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ADVERSUS IUDAEOS IN THE SERMON WRITTEN BY THEODORE SYNCELLUS ON THE AVAR SIEGE OF AD 626

AS is generally known, the war that is labelled as the last great war of the Antiquity (AD 602–628) and the rise of Islam associated with it changed substantially the relations between Christians and Jews in the Eastern Roman Empire¹. Local Christians reacted to the dramatic events of this war (especially the fall of Jerusalem in AD 614 and the Heraclius' recovery of the True Cross) mainly by confrontational polemic tone focused against their long-time ideological rivals². Recently, this topic has been addressed by several researchers who have thoroughly analysed and interpreted these texts³. However, from this point of view at least one of such texts has not been paid sufficient attention.

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² In this connection, see above all D. OLSTER, *Roman Defeat. Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jew*, Philadelphia 1994.

³ On the analysis of the individual anti-Judaic texts in this period, see above all P. SPECK, *Byzantinische Feindseligkeit gegen die Juden im frühen siebten Jahrhundert nebst einer Untersuchung zu*

This marginalised text is a sermon ascribed to the cleric Theodore Syncellus and it is known by its Latin title *De obsidione avarica Constantinopolis*⁴. It describes the great siege of Constantinople in AD 626, exercised between 29th July and 7th August by the Avars supported by the Slavs, Bulgars and Gepids with a more or less symbolic support from the Persian troops lead by the general Shahrbaraz⁵.

Syncellus was a deacon and presbyter of the Church of the Divine Wisdom in Constantinople⁶. On Saturday 2nd August AD 626, he participated in the unsuccessful peace negotiations in the camp of the Avar khagan⁷. Syncellus wrote his sermon before the end of the last Roman-Persian war in AD 628 and the believers might have listened to it in the Constantinopolitan temple of Hagia Sophia on the occasion of the triumph over the Avars and the Slavs in AD 627⁸.

Anastasios dem Perser, Bonn 1997 [= PB, 15]; A. KÜLZER, *Disputationes Graecae contra Iudaeos. Untersuchungen zur byzantinischen antijüdischen Dialogliteratur und ihrem Judenbild*, Stuttgart–Leipzig 1999; G. DAGRON, V. DÉROCHE, *Juifs et chrétiens en Orient byzantine*, Paris 2010 [= BR, 5].

⁴ *De obsidione Constantinopolis homilia*, ed. L. STERNBACH, RAU.WF, ser. II, vol. XV, p. 1–38 [cetera: THEODORUS SYNCPELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*]; F. MAKK, *Traduction et commentaire de l'homélie écrite probablement par Théodore de Syncelle sur le siège de Constantinople en 626*, AUAJ. AAA 19, 1975.

⁵ On the timeline of historical events of this siege among others, see F. BARIŠIĆ, *Le siège de Constantinople par les Avars et les Slaves*, B 24, 1954, p. 371–395; A. STRATOS, *The Avars' Attack on Byzantium in the Year 626*, BF 2, 1967, p. 370–376; IDEM, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, vol. I, Amsterdam 1968, p. 173–196; B.C.P. TSANGADAS, *Fortifications and Defense of Constantinople*, New York 1980, p. 80–106; W. POHL, *Die Awaren. Ein Steppenvolk in Mitteleuropa 567–822*, München 1988, p. 248–255; J. HOWARD–JOHNSTON, *The Siege of Constantinople in 626*, [in:] *Constantinople and its Hinterland. Papers from the Twenty–Seventh Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Oxford, April 1993*, ed. C. MANGO, G. DAGRON, London 1995, p. 131–145; W. KAEGI, *Heraclius – Emperor of Byzantium*, Cambridge 2003, p. 132–139; G. CSIKY, *Konstantinápoly városfalai és a 626. évi avar ostrom*, [in:] *Középkortörténeti tanulmányok 7*, ed. P. KISS, F. PITI, GY. SZABADOS, Szeged 2012, p. 165–183; M. HURBANIČ, *A topographical note concerning the Avar siege of Constantinople the question of the localization of St. Callinicus Bridge*, BS 70, 2012, p. 15–24; IDEM, *A Neglected Note to the Naval Defense of Constantinople during the Avar Siege: the Position of σκαφοκάραβοι in the Golden Horn*, [in:] *Byzanz und das Abendland*, vol. III, *Studia Byzantino-Occidentalia*, ed. E. JUHÁSZ, Budapest 2015 [= ABR.BB, 15.3], p. 211–220. On the historical context, see IDEM, *Posledná vojna antiky. Avarský útok na Konštantínopol roku 626 v historických súvislostiach*, Prešov 2009 [= Byzslav.M, 1]; IDEM, *História a mýtus. Avarský útok na Konštantínopol v roku 626 v legendách*, Prešov 2010 [= Byzslav.M, 2]; IDEM, *Konstantinopol 626. Historia a legenda*, Praha 2016.

⁶ On its authorship and textual tradition S. SZÁDECZKY-KARDOSS, *Textkritische Bemerkungen zur Homilia De obsidione avarica Constantinopolis auctore ut videtur Theodoro Syncello*, AA.ASH 30, 1982/1984, p. 443–450; IDEM, *Zur Textüberlieferung der "Homilia de obsidione Avarica Constantinopolis auctore ut videtur Theodoro Syncello"*, AUAJ. AAA 24, 1986, p. 175–184. Most recently M. KOZELNICKÁ, *Several notes on homily Peri tés tón atheón Abarón te kai Persón – the source on the Avar siege of Constantinople in AD 626*, Bslov 2, 2008, p. 131–144 (in Slovak with the German summary).

⁷ *Chronicon paschale*, rec. L. DINDORF, vol. I, Bonn 1832 [= CSHB], p. 721, 4–722, 14.

⁸ F. BARIŠIĆ, *Le siège de Constantinople...*, p. 373; S. SZÁDECZKY-KARDOSS, TH. OLAJOS, *Breviarum Homiliae Theodori Syncelli de obsidione avarica Constantonopolis* (BHG 1078m), AB 108, 1990, p. 148–149.

The author of the sermon describes the events of the Avar siege chronologically, day after day, mentioning several valuable details that cannot be found elsewhere. By his testimony, he wanted to stress predominantly the salvation of Constantinople after the intervention by the Holy Mother of God on the last day of the siege. This salvation in Syncellus' account proved the unique status of Christianity and its centre – the New Jerusalem (Constantinople) – in comparison with the Jewish religion and the old Jerusalem. The context of the sermon shows that the reader deals with more than a mere historical description of a specific event. In its very essence, the text is clearly a polemic piece of writing focused against the supposed Jewish opponents. Therefore, it is indeed surprising that apart from one exception the text has not been so far approached from this aspect with sufficient attention⁹.

