early Byzantine imperial eschatology (of which *Tib. Sib.* is a foundational document), have to offer for understanding the origins of Islam. Indeed, the fusion of imperial ambition and eschatological urgency that seem to have defined earliest Islam come into much clearer perspective when understood in light of the apocalyptic fervor that had taken hold of the Byzantine world in the sixth and seventh centuries, all the more so in light of the Byzantine expectation that the *eschaton* would be inaugurated through the military triumph of their divinely-favored empire.

THE *TIBURTINE SIBYL*: A LATE ANCIENT APOCRYPHAL APOCALYPSE

Of course, before proceeding any further, one might wish to raise the question of whether or not *Tib. Sib.* should rightly be considered as a Christian apocryphon, particularly in light of its overtly "pagan" framework. Certainly if one adheres to the older definition of Christian apocrypha advanced by the Hennecke-Schneemelcher collection of "New Testament Apocrypha," it is not entirely clear that this text would qualify as an apocryphon. In addition to the differences in literary style and the problem of its late fourth-century date, it is rather difficult to envision *Tib. Sib.*, as Schneemelcher's definition requires, as a text "which by title and other statements lay claim

5. Alexander, "Byzantium," esp. 48–53.

to be of equal status to the writings of the canon.”⁶ Nevertheless, despite similar issues regarding genre and canonical intent, a selection of earlier “Christian Sibyllines” appears not only in the Hennecke-Schneemelcher collection but in the other major collections as well. Likewise, many of these same texts have been published also as part of a larger collection of “Sibylline Oracles” in collections of the “Old Testament Pseudepigrapha.”⁷ On the basis of these precedents then, only the relatively late composition of this particular Sibylline Oracle could possibly stand in the way of its inclusion in the corpus of Christian apocrypha.

Nevertheless, now that scholars are largely agreed in removing this chronological limitation, it seems clear that *Tib. Sib.* is rightly regarded as a late ancient apocryphon that continues in the well-established tradition of Jewish and Christian Sibylline apocrypha. Moreover, despite the pagan trappings of this Christian apocalypse, its contents focus squarely on events and characters from the biblical writings.⁸ In addition to its passing mention of the life and teachings of Jesus and the ministry of the apostles, the bulk of this vision concerns, among other key elements of biblical eschatology, the peoples of Gog and Magog, the appearance of the Antichrist, and the Second Coming of Christ. Yet, leaving behind the formalities and abstractions of defining the limits of apocryphal literature, the function and status of this text in the Middle Ages unmistakably reveal its parallel authority to the biblical traditions. Perhaps there is no more famous example of this than the opening stanza of the “Dies irae” hymn from the Latin Requiem Mass, where we find the lines, “Dies irae! Dies illa! Solvet sæclum in favilla: teste David cum Sibylla!” Here the Sibyl’s authority regarding the end times is placed on par with the biblical tradition, which is hardly a surprise given that, as already noted, *Tib. Sib.* was more influential on medieval eschatology than the canonical Apocalypse.⁹ *Tib. Sib.*, then, was more than just a supplement to the canonical texts but was also considered an authoritative source of Christian doctrine. And the fact that its authority could on some topics equal and even surpass the authority of the biblical tradition certainly

6. Schneemelcher, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, 1:6; English trans., Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:27.

7. E.g., Collins, “Sibylline Oracles,” in Charlesworth’s *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*.

8. Following here especially the influential definition of apocrypha proposed in Junod, “Apocryphes du Nouveau Testament ou apocryphes chrétiens anciens?” 412. For further discussion, see Shoemaker, “Early Christian Apocryphal Literature,” esp. 528–32.

9. See, e.g., McGinn, “*Teste David cum Sibylla*,” 19.

raises some intriguing questions about the function and significance of the canon in the Middle Ages.

The Textual Tradition and Its Date of Composition

At present *Tib. Sib.* is best known from the Latin edition by Ernst Sackur. Sackur was able to identify several different Latin recensions of the text, of which his edition published the oldest on the basis of the manuscripts then known to him.¹⁰ Nevertheless, despite Sackur's remarkable achievement, it is clear that a more comprehensive critical edition is needed, not only in light of the abundance of the manuscript tradition,¹¹ but also because the later Latin recensions were not dependent on the version edited by Sackur, and thus they occasionally preserve some elements of the ancient text that were for some reason left out from the oldest recension. The potential value of these later versions has been demonstrated in part by the discovery and publication of a Greek version of *Tib. Sib.*, which contains some parallels to these other Latin versions, indicating that the passages in question must have once stood in their common Greek source.¹² Even though Greek was the original language of *Tib. Sib.*'s composition, it is widely agreed that the Latin translation preserves an earlier version than we have in the extant Greek. The Greek version's editor, Paul Alexander, has convincingly demonstrated that this version was redacted at the very beginning of the sixth century, judging from the historical events and individuals to which it refers.¹³ Like so many other apocalyptic texts, the prophecies of the Greek *Tib. Sib.* juxtapose a rehearsal of recent historical events with what amount to genuine predictions of events to come that will soon usher in the *eschaton*. Not surprisingly, as the text transitions from its historical section to forecasts of the future, the seer's prognostic powers suddenly depart, and in this seam we can identify a fairly reliable date for the text's composition. As Alexander accordingly observes, "every apocalypse must have been written not long after the latest event to which it alludes," and so in the case of the Greek

10. Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte und Forschungen*, 126–37; see also Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 3–5 and 60–62.

11. Holdenried, *Sibyl and her Scribes* has laid important groundwork for a new edition in this regard.

12. See, e.g., Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 53–55 and 63–64, examples that are also noted below.

13. Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 41–47 and also 75–105. Concerning the original language, see Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 60–65.

Tib. Sib., this locates its production—or rather, its redaction—sometime between 502 and 506.¹⁴

Despite some minor complications, the same principles convincingly date the Latin version over a century earlier, to the end of the fourth century. The main issue is that this earliest Latin version, as preserved in its oldest manuscripts, includes an editorial update designed to refresh its prophecies for more recent generations by inserting a list of Lombard and German rulers from the sixth through the eleventh centuries near the end of its historical section.¹⁵ Nevertheless, these medieval interpolations are rather obvious and easy to isolate from the much earlier text in which they are embedded, so that there is solid consensus that *Tib. Sib.* as preserved in this Latin translation is indeed a late antique text. Leaving then these medieval insertions to the side (they are italicized in Sackur's edition), Sackur's painstaking analysis of the text demonstrates that the latest historical events to which the original Latin *Tib. Sib.* refers are from the later fourth century, a point on which there also has been broad scholarly agreement.¹⁶ Except for the medieval interlopers, the latest figures to which Sackur's edition of *Tib. Sib.* refers are Constantine and his sons, and the text likewise shows a fairly detailed knowledge of events in the eastern provinces at the end of Constantius II's reign.¹⁷ Through comparison of the Latin versions with the Greek, Alexander has demonstrated also that a passage found in certain Latin manuscripts referring to the death of the emperor Valens (d. 378) likely appeared in the original Latin translation, thus postponing the date of composition to a little later.¹⁸ In view of this fact one might wish to reconsider

14. Alexander, "Medieval Apocalypses," 998–99, 1009.

15. Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, 129–37, 181–84; Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 60–62.

