THE JEWISH DIMENSION OF THE SCOTTISH APOCALYPSE: CLIMATE, COVENANT AND WORLD RENEWAL

ARTHUR H. WILLIAMSON

During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries Scottish thinkers sought to find meaning in their national experience in terms which exploded the traditional view of their country as a seat of barbarity and primitivism. Many responded to this challenge by discovering a special role for Scotland in what they conceived to be the latter days of the world, and in so doing they found an increasingly significant connection between themselves and the Jews. Whether concentrating on the analogous position of the Jews as God’s chosen people with the now latterly covenanted Scots, or interpreting sacred prophecy to give the Jews (or those who would convert to Christianity) a telling role in these latter days, Scottish thinkers agreed that the nation of Israel would prove surprisingly relevant to their own future and to the meaning of their culture.

Introductory: Scotland and the Fatality of Geography

"Thay auctoris is na worth that sayis, all peple far fra the sonne ar barbour and miserable"*. So declared John Bellenden’s translation of Hector Boece’s Scotorum Historiae in 1536, both works being of the greatest intellectual significance for sixteenth-century Scotland. “Na region in the world” proved so blasted “be distance fra the sonne” that it could not sustain its inhabitants in health, culture, and virtue. All three merely required the right mix of temperance and wisdom, and Boece’s study was intended to show how Scottish history, in the face of the continuous threat of English corruption, had effectively embodied them over a truly immense stretch of time. Despite the Historia’s evident sanction of baronial revolution, King James V sponsored its translation which eventually appeared in print under royal authority. A touchstone for virtually every Scottish intellectual throughout the century, irrespective of his religion or politics, the Historia’s importance virtually defies exaggeration1.

* For those unfamiliar with Scots, the line may be “translated” as: Those authors are of no worth who say that all people far from the sun are barbarous and miserable.
1 Hector Boece, Heir beginnis the hystory and cronikis of Scotland, trans. by John Bellenden
The work’s success resulted from more than simply its being the first history of the Scots more or less in keeping with contemporaneous humanist models. For among other things it demonstrated or purported to demonstrate what common wisdom denied: a northern culture and civilization sustained through political virtue. Traditionally, from both biblical and classical sources, the north was pictured as quintessentially the place of the primitive, the bestial, the satanic, and it is truly remarkable how deeply this assumption reached into European consciousness. The prophet Ezekiel had warned of the armies of Gog coming out of the north in the latter days of the world, while Aristotle had spoken of the northern peoples as less intelligent than those of the south, more given to impulse than reflection. The authoritative work on northern Europe, Olaus Magnus’ Historia Gentibus Septentrionalibus (Rome, 1555), portrayed at length the paganism and witchcraft of the peoples of that region and flatly stated that the devil had his seat there, mocking the inhabitants “with unspeakable delusions”. In contrast, noted Jean Bodin, the south did not so suffer. The Arabs and Moors had found evil demons to be “rare or non-existent... either on account of the abundance of light from which they are thought to flee, or on account of the rarity of air which cannot sustain them”. The Edinburgh physician Patrick Anderson thought the northern peoples “barbarously simple” and apparently understood the great outburst of Scottish witchcraft in the 1590s within such socio-climatological terms. Even the jurist Thomas Craig, one of the most articulate defenders of Scotland’s legal and cultural autonomy, agreed that barbarism and superficial Christianity characterized the far north — notably Greenland, Iceland, and Finland — countries “full of apparitions, ghosts, hobgoblins, and fairies”. The association of devilry with the north had of course long formed part of European literary tradition: in the friar’s tale, Chaucer could speak of the devil dwelling “fer in the north countree”; a specifically northern wind filled Archimago’s wings in Spenser’s Faerie Queene; Milton spoke of dancing “with Lapland witches, while the labouring moon/ Eclipses at their charms”. Even the radical John Webster during the English Revolution dissociated his critique of the universities from northern barbarism and cold stupidity. Both John Mair and Thomas Craig, two of the finest minds in sixteenth-century Europe, felt the need to respond at


“Nulla enim regio adeo aversu a Sole infecunditatis sterilitatisque damnata est, quin usus humanos omnibus abunde per diviniam Providentiam cuncta suppeditentur: si sit modo qui uti sciat”.
