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THE PECULIARITIES OF THE ANCIENT APOCALYPTIC WORLD OUTLOOK

1. Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of the Eternal Return* : Cyclical Time and the Repetition of Cosmogony Ad Infinitum

In his influential work *The Myth of the Eternal Return* Mircea Eliade continuously emphasises the repetitive function of different rituals that intersperse the life of primitive peoples. On several occasions he mentions the practice of repeating the 'archetypal gesture'. Any 'meaningful' action of our primeval ancestors repeated the initial exemplary action of the mythical time. By these actions they abolished the secular time, and got carried back to the mythical time. Thus repetition had an immense importance. For example, the rituals accompanying the erection of new buildings repeated the act of the divine creation [6, 20]. Since, according to some oriental myths, the creation of the world became possible after the defeat of a primordial monster that represented chaos (for example, the dragon Vritra killed by Indra or the monstrous mother of gods Tiamat vanquished by Marduk) the foundation of a new structure was impregnated with symbolism that directly referred to the exploit of the god-creator. The first spike driven into the earth on the territory allocated for the erection of a new building was aimed at the head of the mythical serpent [ibid., 19]. Any conscious action at the early stage of humankind's development was sacred in the sense that it repeated some divine archetype and exactly because of that it had the due importance and meaning.

The dependence of ancient people on the seasons and the yearly yield of crops contributed to the perception of the New Year as the year of absolute renovation, as the advent of the new era and the end of the previous one. The celebrations of the New Year that coincided either with the spring equinox or the winter equinox were imbued with the symbolism of cosmogony. In fact, those celebrations, according to Eliade, repeated the creation. One of the examples adduced by the scholar is the Babylonian festival *Akitu* that re-enacted the

victory of Marduk over the sea monster Tiamat [ibid., 57–58]. Such rituals contained certain eschatological elements, for the creation of a new world, albeit symbolic, calls for the annihilation of the present one. Various celebrations of the renewal of creation testify to the ancient cyclical perception of time, in accordance with which time periods repeat themselves *ad infinitum*.

Eliade also underlines the significance of another cyclical phenomenon for the formation of this apocalyptic belief of degeneration and subsequent renewal: the waxing and waning of the moon. Humanity, not unlike the phases of the moon, becomes more and more corrupt, until it is destroyed by some cosmic catastrophe and then renewed, usually by some pious survivor of the divine scourge [ibid., 87]. All this contributed to the development of the Chaldean teaching of The Great Year, which is an exemplary manifestation of the myth of the eternal return. The concept of cyclical time, as it is maintained by Eliade, is opposed by the newer model of linear time according to which time not only has a beginning, but also an end. This concept was especially developed in the ancient Jewish beliefs and came to fruition in the Christian teaching of the irrevocable end of the world and the Final Judgement. Eliade subsumes the second concept under the ‘messianic’ tradition. This tradition brings to an end the cyclical time perception as well the repetition of the gestures that were performed in the mythical time, for history *per se* becomes important [ibid., 111–112]. Eliade pays special attention to the idea of suffering that was crucial for the Jewish people. The eternal repetition of suffering deprived it of the great significance it had used to have for the representatives of Judaic faith. As it was correctly noted by the scholar, suffering may be endured only because it will end sometime once and for all, and those responsible for this suffering will be subject to trial and punishment.

2. The Struggle between Chaos and Order

As it is evident from Cohn’s argument the roots of the apocalyptic faith lie in the oldest binary opposition there is: Cosmos vs. Chaos, or Order vs. Disorder. The eschatological category of the end of the world is thus perceived as the development of the centuries-old notion of cosmos threatened by the intrusion of chaos, the very element from which the ordered world was created. In his book *Cosmos Chaos and the World to Come*, a large space is devoted to the analysis of the different ways in which the universal antagonism between the adherents of cosmos and the supporters of chaos is reflected in various cultures. If we

try to summarise his exploration, we shall come up with the following most common aspects of this mythological concept:

- There is a creation of cosmos (that is, the world which is organised in compliance with certain rules) out of the primary chaos. Chaos is usually imagined as a limitless ocean.
- There exists a certain principle of order that helps to keep the creation working properly. The said principle corresponds to anything that is right, just, correct and true.
- The true principle of order is antagonised by the principle of falsehood that underpins the initial chaos.
- Each of these principles has its own supporters who eventually clash in the battle to establish the principle they represent. This usually happens after the representatives of chaos, called 'chaos monsters' by Cohn, attack the ordered world.
- The forces of chaos in the long run are defeated; however, the threat of their next invasion still remains.

Cohn examines several myths along these lines. For example, when discussing the conflict between the aforementioned opposed parties within the framework of Egyptian mythology he specifically mentions two principles: *ma'at* and *isfet*. Here are the respective definitions: 'the word [ma'at] was used to indicate a principle of order so all-embracing that it governed every aspect of existence' [3, 9] and 'Isfet denoted whatever ran counter to the rightness of the world' [ibid., 21].

The sun god Ra and his faithful cohorts were the keepers of *ma'at* that was threatened every day by the powers of chaos embodied by the giant serpent Apophis who bound the waters and prevented the boat of Ra from crossing the line of the horizon. Every day the gods had to fight the monster, to pierce it with spears and cut it up so that the advent of a new day might become possible. Thus the provisional victory of *ma'at* over *isfet* was achieved. It is logical then, that this celestial archetype was constantly repeated by the Egyptian priests, who daily performed a liturgy that symbolically represented the slaying of Apophis [ibid., 22].

There are other examples of fights between chaos-monsters and the heroic gods. For instance, the victorious battle of Marduk against Tiamat that had most crucial consequences: as a result, humanity came to exist: 'The combat ended,

when Marduk the victor had announced his intention of kneading clay with his blood to raise up Man' [4, 207]. The fight between Marduk and Tiamat is a typical example of what Norman Cohn calls 'the combat myth', the myth 'that tells how a god has defended the ordered world against the onslaught of chaos' [3, 42]. As maintained by this scholar the combat myth was instrumental in the formation of eschatology as we perceive it today: the teaching about the final, irrevocable end of the world. But in order to develop into a fully-fledged apocalyptic doctrine the combat myth had to be considerably modified. Although there are many religions that possess such a myth, there is only one within whose framework such a modification actually took place. The religion in question is Zoroastrism, and the author of the decisive changes introduced into the combat myth in particular and into the ancient Iranian beliefs in general was the prophet Zarathustra or, according to the Greek version of his name: Zoroaster. In his vision Zoroaster saw Ahura Mazda as the main god and the preserver of *asha* (the principle of order) opposed by the evil spirit Angra Mainyu, the propagator of *druj* (the principle of falsehood). The two antagonists needed an arena for the struggle, and to meet this demand the earth was created by the benign god.

Zoroaster abandoned the old cyclical tradition and offered instead the division of time into three periods: Creation, that is time before the invasion of Angra Mainyu; Mixture: the time of the continuous struggle on the earth between Ahura Mazda and his evil antagonist, and the period of Separation that marks the final victory over and destruction of Angra Mainyu whereby good is separated from evil and the eternity of bliss is inaugurated [1, 25–26]. The last period of the cosmic history contains all the staples of Christian eschatology: the final battle with the evil legions, the resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgement, and the fiery execution of the archenemy.

Norman Cohn sees the battle between Ahura Mazda and Angra Manyu as the radical transformation of the ancient combat myth. The story of two divine forces continuously struggling on the battleground of our world may be regarded as an elevation of the known combat myths in which a hero-god vanquished a chaos-monster. Here, instead of a divine hero employed for the temporary killing of a serpent, dragon or some other beast, we have a wise uncreated God fighting with the equally uncreated Evil Spirit until the absolute, final victory of one over the other. It is not a question of keeping the world in order, but rather of eliminating disorder for good.