16. See, e.g., Bousset, *Antichrist Legend*, 45–49, 62–65; Bousset, "Antichrist"; Kampers, *Die deutsche Kaiseridee*, 18–19; Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, 162–63; Konrad, *De ortu et tempore Antichristi*, 43–53; Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 49–65; Alexander, "Byzantium," 67 n. 35; Alexander, "Medieval Legend," 14–15; Alexander, "Diffusion of Byzantine Apocalypses," 56–57; Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 171–72 esp. n. 74; Podskalsky, *Byzantinische Reicheschatologie*, 55 n. 333; Rangheri, "La «Epistola ad Gerbergam»,” 708–709 n. 79; Wortley, "Literature of Catastrophe," 16–17; McGinn, *Visions of the End*, 43–44; McGinn, "Teste David cum Sibylla," 26–28; McGinn, "Oracular Transformations," 612–13; Brandes, "Die apokalyptische Literatur," 309; Möhring, *Weltkaiser der Endzeit*, 49. Note that, while some of these scholars have on occasion expressed some doubt as to whether the Last Emperor tradition was a part of this late fourth-century *Tib. Sib.* (a point discussed in some detail below), they are agreed that the text otherwise—except for the medieval king lists—dates to this time.

17. Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, 157–62; see also Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 49–65.

18. Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 63–64; for the text see *ibid.*, 14 See also McGinn,

Sackur's conclusion that *Tib. Sib.* shows no knowledge of Julian's apostasy to paganism. While there is no unmistakable reference to this dramatic turn of events, perhaps *Tib. Sib.*'s persistent concern to confront paganism should be understood in this light, and likewise its notice that, "another . . . king will arise, a mighty man and a warrior, and many neighbors and relatives will become indignant with him," may refer to Julian's apostasy.¹⁹

Alexander's careful analysis of the Greek and Latin versions likewise identifies another passage from the later Latin versions that also seems to have been part of the original text: a prediction that he names the "Constantinopolitan Oracle." In the Greek version, the account of Constantine's reign concludes with a reference to Byzantium's elevation as a new imperial capital named Constantinople, followed by a forecast that warns, "Do not boast, city of Byzantium, thou shalt not hold imperial sway for thrice sixty of thy years!"²⁰ As Alexander notes, this amounts to 180 years, an interval of time consistent with the Greek version's redaction sometime between 502 and 506. According to such reckoning, the Greek *Tib. Sib.* expects Constantinople's downfall roughly in 510, soon after its composition, presumably with the end of the world not far thereafter. Although Sackur's edition contains no equivalent passage, several of the later Latin versions preserve a strikingly similar prediction, albeit one that is well suited to the earlier date of the Latin translation. In these manuscripts, following the description of Constantine and a reference to his new city, the Sibyl warns, "Do not rejoice with joy: they will not rule from Byzantium within 60 years."²¹ As with the Greek version, the interval again fits perfectly with the date of the text as determined on the basis of its most recent historical references. The fall of Constantinople is thus forecast for the year 390, and since this prophecy did not in fact come true, it would appear that the Latin version of *Tib. Sib.*, or more precisely, its Greek source, must have been composed sometime between 378 and 390. Indeed, even in the absence of the Greek parallel, there is good reason to suppose that this prophecy belonged to the original text. The fact that it was not fulfilled makes it very unlikely that some medieval redactor would have added the prophecy to the text centuries later, while its evident falsification presents a powerful motive for its elimination by a later editor. The Greek version simply reflects a different strategy for overcoming this difficulty: its reviser has extended the deadline by just over a century in

"Oracular Transformations," 640.

19. Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, 183; see also 160–62.

20. Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 14; trans. 25.

21. *Ibid.*, 53–55; for the Latin text see Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, 128 n. 4; and Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 14. See also McGinn, "Oracular Transformations," 640.

order to place the fall of Constantinople again on the immediate horizon. Thus, Alexander's recovery of this prophecy, which has been excised from the version edited by Sackur, adds important confirmation of *Tib. Sib.*'s composition in the later fourth century, after which time this prophecy would have been falsified.

At a more general level, structural comparison of Sackur's Latin version with the Greek also demonstrates the former's relative antiquity, revealing that the Greek version has revised an earlier source that now largely survives in the Latin translation. There are to be sure some significant differences between the Greek and the Latin, but as Alexander notes, they "tell essentially the same story," one which the Greek has adapted to meet the circumstances of elapsed time.²² In essence, the Greek version updates the events of the Latin version's historical section, leaving out some elements entirely, in order to make room for more than a century of new events that had elapsed by the time of its redaction. By compressing the time between the Sibyl's prognostications and the appearance of Constantine and also by eliminating much of the Latin version's detail concerning the later fourth century, the Greek editor opens up space in the prophetic vision to introduce the history of the fifth century before the events of the *eschaton* are unleashed.

The Sybil's Vision

Tib. Sib. begins sometime back in the mists of early Roman history, during the reign of the "Trojan" emperor, a reference, as Sackur rightly concludes, to Rome's legendary foundation by Aeneas and other Trojan refugees.²³ When the leading citizens of Rome learn of this woman's great prophecies, they persuade the emperor to bring her to Rome with great honor. We then learn that in one night 100 men from the Roman senate had the same dream. It was a vision of nine different suns, each one having specific qualities that distinguished it from the others. The men approach the Sibyl, seeking the meaning of their dream, and she explains to them that "the nine suns that

22. Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 48–55, 63–64.

23. Although some manuscripts read instead "Traiani," it does not seem possible to identify this figure with Trajan, since the Sibyl subsequently explains that the nine suns represent "all future generations," with the fourth generation witnessing the birth of Christ. Accordingly, some manuscripts read here instead "of their king Romulus" or "of the consul, whose name was Trojanus" or "of the senators." Sackur explains, however, that "Troiani" is in fact the correct reading, and is a reflection of the traditions that the Romans were descended from the Trojans, and so their ancestral king here is here named Trojanus: see Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, 172–73.

you saw prefigure all future generations. Truly the differences that you see among them will also be a different life for humankind” (6).²⁴ The Sibyl then begins to reveal the future, describing each of the nine generations to come. The first two ages will be idyllic; but things begin to take a turn for the worse in the third, when “nation will rise up against nation, and there will be many battles in Rome” (6). The fourth generation will witness the birth of Christ, and here the Sibyl accordingly relates what Alexander calls the “Sibylline Gospel.” This brief account of the birth, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ draws the ire of some of “the priests of the Hebrews,” whom the Sibyl is quick to silence (6–7).²⁵ The fifth generation will witness the spread of the gospel by the apostles, and the sixth, seventh, and eighth generations will see continued turmoil in the Roman Empire. Then in the ninth generation, after the rule of four kings (i.e., the Tetrarchy), there “will arise another king, with the name C [Constantine], mighty in battle, who will reign for 30 years and will build a temple to God and will fulfill the law and establish justice on the earth for God’s sake” (8). The “Constantinopolitan Oracle” then seemingly follows as does the reference to Valens.

At this point a lengthy insertion concerning the Lombard and German kings intrudes, eventually yielding to a forecast of war, famine, and natural disasters, as well as political corruption and religious persecution, although this section itself is also briefly interrupted twice with notices concerning later medieval kings (8–9). These calamities are the events that Sackur correlates convincingly with the reign of Constantius II, but in *Tib. Sib.* they clearly appear also as portents of the impending end of the world. Then, as things reach a fever pitch, with “afflictions such as there have not been since the beginning of the world” and the world completely abandoned to the wicked and unjust (9), the figure of the Last Emperor makes his dramatic appearance: “And then will arise a king of the Greeks, whose name is Constans, and he will be king of the Romans and the Greeks. He will be tall in stature, handsome in appearance, shining in countenance, and well put together in all of his bodily features. And his reign will end after 112 years.” His reign will witness great wealth and abundance, and this king will have before him a “scripture” that says, “The king of the Romans will claim the entire kingdom of the Christians for himself.” Then he will “devastate

24. Translations and section numbers correspond with my forthcoming translation of this text (based on Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*) in Burke and Landau, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha*.