Although Syncellus describes the individual phases of the Avar siege, he uses the attack as a mere historical backdrop against which he develops his polemic with the Jews. Thus he became the first of a number of other Byzantine authors who would in this way come to terms with unexpected catastrophes accompanying the collapse of the Christian empire in the 7th century. The main leader of the attack – the Avar khagan – is depicted as the new pharaoh, while the author's patron – the Constantinopolitan patriarch Sergius – features in the sermon as the new Moses. However, the main role is enacted by the inhabitants of Constantinople and their capital protected by God. In his reasoning, Syncellus uses several motifs from the Old Testament – especially the passages written by the prophets Isaiah, Zechariah and Ezekiel. The Avar siege of Constantinople is compared to an ancient and similarly unsuccessful attack on Jerusalem and Judah that was led against the city in 735 BC by Resin and Pekah, the kings of Syria and Israel. Both rulers then stood at the front of a large Middle Eastern coalition aimed against the expansive Assyria. However, Ahaz, the ruler of Judah in that era, refused to join the coalition, by which decision he summoned up an enemy attack against his kingdom. The prophet Isaiah encouraged Ahaz not to worry about the fate of Jerusalem, warning him not to ally with Assyria (Isa 7, 10–12).

For Syncellus, however, the motif of the ancient attack on Jerusalem was not important from the historical point of view, nor did he want to compare it to his era following the traditional rules of classical rhetoric. Although a scholar, Syncellus was a cleric in the first place and similarly as many of his colleagues, he perceived

⁹ From this perspective, Syncellus' sermon has been interpreted among relevant authors only by David OLSTER (*Roman Defeat...*, p. 73–78). Although A. KÜLZER (*Disputationes...*, p. 36–92) takes into consideration various forms of Byzantine anti-Judaic literature including the homiletic (p. 53–55), he did not include Syncellus' homily in his list. The eschatological motifs of this homily were also briefly mentioned by P.J. ALEXANDER, *The Strength of Empire and Capital as Seen Through Byzantine Eyes*, S 37.3, 1962, p. 346–347; S. SPAIN ALEXANDER, *Heraclius, Byzantine Imperial Ideology, and the David Plates*, S 52.2, 1977, p. 222–223; P. MAGDALINO, R. NELSON, *Introduction*, [in:] *The Old Testament in Byzantium*, ed. IDEM, Washington 2010, p. 16–17; W. BRANDES, *Anastasios ó δίκωπος: Endzeiterwartung und Kaiserkritik*, BZ 90, 1997, p. 38–39.

the events of the Old Testament as mere prefigurations of the actual fulfilment of God's message that took place only after Christ's arrival into this world¹⁰. The author knowingly changed Isaiah's historical account of the allied attack of Syria and Israel against Jerusalem into a prophecy, with the intention to persuade his readers and listeners that the entire story took place in their own lifetime. Hence, the Avars and their allies became the ones that Isaiah had had actually on his mind:

What the prophet said and wrote as a history and allegory came to materialize to the Judeans of that time in Jerusalem as in a shadow or prefiguration, but this prophecy actually refers to You [the inhabitants of Constantinople] upon whom God poured all the grace of his love through the Holy Mother of God¹¹.

Syncellus notices this passage from Isaiah for a specific reason: it speaks of a virgin that gives birth to a son and names him Emmanuel. Since antiquity, Christians have been interpreting these words as a prophecy of the birth of Christ from the Virgin Mary¹². However, the Judean king Ahaz in Isaiah's account refused the divine sign, which Syncellus symbolically understands as the refusal of the real Christ by the Jews. He tried to point out that Ahaz had been only an imperfect prefiguration of a pious and God-fearing Byzantine emperor Heraclius (AD 610–641), even though the latter did not participate in the Avar siege in person:

Then how could this city [of Constantinople] not have received greater help and divine support than that [old] Jerusalem, when it received from God such a God-loving emperor [Heraclius] and when it has a new Isaiah, my high priest [patriarch Sergius], who is constantly alert and with a sober spirit announces God's messages to people¹³.

Syncellus perceives the terrifying Avar attack on Constantinople as a divine punishment for the sins of the capital's inhabitants, similarly as it was in the case of the city's Old Testament predecessor. Subsequently, he explains the causes of the siege. In his opinion, the Avars attacked the city:

¹⁰ This level of interpretation of the Old Testament surely arose in the course of the polemical debates between the early Christians and Jews. For the first time it is probably expressed by Justin the Martyr – cf. JUSTIN MARTYR, *Dialogue avec Tryphon*, 90.2, rec. PH. BOBICHON, vol. I, Fribourg 2003, p. 430–432. On the influence of semi-biblical typology on Byzantine texts dealing with the motive of Constantinople see V. ZERVAN, *Konstantinopel – Präfiguration Jerusalems?*, [in:] *Laetae segetes iterum*, ed. I. RADKOVA, Brno 2008, p. 417–418; IDEM, *Typológia–kresťanská forma myslenia na východe. Podoby typologickej myšlienkovvej formy v rannej Byzancii 6. storočia*, Bratislava 2013, p. 58–74 (with further literature).

¹¹ THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 299, 26–29.

¹² The original Jewish versions of Isaiah's prophecy mention in this point a maiden, while the Septuagint uses the noun Virgin. In this relation see A. KÜLZER, *Disputationes...*, p. 262.

¹³ THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 299, 1–5.

because of the magnitude and variety of our sins and because in the public life, we do not in dignity follow the commandments of our God, our Saviour, we bite and devour each other and are ready to perpetrate any form of evil¹⁴.

The victory of the defenders of Constantinople is, on the contrary, depicted as evidence of God's mercy, with the influence of interceding by the Virgin Mary. Syncellus especially and on various occasions stresses the fact that the decisive defeat of the Avars and the Slavs occurred on 7th of August, i.e. on the fifth day of the week, on the seventh day of August and on the tenth day from the beginning of the siege:

Exactly this fifth day, but also together with it the seventh and especially the tenth day, has shown us all the signs of divine redemption – each number expressed itself clearly in some different way. The fifth day effectively fulfilled all our senses with good divine will... The seventh day, as a Virgin of some kind, motherless, was well worthy of the grace of the eternal Virgin and Mother of God. In the end, the tenth day brought us the full freedom through God and the Virgin.¹⁵

Syncellus perceives the mystical symbolic of the numbers five, seven and ten in the context of yet another Old Testament prophecy, addressed to the Jewish community by the prophet Zacharias. Similarly to him, Syncellus looked in these numbers for contemporary parallels to his own interpretation. Even more interesting is his rendering of the symbolical meaning of the tenth day, on which the inhabitants of Constantinople achieved the final victory over the Slavs in the Golden Horn. In this relation, he literally cites another of the prophets, Jeremiah, who speaks about the first destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem (Jer 52, 12–16) that took place during the reign of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BC). The temple was allegedly torn down by Nabuzardan, the commander of the king's bodyguard. According to Jeremiah, this catastrophe happened on the tenth day of the fifth Jewish month called 'Ab'. It is not without specific reason that Syncellus points out that the month 'Ab' is often coinciding with the Roman month of August, suggesting that the Babylonian attack on Jerusalem and the Avar attack on Constantinople might have both occurred in the same month. Using the mystics of numbers, he again brings forward the qualitative superiority of Christendom and its new centre – Constantinople – which God did not leave to the mercy of the enemies, unlike the centre of the Jewish world.

Nevertheless, the author of the sermon does not limit himself to these comparisons. As another piece of evidence supporting his arguments, he mentions the date of the second destruction of the Jewish temple that occurred in AD 70

¹⁴ THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 301, 10–13; See also D. OLSTER, *Roman defeat...*, p. 73.

