

The Book of Elchasai: a Jewish Apocalypse*

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[After a brief description of the problems connected with the relevant heresiological sources, this article establishes what can be known about the lost book of Elchasai or Elxai. It argues that the book was originally written in Aramaic by a Jew living in northern Mesopotamia during Trajan's Parthian war of 114-117 C.E. The book contained the description of a vision of two angelic beings of stupendous dimensions, a male and a female; it announced a cosmic catastrophe and stipulated under which conditions people could secure absolution in the imminent Judgment-day. More than a century later a Greek version of this revelatory book was used by Syrian Judeo-Christians for their religious propaganda in the Christian churches of Rome and Palestine].

I

There is wide agreement in recent literature that the name of "Elchasai", "Elxai", "Alchasaioi", and that of a sect of "Helkesaites", or "Elkeseans", are variant forms or spellings of the same name, and that the reference is basically to the same historical phenomenon. In line with this assumption, there have been various attempts to harmonize the sources mentioning "Elchasai", "Elxai", "Alchasaioi", or, failing this, to postulate different manifestations or stages of development of the alleged sect or missionary movement of "Elchasai", e. g. Jewish and Judeo-Christian stages, Baptist and Gnostic manifestations¹.

Actually this method of putting together pieces of evidence for Elchasai and the Elkeseans from different sources and reconstructing various stages of development was already applied in Epiphanius' *Panarion*, a voluminous anti-heretic work which was finished about the end of the fourth century. After an analysis of Epiphanius' reports of the teaching of "Elxai" and the religious ideas and customs of a trans-Jordan sect of Elkeseans, it has become clear to me that Epiphanius combines here two totally different sources: (a) a source mentioning a revelatory book, called "Elxai", written during the reign of Trajan by a Jewish author, and (b) a source (most likely an oral one) mentioning a syncretistic Jewish or Judeo-Christian sect of the fourth century, resident in areas beyond the Dead Sea and the river Jordan. In the second source, the sect of the Elkeseans was said to refer to a religious teacher whose name apparently sounded very much like the title of the book of revelations, "Elxai", known to Epiphanius from the former source.

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1. For a survey of scholarly ideas about "Elchasai" and the "Elkeseans" and a detailed examination of all the relevant sources see my monographic study *The Revelation of Elchasai. Investigations into the Evidence for a Mesopotamian Jewish Apocalypse of the Second Century and its Reception by Judeo-Christians Propagandists* (Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum VIII). Tübingen 1985.

I have come to the conclusion that the mere similarity of these names (the title of the revelatory book and the name of the above teacher) induced Epiphanius to believe that the book was written by this teacher and, accordingly, that it was composed in a trans-Jordan environment. This assumption enabled him to connect features of the book with ideas and practices of the trans-Jordan Elkeseans and even with views held by other trans-Jordan sects such as the Jewish Nasareans and the Judeo-Christian Ebionites.

It is therefore necessary to separate information about the book of revelations from details about the Elkeseans and their teacher. As can be deduced from another major source, the *Refutation*, an anti-heretic work written c. 230 C.E. by Hippolytus of Rome, the book in question was not composed in the trans-Jordan area but in northern Mesopotamia. It would seem, moreover, that the name "Elxai" (Epiphanius) or "Elchasai" (Hippolytus) does not refer to the author but to the protagonist of the book, a heavenly being of enormous dimensions.

The *Refutation* was written approximately one and a half centuries before Epiphanius' *Panarion* but the relevant information did not become available until the year 1851, when a manuscript, found at Mount Athos and containing the greater part of the *Refutation*, was published.

The passages in this work referring to Elchasai (book IX, chapters 13 to 17) have given rise to further and even more serious misunderstandings. This is not due, though, to the author, as in the case of Epiphanius, but to the scholars who, from the outset, handled the new text as a source of complementary information: a supplement to Epiphanius' accounts of the teaching of Elxai and the Elkesean sect.

What is the subject matter of *Refutation* IX 13-17? There are, in my opinion, clear indications that Hippolytus describes and refutes a man called Alcibiades, a Judeo-Christian propagandist from Apamea in Syria who was active in Rome at the time of Hippolytus. He was in possession of the book of revelations (the book called "Elxai" in Epiphanius). The book was treated by Alcibiades as a secret writing. He claimed that those who listened to the message of the book and believed in it would receive remission of all their sins. So everybody in Rome was summoned to hear the book. But its actual contents were disclosed only to converts, *i. e.* to those who were prepared to follow Alcibiades².