25. Alexander considers the peculiarities of this “Sibylline Gospel” in *Oracle of Baalbek*, 67–74. David Flusser (“Early Jewish-Christian Document,” esp. 168–69, 176–78) has proposed on the basis of this Sibylline gospel that the core of *Tib. Sib.* goes back to the late first century CE, although I do not find the argument very persuasive.

all the islands and cities of the pagans and destroy all the temples of idols. He will call all the pagans to baptism, and the Cross of Jesus Christ will be erected in all the temples,” and “the Jews will be converted to the Lord.” At this time the Antichrist will arise and lead many astray, and “the most unclean nations that Alexander the Indian king enclosed, God and Magog, will arise from the north.” After the Last Emperor annihilates the peoples of God and Magog, “then he will come to Jerusalem, and there having laid down the diadem from his head and all his royal garb, he will hand over the kingdom of the Christians to God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son.” With the Roman Empire now having come to an end, “the Antichrist will be openly revealed.” The apocalypse then concludes with his defeat “by the power of the Lord by the Archangel Michael on the Mount of Olives” (10).

This figure of the apocalyptic Last Emperor, who appears here seemingly for the first time, quickly became one of the cornerstones of medieval Christian eschatology. The Roman Empire and its emperor were imagined as agents of Christian deliverance that would emerge resurgent at the end of time. The roots of this idea were developed in the context of Constantine’s conversion and the Christianization of the Roman Empire during the fourth century, from which emerged a political ideology that envisioned the Empire and its ruler as divinely appointed to rule on God’s behalf and to defend and advance the Christian faith on earth.²⁶ The Roman Empire was identified as the fourth kingdom of Daniel 2, the kingdom of iron, which was to be the last world empire, after which would follow the Kingdom of God.²⁷ Even Christians living beyond the Empire’s borders were quick to embrace this idea of Rome’s divine election and commission. For instance, Aphrahat, the Persian Sage, also identified Rome with the fourth Danielic kingdom and believed that it would remain unvanquished until the return of Christ. God, as he explains, had given over his rule to the Romans (“the children of Esau”), and accordingly God will preserve Rome until the end of time, when “He should come Whose it is” and the Romans “will deliver up the deposit to the Giver.”²⁸ Thus, from the fourth century onward, Christians increasingly looked to the Roman Empire and its emperor as having been divinely appointed to subdue and defeat the enemies of Christ in order to prepare for his Second Coming.

26. See, e.g. Podskalsky, *Byzantinische Reicheschatologie*, 11–12.

27. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Dem. ev.* 15, frag. 1 (Heikel, ed., *Eusebius Werke*, 493–94).

28. Aphrahat, *Dem. 5: On Wars* 13–14, 24 (Graffin et al., eds., *Patrologia syriaca*, 1:207–12; 233–34; trans. Schaff and Wace, *Select Library*, 13: 361).

**THE LAST EMPEROR IN THE LATER MEDIEVAL
TRADITION: THE *APOCALYPSE OF PS.-METHODIUS***

In *Tib. Sib.* the enemies of Christ are the pagans and the Jews, as one would certainly expect from a late fourth-century composition. Nevertheless, as this legend of the Last Emperor transitioned into the Middle Ages, the face of the Empire's enemies predictably would change, particularly with the effective elimination of "paganism" from the Mediterranean world. Perhaps even more important, however, was the emergence of Islam during the seventh century as a new and formidable threat to the Christian Empire's position in the world. Indeed, with the Islamic conquest of the Roman Near East, North Africa, and the Sasanian Empire, the majority of the world's Christians suddenly found themselves living not under the protection of the Christian Empire and its emperor but instead under the rule of Muslim infidels.²⁹ In this new geopolitical and religious order, Islam and the Arabs quickly emerged as the primary foes of Christ and his chosen Empire. This animosity reconfigured Christian imperial eschatology almost immediately, as we see in the Syriac *Homily on the End* attributed to Ephrem and most especially in the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius* (= *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.*). In these two apocalypses from the mid-seventh century, the "Hagarenes" or the "Ishmaelites" have now become the ultimate enemies whom the Christian Empire must defeat before Christ returns to reign.³⁰ Moreover, like *Tib. Sib.*, *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* draws its focus on a final "emperor of the Greeks" who will fulfill this task, thus offering a rather distinctive version of the Last Emperor myth that differs significantly from *Tib. Sib.* but also has some important points of contact.³¹

Apoc. Ps.-Meth. was written in Syriac in northern Mesopotamia sometime between 644 and 670. Although certain specialists on Syriac literature, most notably Sebastian Brock and Gerrit Reinink, recently proposed a date for the text toward the end of the seventh century, the internal evidence

29. See, e.g., Griffith, *Church in the Shadow*, 11.

30. Ps.-Ephrem, *Homily on the End* 8 (Suermann, *Die geschichtstheologische Reaktion*, 25). There has been some debate as to whether the bulk of Ps.-Ephrem's *Homily* may in fact be even earlier, and some scholars have proposed that the section concerning Islam was later inserted into an apocalyptic homily from the later fourth century. Nevertheless, there is a fairly broad consensus that the work as it presently stands was produced ca. 640. The main exception to this consensus would seem to be Reinink (and Hoyland?), who considers 640 a *terminus post quem*, finding a *terminus ante quem* in 683. See Reinink, "Pseudo-Ephraems 'Rede über das Ende,'" esp. 439–41, 455–63; and Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 261–63.

31. *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* 13.11–14.6 (Reinink, ed., *Syrische Apokalypse*, 38–45 [Syr] & 63–74 [German]; English trans. Palmer, *Seventh Century*, 237–40).

provided by the textual tradition itself clearly favors an earlier dating, as Alexander and Harald Suermann both recognized.³² Brock and Reinink base their determination on the reading of a single manuscript that predicts that the Muslims will rule for ten weeks of years,³³ which they take to mean that almost seventy years had elapsed from the beginnings of Islam until the time of *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.*'s composition. Thus they conclude that the text was written just prior to 692.³⁴ Nevertheless, with the exception of this one Syriac manuscript, all of the other witnesses to this text instead forecast that Muslim rule will last for seven weeks of years, which, following the same principles, would place the anticipated turn of events in 671. This would seem to exclude the possibility of *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.*'s composition after 670. Brock and Reinink give no clear reasons for adopting the unique reading of this single manuscript (which was long the only known Syriac manuscript), and in fact, Brock, in his own translation of the final sections of *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.*, actually translates "seven" weeks of years and notes "ten" as a variant that occurs only in this single manuscript.³⁵ Robert Hoyland proposes that the "substitution" of seven weeks instead of ten "is easily explained as the preference for a more charismatic number and symmetry with the seventh millennium."³⁶ Yet such charisma and symmetry seem just as likely to have influenced the original author to set a deadline of 49 years; moreover, one must not overlook the fact that 70 (ten weeks) is itself a pretty charismatic and symmetrical number whose charms also could have easily swayed a later editor. To the contrary then, it seems more likely that "ten" has been substituted here by someone not long after the text's composition but after the 49th year had passed, in order to extend the deadline. The single Syriac manuscript preserving this variant likely reflects changes of this sort in its earliest antecedent. It certainly makes more sense to suppose that this one manuscript reflects a change made to the original text, rather than assuming that the other Syriac manuscripts and both the Greek and Latin translations

32. Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 24–8; Suermann, *Die geschichtstheologische Reaktion*, 159–61

33. *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* 5.9; 10.6; 13.2 (Reinink, ed., *Syrische Apokalypse*, 11, 23, 35 [Syr] & 15, 39, 57 [Germ]), although according to the edition the manuscripts read in the third instance "in the last week" rather than "in the tenth." The Greek and Latin persistently have seven weeks of years in all three instances, and the edition indicates that the other Syriac manuscripts either read seven weeks or are lacking the passage in question (as the apparatus seems to indicate in 5.9).