¹⁵ THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 308, 34–40.

in the wake of the attack of the Roman legions of the emperor Titus (AD 79–81). According to the report by the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius, whom Syncellus cites literally, the Romans destroyed the shrine on the tenth day of the Macedonian month 'Loos'. Syncellus again stresses the correspondence of the month 'Loos' with the Roman month of August. In his view, this correspondence confirms that both ancient destructions of Jerusalem occurred on the same day and in the same month as the Avar attack on Constantinople. As he follows:

The scripture shows that Nabuzardan destroyed the temple in Jerusalem on the tenth day of the fifth month. Also Titus ruined the same city on the tenth day of the fifth month. And the khagan, the evil tyrant, also launched an attack with a colossal enemy army from the East and West, from the sea and land, exactly in the fifth month and on the fifth day after his arrival...¹⁶

The author of the sermon knowingly manipulates the historical data, but this time he reveals the weak points of his arguments. The definitive defeat of the Avars occurred on the seventh, not on the tenth day of August and Syncellus was well aware of this fact. He argued that by the numeral tenth he did not mean the position of the day in the month (10th August), but the entire period of the siege (i.e. 10 days, from 29th July till 7th August AD 626). As he meaningfully mentions in this relation:

both dates (i.e. the tenth day and the fifth month of the Avar siege) correspond with the previous [dates of the Babylonian and the Roman siege of Jerusalem], although we do not count it from the beginning of the month, but from the arrival of the enemy and the villain [the Avar khagan]¹⁷.

Of course, the use of numeral symbolic was nothing of a novelty in the Judaeo-Christian environment, as can be assumed from the popularity of the second and seventh book of the prophet Daniel¹⁸. Approximately in the same period as the Avar attack on Constantinople occurred, such calculations appear in the Jewish liturgical texts. In those times, Palestine was occupied by the Persians who had invaded it in AD 614. The new governors of the Holy Land initially promoted a tolerant religious policy towards the Jewish communities, raising new hopes for liberation of the people of Israel from the oppression by foreign powers¹⁹. According to one of the Jewish prophecies of the era, the final liberation was supposed to come after 550 years of foreign rule. The fundamental point in time that was to serve as the

¹⁶ THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 310, 11–17.

¹⁷ THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 310, 33–35.

¹⁸ In this relation, see the classical monograph G. PODSKALSKY, *Byzantinische Reicheschatologie: Die Periodisierung der Weltgeschichte in den vier Grossreichen (Daniel 2 und 7) und dem tausendjährigen Friedensreiche (Apok. 20)*, München 1972.

¹⁹ See H. SIVAN, *From Byzantine to Persian Jerusalem...*, p. 302–303.

start for the calculation was the year AD 68, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, as the Jewish sources mention²⁰. When the Persians conquered and occupied Jerusalem in AD 614 they renewed the Jewish hopes for the reconstruction of their shrine. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that Theodore Syncellus stresses in his sermon the twofold destruction of the temple by the Babylonians and the Romans. In compliance with Christ's prophecy, the Christians believed that it would never be renewed²¹. Had the contrary have proven to be true, the trust in the Saviour's message might have been undermined²².

However, the lengthy digression that Syncellus dedicated in his sermon to the Avar attack is not a mere play on numbers. The author used it on purpose to show his listeners that the Jewish Jerusalem and its temple were twice destroyed by their enemies. This time, the Avar khagan only intended to conquer the city on the tenth day after his arrival, but the Christian metropolis and the main temple of Hagia Sophia were left intact. Thus, Syncellus thought that Isaiah's words were finally fulfilled in the new and better Jerusalem. What else could have served as a better proof of the dominancy of the New Testament over the Old Testament or Christendom over Judaism, than this miraculous salvation? Two smoking torches mentioned by Isaiah, symbolically represented the Syrian king Rasin and the Israelite king Pekah who did not succeed in their intention to destroy Jerusalem. Nevertheless, in Syncellus' opinion, the prophet actually talked about the Avar khagan and the Persian general Shahrbaraz, the khagan's ally during the siege. As the author symptomatically mentions in this relation:

they could not harm Jerusalem [i.e. Constantinople], nor they managed to drive away David's descendants, nor they made the Tubals' son a ruler as they had agreed and confirmed by their consent when they closed such agreement. On the contrary: they received an everlasting shame and humiliation in front of all the people and among all nations. Thus it was clearly shown that the most divine Isaiah prefigured in shadow and prefiguration the miracles that occurred in the present-day Jerusalem [Constantinople]...²³

None of the Christian authors had until then expressed more convincingly the idea that later became important for the Byzantine identity: Constantinople is the New Jerusalem²⁴. Syncellus considered his listeners as the people of the New

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 283–284.

²¹ AV. CAMERON, *The Jews...*, p. 79; EADEM, *Byzantines and Jews...*, p. 256.

²² EADEM, *The Jews...*, p. 79.

²³ THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 313, 30–36.

²⁴ AS R. OUSTERHOUT (*Sacred Geographies and Holy Cities: Constantinople as Jerusalem* [in:] *Hierotopy. The Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, ed. A. LIDOV, Moscow 2004, p. 2) rightly comments, such references appear more often in current scholarship than in Byzantine texts. According to V. ZERVAN (*Konstantinopol...*, p. 414–421, with a good overview of the different approaches to this scheme in the present historiography), in the present historiography and Byzantology, the concept of Constantinople as the New or Heavenly Jerusalem remained under the shadow

Testament, i.e. the New Israel. This was not a novelty, but a traditional opinion that had been present in Christendom since the times of the apostle Paul. However, the situation is different in the case of describing Constantinople as the New Jerusalem. The young capital on Bosphorus was not established as a pure Christian city²⁵. Even later, in the 5th century, it was not the spiritual centre of the orthodox belief neither the home of saints without any trace for.

Neither in the widely cited biography of the St. Daniel Stylites (ca. AD 409–493) is Constantinople mentioned as the New Jerusalem, but only as the second Jerusalem, merely due to its belief and sacral buildings and not from the viewpoint of Christian redemption²⁶. The focal point of Christ's message still lies on the Jerusalem

