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978-1-107-00908-0 - Judaism and Imperial Ideology in Late Antiquity

Alexei M. Sivertsev

Excerpt

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Introduction

THIS BOOK TAKES ITS CUE FROM THE CONCEPT OF “BYZANTINE Commonwealth” originally formulated by Dimitri Obolensky and Garth Fowden to describe the Byzantine political and cultural system in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The term was first proposed by Obolensky in a relatively narrow sense to describe the unique mode of “Byzantium’s relations with the peoples of Eastern Europe” during the Middle Ages. According to Obolensky, the Byzantine Commonwealth was based on a sense of cultural commonality between the empire and a number of neighboring East European countries, whose “ruling and educated classes were led to adopt many features of Byzantine civilization, with the result that they were able to share in, and eventually to contribute to, a common cultural tradition.” In Obolensky’s opinion, this cultural commonality ran sufficiently deep “to justify the view that, in some respects, [these countries] formed a single international community.”¹ Although politically independent, the members of the commonwealth shared a common cultural identity which provided them with a sense of unity above and beyond political borders.

Fowden has significantly broadened Obolensky’s definition by projecting it back into the period between the late fifth and the seventh centuries, and suggesting that during that time an “empire,” a geopolitical entity that dominated earlier Near Eastern history, evolved into a “commonwealth.” The commonwealth represented a new “politico-cultural entity,” in which groups that were more or less politically independent formed a common identity on the basis of shared cultural and

¹ Obolensky, *Byzantine Commonwealth*, 13.

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religious values. Fowden referred to the sixth-century situation as the First Byzantine Commonwealth to distinguish it from Obolensky's "Second Commonwealth," which emerged several centuries later and mostly included Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe. Fowden's First Commonwealth was essentially Miaphysite in character: a group of small states and tribal groups across the Near East that embraced a (predominantly) Miaphysite form of Christianity and formed more or less explicit political alliances with the Orthodox (Chalcedonian) Byzantine Empire. The commonwealth included Iberia, Armenia, Ethiopia, Southern Arabia, Nubia, and some Arab tribes. Its existence was defined by a complex web of the multiple identities and loyalties of its members, most of whom identified with the empire and its culture while at the same time seeing the imperial Christian orthodoxy as deeply flawed and misguided.²

Of all the characteristics of Byzantine Commonwealths noted by Obolensky and Fowden, I will focus on a particular type of supersessionist narrative, in which various members of both late antique and medieval commonwealths engaged with remarkable persistence. Whether in its Eastern European version discussed by Obolensky or in its Miaphysite version suggested by Fowden, the Byzantine Commonwealth's views of the imperial center at Constantinople were shaped by complex dialectics of admiration, emulation, and rivalry, all of which developed within a paradigm established by Constantinople's own myth of origins. By the fifth century, Constantinople's claim to be a Second or a New Rome became a fundamental part of the city's religio-political identity. The fact that there could be a Second Rome, however, inevitably led to the possibility that there could also be a Third. The myth of *translatio imperii* created by Byzantine ideologists to justify the imperial status of Constantinople could be used equally well to justify the claims of the other members of the Byzantine Commonwealth to be Constantinople's and Rome's next heirs, destined to inherit and fulfill the two cities' universal mission. In the words of Fowden:

The capital's transfer from the Tiber to the Bosphorus already demonstrated that Romes might be multiplied, according (among other factors) to the

² Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 100–137. Cf. Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions*, 95–126.

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shifting geography of faith and, naturally, of local self-interest. The Byzantine Commonwealth was no less the product of provincials' mimicry of the center and awareness of their personal, vertical relationship with God, than of imperial impetus and missionary monotheism, universalism's horizontal plane.³

The empire's own mythology was conducive to this sort of claim, and, as a result, the Commonwealth potentially contained within itself a number of alternative holy empires and alternative Romes ready to spring forth and assert themselves in the face of the imperial center's perceived inadequacy.⁴

Religio-political mythologies, which developed on the Miaphysite periphery of the late Roman and early Byzantine world between the fifth and the eighth centuries A.D., provide a good illustration of this kind of supersessionism. From the Miaphysite point of view, the imperial center's perceived inadequacy had to do with its acceptance of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. The latter was seen as a Nestorian victory by Byzantine Miaphysites, and so, within the Miaphysite collective memory, 451 became the year when the empire lapsed into heresy by abandoning the true faith of the councils of Nicaea and Ephesus. For the Miaphysite community, the years between the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. and the Council of Chalcedon in 451 became associated with the never realized promise of the "orthodox" Christian empire, whereas Constantine the Great personified the ideal of a Christian ruler. To quote Fowden once more, "the [Miaphysite] commonwealth substituted a more specifically Constantinian and Nicaean persona for generalized identification with Rome and the Church."⁵ The myth of origins developed by the Miaphysite communities within the empire and quickly adopted by local Miaphysite rulers on the empire's periphery portrayed an ideal "orthodox" ruler as a successor of Nicaea, Constantine, and Constantine's imperial vision, that is, of the legacy which the heretical emperors in Constantinople failed to preserve.