34. E.g., Brock, "Syriac Views," 19; Palmer, *Seventh Century*, 225; Reinink, "Ps.-Methodius," 150, 178–84; cf. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 264 n. 17.

35. Palmer, *Seventh Century*, 230, 236, although Brock translates "seventh" in the second instance instead of "last," presumably for consistency with the first passage.

36. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 264 n 17.

(which also have seven weeks of years) have all somehow uniformly deviated from the original.³⁷ Alexander recognized this even before the Syriac manuscripts reading seven weeks had been discovered, and it is not at all clear to me why these other scholars have ignored his compelling reasoning, particularly in light of the new evidence confirming it.³⁸

Apoc. Ps.-Meth. was quickly translated into Greek and Latin, and through these translations it made a deep and lasting impact on medieval Christian eschatology. The Latin translation was made from the Greek, and since we have a Latin manuscript dating to the early eighth century, both translations must have been realized quite rapidly. The recent editors of both versions estimate a date of 710–720 for the Latin translation and 700–710 for the Greek, although they are prevented from proposing an earlier date by Reinink's late dating for the Syriac original.³⁹ Yet in light of the very short interval between the Syriac original's composition and the first Latin manuscript, it would seem that a slightly earlier date for the Syriac also would fit much better with such rapid transmission into Greek and Latin. And so possibly these translations may have been produced a little earlier than the editors suggest. In any case, as it passed into these new cultural contexts, *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* met with enormous popularity. In Byzantium it circulated widely, and its profound influence is evident in all of the subsequent Byzantine apocalyptic tradition.⁴⁰ In the Latin West, the text was even more enthusiastically received. Over 200 Latin manuscripts are presently known, in addition to even more copies surviving in vernacular

37. *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* 10.6; 13.2 (Reinink, ed., *Die Syrische Apokalypse*, 23, 35 [Syr] & 39, 57 [German]; Aerts and Kortekaas, *Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius*, 1:134–35, 164–65)

38. Alexander, "Medieval Apocalypses," 1001; Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 52–53. See also Martinez, "Apocalyptic Genre in Syriac," 337–52, 340–41 n. 9. Brock and Reinink also point to eschatological fervor, the threat of apostasy, and tax increases as motives for *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.*'s composition. Yet eschatological fervor and the threat of apostasy seem just as relevant to the middle of the seventh century as the end, and the suggestion of a response to 'Abd al-Malik's tax increases, while not impossible, is highly speculative. It is perhaps worth noting, however, that taxation is a theme seemingly common to the Last Emperor traditions, as evidenced in the Greek version of *Tib. Sib.* and the *Apocalypse of Elijah*, a text that seems to have strongly influenced *Tib. Sib.* and the Last Emperor tradition, as noted further below. See Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 21, 29; and Steindorff, *Apokalypse des Elias*, 86; English trans. in Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, 312.

39. Aerts and Kortekaas, *Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius*, 16, 30, 57.

40. See, e.g., Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 13–14; Podskalsky, *Byzantinische Reicheschatologie*, 53–6; Aerts and Kortekaas, *Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius*, 16–18; Garstad, *Apokalypse Pseudo-Methodius*, ix–x.

translations.⁴¹ Indeed, its impact on medieval culture was such that one can equally say of *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.*, as was similarly noted concerning *Tib. Sib.* above, that “scarcely any other text of the Middle Ages had such universal influence, excepting the canonical Scriptures and the Church Fathers.”⁴² Perhaps nowhere is this influence more evident than with respect to the Last Emperor. Ps.-Methodius’s vision of the Last Emperor’s triumph over the sons of Ishmael and his final surrender of authority to God at Jerusalem largely determined the shape of these traditions in the Christian East, and in the West its distinctive account of these events rivaled the parallel version offered by *Tib. Sib.*⁴³ Eventually, even *Tib. Sib.* itself would come partly under Ps.-Methodius’s influence, so that in a later version the Last Emperor—perhaps also for obvious historical reasons—defeats not the Jews and Pagans but the Saracens instead.⁴⁴

In light of the substantial influence that *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* had on medieval eschatology in the Christian West, some scholars have even gone so far as to suggest that the myth of the Last Emperor is in fact the genius of its author. The most aggressive of these hypotheses argue that the legend of the Last Emperor was not actually present in the original fourth-century version of *Tib. Sib.*, but instead it is a medieval interpolation that has been introduced on the basis of *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.*, which is credited with the legend’s invention.⁴⁵ Moreover, certain specialists of Syriac and *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* have for whatever reason seemingly ignored *Tib. Sib.* altogether, without affording it any consideration, simply assuming that the legend originates with Ps.-Methodius. The reason for this oversight is not entirely clear: one suspects that they may have similarly assumed that the Last Emperor tradition is a medieval insertion into the late ancient text of *Tib. Sib.*; accordingly it does not merit consideration, although this is never stated.⁴⁶

It certainly is not entirely out of the question that *Tib. Sib.*’s Last Emperor tradition may be a later interpolation, and comparison of the Latin

41. Aerts and Kortekaas, *Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius*, 19.

42. Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, 6.

43. See, e.g., Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 152–84; Alexander, “Byzantium,” esp. 53–62; Alexander, “Diffusion of Byzantine Apocalypses”; McGinn, “Oracular Transformations,” 604–12; Kraft, “Last Roman Emperor Topos.”

44. McGinn, “Oracular Transformations,” 631, 642.

45. Alexander, “Byzantium,” 67 n. 35; Wortley, “Literature of Catastrophe,” 16–17; McGinn, *Visions of the End*, 44; McGinn, “*Teste David cum Sibylla*,” 26–27; McGinn, “Oracular Transformations,” 607, 609, 613.

46. E.g., Reinink, “Die syrischen Wurzeln,” 195–209; Reinink, “Pseudo-Methodius und die Legende,” esp. 82–83; Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius,” esp. 153–55, 165–78; Suermann, *Die geschichtstheologische Reaktion*, 208; Suermann, “Der byzantinische Endkaiser,” esp. 144–5; Kraft, “Last Roman Emperor,” although see 217 n. 18.

with the Greek version possibly could suggest this. Nevertheless, the evidence afforded by the account itself seems to secure its antiquity as well as its presence in the original late fourth-century version of this influential apocalypse. And even if by some odd chance the Last Emperor legend was not a part of this earliest version, there can be little question that *Tib. Sib.*'s account of the Last Emperor myth belongs to late antiquity, antedating significantly both *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* and the Islamic conquests. Admittedly, one of the most puzzling aspects of *Tib. Sib.*'s transmission history is the Last Emperor's near absence from the early sixth-century Greek version, and the same is similarly true of the much later Arabic, Karshuni, and Ethiopic versions that have been published to date, all of which seem to derive from this Greek redaction. It is largely on this basis that some scholars have raised doubts regarding the textual status of the Last Emperor tradition; the silence of the Greek especially has invited suspicion of an interpolation. There are, however, some apparent vestiges of the Last Emperor myth in these more recent versions, as others have also noted. For instance, in the Greek, just before the Antichrist's appearance, a final emperor is identified who will arise and defeat the king of the East. Then, like the Last Emperor of the Latin version, his reign will be marked by abundance and prosperity, until his defeat and murder by the Antichrist.⁴⁷ The same is also true of the Arabic, Karshuni, and Ethiopic versions, which similarly describe an era of great prosperity under the final emperor before the Antichrist's appearance.⁴⁸ Although many important elements of the Latin version are clearly lacking, René Basset concludes that these texts preserve here an abridged version of the same Last Emperor tradition.⁴⁹ Indeed this does seem to be the case, but it is certainly a little curious that the Greek editor would have redacted the legend so dramatically.