of the more famous scheme, that of Constantinople as New Rome. Clearly, the exact references to Constantinople as the New Jerusalem are virtually absent prior to Syncellus' homily. The only exception is Eustratius' Vita of patriarch Eutychius of Constantinople (552 to 565 and 577 to 582). He referred to Constantinople as the New Jerusalem and Queen of cities in connection with the triumphal return of his hero Eutychius after his forced exile from Amaseia. Cf. *Eustratii Presbyteri Vita Eutychiei Patriarchae Constantinopolitani*, ed. C. LAGA, Turnhout 1992 [= CC.SG, 25], 2070–2079. Various comparisons of Constantinople with Jerusalem were collected by E. Fenster, however not systematically by means of separate chapter – See E. FENSTER, *Laudes Constantinopolitanae*, München 1968 (the various references are given on p. 102–105, 109, 114–115, 121, 124, 135, 140–141, 154, 159, 214, 250, 279–280). An excellent overview of the various references to Constantinople – the New or Second Jerusalem is presented by V. ZERVAN, *Konstantinopol ako Nový Jeruzalem. Náčrt polo-biblickej typológie*, Bslov 3, 2010, p. 86–98; on the concept of Constantinople as the New Jerusalem in generally: PH. SHERRARD, *Constantinople, Iconography of a Sacred City*, London 1965, p. 79–136; J. PAHLITZSCH, *Zur ideologischen Bedeutung Jerusalems für das orthodoxe Christentum*, [in:] *Konflikt und Bewältigung. Die Zerstörung der Grabeskirche zu Jerusalem im Jahre 1009*, ed. TH. PRATSCH, Berlin 2011 [= MSt, 32], p. 239–255, esp. 243–252; on its emergence: J. WORTLEY, *Israel and Byzantium: A Case of Socio-Religious Acculturation*, [in:] *Traditions in Contact and Change. Selected Proceedings of the 14th Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions*, ed. P. SLATER ET AL., Waterloo 1983, p. 361–376; P. MAGDALINO, *The history of the future and its uses: prophecy, policy and propaganda*, [in:] *The Making of Byzantine History: Studies dedicated to Donald M. Nicol*, ed. R. BEATON, C. ROUECHÉ, Aldershot 1993, p. 11–12; P. GURAN, *The Constantinople – New Jerusalem at the Crossing of Sacred Space and Political Theology in New Jerusalem*, [in:] *Hierotopy and Iconography of Sacred Spaces*, ed. A. LIDOV, Moscow 2009, p. 35–57, and most recently V. ZERVAN, *Typológia...*, p. 58–74 (with further literature).

²⁵ On the foundation of Constantinople and its alleged Christian character see the critical observations by A. BERGER, *Konstantinopel, die erste christliche Metropole?*, [in:] *Die spätantike Stadt und ihre Christianisierung*, ed. G. BRANDS, H.G. SEVERIN, Wiesbaden 2003, p. 204–215, in the given relation see above all p. 204–207, and recently IDEM, *Konstantinopel: Geschichte, Topographie, Religion*, Stuttgart 2011, p. 7–20.

²⁶ *Vita S. Danielis Stylitae*, 10, 12–14, rec. H. DELEHAYE, [in:] *Les saints stylites*, Brussels 1923, p. 12. On this topic, see H. SARADI, *Constantinople and its Saints (IVth–VIth c.): The Image of the City and Social Considerations*, SMed 36, 1995, p. 98; V. ZERVAN, *Konstantinopel...*, p. 419; IDEM, *Typológia...*, p. 67–68. Recently B. BLECKMAN (*Apokalypse und kosmische Katastrophen: Das Bild der theodosianischen Dynastie beim Kirchenhistoriker Philostorg* [in:] *Endzeiten. Eschatologie in den monotheistischen Weltreligionen*, ed. W. BRANDES, F. SCHMIEDER, Berlin 2008, p. 37) has argued that the comparison of Constantinople to Jerusalem may be older than it has been usually expected. In this regard

in Palestine. The early Christians forged for themselves a celestial counterpoint to the original Jewish Jerusalem – its improved and perfect archetype – and their belief acquired with time an imperial dimension. From the times of Constantine the Great onwards, Jerusalem was gradually turning into a more Christian and pilgrimage-oriented city with a multitude of churches and holy places²⁷. However, in AD 614, it was occupied and pillaged by the Persians²⁸. This catastrophe can only be compared to the first plundering of the eternal city of Rome. Logically, such a dramatic event had a profound influence on many authors of the era, including Syncellus.

In the times of the Avar attack, the Persians had been occupying Jerusalem for twelve years already. It can be assumed, that the new rulers initially supported the Jewish community and preferred it to the local Christians. There was even a slight possibility of renewal of the ruined temple, but we do not know how familiar the inhabitants of Constantinople were with these activities. The last time the Jews had been trying to renew their temple was a long time before that – during the reign of the emperor Julian (AD 361–363)²⁹. The last pagan ruler on the Roman throne also in this way wanted to weaken the growing influence of the Christians; however, his premature death turned his plans fruitless. Since then, the Jews had inferior social and political status in Palestine and the empire as such. However, the Persian occupation brought about a new era, fostering the religious expectations of the Jews. In this new situation, they could pay back the Christians with the same currency: Jerusalem, the sacred site of the passion and resurrection of Christ, fell into the hands of the enemies. Was not this a strong enough proof that Christians believed in a false Messiah?

Nevertheless, Syncellus was far from expressing regrets over the occupation of the Holy Land and the destruction of its sacred centre, as his predecessors often did. His words are addressed to the Christian audience and not to the Jewish opponents, despite the highly polemic tone and reproaches. His words were meant to bring the attentions of the believers to the fact that the search for the real and Christian Jerusalem in Palestine is not possible anymore. In this indirect way he tries to come to terms with the loss of Jerusalem, seeing Constantinople as its substitute, which is a higher level of the Old Testament earthly metropolis of Judea. God and his Mother saved the New Jerusalem and – as the author adds –

he brings attention to the quotation from the anonymous *Life of Constantine* (BHG 365) thought to be a part of Philostorgius' Church history. This fragment relates to the building of Constantinople by the emperor Constantine the Great which was, as the text states, pleasing to God, no less than the Jerusalem of old.

²⁷ See R. WILKEN, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought*, New Haven 1992, p. 326, n. 11.

²⁸ For the analysis and summary of this event, see B. FLUSIN, *Saint Anastase le Perse...*, p. 129–181; see also: Y. STOYANOV, *Defenders and Enemies of the True Cross. The Sasanian Conquest of Jerusalem in 614 and Byzantine Ideology of Anti-Persian Warfare*, Wien 2011.

²⁹ R. WILKEN, *The Land Called Holy...*, p. 139.

showed us – although we are not worthy of salvation – loving goodness. They showed us that God welcomes and loves better the pure and bloodless service of Christians, than the one ruled by the Old Testament, with blood and burnt sacrifices carried out in the land of Israel...³⁰

* * *

Theodore Syncellus considered the Avar siege of Constantinople as the prologue to the end of this world. His opinions reflected the views of many people who faced the consequences of the last Roman-Persian war (AD 602–628). From the moment the conflict was unleashed, the East witnessed the spread of apocalyptic expectations among Christians within the empire and outside its borders³¹. Out of these generally spread notions, Syncellus created an integrated concept, inspired by the Old Testament prophecy by Ezekiel, speaking of the last days of humankind. Ezekiel described his visions in times that were extremely difficult for the Jews, during the Babylonian captivity. He predicted that both parts of the scattered people of Israel and Judea would unite and then, in the end of all times, God would summon against his people the lord of darkness – Gog from the country Magog in the far North, who would fall upon Israel with a terrible blow. Gog and his allies would afflict the country with grave plunder, but God would show his greatness, destroying their army and leaving their remains to the birds and wild animals (Ez 38).

It was in the times of the last Roman-Persian war when testimonies of the popularity of this prophecy appear among the Middle-Eastern Jews and it is referred to by certain passages of the popular Jewish Apocalypse *Sefer Zerubbabel*³². Anti-

³⁰ THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 310, 17–24.