In his religious propaganda, Alcibiades combined ideas of the book of revelations with Judeo-Christian traditions (specific christological speculations and a second baptism for the remission of grave sins) and with elements of pagan learning (*e. g.* astrology and therapeutical prescriptions).

However, this explanation deviates from the usual interpretation of Hippolytus, *Refutation* IX 13-17. It is generally assumed by modern scholarship (a) that Hippolytus quotes directly from the book of revelations. This entails that the Judeo-Christian traditions propagated by Alcibiades are supposed to be ideas deriving from the book. As a result most scholars believe that the revelatory book was a Judeo-Christian document. (b) At the same time these scholars adopt Epiphanius' view on the authorship and the provenance of the book (see above). Consequently in recent scholarship the refutation of Alcibiades of Apamea is taken to be a description and refutation of the ideas of a Judeo-Christian and trans-Jordan teacher (and founder of a sect) "Elchasai" or "Elxai"³.

Both suppositions are erroneous. Hippolytus owes his knowledge of the book to Alcibiades who on certain occasions quoted from this document or referred to its content and to its allegedly heavenly origin. As far as Hippolytus is concerned, it is therefore necessary to distinguish passages from the book quoted by Alcibiades from other statements by this syncretistic Judeo-Christian teacher, just as in Epiphanius we have to

2. See further my article "Hippolytus' Polemic against Bishop Calixtus and Alcibiades of Apamea", in E. A. Livingstone, ed., *Studia Patristica* XVII. Oxford 1982.

3. After the discovery of the so-called *Cologne Mani Codex* (see A. Henrichs- L. Koenen, "Ein griechischer Mani-Codex", *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 5[1970], 97-217) most experts assume that this Manichean text confirms the information of a medieval Islamic encyclopedia, the *Fihrist* of al-Nadīm, to the effect that "al-Ḥasiḥ" (he is called "Alchasaos" in the *CMC*) was the founder of the Babylonian Baptist sect in which Mani was reared. There is general agreement that this Baptist leader is identical with the "Elchasai"/"Elxai" mentioned in Hippolytus, Epiphanius and later patristic sources.

distinguish information about the book "Elxai" from details about the Elkesean sect. We find support for this distinction in the fact that Epiphanius' account of the teaching of "Elxai" and Hippolytus' description of the religious propaganda by Alcibiades of Apamea have little, if anything, in common apart from their reference to the book of revelations.

I will further focus attention on the allegedly revelatory book: what can we learn about this document from the extant sources?⁴

II

The references to the book of revelations in Hippolytus and Epiphanius show that we are dealing with a Jewish book⁵. Furthermore, it would seem that the book in question contained an urgent eschatological message. The latter point needs some clarification. The text quoted indirectly by Hippolytus and Epiphanius is in Greek. There are, however, indications that the original language was Aramaic. In particular a cryptic formula cited by Epiphanius (*Pan* 19, 3, 7) suggests that the book was originally written in this language: *Abar anid moib nochile daasim ane daasim nochile moib abar selam*. What we have here is a kind of mirror sentence. It can be decoded by reading from right to left, beginning with *ane* in the middle of the formula: *ena misaad elichon biom dina raba (selam)* which is Aramaic for: "I shall bear witness to you (or: I shall intercede on your behalf) on the Day of the Great Judgment"⁶. Also, the name "Elchasai" or "Elxai" mentioned in connection with the book argues for a Semitic original: *hyl ksy* or *hyl' ksy'* means "Hidden Power".

The Greek translation must have included a considerable amount of interpretation. Whereas great emphasis was laid on the mysterious and esoteric features of the book, references to eschatological events were most likely obscured or even omitted. A clear instance is the cryptic formula quoted in Epiphanius. There is indeed a striking discrepancy between the cryptic form of these foreign words, on the one hand, and the personal style and the eschatological urgency of the Aramaic sentence concealed in the formula, on the other hand. In my opinion it is highly plausible that the Aramaic sentence was supposed to be wholly understandable for the people for whom the book was meant, and that the message of these words was of great importance to them. Through these words they were comforted by the heavenly mediator of the revelation: on the imminent Judgment-day he would intercede on their behalf. But the readers of the Greek version were facing an incomprehensible formula, which, moreover, was preceded by a command not to search for its meaning: "Let nobody search for the meaning but only speak in prayer the following words, *abar anid*, etc."