Nevertheless, despite the significant differences between the Latin *Tib. Sib.*'s legend of the Last Emperor and these more recent versions, the internal evidence of the legend itself offers compelling evidence of its late antique origin and its independence from *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* The most decisive feature in this regard is the complete absence of any mention of the Muslims or the Islamic conquests, which are defining features of *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* and the rest of the post-Islamic apocalyptic tradition.⁵⁰ Instead, we find the Last

47. Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 21, 29.

48. Schleifer, *Erzählung der Sibylle*, 38–41, 66–67. This similarity in particular suggests the dependence of these versions on the Greek version edited by Alexander, although as he notes, they have been subjected to a tremendous amount of editing during their subsequent transmission: see Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 5–6 n. 9.

49. Basset, *La sagesse de Sibylle*, 19.

50. Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 156. Sackur's edition does refer

Emperor confronting pagans and Jews, who here constitute the main rivals of the Christian faith. Pagans in particular figure very prominently in the Last Emperor's actions; he will devastate their "islands and cities," call them to baptism, establish the cross in all of their temples, so that they will be eradicated or converted to Christianity. The Sibyl additionally cites a slight variation on Ps 68:31, "Egypt and Ethiopia will hasten to offer their hand to God," as affording biblical proof of the Last Emperor's anticipated success against the pagans. It is quite difficult to imagine such pronounced concern with subduing the pagans—and none whatsoever for the Muslims—in a text composed only after the Islamic conquests. All the more so it is hard to imagine that a medieval interpolator would have eliminated the Muslims from an existing tradition in order to replace them with pagans and Jews, as dependence on *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* would require.

Other specific features of *Tib. Sib.*'s Last Emperor similarly fit much better with a late fourth-century context than with a medieval interpolation. For instance, the reference to Ps 68:31 appears to be a reference to the recent conversion of Egypt and especially Ethiopia from paganism to Christianity in the fourth century. Eusebius of Caesarea offers a roughly contemporary witness to the interpretation of this passage as a prophecy of pagan conversion (*Hist. eccl.* 2.1.13). Moreover, Sackur and others after him have noted that in *Tib. Sib.* the Last Emperor is said to lay down the "diadem of his head" in Jerusalem rather than a "crown." This detail seemingly reflects the custom of the late ancient emperors who wore on their heads a diadem, an adorned headband, as opposed to the medieval Latin kings who instead favored crowns.⁵¹ Judged on the whole, then, *Tib. Sib.*'s account of the Last Emperor appears to be solidly late antique in its content. Comparison with the Last Emperor traditions of *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* only strengthens this conclusion.

PS.-METHODIUS'S ADAPTATION OF THE TIBURTINE SIBYL'S LAST EMPEROR TRADITIONS

Careful comparison of *Tib. Sib.* with the Last Emperor traditions of *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* reveals that there is almost no chance that the former depends on the latter while also confirming that the traditions of *Tib. Sib.* are almost

twice to the Hagarenes, but these are clearly medieval interpolations of the late antique text related to the medieval kings who have been added.

51. Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, 167–68. See also Konrad, *De ortu et tempore Antichristi*, 46–47; and Möhring, *Weltkaiser der Endzeit*, 42; cf. McGinn, *Visions of the End*, 295 n. 9.

certainly older. These two versions of the Last Emperor myth are so strikingly different from one another that, as Alexander concludes, the Sibyl's Last Emperor simply "cannot be interpolated from Pseudo-Methodius where the details given differ on a number of points." There is in fact nothing at all to indicate that *Tib. Sib.*'s account has borrowed anything from *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.*⁵² Yet influence in the opposite direction not only seems possible but in fact highly likely. In several instances it would appear that Ps.-Methodius has developed earlier traditions about the Last Emperor that appear in *Tib. Sib.* and adapted them to his Syriac cultural milieu and to the circumstances of Islamic hegemony. This is particularly true of Ps.-Methodius's account of the Last Emperor's person and his actions, his (re)interpretation of Ps. 68:31, and his description of Gog and Magog, all of which seem to reflect the use of earlier traditions about the Last Emperor found in *Tib. Sib.*

The Figure of the Last Emperor and His Abdication

One important difference between *Tib. Sib.*'s Last Emperor and his appearance in *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* and the later apocalyptic tradition is that the Sibyl assigns him multiple tasks. He brings prosperity and defeats paganism by force, calling the pagans to conversion so that Egypt and Ethiopia will offer their hand to God. He also converts the Jews and then defeats Gog and Magog before finally surrendering power to God at Jerusalem. By contrast, in *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* and other later texts, Alexander states, "the Last Emperor is severely specialized and limits himself to the defeat of the unbelievers (Moslems) and the surrender of his rule."⁵³ *Tib. Sib.*'s Last Emperor stands out against this later tendency toward narrowing his role.⁵⁴ Moreover, *Tib. Sib.* is the only text to assign the Last Emperor the task of defeating Gog and Magog, which in the later apocalypses instead falls to an angel. In *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* and the subsequent tradition, the Emperor's victory over Gog and Magog has been displaced by his triumph over the Muslims, leaving this eschatological conquest instead to supernatural forces.⁵⁵

The later tradition also mythologizes the figure of the Last Emperor in comparison with *Tib. Sib.* Whereas the Sibyl knows this emperor's name and

52. Alexander, "Diffusion of Byzantine Apocalypses," 58, 63–64, and esp. 93–94 n. 9; so also Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, 170; and Rangheri, "Epistola ad Gerbergami," 708–9 n. 79.

53. Alexander, "Diffusion of Byzantine Apocalypses," 58.

54. *Ibid.*, 63–64.

55. Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 156, 158, 163, 166; Alexander, "Diffusion of Byzantine Apocalypses," 63–64.

describes his personal appearance, the later apocalyptic tradition has lost these elements. In *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* and other more recent texts, the Last Emperor appears less as an actual historical figure “comparable to the Roman emperors of the past and present” and instead more as a shadowy, mythological figure who stands on the margins of history.⁵⁶ His rise to power is also cast in more mythic and even supernatural terms. According to *Tib. Sib.*, this Last Emperor, like others before him, will simply “arise” (*surget*), a verb applied routinely to the many kings and emperors mentioned in her vision (10). Nevertheless, *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* adds considerable mystique and moment to the Last Emperor’s appearance: not only will he go forth against the Arabs, but “he will be awakened against them like ‘a man who has shaken off his wine’—someone who had been considered by them as though dead.”⁵⁷ Here Ps.-Methodius associates the Last Emperor with the Lord by invoking Ps 78:65, which reads in the Peshitto, “The Lord was aroused like a sleeper and like a man who shakes off his wine.”⁵⁸ This same reference also resounds in the Byzantine apocalyptic tradition, and as it passed into Greek through the translation of *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.*, misunderstandings of the Syriac original only “served to intensify the aura of paradox and mystery created by the citation of the Psalm,” as Alexander notes.⁵⁹

Other differences between *Tib. Sib.* and *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* seem to reflect the latter’s efforts to adapt earlier traditions concerning the Last Emperor to the contours of its Syriac cultural milieu. For instance, according to the Sibyl, the Last Emperor “will come to Jerusalem, and there having laid down the diadem of his head and all his royal garb, he will hand over the kingdom.”⁶⁰ Ps.-Methodius relates these same events much more elaborately, with greater drama and specificity. In *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.*, the Emperor will finally “go up and stand on Golgotha and the holy Cross shall be placed on that spot where it had been fixed when it bore Christ. The king of the Greeks shall place his crown on the top of the holy Cross, stretch out his two hands towards heaven, and hand over the kingdom to God the Father. And the holy Cross upon which Christ was crucified will be raised up to heaven, together with the royal crown.”⁶¹ As Sackur noted over a century ago, this

56. Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 152–53, 166–67.

57. Reinink, ed., *Syrische Apokalypse*, 38 (Syr); English trans. Palmer, *Seventh Century*, 237.

58. Trans. in Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 166.

59. *Ibid.*, 167.

