THE ORIGIN OF DANIEL'S FOUR EMPIRES SCHEME RE-EXAMINED[1]

Ernest C. Lucas

Since the work of Swain[2] it has been widely held that the four empires scheme found in Daniel 2 and 7 originated in Persia. Thus Winston says, 'Embedded in its [Daniel's] second and seventh chapters is a four-monarchy theory which derives unmistakably from Persian apocalyptic sources'.[3] The scheme is also found in some of the Sibylline Oracles, where it is combined with a division of history into ten periods. In Daniel 7 there is a series of ten kings, though this is not emphasized as a ten-fold division of history. The ten-fold division of history is also attributed to Persian influence. For example, Collins[4] says, 'The division of history into ten periods ultimately derives from Persian religion, but is also found widely in Jewish apocalyptic'. Before discussing the origin of these two schemes we will survey their occurrence in the Sibyllines.

I. The Four Empires and Ten Periods in the Sibyllines

Sibylline Oracle 4 in its final form is usually dated soon after the latest event it records, namely the eruption of Vesuvius (AD 79), which is presented as God's response to the sacrilege of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (vv. 115–134). However, Flusser[5] and Collins[6] argue that embedded in the

---

[2]J.S. Swain, 'The Theory of the Four Monarchies: Opposition History Under the Roman Empire', *Class. Phil.* 35 (1940) 1–21.

[3]D. Winston, 'The Iranian Component in the Bible, Apocrypha and Qumran: A Review of the Evidence', *Hist. Rel.* 5 (1966) 183–216.

[4]J.J. Collins in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* I (New York 1983) 323.

[5]D. Flusser, 'The Four Empires in the Fourth Sibyl and in the Book of Daniel', *IOS* 2 (1972) 148–75.

final form of the book is a much older oracle. Its core is found in
verses 49–101. Here the Sibyl speaks of ten generations divided
amongst four world empires—the Assyrian, Median, Persian,
and Macedonian. These are allotted six, two, one, and one
generations respectively. The build-up leads the reader to
expect the final judgement and/or the divine kingdom to
appear after the tenth generation. Instead Rome appears and
the survey of history continues until AD 79.

It looks as if an oracle written before the rise of Rome,
and presenting Macedonia as the last great world power, has
been re-used with verses 102–51 added as a sequel. It may be
that the original conclusion of the early oracle lies behind the
present ending in verses 173–92, as Collins suggests. Flusser sees
the beginning of the original oracle in verses 1–3, 18–23, 48. The
four nations referred to in the oracle indicate its provenance in
the eastern Mediterranean, where these powers held sway. It
must be dated between the conquests of Alexander the Great and
the defeat of Antiochus III by Scipio at Magnesia. Collins
favours a date not long after the time of Alexander because
there are no allusions to any events after his death and the
Macedonian Empire is alloted a life-time of one generation.
There is nothing specifically Jewish about it. The Jewish
character of the final form of Sibylline Oracle 4 is quite clear,
for example in its understanding of the eruption of Vesuvius as
punishment for the destruction of Jerusalem. Sibylline Oracle 4
differs from the other Jewish Sibyls in a number of ways: there
is an implied rejection of Temple worship in verses 5–12, 24–34;
verses 179–82 show belief in resurrection; in verses 163–69
salvation requires baptism and repentance. These factors, plus
the fact that the only clear reference to Egypt is in the re-used
oracle (v. 72), leads to the suggestion that, unlike the other
extant Jewish Sibyllines, Sibylline Oracle 4 originated in
Palestine in one of the Jewish baptismal sects that was part of
the milieu that produced John the Baptizer, the Ebionites, and
the Elcasaites. There is nothing in the oracle to suggest
Christian redaction.

---

[6]J.J. Collins, 'The Place of the Fourth Sibyl in the Development of Jewish
Sibyllina', *JJS* 25 (1974) 365–380.

