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Kevoik B. Bardakjian and Sergio La Porta, eds., *The Armenian Apocalyptic Tradition: A Comparative Perspective*, E.J. Brill, 2014, 797 pp., \$264.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9789004270244.

This massive tome is a wide-ranging discussion of apocalypse and apocalyptic themes in Armenian literature and art, together with a useful group of chapters on five comparative traditions. Comprising some 31 different articles by major scholars, *The Armenian Apocalyptic Tradition* is likely to be a basic foundation for the field. The volume is divided into two major parts—"Until the Tenth Century" and "Eleventh to Fifteenth Centuries"—subdivided into five sections in the first part, and three in the second. Familiar biblical figures as the mediums for apocalypse, such as Enoch and Daniel, or anti-heroes such as Nimrod, are discussed in detail in Part I, Sections 1-2. By Part I, third section, the Christianization of Armenia, and a number of attendant apocalypses and visions by St. Gregory the Illuminator (d. c. 331), and St. Sahak (d. 439) make their appearance.

One has to ask on a basic level after reading Part I, Sections 1-3, of *The Armenian Apocalyptic Tradition*, to what extent is all of this literature "Armenian"? It is obvious that the Armenian language as a medium is extremely useful, and preserves numerous examples of Jewish and early Christian texts in interesting and often revealing variants. And it is equally obvious that the Armenian church, and perhaps even the entire people, were shaped by these narratives and their transmission. But it is not clear what precisely, other than the language, is actually of an Armenian character. Indeed, one could, upon reading this book, ask whether it could be summarized as: "how a literary genre invaded the Armenian people and used them as a receptacle for preserving apocalypses otherwise lost in other traditions." Clearly the initial portrayal of Armenian apocalypse in this work is tilted towards the textual. However, the Armenian-ness of apocalypse is actually redeemed by the discussion (in three chapters in Part II, Section II, "The Apocalypse in Art") of its architectural and artistic ramifications. Depictions of sundials and the Throne in Ezekiel 1:1-28f. are related to the practical goal of communicating the message to the masses, as is the fascinating discussion of manuscript illustration. That being said, it is not clear to me what the function of Bartal's chapter on "Vernacular Apocalypses from Fourteenth-Century England" is doing in *The Armenian Apocalyptic Tradition*. Indeed, I could not find the word "Armenia" in it at all.

To someone who is interested in apocalyptic literature and thought overall, who does not know Armenian, this book does suffer from some deficiencies. First of all, the emphasis is quite uneven. For example, there is little coverage of apocalyptic thought during the period of the Crusades (virtually all in Zaroui Pogossian's chapter, "The Last Emperor or the Last

Armenian King?"). I can only speculate about what exists on the basis of my knowledge of the highly selective translation of Matthew of Edessa (d. 1236?), but it seems likely that there is a good deal more extant. A discussion of the apocalyptic themes in medieval Armenian history would have been very helpful. It seems as if the organizers of the conferences upon which this volume was based limited themselves chronologically. Omitted promising areas of apocalyptic production (again, according to my minimal exposure to the material) would seem to be the Armenian Genocide (1915-22), as well as the period of the Soviet Union (1920-91) and the attendant suppression of the Armenian church. Both of these periods of Armenian history were ones of great stress, and it seems likely to me that either apocalyptic narratives were produced during these times, or else older apocalypses would have been reworked for contemporary use.

Secondly, as an outsider, not knowing Armenian, I would have been happier to have seen authoritative translations of more material. Actually, I would have been happy if the volume had been *entirely* translations. Valuable fragments are translated, such as in Jean-Marc Rosenstiehl's chapter, "Armenian Witnesses of Three Eschatological Motifs"; however, for the non-Armenian scholar, reading about the fascinating Armenian version of Pseudo-Methodius just raises a strong desire to see it translated. Aram Topchyan on the Armenian *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* provides us with some very interesting excerpts, comparing the different versions, along with a summary of the text's complicated history. However, these teasers only whet the appetite to see a thorough scholarly edition like that of Reinink (for Syriac) or Aerts and Kortekaas (for the Greek and Latin translations).