There is a second reason for assuming that the Greek version was more than a literal rendering of the Aramaic text. From Hippolytus it may be inferred that the book announced a final war among the wicked angels and apocalyptic troubles in all godless kingdoms. The remarkable thing now is that this prediction was embedded in an astrological warning against the influence of the warlike Mars. The text runs as follows (*Ref* IX 16,3b-4): "But beware of undertaking anything on the third day of the week too, for when again three years of Emperor Trajan are completed, from the time he brought the Parthians under his rule, when three years have been completed, the war among the impious angels of the North breaks out. Thereby all impious kingdoms are troubled". I assume that in speaking of the war among the evil angels and the attendant troubles

4. For the relation between the book of revelations and Alcibiades of Apamea, the trans-Jordan Elkeseans, and the Babylonian Baptists mentioned in the *Cologne Mani Codex* and al-Nadim's *Fihrist*, respectively, I refer to my study mentioned in n. 1 (chapt. X).

5. The Jewish character of the book can be deduced from (1) Jewish features in the preserved fragments (while we do not meet unmistakably Christian ideas), (2) from Epiphanius' treatment of the book: (a) he discusses it within the context of his report of Jewish "heresies" (*Pan* 14-20, (b) in *Pan* 19, 1, 5 Epiphanius states explicitly that "Elxai" was of Jewish origin and that his ideas were Jewish, although he did not live according to the Law, (c) in *Pan* 19, 3, 4 Epiphanius doubts whether the book spoke about Jesus Christ.

6. The meaning of the cryptic formula was discovered in 1858 by two scholars, independently of each other, I. Stern and M. A. Levy.

in all godless kingdoms, the original Aramaic book referred to particular events of the real future (events that were closely connected with the current political situation, *i.e.* Trajan's invasion of Parthia), whereas in the Greek version this war was believed to illustrate the fatal and disastrous influence of Mars, the ruler of Tuesday. In this way, passages of the Aramaic book which were no longer topical, acquired a more general and lasting significance.

III

Only a handful of fragments of the Aramaic book, the textual base, can be reconstructed. Still, these few fragments turn out to be highly informative.

The prediction of a war among the wicked angels, "when again three years of Emperor Trajan are completed, from the time he brought the Parthians under his rule", enables us to date the document, determine its provenance, and trace the politico-historical circumstances quite accurately. The book was written during Trajan's Parthian war of 114-117 C. E., in all likelihood in northern Mesopotamia in the summer of 116, when, according to the ancient mode of inclusive counting, three years of Roman dominion over northern Mesopotamia were completed. At the time the Jewish population of this Parthian area passed through a serious crisis. The first Parthian rebellion to Trajan in the summer of 116, in which Mesopotamian Jews may well have taken an active share⁷, ended in a complete failure. During the Roman reprisals, a slaughter took place among the Jews of Mesopotamia.

The purpose of the book seems to have been to comfort the Jews who had survived this massacre and to prepare them for the imminent eschatological events.

The book opened with the description of a vision of two angelic figures of gigantic or even cosmic size. The enormous measurements were recorded in *schoinoi* and Roman miles (or perhaps the Roman miles were added in the Greek translation). To quote Hippolytus (*Ref IX 13,2f*): "the book had been revealed by an angel whose height was 24 schoinoi—that is 96 miles—and whose girth was 4 schoinoi; from shoulder to shoulder he was 6 schoinoi; his footprints were three and a half schoinoi long—that is fourteen miles—the width being one and a half the height half a schoinos. With him was a female whose dimensions accorded with those mentioned"⁸. The female being is referred to as "Holy Spirit".

The large measurements recall the enormous proportions of the angel Metatron, or indeed those of *Shi'ur Qoma* in Hekhaloth texts. As yet I have not been able to establish whether we are dealing with related traditions.

The huge male angel was referred to as "Hidden Power", *hyl ksy* (corrupted to "Elchasai"/"Elxai"). As in the case of "The Shepherd (of Hermas)", the revelatory book was called after the revealing angel: The Book (or: Revelation) of Elchasai.