Sibylline Oracle 3. It is generally accepted that this is a composite work.[7] The core of the book consists of three sections, verses 97–349, 489–656, 657–829, each of which culminates in a decisive intervention by God. All three sections show similar ideas and probably come from one author. The date of this main corpus is fixed by three references to the seventh king of Egypt (vv. 193, 318, 608), who belongs to 'the dynasty of the Greeks' (v. 609). This implies a date not later than the reign of Ptolemy VI, since this king is seen as still in the future. Moreover, since this king is a messianic figure, the oracle, which is clearly Jewish, must have been written at a time when Jews were well-disposed to the Ptolemies. This was especially so in the reign of Ptolemy VI. The prominence of Rome in verses 175–90 may indicate a date after Rome's intervention in Egyptian affairs in the time of Antiochus IV, and so during the second half of Ptolemy VI's interrupted reign, that is 163–145 BC. Collins[8] argues that the emphasis on war and politics in Sibylline Oracle 3, its positive attitude towards the Ptolemies, and its great interest in the Jewish Temple, all point to its origin in the circle of Jews around Onias, the refugee priest of the High Priestly line who was a prominent general in the army of Ptolemy VI. Since there is no mention of the Leontopolis Temple which was built for Onias, the oracle must pre-date it. If the book was written between Onias' arrival in Egypt and the building of the temple there, it must be dated in the period 160–150 BC. The only Christian interpolation in the core of the book is verse 776.

In Sibylline Oracle 3:156–61 there is a list of eight kingdoms. However, we should probably assume that the kingdom of Chronos and the Titans mentioned in verses 110ff. is taken as preceding these, and that a final kingdom is expected after Rome (as in vv. 193ff.)—giving a division of history into ten periods. Flusser[9] argues that the use of conjunctions in this passage implies a scheme of four kingdoms plus Rome by linking

---

[7]J.J. Collins, *The Sibylline Oracles of Egyptian Judaism* (Missoula, Mont. 1974) 21.

[8]J.J. Collins, 'The Provenance of the Third Sibylline Oracle', *Bull. Inst. Jew. Stud.* 2 (1974) 1–18.

[9]Flusser, 'The Four Empires' 160 n. 49.

together the Persians, Medes, Ethiopians, and Babylonians. Against this is the oddity of including Ethiopia with the eastern powers, though the author of Sibylline Oracle 8 does this (see below).[10] Verses 162–95 constitute a separate oracle giving a sketchy survey of history from Solomon to the Roman defeat of the Seleucids, and then prophesying the collapse of Rome because of her immorality, and the messianic reign of the seventh king of Egypt when 'the people of the great God will again be strong' (v. 194). This survey refers to ten kingdoms prior to the messianic one. However, several of them—the Pamphilians, Carians, Mysians, Lydians—never had any claim to world rule, and only the Macedonians and Romans really interest the writer.

Sibylline Oracles 1 and 2 are not separated in the manuscripts and in fact constitute a single unit. There is general agreement that the work consists of an original Jewish oracle with an extensive Christian redaction.[11] The Jewish oracle surveyed history from creation to the eschaton, dividing it into ten generations. The first seven generations are preserved without interpolation in Sibylline Oracle 1:1–323. A Christian interpolation takes up the rest of Book 1. After a transitional passage in 2:1–5, the original sequence is resumed in 2:6–33. However, the passages dealing with generations eight and nine have been lost. The prominence given to Phrygia in 1:196–98, 261f. is the only evidence of the provenance of the Jewish oracle. There is nothing to indicate the provenance of the Christian redaction. Assuming an origin in Asia Minor, the dominance of Rome in the tenth generation suggests a time of writing when Roman power in the Near East had been consolidated, that is, after 30 BC. There is no reference to the events of AD 70, so setting an upper limit to the date. Kurfess[12] suggests a date around the turn of the era for the original Jewish oracle.

---

[10]A possible explanation of this oddity is the link of Cush with Mesopotamia in Gen. 2:13, 14; 10:8–12. In the OT Cush usually denotes Ethiopia, but in these passages it may refer to the Kassites.

[11]Charlesworth (ed.), *OT Pseudepigrapha* I 330.

[12]A. Kurfess, 'Oracula Sibyllina I/II', *ZNW* 40 (1941) 151–65.

Sibylline Oracle 8:1–15 repeats the list of nations from Sibylline Oracle 3:159–61, but with no mention of Chronos. By linking together the Persians, Medes, and Ethiopians as one, Rome becomes the fifth kingdom. This looks like an attempt to combine the list from Book 3 with the scheme of four kingdoms plus Rome in Sibylline Oracle 4:49–151. The author of Sibylline Oracle 8 knew of the ten generations scheme which is used in Sibylline Oracle 4, as the reference to the tenth generation in verse 199 shows. Verses 1–216 are quite distinct from verses 217–500 in character, and probably from a different author. The expectation of Nero's return in the reign of Marcus Aurelius (vv. 65–74) indicates a date for the first part of the oracle before the latter's death in AD 180. In view of the prominence of christology in verses 217–500, and in the Christian Sibyllines in general, the lack of it in verses 1–216, plus the reference to Nero's attack on 'the nation of the Hebrews' (v. 141) may be taken to indicate Jewish authorship of this section.