60. Reinink, ed., *Die Syrische Apokalypse*, 44 (Syr); English trans. Palmer, *Seventh Century*, 240.

61. Reinink, ed., *Die Syrische Apokalypse*, 44 (Syr); English trans. Palmer, *Seventh Century*, 240.

scene seems to depend on a similar narrative from the late fifth or early sixth-century Syriac Julian Romance. There, following Julian's death, the imperial crown is placed atop the army's standard Cross, from which it miraculously descends to rest upon Jovian's head. In similar fashion, the sixth-century Syriac *Cave of Treasures* relates that the world's first king, Nimrod, received his crown through its miraculous descent from heaven. Thus the specific details concerning the crown's placement on the Cross and its ascent into heaven seem to have been added to the Last Emperor legend by Ps.-Methodius on the basis of these traditions specific to his Syriac cultural context.⁶² Moreover, in conjunction with this new focus on the Cross, the *Cave of Treasures* also seems to have inspired the location of these events at Golgotha. While *Tib. Sib.* merely notes that this Last Emperor will hand over power in Jerusalem, Ps.-Methodius has further developed this tradition by specifying Golgotha as the site of the Emperor's abdication. As Reinink and others have noted, "In locating the abdication of the Last Emperor on Golgotha, Ps.-Methodius depends on traditions related to the Cross and Golgotha in the *Cave of Treasures*."⁶³ And so this addition too seems to derive from the author's Syriac cultural heritage.

Psalm 68:31 and Ethiopia

As Ps.-Methodius continues, he begins to expound the significance of the Cross and its ascent to heaven with the crown, and before long he introduces a reference to Ps 68:31, cited in a slightly different context from *Tib. Sib.* and also according to certain nuances that are present only in the Syriac version of this passage. Here, once again comparison of the references to this Psalm in *Tib. Sib.* and *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* indicates that the latter has seemingly adapted an earlier tradition to fit its Syriac cultural context.⁶⁴ *Tib. Sib.* introduces this passage immediately after the Last Emperor's conversion of the pagans, so that it stands as a prophecy of their conversion, as repre-

62. Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, 44. See also Konrad, *De ortu et tempore Antichristi*, 48; Reinink, "Die syrischen Wurzeln," 202; Reinink, "Ps.-Methodius," 170–74; Reinink, "Romance of Julian the Apostate," 75–86; Martinez, "Apocalyptic Genre in Syriac," 349–50. For the passage from the Syriac Julian Romance, see Hoffmann, *Iulianos der Abtruennige*, 200–201. For the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*, see *Cave of Treasures* 24:24–6 (Su-Min Ri, ed., *La caverne des trésors*, 192–95 [Syr] and 74–75 [Fr]).

63. Reinink, "Ps.-Methodius," 176–77. See also Konrad, *De ortu et tempore Antichristi*, 47–48; Reinink, "Die syrischen Wurzeln," 201; Martinez, "Apocalyptic Genre," 351.

64. In addition to the following discussion, see also Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, 170–71; and Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 167–69.

sented by Egypt and Ethiopia. When the Sibyl predicts the conversion of the Jews immediately thereafter, she invokes Jeremiah 23:6 (“In those days Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell in confidence”), thus making the meaning of the Psalm even more clear through the parallel structure (*Tib. Sib.* 10). Ps.-Methodius, however, takes this passage in a decidedly different direction, which is governed largely by his elaborate speculations concerning the Ethiopian lineage of the Greek kings in combination with certain ambiguities present in the Syriac version of the Psalm that are absent from the Greek. For Ps.-Methodius this verse stands not as a prophecy of the pagans’ conversion but as a forecast of the Last Emperor’s abdication, which will fulfill the Psalmist’s prediction (in 68:31) that “Kush [Ethiopia] will hand over power to God; . . . for a son of Kushyat, daughter of Pil, king of the Kushites [Ethiopians], is the person [i.e., the Last Emperor] who will ‘hand over power to God.’”⁶⁵

In offering this interpretation, Ps.-Methodius explicitly rejects an already-established tradition of interpreting this verse as a reference to the kingdom of Ethiopia and its conversion, and he insists instead that this prophecy concerns the kingdom of the Greeks (i.e., Byzantium).⁶⁶ In order to justify this interpretation, *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* devotes much of its “historical” section to demonstrating the Ethiopian lineage of the Byzantine emperors through Alexander the Great, in an effort to underscore, according to Reinink, the unity of the Greek-Roman-Byzantine Empire as the fourth and final empire predicted by Daniel.⁶⁷ The end result, as Alexander observes, is that the author “dedicates the entire first half of the work to proof of the proposition that the ‘Ethiopia’ of the Psalmist was not, as some earlier members of the clergy had believed, the historical and contemporary kingdom of Ethiopia but the Roman (i.e., Byzantine) Empire.”⁶⁸ Yet the interpretation is so awkward, so forced, that one would imagine that the author had inherited a tradition already linking this verse with the Last Emperor’s appearance, thus requiring him to rethink the verse’s eschatological meaning. Of course, by the mid-seventh century it no longer made much sense to understand this verse as a prophecy forecasting the conversion of Ethiopia just before the end of time. That event had already taken place in the mid-fourth century, and so it made much better sense as a portent of the *eschaton* for *Tib.*

65. Reinink, ed., *Syrische Apokalypse*, 44–45 (Syr). My translation, although see also Reinink, ed., *Syrische Apokalypse*, 73–74 (Germ); Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius: A Concept of History,” 161–62; and Palmer, *Seventh Century*, 240.

66. Reinink, ed., *Syrische Apokalypse*, 19–20 (Syr) and 29–34 (German).

67. See e.g., Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius,” 161–68; Reinink, “Alexander the Great,” 175–76.

68. Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 168.

Sib.'s author. Yet identifying Ethiopia with the Byzantine Empire likewise would not make much sense if by "hastening to offer its hand to God" one envisioned the Empire's conversion: this too had already taken place long ago. Ultimately, Ps.-Methodius's reinterpretation of Ethiopia as Rome only becomes intelligible on the basis of an ambivalence specific to the Syriac version of this Psalm that is absent from the Greek.

The Syriac expression that translates the phrase "offer its hand" has a significant range of meaning beyond the Greek version: in Syriac the expression *tashlem ido* can also mean "will hand over power," and this is the sense with which the author of *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* has determined to understand the passage.⁶⁹ Accordingly, the Psalm predicts not Ethiopia's conversion, as *Tib. Sib.* and other sources have understood it; instead this verse portends the surrender of power to God by "Ethiopia," which is here the Roman Empire, through the Last Emperor's deposition of his crown and robe at Golgotha. The fact that Ps.-Methodius not only deliberately rejects an earlier interpretation of this verse that is present in *Tib. Sib.* but also reinterprets this verse in a manner specific to the nuances of the Syriac translation again seems to indicate that he has developed an earlier tradition in some new directions. In this instance as well then, *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* seems to have adapted earlier traditions about the Last Emperor that are witnessed in *Tib. Sib.* in order adjust them to a seventh-century Syriac milieu.