The designation "Hidden Power" suggests that the angel was supposed to be preserved in God's presence (he was hidden with God) but that in the imminent universal war he was expected to manifest himself and to intervene on behalf of the faithful. Also, the title of "Great King"⁹ is likely to indicate that the angel was expected to protect and defend the faithful. I assume that some of the eschatological duties of the guardian angel of Israel, Michael, "the Great Prince", were transferred to the huge angel of our book.

This explanation of the gigantic male angel as a guardian angel and a heavenly representative of the faithful can easily be related to the book's announcement of a war among the impious angels. Since this future was said to have repercussions in all godless kingdoms, it would seem that the wicked angels were

7. The revolt coincided with Jewish uprisings in several countries of the Diaspora. Cf. V. A. Tcherikover in; *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* I. 1959, pp. 86-93.

8. Epiphanius paraphrases this description of the two huge angelic figures in *Pan* 19, 4, 1f; 30, 16, 6f; 53, 1, 9.

9. Hippolytus, *Ref. IX 15, 1*; Epiphanius, *Pan* 19, 3, 4.

thought of as the protagonists of these kingdoms. I therefore presume that the revelation granted by the "Hidden Power" included the assurance that he would protect the faithful during the imminent final war and that he was about to destroy the godless angels and their protégés on earth.

There are reasons to surmise, in conclusion, that the male angel of the book was more than the mediator of a heavenly revelation, a revealing angel: the idea seems to have been that the eschatological Saviour himself had appeared to the author of the book.

On the Great Judgment-day this angel would be present as a celestial intercessor, at least, if the words, "I bear witness to you (or: I shall intercede on your behalf) on the Day of the Great Judgment", the words concealed in the secret formula in Epiphanius, were spoken by this angelic figure.

The book seems to have focused more on the male angel, the Hidden Power, than on his female companion, the Holy Spirit. In my opinion, the second angel was conceived as a female being merely because in the Hebrew and Aramaic languages the word for "spirit" —*ruah* or *ruha*— is grammatically feminine. In any case, the belief in the existence of *two* supreme angels seems more fundamental to me than their being presented as male and female.

I hope that the above will stimulate students of Jewish apocalypticism and Jewish mysticism to give their attention to the book's notion of two gigantic angels, one male, the other female.

Not only did the book announce a cosmic catastrophe and the imminence of the Last Judgment: it also stipulated how the hearers of the revelation should prepare themselves for these eschatological events. They were summoned to formally declare before seven witnesses that they would no longer commit any sins. The text is preserved in Hippolytus, *Ref IX* 15,5-6: "Lo, I call to witness the heaven and the water and the holy spirits and the angels of prayer and the oil and the salt and the earth. I call these seven witnesses to witness that I shall sin no more, I shall not commit adultery, I shall not steal, I shall not do injustice, I shall not be greedy, I shall not hate, I shall not break faith, nor shall I take pleasure in any evil deeds"¹⁰.

In searching for the nature and the function of the seven non-human witnesses, it may be of some help to compare a few passages of the book Deuteronomy where heaven and earth are called upon by Moses as witnesses to the Covenant relationship between Jahwe and Israel (Deut 4:26; 8:19 LXX; 30:19; 31:28). In later interpretations, *e. g.* in the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch, the Targum of ps.-Jonathan, and Sifre Deuteronomy, we meet the idea that heaven and earth were called to witness because of their stability and permanence. I suggest that the seven non-human witnesses of our book were regarded as symbols of the same properties: they were expected to survive the coming cosmic catastrophe and would be present on the Day of the Great Judgment.

We are probably dealing with a kind of treaty or contract: if the hearer of the revelation made the relevant vow in the presence of the seven witnesses, and if he lived in conformity with this vow, the heavenly judge was bound to grant him a share with the righteous, and everlasting peace. In the heavenly court the seven witnesses would be present as testifying witnesses along with the huge revealing angel acting as a celestial intercessor. If this is a correct reconstruction, the way of thinking of the book probably was juridical as well as eschatological.

It must have been of vital importance to the person who had abjured all kinds of trespasses in the presence of forensic witnesses to avoid further sins, in particular grave sins such as apostasy or renunciation of one's faith, and sexual sins. It is interesting, then, to notice that two passages of the account of Elxai's teaching in Epiphanius, *Panarion* 19, seem to be concerned with this very issue.