Sibylline Oracle 7 contains a passing reference to 'the tenth time' as a time of judgement in an oracle against Sardinia (v. 97). Sibylline Oracle 7 is a poorly preserved and loosely structured collection of oracles, which is usually dated to the second century AD, though indications of date are sparse.[13] It is a Christian work with no clear evidence of a Jewish substratum. The reference to the House of David (vv. 29–39) and condemnation of those who falsely claim to be Hebrews (vv. 134f.) may indicate that the author was a Jewish Christian.

This discussion shows that the 10 period scheme is a feature of the Jewish material in the Sibyllines. Its first appearance seems to be in Sibylline Oracle 4:49–101 (third century BC), where it is combined with the four kingdom scheme. The same combination may occur in Sibylline Oracle 8:1–15 (second century AD), perhaps imitating Sibylline Oracle 4. In Sibylline Oracles 1, 2, 3 the ten period scheme occurs on its own.

---

[13]Charlesworth (ed.), *OT Pseudepigrapha* I 408.

II. The Proposed Persian Origin of the Schemes

The case for a Persian, and more specifically Zoroastrian, source of these schemes has been argued in detail most recently by Flusser,[14] and we shall take his arguments as the basis for our discussion.

As Flusser notes, the earliest known examples of the four empires scheme are those in Sibylline Oracle 4 and Daniel 2 and 7. In Sibylline Oracle 4 the empires are the Assyrian, Median, Persian, and Macedonian. This is the list found in Roman writers, beginning with Aemilius Sura,[15] whose work is usually dated to the early second century BC,[16] with Rome added as the fifth empire. In Daniel 2 the list begins with Babylon, but the other empires are not explicitly identified here, or in chapter 7. The explicit re–interpretation of the fourth beast of Daniel 7 as the Roman Empire in 4 Ezra 12:12 implies that the author was aware of an alternative, more common, interpretation. The most likely one is that adopted by most modern commentators: Babylonia, Media, Persia, Macedonia. In Josephus' *Antiquities* we find the third empire taken as the Macedonian (X.209f.) and the last as the Roman (X.276f.). This implies the sequence: Babylonia, (Medo-) Persia, Macedonia, Rome. Flusser's argument concerning the Persian influence on Sibylline Oracle 4 and Daniel consists of the following points:

(1) The sequence, Assyria, Media, Persia, Macedonia, for the great empires must have arisen in the eastern Mediterranean where these powers held sway, and would fit best a region which, having been under Assyrian rule, was taken over by the Medes rather than the Babylonians.

(2) The author of Daniel 2 knew this scheme but in taking it over replaced Assyria by Babylon. This point is asserted

---

[14]Flusser, 'The Four Empires' 148–75.

[15]For the fragment of Aemilius Sura preserved in Velleius Paterculus see Swain, 'The Theory of the Four Monarchies' ref. 2. The Latin text and an English translation are given.

[16]D. Mendels, 'The Five Empires: A Note on a Propogandistic Topos', *Amer. J. Phil.* 102 (1981), 330–37, disagrees and dates Aemilius Sura to the end of the first century BC.

rather than proved by argument. In Daniel 2 the four empires are associated with four metals: gold, silver, bronze, and iron (part mixed with clay).

(3) Servius,[17] writing about AD 400, in his commentary on Virgil, *Eclogues* IV.4, speaks of the Cumean Sibyl. He says that she divided the generations by metals, said who would rule each generation, the Sun being the tenth and last ruler, and said that at the end of all the generations everything that had been would be repeated. Flusser argues for Persian influence on the Sibyl because he sees in the Sun as ruler a reference to Mithras (often called *Sol invictus Mithras*) who, according to the Persians, will be the eschatological judge. He admits that the idea of a cyclical renewal of the world is Stoic and not Zoroastrian, but suggests that here Servius misunderstood his source. It is not clear from Servius whether the Sibyl associated each generation with a different metal, or shared them out between a smaller number (four?) of metals.