³ Fowden, 125. For a later period, cf. Obolensky, *Byzantine Commonwealth*, 142–57, 316–34, and 466–73.

⁴ On the *translatio imperii* doctrine in Byzantine political theory, see Dölger, "Rom in der Gedankenwelt der Byzantiner," 93–111; Irmscher, "'Neurom' oder 'zweites Rom,'" 431–39; Nicol, "Byzantine Political Thought," 58–60.

⁵ Fowden, 127.

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In the process the Miaphysite historical mythology adopted and internalized a series of imperial symbols and narratives which, as a rule, met two conditions. On the one hand, they played a significant role within the dominant imperial discourse, and on the other, they could be relatively seamlessly integrated into the Miaphysites' own teleological narrative. By integrating the elements of the dominant imperial discourse into their own teleology, Miaphysites could, among other things, claim ownership of this discourse and position themselves as the discourse's only legitimate recipients. Even though it was subversive with respect to the existing power relations, the resulting Miaphysite narrative was essentially the product of the Byzantine Commonwealth's cultural environment and symbolic universe.⁶

The myth of Constantine and Nicaea was central to Miaphysite collective memory precisely because of its centrality to the dominant imperial discourse and its adaptability to Miaphysite counter-narrative. When the fifth-century Ethiopian rulers advertised themselves as "New Constantines" by using "the triumphant cross" symbolism on their coins, they effectively claimed for themselves the Byzantine imperial discourse.⁷ The same holds true for references to the Constantinian past scattered across the *Kebra Nagast*, as well as for recurring themes of Constantine's reign in Miaphysite Syriac literature, and for the use of Byzantine, and specifically Constantinian, imagery in medieval Nubian court culture.⁸ The *Kebra Nagast* explored a related venue when it traced the origins of the ruling Ethiopian dynasty back to King Solomon. By doing so the *Kebra Nagast* claimed Ethiopian ownership for another symbolic figure who featured prominently in Byzantine self-representation. In the book's narrative the myth of Solomon is inseparably intertwined with that of Constantine, reflecting the fact that both Solomon and Constantine were important precisely because of their prominence in the imperial master narrative.

⁶ In addition to Fowden, see Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions*, 251–92, and more recently Van Rompay, "Society and Community in the Christian East," 239–66.

⁷ See Bowersock, "Helena's Bridle," 390–91.

⁸ See Fowden, 109–16, 136–37 (on Southern Arabia and Ethiopia), 116–19, 135–36 (on Nubia), as well as 127, n. 112 (on reverence for Constantine in Ethiopia and Nubia). On Constantine in Miaphysite Syriac literature, see Drijvers, "The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles," 189–213.

The road from biblical Jerusalem to Axum lay through imperial Constantinople. In all of these cases, religious and ethnic groups located on the empire's margins, both socially and geographically, created counter-narratives that positioned them at the empire's center as successors to the dominant imperial culture as well as to that culture's symbols and mythology. Although subversive with respect to existing power relations, these counter-narratives asserted the imperial culture's fundamental values and sought to perpetuate them into the future.⁹

GOALS AND PLAN OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The hypothesis behind this study is that the “commonwealth” paradigm suggested by Obolensky and Fowden can be productively used to describe Jewish experience in the Byzantine Empire in the period between the fifth and the early eighth centuries A.D. Like the Miaphysite community, the Jewish population of the empire constituted a distinct entity within the empire's borders. Like Miaphysites, the Jewish community transcended the political borders of the empire by cultivating close contacts with Jewish communities in Sasanian Babylonia. Like Miaphysites, the Jewish community in the sixth and seventh centuries was becoming increasingly alienated from the imperial Greek culture, increasingly inward-looking and ethnocentric. Along with Coptic and Syriac, and at the expense of Greek, Hebrew was making a comeback as a language of high culture and communal identity.

As I hope to demonstrate later in this work, however, Byzantine Jews very much remained part of the empire. They shared many of its cultural symbols and codes, and identified with many of its institutions and values. Jews constituted a distinct ethnic, religious, and cultural group that nevertheless participated in the symbolic universe of Byzantine culture. In this sense Jews were part of the Byzantine commonwealth. I will argue that, like other Byzantine provincials, Jews developed a coherent worldview that did not merely seek to subvert, undermine, and overturn the dominant imperial discourse. Instead, Byzantine Jews attempted to

⁹ See Shahid, “The *Kebra Negast* in the Light of Recent Research,” 133–78; Bowersock, “Helena's Bridle,” 383–93; Lourié, “From Jerusalem to Aksum through the Temple of Solomon,” 152–54, 166–72 (in Russian).