Gog and Magog

Tib. Sib. and *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* also share a tradition concerning Alexander the Great's enclosure of the 22 peoples of Gog and Magog, and here again Ps.-Methodius' description of Gog and Magog and their role in the events of the *eschaton* appears to be much more developed and recent in comparison with the Sibyl's. Sackur seemingly was the first to notice this relationship, and he considered it one of the clearest indications of *Tib. Sib.*'s independence from *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* and other later apocalyptic texts. The key difference, according to Sackur, is that *Tib. Sib.* names only Gog and Magog, whereas Ps.-Methodius provides a list identifying each of the 22 peoples that Alexander enclosed. On the basis of this difference as well as the Last Emperor's removal from Gog and Magog's defeat, Sackur concludes that Ps.-Methodius has adapted here an earlier tradition from *Tib. Sib.*⁷⁰ Yet in other ways also, Ps.-Methodius shows evidence of having expanded the sig-

69. Martinez, "Apocalyptic Genre," 347–48; Greisiger, "Ein nubischer Erlöser-König," 195.

70. Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, 171–72.

nificance of Gog and Magog in this eschatological narrative. For instance, the account of their enclosure by Alexander behind a bronze gate occupies a significant portion of *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.*'s historical section—essentially all of book eight. By contrast *Tib. Sib.*, which mentions no gate, merely notes their enclosure, their appearance at the end of time, and their defeat by the Last Emperor, all in just a few lines.⁷¹ Likewise, *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* and other later traditions describe the savagery and cruelty of these peoples in some detail, as well as the terror and plight of their victims. *Tib. Sib.* has none of this, noting only that these nations are “unclean” (*spurcissime*),⁷² and as Reinink has demonstrated, Ps.-Methodius had drawn all of this additional information concerning Gog and Magog primarily from the *Syriac Alexander Legend*.⁷³ Once again it would appear that here also Ps.-Methodius has developed earlier traditions present in *Tib. Sib.* by expanding them and adapting them to his Syriac cultural context.

Nevertheless Paul Alexander, in a marginal note added to his posthumously published book, remarks that “the combination of Gog and Alexander is not attested before the seventh century.” On this basis he suggests there that the Last Emperor’s abdication in *Tib. Sib.* is an interpolation, which “if not derived from Pseudo-Methodius, is contemporary with it, or possibly may have a common source.”⁷⁴ Yet, even if it were true that Alexander (the Great) is not linked with Gog and Magog prior to the seventh century, this small point hardly seems sufficient to justify eliminating the entire Last Emperor episode from *Tib. Sib.*, particularly in light of all of the evidence considered above. And as Paul Alexander himself notes elsewhere with unmistakable clarity, in light of the differences between the two traditions, it simply does not seem possible that *Tib. Sib.* could depend on *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.*⁷⁵ Much more importantly, it is clear that the tradition of Alexander’s enclosure of Gog and Magog in the north is indeed earlier than the seventh century and even earlier than the late fourth century, the time of *Tib. Sib.*’s composition.⁷⁶

Already at the beginning of the Christian era, Hellenized Jews in Alexandria had begun to merge the biblical traditions of Gog and Magog

71. Reinink, ed., *Syrische Apokalypse*, 13–17 (Syr) and 19–26 (German); Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, 186, lines 2–5.

72. See Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 187.

73. See Reinink, ed., *Syrische Apokalypse*, 21–26 and 67–68 (Germ), esp. 21 n. 4 and 67 n. 2.

74. Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 163 n. 44.

75. Alexander, “Diffusion of Byzantine Apocalypses,” 58, 63–64, & esp. 93–94 n. 9; cf. Alexander, “Medieval Legend,” 15; Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, 170.

76. Möhring, *Weltkaiser der Endzeit*, 44.

“with stories of how, during his military campaigns, Alexander the Great built enormous iron gates in order to prevent barbarous incursions from the north.”⁷⁷ Josephus is an early witness to this emergent tradition. In his *Jewish War* he refers to the “Scythians” as enclosed behind “the pass which king Alexander had closed with iron gates” (*J.W.* 7.7.4, trans. Thackeray), while elsewhere, in the *Antiquities*, he equates the Scythians with Gog and Magog (*Ant.* 1.6.1). Jerome also seems to know a similar tradition concerning a place in the north “where the gates of Alexander keep back the wild peoples behind the Caucasus” (*Epist.* 77.8, trans. Hilberg). And even the Gog and Magog traditions of the *Syriac Alexander Legend* and the homily on Alexander attributed to Jacob of Serug are not as securely dated to the early seventh century as Paul Alexander seems to presume. Despite Reinink’s arguments to the contrary, it seems quite possible that both texts draw on an earlier common source, and some specialists even remain convinced that Jacob’s homily is in fact authentic.⁷⁸ Sackur for his part does admit some concern regarding the mention of 22 peoples in *Tib. Sib.*, inasmuch as Josephus and Jerome do not indicate any particular number, and accordingly he allows for the possibility that the sentence specifying their number may be an interpolation.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the earliest version of the *Alexander Romance*, from the third century if not perhaps even earlier, concludes with the notice that Alexander “overcame twenty-two barbarian peoples.”⁸⁰ Undoubtedly this tradition is the source of the number 22 in *Tib. Sib.* and in later apocalyptic texts as well.

TIBURTINE SYBIL AND LATE ROMAN POLITICAL ESCHATOLOGY

Comparison of the Last Emperor traditions from *Tib. Sib.* and *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* thus shows not only that the former is not dependent on the latter, but

77. Van Donzel, Schmidt, and Ott, *Gog and Magog*, 9; see also Pfister, *Alexander der Grosse*, 319–27.

78. See the discussion of the various hypotheses in Reinink, *Das syrische Alexanderlied*, 1–15. On the authenticity of the homily attributed to Jacob of Sarug (d. 521), see Zuwiyya, ed., *Companion to Alexander Literature*, 42–45.

79. Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, 172.

80. Kroll, *Historia Alexandri Magni*, 146; trans. Stoneman, *Greek Alexander Romance*, 159. This passage is also confirmed by the Latin and Armenian translations, both of which were realized very early: Kübler, *Iuli Valeri Alexandri*, 168; Wolohojian, *Romance of Alexander the Great*, 158 (trans. of the Armenian). Concerning the date and these versions, see Zuwiyya, ed., *Companion to Alexander Literature* 2–3, 5–6; Stoneman, *Greek Alexander Romance*, 8–14.

to the contrary, if anything, Ps.-Methodius seems to have further developed earlier traditions that are found in the Sibyl's prophecies. No part of the Sibyl's predictions concerning the Last Emperor requires *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* to explain its presence, and other, much earlier sources provide strong precedent for most of the legend's content. The basic building blocks of the Last Emperor tradition had in fact already found expression in the late third-century *Apocalypse of Elijah*, as David Frankfurter and others have noted. Here one finds, among other parallels with *Tib. Sib.*, a king from the "City of the Sun," whose striking similarities to the Latin Sibyl's Last Emperor suggest that we have here "one of the 'last emperor's' ideological roots."⁸¹ As Frankfurter writes, "This penultimate savior in the *Apocalypse of Elijah* no doubt forms one of the major sources of the 'Last Emperor' tradition in Byzantine apocalypticism: a human ruler whose beneficent accession and dominion would paradoxically usher in the period of the Antichrist."⁸² Moreover, as noted already above, the ideology of the Roman Empire as a divinely-elected polity was well-established by the late fourth century, as was the notion that, as the last of Daniel's four kingdoms, Rome was destined to be the last world empire, after which would follow the Kingdom of God. It certainly is no great leap to combine this ideology with the idea of a final eschatological king such as we find in the *Apocalypse of Elijah* to yield the myth of the Last Roman Emperor.

The idea of a Last Emperor thus was already implicit in the eschatology and political ideology of fourth-century Christianity; all *Tib. Sib.*'s author had to do was pull these two related themes together. Only the means by which this Last Emperor would relinquish authority remained to be imagined. That Jerusalem would be the site is certainly to be expected, given the Holy City's paramount importance in Jewish and Christian eschatology.⁸³ As for the Emperor laying down his diadem, the symbolism of this deed is fairly obvious, and its inclusion does not require much imagination. Yet this act too is not without precedent; as Sackur notes, the tradition of hanging "crowns" in holy places is an ancient custom, and Constantine himself had his diadem hung in Hagia Sophia.⁸⁴ There was also a late-antique practice of sending royal headgear to Jerusalem, as witnessed by the Piacenza Pil-

81. Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, 24, 202; Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 60, 137.