(4) The identification of four world-ages with gold, silver, bronze, and iron is found in Hesiod, *Works and Days* 109–201,[18] and Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I.89–162.[19]   A slightly different scheme is found in the Zoroastrian texts Denkard IX.8 and Zand-i Vohuman Yasn 1 (this text is also known as Bahman Yasht).[20]   These speak of the four periods of the millenium of Zoroaster which are characterized by gold, silver, steel, and iron-mixed. In the Zand rulers of each period are named. Flusser thinks it probable that the author of Daniel 2 combined the schemes found in Hesiod and the Persian sources to produce his own with its combination of iron and iron-mixed-with-clay in the fourth age.

---

[17]For the Latin text see D. Flusser, 'The Four Empires' ref. 14, n. 59.

[18]For the Greek text and English trans. see, H.G. Evelyn–White (ed.), *Hesiod: The Homeric Hymns and Homerica* (London, Loeb 1914).

[19]For the Latin text and English translation see, F.J. Miller (ed.) *Ovid: Metamorphoses* I (London, Loeb 1916).

[20]See Flusser, 'The Four Empires' ref. 74, for sources and translation of relevant passages. The full English text can be found in E.W. West, *Pahlavi Texts*, Part I (Zand) Part IV (Denkard, Oxford 1880–1897). The exact meaning of 'iron–mixed' is unknown.

(5) The Zand chapter 1 refers to the fourth age as the one 'when thy tenth century will be at an end, O Spitaman Zarathusht'. This phrase is repeated later in 4:16, and there is also a variant of it, 'that tenth century, which will be the end of thy millenium' (4.41).

(6) Flusser points out that it is only in Zoroastrian sources that we find the combination of four ages/four metals/ten periods. He concludes therefore that Persian sources are the ultimate origin of these motifs when they occur in the Sibylline Oracles, Daniel, Jewish apocalyptic, and rabbinical literature.

III. The Four Empires in Daniel

The argument concerning the provenance of the origin of the sequence of world powers is reasonable. So is Swain's suggestion that it was mediated to the Romans by Persian colonists in Asia Minor. However, the assumption that the author of Daniel 2 consciously borrowed and adapted this scheme deserves scrutiny. If the order intended in Daniel 2 is: Babylonian, Persian, Macedonian, Roman, the idea of borrowing is superfluous. The sequence simply reflects the historical reality experienced by a Jew living in Babylonia or Judaea. If what is intended is the sequence: Babylonian, Median, Persian, Macedonian, the inclusion of the Median Empire is odd since the Medes never gained control of Babylonia or Judaea. Swain[21] explained this oddity by the suggestion that the author of Daniel 2 included the Medes because he adhered to the traditional scheme, apart from the need to replace Assyria by Babylon, and because in any case his knowledge of the period was sketchy. With regard to this point it must suffice here to say that the imagery of the ram in chapter 8 indicates an accurate knowledge of the relationship of the Median and Persian empires which should make one cautious about

---

[21]E.W. Heaton, *Daniel* (London 1972) 192, says, 'As J.A. Montgomery comments, "The moments of the vision of the horns well represent the relation of Media and Persia in power and time", and one wonders whether the writer's knowledge of their history is quite as inaccurate as some of the other references ... suggest'. On the history see I.M. Diakonoff, 'The Median Empire' in I. Gershevitch (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran* II (Cambridge 1981) 110–48.

suggesting that in chapter 2 the author evidences only imperfect knowledge of the Median Empire.