3. Typology of Eschatological Myths

Christine Dumas-Reungoat has performed an impressive investigation aimed at classifying various eschatological myths reflected in the texts of the ancient Greeks, the Romans, the Iranians, the Jews and the Mesopotamians. Her study illuminates different types of world endings imagined by the representatives of the oldest cultures known today. Such a typology, no matter however schematic it may be, is a useful contribution to the general examination of what may be called the ancient apocalyptic faith or the ideas that prefigured the pervasive apocalyptic world outlook widespread in the Middle Ages. Dumas-Reungoat draws a demarcation line between two distinct motifs that may be found in the old texts in question: the motif of the End of the World (*la Fin du Monde*) and that of the End of a world (*la Fin d'un monde*). Another word used for the End of a world is a (divine) scourge or catastrophe, or a series of scourges (*le fléau, la séries des fléaux*) that refers to a cataclysm that brings about a lot of destruction and suffering but does not obliterate the world completely, no matter what has been the scale of the damage caused [5, 93]. What follows is the critical summary of Dumas-Reungoat's typology:

The provisional end of the world by water. The most popular myth of this kind is the legend of an infuriated deity decimating the corrupted or annoying humankind with the great deluge provided that one righteous man and his wife or family survive to give birth to a new generation. The oldest version of this myth is offered by the Babylonian poem about Atrahasis, the precursor of Biblical Noah, who escaped the deluge triggered off by the god Enlil. There is also a Greek version of the Flood myth. The story of Deucalion and Pyrrha was immortalised by Ovid in *Metamorphosis*. According to Ovid Zeus became convinced in the profundity of human vice when the king Lycaon in order to ascertain the divinity of his immortal guest served to the supreme god the meat of a butchered Molossian slave. The enraged Zeus first wanted to incinerate the earth with his thunderbolts but thought better of it for fear that 'the sparks should catch his axle tree of Heav'n' [7, line 255] and resolved to drown the evil humans in a flood. Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha proved to be the sole survivors of the scourge.

The end of the world by fire, both provisional and final. The author of *Le Fin du Monde* provides us with more information on the fiery catastrophes of the 'incomplete' type, which may be explained by the popularity of this notion in the ancient cultures that had the cyclical notion of time at their basis. We shall

point out the most significant of the myths considered by Dumas-Reungoat. The myth of Phaeton relates in a graphic fashion the great conflagration brought about by his inapt driving of the sun god's chariot. The fiery chariot of Phoebus causes the destruction on a cosmic scale: the whole cities turn into ashes, the sea and rivers boil down exposing the incandescent bottoms, the mountains are in flames, Olympus included. Eventually, the thunderbolt of Jove puts an end to the life of Phaeton and the further devastation to the blazing earth.

Another instance of a fiery catastrophe occurs in the cosmological views of the Stoics who in their turn were influenced by the philosophy of Pythagoras. The Stoics developed the doctrine of *ekpyrosis* that postulated the recurrent destruction of cosmos in the conflagration followed by its recreation. This process is eternal, and the newly created world exactly replicates the previous one. This concept may be summarised in the following way: "The Stoics say that when the planets return, at certain fixed periods of time, to the same relative positions, in length and breadth, which they had at the beginning, when the cosmos was first constituted, this produces the conflagration and destruction of everything which exists. Then again the kosmos is restored anew in a precisely similar arrangement as before" [cited in 8, 73].