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appropriate this discourse as part of Judaism's own narrative, by following the same fundamental principles as did Ethiopians, Nubians, Syrians, or, later, Slavs. Jewish authors chose elements within the imperial mythology with which they could identify and then integrated these elements into their own teleology. By doing so they positioned themselves as the Byzantine imperial narrative's sole legitimate heirs.

Methodologically my approach has both similarities and differences to recent attempts by David Biale and Ra'anan S. Boustan to interpret some of the Byzantine Jewish literary compositions as examples of "counter-historical" and "counter-geographical" engagement with dominant Byzantine literature.¹⁰ As noted by Biale, the counter-history is a form of revisionism in which the counter-historian, rather than proposing a new theory or finding new facts, "transvalues old ones."¹¹ In other words, the counter-historian acts within an old symbolic universe, appropriating it to express his/her own vision of reality, often at the expense of traditional meanings embedded in this universe. The studies by Biale and Boustan have shown that the use of counter-cultural techniques, including "counter-history" and "counter-geography," was an essential element in Jewish appropriation and internalization of Byzantine cultural codes. To quote Boustan, in a series of late antique and early medieval Jewish texts, such as *Sefer Zerubbabel*, *Toldot Yeshu*, traditions describing the fate of Temple vessels, and the story of R. Ishmael's postmortem mask, "the late antique Jewish writers both mocked and mirrored Roman imperial ideology and the narratives that underwrote it."¹²

Although fundamentally agreeing with Biale's and Boustan's assessment of Byzantine Jewish literature as "counter-historical," I would also like to suggest that part of this counter-historical narrative's goal was to create a distinct ideological system that was every bit as totalizing as Byzantine imperial ideology itself. An essential characteristic of this ideological system was its ability to draw on and claim ownership of the dominant imperial discourse. Byzantine Jewish literature participated in the symbolic universe of Byzantine imperial culture by partly

¹⁰ See Biale, "Counter-History and Jewish Polemics against Christianity," 130–45; Boustan, "The Spoils of the Jerusalem Temple," 362–70.

¹¹ Biale, "Counter-History," 131.

¹² Boustan, "Spoils," 370. On the story of R. Ishmael's martyrdom and postmortem mask, see Boustan, *From Martyr to Mystic*, 121–30.

appropriating and partly subverting the mainstream meaning of the latter's cultural codes. In the latter case, Jewish texts often engaged ambiguities and anxieties already present within the dominant culture. The resulting narrative created new meanings but did so within an old symbolic universe and by using traditional cultural codes. In fact, the preservation of traditional cultural codes was essential to the very project of counter-history. Without them the counter-historical and broader counter-cultural narrative would lose much of its power.

In other words, whereas Biale and Boustan seek to uncover ways in which Jewish counter-history deconstructed the dominant ideological paradigm, I will analyze ways in which Jewish counter-history attempted to build its own ideological master narrative through constant dialogue with the dominant imperial culture. I will also argue that part of this master narrative involved the conscious positioning of Judaism as the successor of Rome's and Constantinople's universalism, in a way that was not significantly different from imperial fantasies taking shape among other marginalized ethnic and religious groups of the Byzantine Commonwealth.

Following Biale's and Boustan's choice of source material for their argument, I will focus my discussion on eschatological Jewish writings produced in the course of the fifth through eighth centuries A.D. These texts were preserved in multiple literary formats, which include sections in classical rabbinic compositions, late antique and early medieval apocalyptic literature, such as *Sefer Zerubbabel* and *'Otot ha-Mashiah*, and finally liturgical poems, *piyyutim*, composed mostly during the turbulent decades of the seventh century. On the Christian side, I will predominantly focus on the sources produced between the fifth and the eighth centuries A.D., with occasional excursions into earlier and later periods. Thus Eusebius' writings will be used extensively due to their seminal role in the formation of Christian imperial ideology and their lasting impact on subsequent Byzantine literature. On the opposite chronological pole, the writings of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus will also be occasionally consulted because, although composed in the tenth century, they most likely incorporated sources from a much earlier period.

The structure of the book is as follows: The first chapter will explore possible conceptual affinities between Romano-Byzantine imperial eschatology and eschatological motifs in midrashic and Talmudic

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literature. Chapter 2 will focus on a particular eschatological scenario preserved in one of the versions of *’Otot ha-Mashiah* and analyze it within its seventh-century Byzantine literary and ideological context. Chapter 3 will revisit different versions of Hephzibah legend, once again discussing them within broader parameters of contemporaneous Byzantine culture. Chapter 4 will take up the *renovatio imperii* theme and trace its applications in Byzantine Jewish literature. Finally, Chapter 5 will discuss the possible impact of late Roman and Byzantine “emperor mystique” on the representations of the Messiah in Jewish eschatological writings. I conclude this book by offering some thoughts about the broader implications of Byzantine Jewish eschatology for the study of Judaism.