If the author of Daniel 2 (and 7) did have an accurate knowledge of the Assyrian, Median, Babylonian, and Persian empires, why did he adopt the sequence: Babylonian, Median, Persian, Macedonian? Gurney[22] comments that the passing of power from one empire to another is not always a clear-cut matter. The perception of when a power becomes 'top nation' depends on one's stand-point and interests—as is indicated by the omission of Babylon from the sequence in Sibylline Oracle 4. Throughout the lifetime of the Neo-Babylonian Empire Media could be seen as at least its equal in power, and a potential rival. The Medes had played a major part in toppling the Assyrian Empire and had annexed its northern and eastern portions. Following Nebuchadnezzar's death, whilst Babylon was weakened by court intrigues, Media could be seen as the major power in the eastern Mediterranean world—until Cyrus rebelled and brought the Persians to the fore. Scholars have sometimes commented on the seeming inconsistency in Daniel 2:36ff. in that the golden head is identified with Nebuchadnezzar rather than Babylonia, while the other parts of the image are identified with kingdoms and not individual kings.[23] Is it too subtle to see here a recognition of the fact that with the passing of Nebuchadnezzar Babylonian power entered irreversible decline and 'top nation' status passed to others? Probably not when one adds the fact that the imagery of the first beast in Daniel 7 has clear allusions to Nebuchadnezzar's experience in Daniel 4 (note 7:4b with 4:33 and 7:4b with 4:16), suggesting that the power depicted is not that of Babylon in general, but of Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar. Another point to consider is that the view-point of Daniel is that of a Babylonian Jew. We might therefore expect a Jewish slant on the perception of world powers. 2 Kings 17:6 and 18:11 state that when the Assyrians deported many of the Israelites they settled some 'in the cities of the Medes'. The Judaeans were

---

[22]R.J.M. Gurney, 'The Four Kingdoms of Daniel 2 and 7', *Themelios* 2 (1977) 39–45.

[23]See for example: N. Porteus, *Daniel* (London rev. edn. 1979); L.F. Hartman, and A.A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel* (New York 1978).

interested in the plight of their northern brothers. We find
oracles of Judaean prophets expressing the belief that those
exiled from the North will return and that this will be
associated with a re-union of the two kingdoms under a Davidic
ruler, for example, Micah 5; Jeremiah 30 and 31; Ezekiel 37.
The experience of these exiles could have been of concern to the
author of Daniel, who was aware of the prophecies of
restoration in Jeremiah (Daniel 9:2) and who incorporates in
chapter 9 a prayer expressing the distress of Judah, the
inhabitants of Jerusalem, and 'all Israel, those that are near
and those that are far away, in all the lands to which thou
hast driven them' (9:7). At the time when the Judaeans were
experiencing Babylonian rule some of these exiles, who never
felt the power of Babylon, were under the rule of the Medes as
successors to the Assyrians. One can therefore suggest that
rather than being the result of a combination of adherence to a
traditional scheme and an inaccurate knowledge of history, the
sequence of world powers in Daniel 2 and 7 expresses a Jewish
perception of history from the fall of Jerusalem to the expected
intervention of God to restore his kingdom. During this period
those Judaeans and Israelites who are experiencing God's
chastisement and who will, if they are faithful, share in the
kingdom, experience the power of Babylon, Media, Persia, and
Macedonia. If one asks why the Jews of the Egyptian
dispersion have no place in this scheme the answer is found in
Jeremiah 24. Hope for the future lies with the eastern
dispersion, not those in Egypt who had tried to escape God's
chastisement.

IV. The Sequence of Metals in Daniel 2

The imagery used here lacks any precedent in the Old
Testament, which does not use metals to symbolize rulers
anywhere else. Flusser recognizes that it cannot be explained
by the Persian sources alone. It is closer to that of Hesiod and
Ovid than that of the Zoroastrian texts. Hesiod, of course, pre-
dates (eighth century BC) the penetration of Zoroastrianism
into western Iran (sixth century BC).[24] His sequence of metals

[24]M.Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism* I-II (Leiden 1975/82).

seems more primitive than that of the Persian texts. The sequence bronze-iron probably reflects the knowledge that before men used iron there was a time when only bronze was used. Line 151 in the relevant passage suggests this, 'of bronze were their implements: there was no black iron'. The whole passage expresses a nostalgia for the great days of the legendary past,[25] and so it is quite understandable that ages of gold and silver should preface those of bronze and iron. The scheme of the Persian texts has lost any historical reference. An indication of the date of the extant form of the Persian scheme is given by the statement in the Zand that in the fourth, iron-mixed, age sovereignty will be given to the 'divs, having dishevelled hair'. Divs means 'evil spirits', but since the rulers of the other ages are human beings this is probably to be taken as metaphorical and condemnatory rather than literally. Eddy[26] identifies these divs as the Macedonians. He points out that in the Persepolis reliefs the Persian king and courtiers have well-groomed hair, whereas on coins and in sculptures Alexander is always depicted with dishevelled hair. Also, since the three preceeding ages are said to be ruled by Persians and the fourth has different, devilish (non-Zoroastrian?), rulers it is natural to think of the Macedonians who conquered the Persian Empire. This indicates that the present form of the scheme cannot be earlier than the Hellenistic age. It is not impossible that it was Hesiod who invented the idea of four ages characterized by metals, as Meyer suggested.[27] However, one can say no more for certain than that he witnesses to the existence of the idea and that it could have been, or become, widespread in the eastern Mediterranean world and have been drawn on independently by the authors of Daniel and the Zoroastrian texts. Since the meaning of 'iron-mixed' in the latter is unclear it is precarious to assume that Daniel's 'iron mixed with clay' is based on this rather than an independent and original touch to express a