A series of scourges or cataclysms. Duma-Reungoat offers these in a separate category as another manifestation of the provisional end of the world [5, 61]. In this case the primary significance lies in the scale of the catastrophe, of course. We would suggest that a certain degree of modality be applied to this category, for if cataclysms do not provoke the complete annihilation, then their apocalyptic value lies in the inherent possibility of doing it. Hesiod's *Works and Days*, which is offered as an example of the succession of scourges, does not always possess the sense of an inevitable global obliteration in contrast to Ovid's story of Phaeton or Deucalion and Pyrrha. The pernicious gift to humanity represented by Pandora introduced a number of different ills into the world that prior to this enjoyed a carefree life. The diseases and other scourges let out of the forbidden vessel have caused great suffering and misery, but the existence of the human race was not put in jeopardy. As for the succession of various human races beginning with the generation of gold and ending with the generation of iron which in the poet's opinion is doomed to be destroyed, we could pinpoint only one indisputable case of divine ire that really brought about the extinction of humankind: the punishment of the silver generation which was intentionally destroyed by gods.

Finally, let us take a closer look at the prophetic type of writing in which the end of the world is unveiled to a seer in a vision sent by God. We shall consider this book separately and in fact, Dumas-Reungoat also examined it separately, under the heading *The Prophets of the Old Testament (Les prophétes de l'Ancien Testament)*. She has included it into her general classification as the depiction of the end of the world; however, there is no clear indication in the text as to the means of this ending save for a brief reference to the river of fire near the throne of the Ancient of Days, which might suggest the decisive role of fire. Therefore one cannot be certain about the technicalities of the global destruction hinted at in this Jewish apocalyptic text. Our main interest lies in two important facts: first, the Book of Daniel is the true apocalypse in terms of genre (by the way it is the only Jewish apocalypse admitted to the canon) and secondly, the apocalyptic vision of Daniel has concrete historical events as its background.

The Book of Daniel is a vivid example of apocalypse as a genre, a narrative in which there is a revelation of the last destiny of the world and humankind. As it turned out, the events that served as a stimulus for the creation of this apocalypse took place around 160s BC when the Persian king Antiochus, member of the Seleucid dynasty, initiated large-scale persecution against the denizens of Israel. The tragic events that took place during the invasion of Antiochus's troops were extrapolated into the time of Babylonian exile in the cryptic form of dreams or visions. The prophet Daniel serving at the court of Nebuchadnezzar and his successors interpreted these dreams and thus predicted the destruction of the last earthly kingdom and the advent of the eternal realm of bliss. The most outstanding apocalyptic visions of the Book of Daniel are the terrifying image of a statue made of different metals in the dream of Nebuchadnezzar and the frightening scene of the four beasts coming out of the tumultuous ocean. The first vision undoubtedly belongs to the ancient tradition of representing history as four periods succeeding one another. The four beasts should be associated with the four oppressing empires: "the kingdoms of the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians, the Greeks" [2, 26–27]. The evil empires that threatened the established order of the state of Israel may be pictured as the beastly supporters of chaos and disorder not unlike such monsters as the Indian Vritra, Egyptian Apophis or the Babylonian Tiamat.

References

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Seno apokaliptisko uzskatu īpatnības

Kopsavilkums

1. Mirča Eliade uzsver atšķirības starp seno pirmskristietības domāšanas veidu, ko spilgti raksturo mūžīgās atgriešanās mīts, un kristīgās kultūras pārstāvju uzskatiem par to, ka laikam ir lineāra daba.
2. Normans Kons apgalvo, ka apokaliptiskais mīts ir attīstījies no "kaujas mita", kas atspoguļoja kosmosa un haosa cīņas arhetipu. Par apokaliptiskās ticības šūpuli pieņemts uzskatīt zoroastrismu.
3. Grieķu un indiešu mitoloģijā, kā arī dažu seno filozofu uzskatos atrodamas norādes uz laicīgās pasaules galu, turpretim, pēc Zoroastra mācības, seno ebreju mesiāniskās tradīcijas un kristīgās eshatoloģijas pamatnostādnēm, pasaule ir nolēpta galigai iznīcībai, pēc kuras radīsies pilnīgi cita realitāte.

4. Daniēla grāmatas apokaliptiskais simbolisms liecina par tolaik izplatītām ebreju vajāšanām, kā arī iepazīstina lasītājus ar specifiskiem "haosa briesmoņiem".