Thirdly, being a scholar of Islamic apocalyptic literature, I am rather disappointed at the lack of treatment from a comparative point of view of Islam. Most of the material on Islam is dealt with in Yuri Stoyanov's chapter, "Apocalypticizing Warfare," (covering the initial Arab conquests) and throughout the book there is minimal knowledge of and relation to the Islamic apocalyptic heritage (Lorenzo DiTommaso's summary chapter, "Armenian Apocalyptic and Medieval Apocalypticism," is an exception). The comparative material from medieval English, Manichaean, Syriac, Ethiopic, and Bulgarian is quite fascinating, and it seems to me, competently researched. Why there is no summary chapter on the Georgian apocalyptic materials, mentioned infrequently throughout the volume, is not clear to me.<sup>1</sup> But the fact that no one who knows the Islamic material was brought into the conversation seems to be a serious detraction from an otherwise fine work. For example, the apocalyptic collection of Nu`aym b. Hammad al-Marwazi (d. 844), *Kitab al-fitān* (*The Book of Tribulations*), mentions Armenia and Armenians 4 times, while the book of Ibn al-Munadi (d. 947-8), *Kitab al-malahim* (*The Book of Apocalyptic Wars*), also mentions Armenia at least 3 times. Even beyond these specific references, there is a wealth of material in Muslim apocalyptic and historical writings that could have enriched *The Armenian Apocalyptic Tradition*.

Probably the most useful chapter for the comparativist is DiTommaso's, which summarizes the volume. His discussion is quite wide-ranging, and very nicely moves away from the predominantly Jewish and Second Temple focus of the study of the J.J. Collins' school of apocalypse into the much more complete range of apocalyptic themes found in Late Antiquity and the medieval period in both Christianity and Islam. DiTommaso comments:

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<sup>1</sup> There are discussions of Georgian materials in Stephen H. Rapp, Jr., "The Georgian Nimrod," and Zaza Aleksidze, "The Visions of Grigor and Sahak Part'ew"; but both of these are covering themes within the tradition rather than thorough surveys as with the other traditions.

But formal apocalypses are exceptionally rare outside early Judaism...instead, apocalyptic speculation throughout the Middle Ages was expressed through a multitude of other literary forms, including apocalyptic oracles, prophecies, commentaries, prognostica, astrological texts, physiognomies, sermons, homilies, postilla, and alchemical tracts. (733)

This statement has long been needed in the study of apocalypse, and DiTommaso takes it even further by stating: “the worldview informs the literature, not the other way around” (733). In fact the entire genre of apocalypse is in dire need of some reformulation and standardization of terminology. The genre’s early domination by scholars of Second Temple Judaism was useful in its inception, but has since the 1980s become more of a liability. In particular, DiTommaso notes the movement away from angelic mediation revelations characteristic of Second Temple materials into the interpretation of history, and the placement of events contemporary to the writer within the context of an imminent end. Most especially we should see this later material as no longer revelatory but exegetical.

DiTommaso also brings out the fact that the cast of characters is quite different in medieval apocalypsa—that figures such as the Last Roman Emperor, the Antichrist, and the fixation upon an imminent and cataclysmic invasion from the east (mainly from Central Asia) have few parallels in the biblical and Second Temple apocalypses. To this list one could add the fact that the Mahdi (messianic figure) in Islam is entirely without a Qur’anic basis. In summary, *The Armenian Apocalyptic Tradition* is more of a value to an outsider as an introduction, if at times quite uneven, to the genre, rather than a thorough discussion of it. The bibliographies are quite useful, although their utility is dissipated because of being scattered at the end of each chapter rather than consolidated at the end. At the very least one can say that it gives an outsider a taste of the richness of the Armenian tradition.

David Cook  
Associate Professor of Religion  
Rice University

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