---

[25]In ll. 174f. the poet bemoans having to live in the age of iron.

[26]S.K. Eddy, *The King is Dead* (Lincoln, Neb. 1961) 19.

[27]E. Meyer, 'Hesiods Erga und das Gedicht van den funf Menschengeschlechtern', *Kleine Schriften* II (Halle 1924) 15–66.

particular historical reality.   In fact, just as reasonable as
Flusser's speculation is Collins' comment[28] regarding the
pattern of four kingdoms plus a fifth:

The formative influence of this pattern would seem to be derived not
from a Persian source, but from Hesiod's myth of the four ages. It is
possible then that the Baham Yasht ultimately derived this pattern
from the oracles of the hellenised east, possibly even from Daniel.

If the pattern were derived from Daniel, so might be the iron-
mixed.   However, such speculation goes well beyond the
evidence.   Momigliano[29] also believes that there is Greek but
not Persian influence in the four kingdom scheme in Daniel.

V. The Dating of Material in Zoroastrian Sources

The difficulty of this and of reconstructing a history of the
development of Zoroastrian ideas is a well-recognized problem.
Gershevitch[30] summarizes the situation regarding the extant
literature:

According to the 9th. century Pahlavi Denkart (Acts of the Religion)
the texts of the scriptures had been written down in Achaemenian
times, but Alexander had burnt them; one of the Vologeses of the
Arsacid dynasty (ca. 250 B.C.—226 A.D.) rescued them from oblivion,
and under Ardashir a selective canon was established. However, the
recording of the text in a special Avestic alphabet invented for this
purpose, probably took place only in the sixth century. During the
Arab invasion parts of the canon seem to have been lost, but even so
the author of the Denkart had before him about three times more
Avestan material than has come down to us in manuscripts datable
from 1278 onwards.

This means that whilst the extant texts, only available in
manuscripts of the thirteenth century AD and later, probably

---

[28]Collins, *Sibylline Oracles* 11.

[29]A. Momigliano, 'The Origins of Universal History', in R.E. Friedman (ed.),
The Poet and the Historian (Chico, Calif. 1983) 133–48.   In addition to the
previous points he argues that in the Persian texts the declining value of the
metals is very important, representing a decline from Zoroastrianism, whereas
there is no hint in Dan. 2 that it has any importance.

[30]I. Gershevitch, 'Old Iranian Literature', *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, 1st.
Abt., 4th. Band, 2nd. Abschnitt, Lieferung 1 (Leiden 1968) 11.

contain quite a lot of early material, this is difficult to isolate from accretions that occurred during the period of mainly oral transmission until it was written down in the third to sixth centuries AD, and also from additions and changes introduced in the ninth century, when there was an upsurge of literary activity once the disruptions caused by the Arab invasion had subsided. For this reason any attempt to reconstruct the development of Zoroastrianism can produce only provisional results. A recent detailed study is that of Boyce. She concludes that:[31]

There is no trace in Zoroaster's own utterances of any fixed chronology, or any speculation about the world-age in which Frasho.Kereti will be brought to pass; but in the Gathas, as in the Christian gospels, there is a sense of urgency, of the end of things being at hand.

Zoroaster spoke of 'three times': the time of Creation, the time of Mixture (the struggle between good and evil), and, following the Frasho.Kereti (the 'making wonderful' in which creation is restored to its original perfect state), Eternity, which was later called the time of Separation because then good is separated from evil for ever. A detailed chronology seems to have come into being only with the rise of the Zurvanites, a sect that appeared in late Achaemenian times. The earliest datable reference to them is a fragment of Theopompos (fourth century BC) preserved by Plutarch.[32] It is generally believed that Zurvanism was influenced by Babylonian astrology, especially by its speculations about recurrent 'great years' that repeat themselves throughout time. The Zurvanites believed in a 'world-year' divided into periods of 1,000 years. The texts vary as to the length of the world-year. Some give it as 9,000 years (three times three being a favoured number in Zoroastrianism), others as 12,000 years (corresponding to the twelve months of the calendar year). Boyce[33] thinks that

---

[31] Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism* I 233. What follows summarizes the discussion on 229–46.