In *Pan* 19,7 Epiphanius states: "He (i. e. Elxai) detests virginity, hates continence, and forces people into marriage", and in 19, 1,8f the following opinion is attributed to Elxai: "... it is not a sin if somebody happens to have worshipped idols in the face of an imminent persecution, if only he does not do so from conviction,

10. As I have demonstrated in my book (cf. above, n. 1), this vow is wrongly connected in Hippolytus' text with a therapeutical prescription by Alcibiades of Apamea (an antidote against rabies).

and if he does not confess in his heart what he does with his lips... During the exile in Babylon, a certain Phineas, a priest from the family of Levi and Aaron and the ancient Phineas, worshipped the Artemis in Susa and so escaped destruction by death under King Darius." I am tempted to trace both opinions to the book of revelations¹¹.

When we read Epiphanius' words in 19,1, 7 without the obvious polemical value judgments they just convey that marriage was strongly recommended by Elxai, whereas virginity and continence were rejected. We are likely to have here an expression of the ancient Jewish view of marriage as an institution against fornication¹². Within the context of the book of revelations, marriage may have been recommended precisely because married people would be less exposed to the danger of committing sexual sins¹³.

The other passage is an attempt to define idolatry, indeed the gravest of all sins. It is not difficult to relate this passage to the abjuration of all sins which was prescribed in the allegedly heavenly book in preparation for the imminent Judgment-day. It should be clear that after the massacre of Jews in northern Mesopotamia in the summer of 116 C. E. and the restoration of the Roman dominion over this Parthian area, there was every reason for the surviving Jewish population to fear that the Romans would soon put an end to the religious liberty they had enjoyed under the Parthians. They were in serious danger of being compelled to worship pagan gods. The passage under discussion makes clear that idol-worship is not a sin if it merely amounts to lip-service. Within the context of the book, this may very well mean that denying one's faith under coercion is not a violation of the vow made before seven witnesses.

We do not know how the book was received by its original addressees, Jews living in Mesopotamia during the last year of Trajan's Parthian campaigns. We are only informed about the fortunes of the Greek version of the book more than a century later. This version still pretended to reveal how the hearers could ensure their future bliss. Syrian Judeo-Christian propagandists, who were active in the Christian churches of Rome and Palestine, referred to this book in connection with their proclamation of divine remission: their claim was that those who listened to the book and believed in it would be absolved from their sins¹⁴. No doubt listening to the book meant that one obeyed the instructions of the book, first of all the prescription to declare in the presence of seven witnesses that one would no longer commit any sins. It seems plausible to me that this was the essential message of the Greek version as well as that of the Aramaic original.

11. It is quite difficult indeed to establish which statements and ideas attributed by Epiphanius to "Elxai" stem from the Mesopotamian book and which do not. The problem is that in Epiphanius' account of the teaching of Elxai features of the book are mixed up with ideas and customs of the trans-Jordan Elkesaens and their teacher, and probably with heterogeneous ideas as well. Cf. the first part of this paper, and chapt. III of my book. As far as the permission of outward denial under coercion is concerned, we are on firmer ground, since a similar opinion is reported in Origen's account of the doctrine propagated by "Helkesaites" in the churches of Palestine (this short account is preserved in Eusebius, *Hist. eccles.* VI 38): "It (the Helkesaite doctrine says that denial is a matter of indifference, and he who has understood this will under necessity deny with his lips but not in his heart". The Helkesaites were in possession of the book of revelations (cf. below, n. 14).

12. Cf. 1 Cor. 7, 2. 5. 9; *epistula Clem. ad Jac.* 7; ps.-Clem. *Homilies* III 68; E. Peterson, *Frühkirche, Judentum und Gnosis*. 1959, pp. 212 f.

13. According to the two ps.-Clementine passages quoted in the preceding note, fornication is the second gravest sin in the sight of the Lord (the gravest sin is idolatry). Cf. further *Test Reuben* 3:3, and *Test. Simeon* 5:3 ("fornication is the mother of all evils").

14. Hippolytus, *Ref IX* 13,4; 15, 1.3; Eusebius, *Hist. eccles.* VI 38: "And they (the Helkesaites) possess a book which, they say, has fallen from heaven, and he who listens to it and believes in it will receive remission of sins..."