ON A POSSIBLE BAPTISMAL BACKGROUND OF 4 EZRA 13:3–6

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The following observations upon a possible baptismal background of the “man rising from the midst of the sea” (4 Ezra 13:3–6) are intended as a footnote to Michael Stone’s epochal commentary upon the fourth book of Ezra. To be more precise, I wish to attach this note to a reference linking the motif of a seaborne savior to the book of Jonah 2:4 where the prophet complains of being thrown זָרִיב “into the heart of the sea,” the same place from where the messianic figure in 4 Ezra emerges. In the New Testament (Matt 12:40) and later rabbinic tradition (PRE chap. 10; Midr. Jon.) Jonah is a type or precursor of the messiah, and his rescue from the fish seems to have been interpreted as a successful return from the nether-world which in some strands of early Christianity was equated with baptism. In this note I will contend that the man emerging from the sea in 4 Ezra does indeed refer to Jonah and a tradition of interpretation which understands him as type of the messiah; a notion that found its way into baptismal theology as well as rabbinic symbols of salvation.

Jonah as Type of the Messiah

A first clue as to why Jonah’s escape from the whale could have been regarded as more than a miraculous event in the life of a prophet can be found in the Greek wording of Jonah 2:1–8. Here, the text mentions μοχλοί (v. 7),


“bars” or “bolts,” in connection with the abyss by which Jonah is swallowed. These bolts are in other contexts closely attached to Hades. A variation to Matt 16:18 in Tatian’s diatessaron reads “bars of hell” instead of “gates,”3 thus bringing the text in line with Ps 106 (107):16 and Is 45:2, which Christian authors of the third and fourth centuries (Hippolyt, *Pasch.* 62; Afrahat, *Dem.* 14:31; 22:4; *Acts Thom.* 10; *Odes Sol.* 17:8–9) relate to Christ’s descent into hell. Ps 106 (107):16 speaks of “doors of bronze” (πύλας χαλκᾶς) and “bars of iron” (μοχλοὺς σιδηροῦς), which are broken by God delivering humankind from death and destruction. Is 45:2 applies the same terminology (θύρας χαλκᾶς and μοχλοὺς σιδηροῦς) to Cyrus whose path as savior is made level by God. In *sanctum pascha,* a Greek Christian tractate generally ascribed to Hippolytus of Rome, has these terms refer to Christ by whose descent to the netherworld the “gates” (πύλαι) and “locks/bars” (κλεῖθρα) of Hades were opened.4 In a similar way Afrahat, a Syrian author of the early fourth century, sees Christ as the one who breaks the doors and bolts in his descent to Hades; in this context he furthermore refers to the Church’s prevalence over the forces of evil, which is a prominent theme of Matt 16:18 in both the canonical and Diatessaron version, as well.5 The same holds true for the *Acts of Thomas* (chap. 10), where Jesus in a general way is said to have opened the gates of Hades, and especially for the *Odes of Solomon,* a collection of poetical texts that seem to have emerged among the Aramaic speaking Christians of Syria in the late first or early second century, from where the motif made a broad inroad into later Syriac tradition.6 In *Odes Sol.* 17:8–9 Christ himself

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5 See the Syriac text in Jean Parisot (ed. and trans.), *Aphraates Sapientis Persae demonstrationes* (Patrologia Syriaca 1; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1894), col. 524 ll. 4–5 (dem. 12:8), col. 652 l. 9–10 (dem. 14:31), and col. 997 l. 2 (dem. 22:4). In *dem.* 14:31 Afrahat uses the Syriac word *mukāl,* which goes back to the Greek μοχλός.