[32] Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* 47. For the Greek text and an English translation see F.C. Babbit (ed.), *Plutarch: Moralia* V (Tondon, Loeb 1984) 115.

[33] Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism* II 231ff., discusses Zurvanism.

originally the figure may have been 6,000 years, but that this was elaborated as time went on. Zoroaster seems to have taught about some kind of saviour figure. In the fully developed scheme this has become a belief in three saviours, descendants of Zoroaster, who will be born at 1,000 year intervals. Zoroaster is said to have received his revelation in the year 9,000, and the saviours will be born in the years 10,000, 11,000, and 12,000. The millenium referred to in the Zand-i Vohuman Yasn is presumably the period 9,000 - 10,000, since Zoroaster is addressed and it is described as 'thy millenium' (Zand 4:41). The four ages are meant to fit into this period. While it is not possible to date the material about the four ages and the tenth century more precisely than to say that in its present form it cannot be earlier than the Hellenistic period, it is a chronological possibility that the traditions in it could have influenced the scheme in Sibylline Oracle 4. Whether such influence is probable can only be judged by studying the content of the passages in the two works.

VI. Sibylline Oracle 4 and Zoroastrianism

The presence of a combination of two schemes of four and ten periods in both Sibylline Oracle 4 and the Zand might seem clear evidence of inter-dependence. However, there are also significant differences between the passages:

(1) In the Zand the ten centuries are not distributed between the four ages.

(2) There is no mention of the metals in Sibylline Oracle 4.

(3) The first three ages in the Zand are assigned to three Persian rulers, and the fourth, probably, to the Macedonian Empire. However in Sibylline Oracle 4 all four ages are assigned to different empires.

(4) In the Zand the metal sequence seems to signify decreasing adherence to Zoroaster and his teaching. The significance of the number of generations assigned to the empires in Sibylline Oracle 4 is not clear. It may well reflect current belief about the relative length of reign of the Assyrians and Medes. Greek sources give the Assyrian Empire a life three to four times that

of the Median Empire.[34] That Media gets two generations whereas Persia and Macedonia get one each may indicate the ethnic sympathies of the author of the scheme.

(5) The ten periods are an explicit and essential feature of the scheme in Sibylline Oracle 4. The tenth century is only mentioned in passing in the Zand, where the mention of it seems intended to focus attention on the (imminent?) end of the period.

These differences indicate that considerable caution should be exercised before asserting that the scheme in Sibylline Oracle 4 is dependent on Persian ideas of periodized history. In fact one can readily imagine a quite independent origin for the scheme. The notion of a span of history being divided into ten generations (not centuries), a fairly obvious scheme in any case, seems to have been an ancient one in the Near-East. Thus we find ten kings before the Flood in some Mesopotamian sources.[35] In the Old Testament there are ten generations from Adam to Noah before the Flood (Gen. 5), and ten from Shem to Abraham after it (Gen. 11). Nearer the time of the Sibyllines we find ten generations from the Exodus to David in the Chronicler's genealogies (1 Chron. 6:3–8). In Sibylline Oracle 4 this ancient notion may simply have been combined with the reality of historical experience in a region where folk-memory began with the Assyrian Empire and had recorded the shifts of power since then. We submit, therefore, that the parallel that does exist between the Sibyllines and Zoroastrian texts is too tenuous a basis on which to assert Zoroastrian influence on the Sibyllines.

The inclusion of ten kings in the fourth empire in Daniel 7 has no parallel in either the Sibylline or Persian texts, so influence from them seems unlikely.

---

[34]R. Drews, *Greek Accounts of Eastern History* (Cambridge, Mass. 1973) 27f. (Herodotus gives Assyria 520 yrs., Media 156 yrs.) and 111f. (Ctesias gives Assyria about 1300 yrs., Media ca. 300 yrs.).

[35]W.G. Lambert, 'New Light on the Babylonian Flood', *JSS* 5 (1960) 113–23. J.J.Finkelstein, 'The Antediluvian Kings: A University of California Tablet', *JCS* 17 (1963) 39–51.