³¹ The first of these expectations seems to be reflected in the Revelation commentary of Andrew of Caesarea written probably not long before 614, see *Studien zur Geschichte des griechischen Apokalypse-Textes*, vol. I, *Der Apokalypse-Kommentar des Andreas von Kaisareia*, Text, ed. J. SCHMID, München 1955 [cetera: ANDREAS CAESARIENSIS]. For the date of its composition see recently E.S. CONSTANTINOU, *Guiding to a Blessed End: Andrew of Caesarea and His Apocalypse Commentary in the Ancient Church*, Washington 2014, p. 61–71. In fact, most of these texts were completed after the end of the last Roman-Persian war. Saint Theodore of Sykeon, who died in AD 613, foretold the raids by the barbarian nations, bloodshed and cities being turned into ruins, but his biographer George finished this Vita only after the death of Emperor Heraclius. Cf. *Vie de Theodore de Sykeon*, c. 119, 134, ed. A.J. FESTUGIÈRE, Brussels 1970, p. 96, 20–22, 106, 22–34. The other contemporary prophecies are presented by Theophylactus Simocattes – *Theophylacti Simocattae historiae*, V, 15, 5–6, ed. C. DE BOOR, Leipzig 1887, p. 216, 21 – 217, 6. For these and other texts see also G.J. REININK, *Heraclius, the New Alexander. Apocalyptic Prophecies during the Reign of Heraclius*, [in:] *The Reign of Heraclius (610–641): Crisis and Confrontation*, ed. IDEM, B.H. STOLTE, Leuven–Paris–Dudley 2002, p. 81–83; W. BRANDES, *Anastasios...*, p. 47–48.

³² *Sefer Zerubbabel*, [in:] *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature*, ed. D. STERN, M. MIRSKY, New Haven 1998 [= YJS, 29], p. 78. This text emerged between 603–630, probably as a response to the persecution of the Jews by Emperor Heraclius after the end of the Roman-Persian war. In this regard: B.M. WHEELER, *Imaging the Sasanian Capture of Jerusalem. The „Prophecy and Dream of Zarubbabel” and Antiochus Strategos „Capture of Jerusalem”*, OCP 57, 1991,

ceptions of the end of all times can also be found in the Jewish synagogal poetry (*piyyut*), speaking of, among other things, the lethal war of the kings of the East and West, during which the Last Judgement and the attack of Gog and Magog against the people of Israel shall occur³³. Recently, the passage in question has been also put into relation with the last war of antiquity³⁴. According to the Jewish interpreters of the Holy Scripture, this conflict marked the beginning of the end of the Roman/Byzantine supremacy in Palestine. The era of the Persian occupation of Palestine is reflected in yet another *piyyut*, written by an anonymous author on the occasion of the anniversary of the destruction of the Jewish temple by the Babylonians. This song also anticipates the end of the supremacy of the country known as Edom, identified by Jews with the Roman (alt. Byzantine) Empire³⁵.

Dramatic changes, brought about by the last confrontation of the traditional powers, undoubtedly influenced the mental landscape of Christians. After the conquering of Jerusalem in AD 614, many might have assumed that doomsday was near. However, the Palestinian clerics who were lamenting the fall of Jerusalem were not preoccupied that it would mean the approaching of the end of the world³⁶. Nevertheless, their Constantinopolitan contemporary Theodore Syncellus was of a different opinion. In corresponding places in his sermon on the Avar siege he cites selected passages of Ezekiel's prophecy, especially those referring to the destruction of the northern enemies of Israel (Gog and Magog)³⁷.

p. 73–77; G. STEMBERGER, *Jerusalem in the Early Seventh Century: Hopes and Aspirations of Christians and Jews*, [in:] *Jerusalem: Its Sanctity and Centrality to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. L. LEE. New York 1999, p. 267; J.W. VAN BEKKUM, *Jewish Messianic Expectations in the Age of Heraclius*, [in:] *The Reign of Heraclius...*, p. 103–112. The similarity of the motifs in Syncellus' homily and Jewish eschatological literature in this period has been recently stressed by Alexei SIVERITSEV (*Judaism and Imperial eschatology in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge 2011, p. 9, 13).

³³ *On that Day*, [in:] H. SIVAN, *From Byzantine to Persian Jerusalem...*, p. 294–296.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 296.

³⁵ *Time to Rebuke*, [in:] H. SIVAN, *From Byzantine to Persian Jerusalem...*, p. 287–289.

³⁶ Such expressions are nowhere to be found in the contemporary texts describing the Persian onslaught of Jerusalem in 614. However, Strategius used even such an occasion to enhance the contrast between the destruction of the Christian Jerusalem and the Old Jewish one. He makes this comparison through the use of Biblical typology similar to Syncellus. But whereas Syncellus can prove the superiority of the New Testament over the Old one by means of the miraculous salvation of his terrestrial New Jerusalem, in Strategius' lamentation over the fall of the Christian Holy city, such a distinction remains logically impossible. Cf. STRATEGIUS, *La prise de Jérusalem par les Perses en 614*, I, 12–17, ed. G. GARITTE, Louvain 1960 [= CSCO.SI, 203.12], p. 3; see also R. WILKEN, *The Land called Holy...*, p. 325–326.

³⁷ On this prophecy, see especially S. BØE, *Gog and Magog: Ezekiel 38–39 as Pre-text for Revelation 19: 17–21 and 20: 7–10*, Tübingen 2001 [= WUNT, 2nd Series, 135], and A.R. ANDERSON, *Alexander's Gate: Gog and Magog and the Enclosed Nations*, Cambridge, 1932 [= MMAA, 5]. For an overview of the most important early Christian interpreters of Gog and Magog see O.J. MAENCHEN-HELFEN, *The World of the Huns*, Los Angeles 1973, p. 3–5; R. MANSELLI, *I popoli immaginari: Gog e Magog*, [in:] *Popoli e paesi nella cultura altomedievale*, Spoleto 1983 [= SSCISAM, 29], p. 487–519; P. ALEX-

Syncellus brings forward the fact that Ezekiel wrote his testimony during the Jewish captivity in Babylon, which is a matter of an ancient past. However, he could not find in the troubled lot of the Jewish community in Palestine any event that could be identified with the prophet's words about the last days of humankind. Especially in this relation, he mentions two examples: the uprising led by the high priest Matatiah during the reign of the Hellenistic king Antiochus Epiphanes (176/5–164/3 BC); and the victorious Roman expedition against Jerusalem in AD 70. As the author observes both events brought hardship and suffering to the Jews. In the same time he adds that although the enemies had plundered the Holy Land and looted whatever they could find, none of the inhabitants was doomed, as Ezekiel had been predicting in his prophecy. None of the enemies up to that point could be considered as the apocalyptic figure of Gog from the country of Magog. Having finished with the citations from the book of Ezekiel, Syncellus states:

See, you have heard the words of the prophet. Can someone with a sober judgement decide whether these prophecies refer to the Old Israel and its land and whether they might see their fulfilment? Time wise, such fulfilment is impossible in Israel. Concerning the places in which it was supposed to take place, as the prophet says, neither these lead us to a conclusion that it indeed is Israel according to the flesh.³⁸

Nevertheless, Syncellus did not finish off his polemic by this statement, being convinced that Jews would not ever see the fulfilment of this prophecy. He saw the possibility in which Gog's hordes would ever fall upon the Holy Land and pillage it as hardly probable, as it had already been thoroughly plundered and nothing valuable was left there to be found and stolen.

