CHAPTER EIGHT

GOG AND MAGOG AND THE BARRIER: THE ORIGIN OF SALLAM’S DESCRIPTION

The description of the barrier as given by Sallam shows a remarkable resemblance with those found in the Syriac texts. These descriptions, separated in time and Umwelt, are clearly interconnected, but so far no endeavour seems to have been made to explain this. It may be done by showing that an uninterrupted line of transmission of the Gog und Magog and barrier motif joins the Syriac tradition of the 6th century with Sallam’s days. Two important groups witness to this phenomenon: Arab poets and transmitters of Islamic traditions.

1. Early Arabo-Muslim poets: links with the Syriac tradition

In chapter 6 we have seen that between the 7th and 8th centuries the following poets have dealt with the motif:

– Hassan b. Thabit. As far as the motif is concerned, he embodies so to speak the transition of the Syro-Christian to the Arabo-Muslim world. Born into the Khazraj tribe in Yathrib, the later Medina, in the pre-Islamic period, he probably died around 659, surviving Muhammad by some 27 years. He already had an established reputation at the rise of Islam, and became known as “the poet laureate” of the prophet Muhammad. It cannot be decided whether or not his eschatological poem on Gog und Magog and the barrier of ‘the two-horned one’ was composed before or after the revelation of Sura xvi:83-98. But its relation with these verses on the one hand and with the Syriac texts on the other, is undeniable. He had visited the courts of the Christian Ghassanids at al-Jabiya south of Damascus and of the Christian Lakhmids at al-Hira, near al-Najaf in modern Iraq. These towns had been in former days important centres of Syriac Christian culture. Hassan may well have heard stories about

1 Called ḍāhiliyya or “time of ignorance” by the Muslims, cf. EI s.v. (Ed.).
2 Cf. Chapter 6, p. ■■.
the apocalyptic people and Alexander’s barrier, and may have brought them back to his native town.

– ‘Alqama b. Dhi Jadan (7th c.), a contemporary of Muhammad.
– al-Farazdaq of Basra (d. 728).
– Ru‘ba b. al-‘Ajjaj of Basra (d. 762).
– Abu ‘l-‘Atahiya of Kufa (d. 825).

There are no indications that these poets who mention Gog und Magog and the barrier were aware of the Syriac Christian origin of the stories around Alexander ‘the two-horned’. But it seems clear that these poets between the rise of Islam and Ibn Khurradadhbih’s and Sallam’s days were the link between Syria and Arabia and between Christian and Muslim culture as far as these stories are concerned. Sallam’s description thus does not come as a surprise.

2. Islamic traditionists: links with the Syriac tradition

Doufikar-Aerts’ investigations show that already before Sallam’s days there existed several Arabic texts which contain versions of the Syriac Alexander tradition:

– ‘Umara b. Zayd al-Madani, who lived from 767 till ca. 815. He was the author of The story of Alexander and the wonderful things it contains.
– Pseudo-Asma‘i. From around 850, i.e. shortly after Sallam’s journey was perhaps composed the book with the biographies of the kings, called The final aim, dealing with the stories of the Persians and the Arabs.

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5 Qiṣṣat al-Iskandar wa-ma‘āshu min al-amr al-‘aḏīd.