Biblical scholars are no longer Ratlos vor der Apokalyptik. An abundance of studies from the last thirty years has revealed many facets of this fascinating phenomenon. An important point, in my view, is the growing awareness of the distinction between a literary genre; a specific view on the fabric of the world and its history; and a sociological classifier for certain milleniarist groups. One of the untied knots still is the question of the origins of the apocalyptic view. In this interesting monograph Jason Silverman argues strongly for an Iranian background of ideas such as the dichotomy between “good” and “evil”; the eschatological view of history; the concept of the final combat between two divine powers—and their angelic helpers—on behalf of the personae miseræ of the world. His argument runs as follows.

In the prolegomena (1–38) Silverman introduces the theme of his book and refers to previous scholarship. He presents a dozen views of scholars who were engaged directly or
indirectly with the question on the relationship between Iranian religion and Jewish/Christian apocalypticism. He arrives at the conclusion that this research was either haphazard or prejudiced. He then displays a very informative outline of recent studies on the complex phenomenon of apocalyptic. He adopts the well-known definition of John Collins and others, which was paraphrased more or less in the introduction to this review. Finally, Silverman gives his considerations on the concepts “influence” and “transmission,” resulting in a six-dimensional matrix: (1) the source must be older than the influenced text; (2) there must have been a historical context for interaction; (3) the transmitted ideas must be at home in the original text or culture; (4) there must be a pointer in the receiving culture for the transmitted idea; (5) the adopted ideas must be distinct or foreign to the receiving culture; and (6) there must be traces of adaptation or cultural change in the adopted idea in its new cultural context. These six elements form the fabric of the rest of his book.

In chapter 1 (39–75), Silverman offers his (re)construction of Iranian religion and royal ideology. He operates with three sets of data: (1) archaeological evidence; (2) Iranian texts, and (3) references in classical authors. From the excavations at Persepolis it became clear that the Haoma-rites already existed in Iron Age Iran. Next to that, the motif of a man carrying a bundle of grass or twigs—the barasman from the Avesta—is not infrequent in reliefs and wall decorations from Persepolis. This might hint at Achaemenid, or even older, roots of the rituals described in the Avesta. The great majority of texts informing on the Zoroastrian religion are late, that is, early medieval. Silverman sidesteps this complication—especially in view of dimension 1—on the basis of an ingenious linguistic theory on the antiquity of the Avestan language, which, in his opinion, opens the lane for the possibility that ninth-century C.E. Sassanian documents might reflect religious ideas from Iron Age Iran. In Greece, Zoroaster was known already in the days of Plato, although Plato is not informative on the ideas of the Persian thinker other than that he was associated with the Magi. Silverman scans texts by Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, Xenophon, Plutarch, and Strabo in which he finds several remarks on Persian lore sometimes of a religious character. It is a pity that Silverman has overlooked the Persian references in the works of Ktesias. Applying the art of premature generalization, Silverman arrives at the conclusion that the sum of this combined evidence hints at the existence of a dualistic worldview in the Achaemenid era, if not already earlier.

---

2. See the special issue of *Semeia* 14 (1979), dedicated to the theme “Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre,” and especially the remark in the introduction (9).

In chapter 2 (76–97) Silverman gives a display of all sorts of possible contacts between Yahwists and Persians. He refers to the Murashu archives from ancient Nippur, the recently found texts from Al Yahudah and Al Nesher in southern Babylonia, the presence of descendants of the Samarian exile in Media, the presence of Persian administrators and mercenaries in Yehud, and the archives from the Persian border garrison in Elephantine in Egypt. His display makes clear that during the Achaemenid age all sorts of contacts between the two groups mentioned must have occurred. A weak point in his further argument, however, is the absence of references to a dualistic form of religion in all the documents mentioned. In Elephantine, for instance, Ahura Mazda is mentioned only in the Aramaic version of the Bisitun Inscription and never in the archives, not even in the oath texts. On the other hand, Silverman is correct in pointing at the fact that the creation theology of Deutero-Isaiah must have been influenced by some Iranian ideas.

At first sight, chapter 3 (98–129), on orality, seems to be a corpus alienum. Silverman, however, makes clear that in communities that were not very much literate, the oral form of communication was predominant. Building on the work of Walter Ong, he correctly argues that oral transmission of ideas—especially in view of its dialogical character—is far from shallow. He then constructs that the exchange of (religious) ideas between Yahwists and Persians must have taken place primarily at the oral level. This is a convincing point that, however, has a weakness: oral communication is untraceable beyond the mind of the speaker and the hearer. This makes a thesis built on oral communication hard to verify or falsify.

In chapter 4 (130–74) Silverman examines a set of biblical texts for traces of Persianisms. He starts off with an analysis of Ezek 37, the section on the valley of the dry bones. His nonmetaphorical reading of this section opens a window to talk about two possible influences from Iran: (1) the idea of bodily resurrection, which was unknown in Yahwism, and (2) the language on spirit, breath, and bones for which he sees parallels in the Gāthās and the Bundahišn. In the two chapters on Gog and Magog (Ezek 38–39), he detects the first Israelite distant future eschatology, which could be interpreted in the framework of a Mithra mythology. The imagery of the four kingdoms in Dan 2 and 7 eventually goes back to an Iranian source also to be found in the Zand-i Wahman Yašn, although Silverman admits that the idea is also phrased by classical authors (Hesiod; Herodotus; Ovid).

The very informative chapter 5 (175–205) is devoted to 1 (Ethiopian) Enoch and traces of Iranian ideas in this work. Silverman reads the Book of the Watchers (1 En. 1–36) as

---

containing a *Kulturentstehungsmythos* that can be compared with the stories on the first human couple in the Greater and the Shorter *Bundahišn*.

Next to the fact that these compositions are only known in early medieval manuscripts, the character of the comparison is very general. In Silverman’s view, the Book of the Watchers used Iranian concepts to bring to life traditional Canaanite mythology. In the Enochic Similitudes one interesting feature is the element of the “weighing of the souls” before judgment (1 En. 41:1; 61:8). Silverman argues that this motif was chosen by the Enochic cycle inspired by the Iranian preoccupation of the “balancing of deeds.” In the section of the birth of Noah, it is told that the hero of the flood at birth already had snow-white hair (1 En. 106:2). Silverman connects this feature with elements from the story on a Persian hero Dastān, or Zāl-i-Zar, known from the tenth-century C.E. *Shāhnāmeh*, which according to Silverman could contain very traditional material.

Chapter 6 (206–27) is a little obscure. Here Silverman develops his idea of an apocalyptic hermeneutic. If I understand him correctly, he is arguing that the ancients—Persians, Yahwists, as well as Jews—shared an interpretative framework that could be labeled as such. This framework or, as I would prefer, belief system was of help in coping with the harsh reality of both threatened personal lives and impoverished communities. This framework was communicated between people at the level of orality and found its way in various literary compositions. On the beams of this framework had been constructed the Iranian concept of duality.

Silverman has elaborated an intriguing hypothesis. He has, however, not convinced me for three reasons. (1) There are too many ifs and maybes in his argument. (2) He has not convinced me of the antiquity of specific notions in late texts. (3) His focus on Iran gives him a set of blinders for other possible backgrounds of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic thinking—Canaanite, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian backgrounds. Nevertheless, this is a daring book on a subject that will continue to catch scholarly attention in years to come.

---

5 But also to the Mesopotamian Adapa-myth and the Greek Prometheus story, as Silverman admits.