VII. The Cumean Sibyl

Here there is a dating problem. Servius wrote about AD 400
and we have no evidence of the date of his source material
about this Sibyl. The similarities between the Sibyl and the
Zand are the use of metals to characterize ages and the number
ten. Again one must not ignore the differences:

(1) In the Sibyl the rulers of each of the ten generations are
named. In the Zand it is the rulers of four ages who are named.

(2) It is possible (*pace* Flusser) that the Sibyl referred to ten
metals.

(3) The number four, central to the Persian text, is not mentioned
in the Sibyl.

The real reason why Flusser sees Persian influence in
the Cumean Sibyl is his equation of the tenth ruler, the Sun,
with Mithras. While this identification cannot be ruled out of
court, another is possible. Collins[36] has collected examples of
the old Egyptian mythology that linked the Pharaoh with the
sun being applied to Ptolemaic kings from Alexander IV in 311
BC onwards. Most notable are the references to a future saviour
figure, a 'king from the sun', in Sibylline Oracle 3:652 and The
Potter's Oracle. It is therefore possible that behind the
imagery of the Cumean Sibyl lies Egyptian mythology about
Isis and Osiris rather than Persian mythology about Mithras.
In fact whereas in Sibylline Oracle 3 and The Potter's Oracle
the 'king from the sun' is the ruler who ushers in the
eschatological age of salvation, in Persian sources Mithras is
the eschatological judge, not the final ruler who brings in the
last age. Flusser appreciates this point but slides over it with a
supposition:

He could become in the Sibylline text the last, tenth ruler. This
change is not difficult, because, as already suggested, the concept of
four empires is of Persian origin and a Persian source speaks about a
sequence of kings.

Apart from anything else, he here assumes that the mention of
metals in the Cumean Sibyl is proof of the Persian four ages

---

[36]Collins, 'Provenance of the Third Sibylline' 1–18.

scheme being present, making the argument close to circular. Once again, the case for a link between the Sibyllines and Zoroastrian ideas must be pronounced unproven. The Sibyl could be combining the idea of ages associated with metals found in Hesiod with Egyptian ideas about a saviour king, and the round number of ten generations marking out a span of significant history, all without depending on Persian ideas. Flusser's point that the fact that only in Persian sources are the three ideas of four metals/four ages/ten periods linked indicates the priority of the Persian texts is a far from obvious one. The combination in the Zoroastrian texts could show that it is a relatively late synthesis of three earlier motifs that occur only in pairs in the earlier sources.

VIII. Conclusions

(1) From the time of Hesiod onwards the idea of four ages characterized by metals was current in the eastern Mediterranean world. Daniel 2 and Zand-i Vohuman Yasn are independent adaptations of it, with Daniel 2 preserving the original sequence of metals.

(2) Whether the tradition Hesiod attests lies behind the four empires listed in Sibylline Oracle 4 we cannot say, since no metals are mentioned. The list could simply reflect the historical reality experienced by the area in which it arose.

(3) The sequence of empires in Daniel 2 and 7 is probably not an adaptation of that found in Sibylline Oracle 4, but reflects the historical experience of the Jewish and Israelite exiles in the Eastern Dispersion.

(4) In Daniel 7 the ten kings belong to the fourth empire. This is quite different from the apportioning of the ten periods between the four empires which is found in Sibylline Oracle 4 and the Persian sources.

(5) There are no good grounds for supposing that the ten period scheme in the Sibyllines is derived from Zoroastrian ideas about history. Its origin is unclear, but it may have arisen from using the round number ten to divide up a span of history, as is done in some old Mesopotamian and Hebrew texts.

(6) The eschatological saviour figure in the Cumean Sibyl is probably described in terms of Egyptian mythology about kingship, as seems to be the case in Sibylline Oracle 3 and The Potter's Oracle.   The influence of ideas about Mithras' eschatological role as judge seems much less likely.

IX. Implications

If Daniel 2 and 7 are 'unmistakably' dependent on Persian sources, which themselves seem dependent on Zurvanite ideas, then these visions cannot be dated earlier than the fourth century BC. If, however, our conclusions are valid, there is no compelling evidence of Persian influence on either the Sibylline Oracles or Daniel. Hence this particular reason for favouring a later date for Daniel has no basis.