Today, there is none of those things in that land of Israel that could become a pretence for war, nor there ever will be,

– he concludes symptomatically³⁹.

The author of the sermon logically assumed that Ezekiel's prophecy about Gog's plundering of the land and of the multitude of loot do not refer to Palestine, even less so to its original owners. The historical land of Israel is for him, as for other Christian commentators of the Holy Scripture, a prefiguration of the actual

ANDER, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, Los Angeles–London 1985, p. 185–192; S. BØE, *Gog and Magog...*, p. 211–218; W.J. AERTS, *Gog, Magog, Dogheads and Other Monsters in the Byzantine World*, [in:] *Gog and Magog: The Clans of Chaos in World Literature*, ed. A.A. SEYED-GOHRAB ET AL., Amsterdam 2007, p. 23–34; E. VAN DONZEL, A. SCHMIDT, *Gog and Magog in Early Eastern Christian and Islamic Sources. Sallam's Quest for Alexander's Wall*, Leiden 2010, p. 12–56. However, they all omitted to mention and analyse the homily of Theodore Syncellus from this point of view.

³⁸ THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 315, 31–35.

³⁹ THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 316, 29–30.

Promised Land. Hence, the Jews would not witness the dusk of the times and the arrival of new times of justice, since – as Syncellus says –

today they live scattered among all nations and Israel according to the flesh does not own land which Gog might attack with the intention to pillage and loot⁴⁰.

Syncellus does not perceive Gog as a formless apocalyptic figure. Instead, in compliance with the Revelation of John the Apostle, he considers him as a certain type of assembly of the impure nations (Rev 20, 7–9). Unlike Ezekiel, John says that the destruction of the world shall be preceded by the arrival of Satan who shall collect the nations from the four corners of the land of Gog and Magog. Comparing these to sand in the sea, John the Apostle says that these nations shall round God's beloved city (Rev 20, 8–9). These visions, along with literal citations from the Apocalypse, are used by Syncellus in his sermon to describe the start of the Avar attack on Constantinople, symptomatically combining the Old Testament and the New Testament notions of the end of the world and setting them into the context of the Avar siege.

Theodore Syncellus made every effort to prove the connection of the Avar attack with the aforementioned prophecies. Ezekiel's prophecy is cited according to the Septuagint – the oldest translation of the Hebrew alphabet into Greek. This translation includes that God shall send Gog against those who inhabit the eye of the land. This invasion shall be allegedly witnessed by the Carchedonian, i.e. Carthaginian merchants⁴¹. However, Syncellus intentionally modified the name of the Carchedonian merchants to Chalcedonian merchants when citing from the Septuagint. Chalcedon was an Asian suburb of Constantinople, in which the Persian armies of general Shahrbaraz – who tried to conquer the city as well – were stationed. This manipulation of words served Syncellus as yet another proof that Ezekiel's prophecy refers to the Avar attack.

Nevertheless, the author is also here aware of the weak points in his argumentation, knowing that such interpretation of the cited passage digresses from other Christian exegetes. Be it this way or another, he concludes his consideration meaningfully:

But if somebody was to say that the Chalcedonian merchants are allegedly merchants from Libya [Carthage], even in such case it remains clear that the prophet did not mean the land of Israel according to the flesh. The Chalcedonian merchants never traded with the land of Israel⁴².

⁴⁰ THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 316, 22–24. The Byzantine commentaries of the apocalypse do not stress that the target of this attack would become the Holy Land itself. See P. ALEXANDER, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition...*, p. 190.

⁴¹ It should be remarked here that other versions of the Old Testament mention in this point the merchants of Tarshish, a locality that is being identified with Tarsus, a city in Southern Spain. For more details see W.S. LASOR, *Tarshish*, [in:] *ISBE*, vol. IV, ed. G.W. BROMILEY, Grand Rapids 1995, p. 734; F. MAKK, *Traduction et commentaire...*, p. 217.

⁴² THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 317, 11–14.

Another passage from Ezekiel's prophecy that speaks about the destruction of Gog is interpreted in a similarly dubious way. Syncellus does not identify Gog directly with the Avar khagan, assuming that Gog does not refer to a single person, but to an assembly of nations. Ezekiel speaks about the ultimate destruction of Gog, yet that cannot be said about the Avars, since the substantial part of them returned home, including the khagan himself. However, Syncellus rejects the contradiction between the prophecy and the Avar siege, pointing out that Ezekiel in the cited passage literally speaks of 'the fall' of Gog and not of his physical doom. The author of the sermon appeals to the experts in Bible who are familiar with several meanings of the verb 'to fall', stating that this word has

in the Holy Scripture many meanings and significations and there are many and different ways to interpret it⁴³.

Syncellus interprets the word 'fall' symbolically, as could be expected in his case, understanding it as the expression for doomed hopes that the Avar khagan had been harbouring when he decided to besiege a city protected by God. *As the godly prophet Ezekiel clarified*, – he adds in conclusion – *thus the tyrant fell and his fall illustrated that the combat-worthy part of his people fell in truth and in reality*⁴⁴.

Syncellus knowingly identifies all the nations mentioned in the prophecy with the Avars and their allies who had arrived under the walls of Constantinople. They are the apocalyptic Gog predicting the destruction, but also the spiritual renewal of this world. Already the early Christian manuscripts feature a common idea that Ezekiel's prophecy of the unification of the people of Israel shall fulfil among the people of the New Testament, i.e. the Christians. The Church of Christ – a community of believers – became a new unified Israel.

The first of the Christian authors who knowingly tried to persuade his readers that this prophecy was fulfilled in his own times was probably St. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan (ca. 340 – 4th April AD 397). He identified the apocalyptic Gog with the Goths, seemingly on the basis of the impending threat to the Roman Empire after the disastrous battle of Adrianople in 378, but the similarity of both names probably played a certain role as well⁴⁵. Nevertheless, this opinion was not shared by St. Augustine. In his *De civitate Dei (The City of God)* he roundly refused any identification not only of Gog, but also of Magog, with a specific ethnic entity⁴⁶.

⁴³ THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 316, 1–3.

⁴⁴ THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 316, 6–7.

⁴⁵ ST. AMBROSE, *De fide* [ad Gratianum Augustum], II, XVI, 137–138, ed. O. FALLER, [in:] CSEL, vol. 78, Vienna 1962 (written after the famous battle of Adrianople in 378). St. Isidore of Seville also identified Gog with the Goths, see ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, *Historia Gothorum, Vandalorum et Suevorum*, cc. 1–2, ed. C. RODRIGUEZ ALONSO, Leon 1975, p. 172–173.

⁴⁶ AUGUSTINE, *De civitate Dei*, XX, 11, ed. B. DOMBART, A. KAIB, Turnhout 1955 [= CC.SL, 48/49], p. 720.