Esau, Jacob's Brother

IN HIS HOMILY COMMEMORATING THE DEFENSE OF CONSTANTINOPLE against the Avars and the Persians in 626, Theodore Syncellus hails the sacred and eternal nature of the Byzantine Empire and its capital city by portraying them as the true Israel and New Jerusalem, respectively.¹ Theodore presents an elaborate exegesis of prophetic and historical books of the Old Testament arguing that they should be read as references to the events of 626. Among other things, according to Theodore, the sack of the Old Jerusalem and the salvation of the new one took place on the same date.² This providential coincidence marked the special destiny of the New Jerusalem, Constantinople, to be the religious center of the true Israel as well as the geographic center of the inhabited world, “the navel of the world,” binding the world together in religious and imperial unity.³ Theodore Syncellus stands in a long line of Byzantine authors who used the theme of succession from Israel to Byzantium as a way to buttress the triumphant universalism of the empire. The supersessionist narrative that portrayed Israel as a typological precursor of Christian Byzantium became a ubiquitous feature of Byzantine religio-political discourse and court ritual.⁴

¹ For the edition of the text, see L. Sternbach, *De Georgii Pisidae apud Theophanem aliosque historicos reliquiis* (Cracovia, 1900). Sternbach's edition was reprinted with French translation in F. Makk, *Traduction et commentaire de l'homélie écrite probablement par Théodore le Syncelle sur le siege de Constantinople en 626* (Szeged, 1975).

² Sternbach, 309, lines 1–310, line 36.

³ Sternbach, 314, lines 18–318, line 7. On Constantinople as the navel of the world, see Sternbach, 317.29–31. On Theodore's view of the empire as New Israel, see Spain Alexander, “Heraclius, Byzantine Imperial Ideology and the David Plates,” 222–23, 231–32; Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 72–79.

⁴ See Von Ivánka, *Rhomäerreich und Gottesvolk*, 49–61; Spain Alexander, “Heraclius, Byzantine Imperial Ideology and the David Plates,” 227–29.

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Christianity did not invent Roman universalism. The ideology of Rome's eternal rule had a long and deeply rooted pre-Christian history, going all the way back to the Golden Age of Augustus and past him to the republican period.⁵ Yet the Christian Roman Empire and its ideologists proved to be worthy recipients of this age-old doctrine. As a result, an imperial Christian ideology was born that embraced the traditional universalism of Rome and transformed it into a new vision of the eternal Christian empire with a special mission to fulfill. By combining Roman imperial universalism with the messianic universalism of the Hebrew Bible as well as early Christian millenarian expectations, late antique Christianity succeeded in producing a comprehensive and coherent ideological framework that tied together the destiny of imperial Rome with that of Christ's kerygma.⁶

As noted by Milton V. Anastos, many Byzantine authors continued to accept the traditional Jewish and early Christian view of Rome as the fourth in Daniel's fourfold succession of world empires destined to perish just as its predecessors did and "be succeeded by the Last Judgment and the inception of the heavenly kingdom, ushered in by Christ in his Second Coming." There was also, however, a persistent sentiment that the empire of Rome was unique in that it stood right on the border of the two worlds of human and heavenly imperialisms and served as the crossing point between them.⁷ In addition to being the last link in the succession of earthly empires, Rome was the beginning of the heavenly empire of the eschatological future. This view embraced an earlier Roman doctrine that saw Rome as the fifth and ultimate world empire, and combined this doctrine with Daniel's vision of the fifth kingdom "that shall never be destroyed."⁸

Some Christian writers, such as Ephrem the Syrian in the fourth century, viewed Rome as precisely this liminal "fifth" kingdom and the first

⁵ On the Hellenistic and Roman background of this ideology, see Instinsky, "Kaiser und Ewigkeit," 313–55; Von Ivánka, *Rhomäerreich und Gottesvolk*, 13–49.

⁶ See Podskalsky, *Byzantinische Reicheschatologie*, and "Représentation du temps dans l'eschatologie impériale byzantine," 439–50; Mango, *Byzantium*, 201–17; Magdalino, "The History of the Future," 3–34; Olster, "Byzantine Apocalypses," 48–73.

⁷ See Anastos, "Political Theory in the Lives of the Slavic Saints," 21, and, in general, 17–29.

⁸ Dan 2:44. The original relationship between Daniel's vision and the Roman doctrine of Rome as the fifth kingdom remains unclear. See Swain, "The Theory of the Four Monarchies," 1–21, but cf. Mendels, "The Five Empires," 330–37.