82. See *Apoc. Elijah* 2.46–3.1 (Steindorff, *Apokalypse des Elias*, 84–87; trans. Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, 311–13). On the relation between the *Apocalypse of Elijah* and *Tib. Sib.*, see Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, 24, 202; Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 60, 137.

83. See, e.g., Alexander, "Medieval Legend," 5–7.

84. Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, 165.

grim, who saw imperial crowns hanging from the Holy Sepulcher in the later sixth century.⁸⁵ King Kaleb of Ethiopia affords a specific example of this practice: after defeating the Himyarites in Yemen at the beginning of the sixth century, Kaleb abdicated his rule in order to enter a monastery, sending his crown to Jerusalem to hang before the door of the Holy Sepulcher.⁸⁶ Thus the basic elements of *Tib. Sib.*'s Last Emperor traditions all seem to have been well in place long before *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* was translated into Greek and Latin.

Nevertheless, the question still remains as to why this Last Emperor legend is largely absent from the Greek version of *Tib. Sib.*, and the answer admittedly is not entirely clear. As noted above, some of the most basic elements of the Last Emperor tradition do in fact appear, reflected in the reign of prosperity that is promised under the final emperor, just prior to the Antichrist's manifestation. But much more is lacking, including the description of the Last Emperor's physical appearance and his name, his subjugation and conversion of the pagans and Jews, his defeat of Gog and Magog, and his deposition of his diadem and royal garb at Jerusalem. If these themes belong to the earliest layer of the textual tradition, why then are they missing from the Greek? It certainly is possible that for some reason these traditions were absent from the particular version of *Tib. Sib.* that this Greek redactor used; perhaps it was a slightly older redaction that did not yet have the Last Emperor traditions included. Alternatively, these elements may have been deliberately left out by the Greek redactor, as Rangheri and Möhring have proposed.⁸⁷ Possibly the legend's specific links to the fourth century, and especially the Last Emperor's name "Constans" and its focus on converting the pagans, seemed less relevant to the sixth-century editor. Rangheri and Möhring both additionally suggest a possibility that the legend may have been a separate early tradition that was added to the Latin version of *Tib. Sib.* at the time of its translation from Greek during the later fourth century.⁸⁸

There certainly is no way to exclude entirely the possibility that the Last Emperor tradition may have been interpolated into the Latin *Tib. Sib.*, perhaps even sometime after its translation from Greek into Latin. Yet there are no obvious textual signs of an interpolation, and the legend seems to

85. Antonius of Piacenza, *Itinerarium* 18 (Geyer, ed., *Itineraria et alia Geographica*, 138).

86. *Martyrdom of St. Arethas and His Companions* 39 (Detoraki, ed., *Le martyre de Saint Aréthas*, 284–85)

87. Rangheri, "Epistola ad Gerbergami," 708–9 n. 79; Möhring, *Weltkaiser der Endzeit*, 43.

88. Rangheri, "Epistola ad Gerbergami," 708–9 n. 79; Möhring, *Weltkaiser der Endzeit*, 43–44. Cf. Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 63–65.

fit its context rather well. And if it is an interpolation, it does not depend on *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.*, which it clearly predates. Not only are there too many differences between the accounts to imagine that *Tib. Sib.*'s version could possibly derive from Ps.-Methodius, but the content of the Sibyl's prophecies concerning the Last Emperor clearly marks them as late-antique and pre-Islamic. Moreover, it would seem that despite their preservation now only in Latin, these early traditions of the Last Emperor were circulating broadly in the eastern Mediterranean world prior to the advent of Islam. Their adaptation by Ps.-Methodius itself offers compelling evidence of this fact. Equally important is the appearance of the Last Emperor in *5 Baruch*, an Ethiopic apocalypse that seemingly dates to the early seventh century⁸⁹ and significant echoes of this myth that register in Jewish apocalyptic literature from the same era,⁹⁰ both of which appear to confirm the legend's broader cultural currency. Consequently there can be little doubt that the final triumph and abdication of the Last Emperor had entered into the Christian eschatological imagination sometime before the Islamic conquests, and already in late antiquity this myth formed an important part of the Byzantine apocalyptic tradition.

Yet the emergence of this legend prior to the rise of Islam holds significance beyond merely refining our knowledge of early Byzantine apocalypticism and imperial eschatology. The circulation of the Last Emperor myth in late antiquity is equally important, as noted above, for understanding the broader religious milieu that gave rise to the Islamic tradition. In particular, the Last Emperor tradition can help to illuminate the apocalyptic political ideology that seems to have fueled formative Islam.⁹¹ In contrast to the somewhat different memories of Islamic origins that were canonized by the classical Islamic tradition during the later eighth and ninth centuries, earliest Islam appears to have been an eschatological movement focused on Jerusalem. There, it would seem, Muhammad and his followers expected their righteous polity to triumph over the infidels and liberate the

89. For the text of *5 Baruch* see Halévy, *Těžžâza sanbat*, 95–96; trans. in Leslau, *Falasha Anthology*, 75–76. Regarding the date, Pierluigi Piovaneli recently presented his arguments in a paper entitled “The Visions of Baruch and Gorgorios: Two ‘Moral’ Apocalypses in Late Antique Ethiopia,” at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature in Chicago (19 November 2012). The foundation of the argument is the text's failure to make any mention of the Islamic conquests or any other event beyond the end of the sixth century.

90. See, e.g., Van Bekkum, “Jewish Messianic Expectations,” 95–112, 107–8; Reeves, *Trajectories*, 20, 31–39, 58–66; Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies*, 53–54; Himmelfarb, “*Sefer Eliyyahu*,” 229–30. See also Suermann, “Der byzantinische Endkaiser,” 148–55.

91. For more on this topic, see Shoemaker, “Reign of God.”

Promised Land, thus ushering in the Final Judgment of the Hour and the eschatological reign of God.⁹² Although the sixth and early seventh centuries were generally an age of intense and intensifying eschatological expectation in Byzantium,⁹³ the legend of the Last Emperor in particular offers important precedent for early Islam's vision of an eschatological imperial triumph that would be fulfilled in Jerusalem. Other sources from the period, especially Jewish sources, similarly envision the *eschaton's* arrival through victory over the enemies of God in the Holy Land. But *Tib. Sib.* indicates that such ideas were equally current among the Christians of late antiquity. The myth of the Last Emperor then was not something new that first emerged only in the wake of the Islamic conquests, as some studies of this tradition in Syriac especially could seem to suggest. Rather, it reflects an already-established apocalyptic political ideology that was an important facet of early Byzantine imperial eschatology. The Last Emperor's appearance in *Apoc. Ps.-Meth.* and other related texts thus reflects the reinvigoration of an already-established tradition in reaction to the ascendancy of Islam. Consequently, we should understand this influential theme from the Byzantine apocalyptic tradition not merely as a response to Islamic dominion, but also as an important element of the immediate religious context that gave birth to the Islamic tradition itself.

92. See, e.g., Shoemaker, *Death of a Prophet*.

93. Mango, *Byzantium*, 203–204; Magdalino, “History of the Future,” 4–5; Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, 118–20; Brandes, “Anastasios ó δίκτορος,” 26–32, 39–40, 53–63; Ashbrook Harvey, “Remembering Pain,” 298–302; Nicholson, “Golden Age,” 11–18; Brandes, “Die apokalyptische Literatur,” 308; Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies*, 55, 62. In a forthcoming article, however, Averil Cameron raises a challenge to this consensus of a spike in apocalypticism in the sixth and seventh centuries: “Late antique apocalyptic: a context for the Qur’an?” I thank Prof. Cameron for sharing the text of this article in advance of its publication.