Somewhat later, another effort aiming to interpret Ezekiel's prophecy historically and not allegorically appeared⁴⁷. For the Constantinopolitan patriarch Proclus (AD 434–437), the Huns who almost attacked Constantinople under the lead of Rua, the uncle of the great Attila, become the biblical Gog⁴⁸. Theodore Syncellus is perhaps the second Greek author who identifies the prophecy with a concrete historical event⁴⁹. Hence, the Avars together with their allies became in his opinion the toughest of the tests that the chosen people had to withstand. It should be pointed out that his definition of the chosen people was rather narrow, including only the citizens of Constantinople, not the inhabitants of the whole empire. Syncellus was not thinking in imperial dimensions, since in his times, the Late Roman

⁴⁷ The great Hunnic raid into Mesopotamia in 395/6 was observed by the famous Church father Jerome. Despite various comments on his letter 77, he did not make any special references to Gog or Magog in connection with these Huns. See *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae*, II, rec. I. HILBERG, Wien 1996 [= CSEL, 55], p. 45. In his commentary on Ezekiel, Jerome mentioned the identification of Gog and Magog with the Scythians, however, not as a fact but as a mere statement of his opponents – the Jews and the Judaizing Christians. He subsequently rejects such proposal together with the other ones and clearly states that the apocalyptic Gog and Magog cannot be identified with any particular historical nation. See JEROME, *Commentarium in Hezechielem libri XIV*, ed. F. GLORIE, Turnhout 1964 [= CC.SL, 75], p. 525–527. In another commentary on Genesis he questioned a certain person, probably St. Ambrose (see note 45) who had tried to give a historical explanation of Ezekiel's prophecy by equating Gog with the Goths. JEROME, *Hebraicae Quaestiones in libro Geneseos*, ed. P. DE LAGARDE, Leipzig 1868, p. 14.

⁴⁸ This text is, unfortunately, no longer extant. Gog and Magog topic in Proclus' homily is stressed by SOCRATES SCHOLASTICUS, *Kirchengeschichte*, VII, 43, ed. G.CH. HANSEN, Berlin 1995, p. 391, 8 – 392, 3. Cf. also THEODORETUS, *Historia ecclesiastica*, V, 37, 4, rec. L. PARMENTIER, G.CH. HANSEN, Berlin 1998, p. 340, 6–12. In this regard, see W. BRANDES, *Anastasios ó dikopos...*, p. 32–37, and recently IDEM, *Gog, Magog und die Hunnen. Anmerkungen zur eschatologischen „Ethnographie“ der Völkerwanderungszeit*, [in:] *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World. The West, Byzantium, and the Islamic World*, ed. W. POHL, C. GANTNER, R. PAYNE, Aldershot 2012, p. 477–498, esp. 478–485. It is of some interest that Theodore mentioned neither Proclus' homily nor its eschatological context. Also his commentary on Ezekiel is explained only as a future prophecy and did not contain any concrete historical framework. Although the early ecclesiastical author Theodoret of Cyrillus identified Gog with the Scythians, he refused the claim that Ezekiel's prophecy referred to the end of the world. According to him, it referred only to the end of the Jewish diaspora. THEODORETUS, *Interpretatio in Ezechielem*, [in:] PG, vol. LXXXI, col. 1217 A–C. (see note 44). The same can be said about another Greek author, the archbishop Andrew of Caesarea. Despite the emergence of barbarian incursions into the empire, he did not believe that the end of the world was approaching. He mentioned proposed identifications of the Gog and Magog with Scythians called in his time the Huns, but only as a general statement, not as his own opinion. He also rejected proposed identification of Gog and Magog with the past historical events. See ANDREAS CAESARIENSIS, p. 223. Theodore Syncellus himself did not use the term Huns, but his contemporary George of Pisidia did, at least on one occasion when describing the last day of the Avar siege. Cf. GEORGIUS PISIDES, *Bellum avaricum*, v. 197, rec. L. TARTAGLIA, [in:] *Carmi di Giorgio di Pisidia*, Torino 1998, p. 166.

⁴⁹ According to W.J. AERTS (*Gog, Magog...*, p. 33), 'the great career' of Gog and Magog begins only with Pseudo-Methodius and it has a clear Syrian background (with regard to the Syrian original of this text). Taking into consideration Syncellus' homily, this opinion can no longer be maintained.

Empire was being shaken to its foundations. Therefore, he saw the localism of the chosen city – the New Jerusalem surrounded and besieged by enemies – as the point of departure:

By the land of Israel I mean this city, in which God and the Virgin are both devotedly praised and ceremonies are held with the utmost devotion. Because Israel actually means that God is adored in a devote heart and to live in an innocent land of Israel means to bring pure and bloodless sacrifices. What other city, if not the ours, can unmistakably and rightly be in completeness called the place of God's sacrifice, seeing the single Church that brings glory and hymns to God and the Virgin?⁵⁰

The author of the sermon comments on the selected verses of the prophecy, aiming to bring forward the compliance with the times in which he himself lived. Ezekiel speaks of an unprotected land that shall experience the arrival of Gog. Syncellus understands this in such a way that there is no ruler present in that country, repeatedly seeking the compliance with his interpretation, as the emperor Heraclius was indeed absent from Constantinople during the Avar siege. Another parallel that the author sees is the claim that Gog and his allies shall strike upon the chosen people in times of peace. Syncellus knew that the last time Constantinople had faced a serious threat was three years before that, when the Avars managed to cross the fortification known as the 'Long Walls' and plundered the city's suburbs⁵¹. Yet the most important argument of the Syncellus' updating of Ezekiel's prophecy rests in the commented passage stating that Gog and his allies shall be crushed near the sea:

because the prophet said that when the nations would come against the land of Israel, their common grave would be a place by the sea and after their defeat, the island would be inhabited without any fears⁵².

It is not a matter of coincidence that Syncellus explicitly stresses this passage, since it was indeed by the sea, more precisely in the Golden Horn, where the fleet of Slavic monoxyla was drowned:

this bay is thus called... also the common grave of Gog... and in the same time, the Red Sea, where the entire Pharaoh's army and all his chariots were drowned⁵³.

⁵⁰ THEODORUS SYNCCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 316, 37 – 317, 3.

⁵¹ THEODORUS SYNCCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 317, 23–26. On the Avar invasion of AD 623 most recently M. HURBANIČ, *The Eastern Roman Empire and the Avar Khaganate in the Years 622–624 AD*, AA.ASH 51, 2011, p. 315–328.

⁵² THEODORUS SYNCCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 315, 35–37.

⁵³ THEODORUS SYNCCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 318, 4–8.

Syncellus does not intend to engage in further polemics with his alleged Jewish opponents:

Should the sons of the Hebrews want to interpret the words of the prophet in a different way and not in this way, let them interpret it the way they want⁵⁴.

Nevertheless, also in this case he was too tempted to use a polemical tone:

What other common grave of nations that had come with Gog against the land of Israel can they show upon the sea? When and how were the islands inhabited without any fears after Gog had been destroyed on his expedition against Israel?⁵⁵

The author of the sermon does not doubt anymore that Ezekiel's prophecy had been fulfilled in his lifetime:

Which other city could rightfully call itself *the Eye of the Land* if not this city [of Constantinople], in which God has established the kingdom of Christians and made it a central point to become an intermediary between the East and the West. Against this, the rulers, armies and nations have gathered, whose power has been broken by the Lord who said to Zion: *Have courage, Zion, let your arms not hang down, look, your mighty God is amidst you to save you.*⁵⁶

Several Christian and Judaic texts written nearly about the same time as Syncellus' homily stressed the fear of the end of the world. From this we can conclude that the apocalyptic expectations were surely on the increase after the end of the last Roman-Persian war⁵⁷. Nevertheless, Syncellus' sermon is a unique testimony for various reasons. First, it is the only preserved early Christian text which clearly relates the exegesis of Chapter 38 and 39 of Ezekiel to the concrete historical event – the Avar siege of Constantinople. Syncellus firstly interpreted the Old Testament siege of Jerusalem by the use of typology as prefiguration of the Avar siege of Constantinople and then he tried to connect it with the apocalyptic prophecy of Ezekiel, which he finally surprisingly changes into the triumph of the New Israel

⁵⁴ THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 316, 7–9.

⁵⁵ THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 316, 9–10.

⁵⁶ THEODORUS SYNCELLUS, *De obsidione Constantinopolis*, p. 317, 29–34.

⁵⁷ Most of these texts containing the topic have clearly Syrian origin and go back to the so-called Alexander Legend written c. 630, probably in North Mesopotamia. Cf. *The History of Alexander the Great*, rec. A.W. BUDGE, Cambridge 1889. Here the apocalyptic Gog and Magog are clearly identified with the Huns (see p. 150–155). See also G.J. REININK, *Die Entstehung der syrischen Alexanderlegende als politischreligiöse Propagandaschrift für Herakleios' Kirchenpolitik*, [in:] *After Chalcedon: Studies in Theology and Church History*, ed. C. LAGA, Leuven 1985, p. 263–281. For the other texts (Alexander Poem, Pseudo-Ephraem and Pseudo-Methodius) see P. ALEXANDER, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition...*, p. 13–60; G.J. REININK, *Heraclius the New Alexander...*, p. 81–94; E. VAN DONZEL, A. SCHMIDT, *Gog and Magog...*, p. 16–31.

in the New Jerusalem. His comments on Ezekiel were not pessimistic as those of the other contemporary authors dealing with the Gog and Magog theme, but his triumphalism is related not to the empire but mainly to the faith of its inhabitants and their God-protected city. Although the motif of Constantinople as the New Jerusalem is not entirely new in the early Christian literature, it is only Syncellus who clearly defines and explains the content of this concept by highlighting its spiritual and eschatological aspects. His New Jerusalem is neither a convenient metaphor for Constantinople nor a mere imitation or 'Abbild' of the older one. It is the typological 'Urbild' in the very sense of that meaning and in that way the 'real' and not imaginary one⁵⁸. Such concept has, to my knowledge, no further parallel in Byzantine literature⁵⁹.

At the first sight, this homily clearly reflects the historical narrative and proposes its eschatological explanation, but such themes, although important and stressed by many scholars, were only the means of expression of his basic idea to prove the primacy of the New Testament over the Old one and the spiritual truth of Christianity over Judaism⁶⁰. It is without doubt a unique text but it remained an isolated testimony as further development and its own textual tradition clearly reveals⁶¹.

⁵⁸ See the comments by R. OUSTERHOUT, *Sacred Geographies...*, p. 98; J. PAHLITZSCH, *Zur ideologischen Bedeutung Jerusalems...*, p. 245–246.

⁵⁹ From the list of quotations preserved by E. FENSTER and V. ZERVAN (see note 24) is clear that the majority of the expressions referring to Constantinople as the New Jerusalem belongs to the category of traditional rhetorical comparisons. Of some interest is *The Life of St. Andrew the Fool*, in which a special sanctity of Constantinople – the New Jerusalem is highlighted through the idea of its eternal being. Cf. *The Life of St. Andrew the Fool*, vol. II, *Text, Translation, Notes*, ed. L. RYDÉN, Uppsala 1995, p. 260. This text is dated by its editor between 950–1000. Cf. L. RYDÉN, *The Life of St. Andrew the Fool*, vol. I, *Introduction, Testimonies and Nachleben. Indices*, Uppsala 1995, p. 41–56. The subsequent passage is commented by A. KÜLZER (*Konstantinopel in der apokalyptischen Literatur der Byzantiner*, JÖB 50, 2000, p. 73) who rightly concludes that the concept of Constantinople as New Jerusalem can be traced back to the seventh century, but he never touched upon Syncellus' homily despite the fact that his contribution deals with the image of Constantinople in apocalyptic literature.

⁶⁰ To my knowledge, such scheme might be unique in the Byzantine texts but there is at least one example in Early Russian literature – the *Sermon on Law and Grace* of the Kievan metropolitan Illarion. The historical conversion of the knjaz' Vladimir is, like in Syncellus account of the Avar siege, mere historical backdrop against which he develops his polemic with the imaginary Jews. It is not without interest that Constantinople is here referred to not only as the centre of the orthodox belief and source of Russian Christianity but also as the New Jerusalem; see *Слово о Законе и Благодати Илариона*, rec. А.Н. МОЛДОВАН, Киев 1984. For commentary see recently С. ТЕМЧИН, *Слово о законе и благодати киевского митрополита. Илариона и раннехристианская полемика*, Ru 7, 2008, p. 30–40.

⁶¹ As clearly pointed out by A. KÜLZER (*Peregrinatio graeca in Terram Sanctam: Studien zu Pilgerführern und Reisebeschreibungen über Syrien, Palästina und den Sinai aus byzantischer und metabyzantischer Zeit*. Frankfurt am Main 1994 [= STB, 2], p. 136). The Syncellus homily is preserved in four manuscripts but only one of them (Codex Graecus Parisinus Suppl. 241) is complete. The long eschatological passages were omitted by later copyist (Codex Athous Pantokrator gr. 26; ms.

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dated to 11th century). For this version see S. SZÁDECZKY-KARDOSS, T. OLAJOS, *Breviarum Homiliae Theodori Syncelli...*, p. 147–182. The later Byzantine texts based on Syncellus' homily are also preserved without these passages. Cf. *Diegesis Ophelimos (Oratio historica in festum Acathistum)*, [in:] PG, vol. XCII, col. 1353–1372; *Ἱστορία σύντομος περὶ τῆς ἐλεύσεως τῶν Περσῶν καὶ τῶν Ἀβάρων* (= *Epitome de Acathisto*), ed. L. STERNBACH, RAU.WF, ser. II, vol. XV, 1900, p. 38–39; *Lectio Triodii*, [in:] PG, vol. XCII, col. 1348–1372.

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ТЕМЧИН С., *Слово о законе и благодати киевского митрополита. Илариона и раннехристианская полемика*, Ru 7, 2008, p. 30–40.

Abstract. A sermon attributed to Theodore Syncellus (Theodoros Synkellos) is considered as one of the basic sources for the study of the Avar siege of Constantinople in AD 626. Therefore, the most historians paid more attention to the analysis of its historical background than to its ideological content. From the ideological point of view, the document serves as an evidence that a fear for the future of the Empire and its capital Constantinople began to rise within emerging Byzantine society. The Avar siege served its author mainly as a model for developing his polemics with imaginary Jewish opponents and their religion. It deserves to be included in a long succession of similar polemical treatises, which have existed in Christianity from its earliest times.

Keywords: Avars, Constantinople, Theodore Syncellus, De obsidione avarica Constantinopolis, patriarch Sergius, the Avar Siege of 626, typology, Jews, Gog and Magog, New Jerusalem, Old Testament prophecies, eschatology, the last war of Antiquity.

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