

Vergil's Apocalyptic Vision: Jewish Influence on *Aeneid* 2.605-623

In *Aeneid* 2:605-623, Athena persuades Aeneas to abandon his futile defense of Troy by unveiling his eyes and showing him sees the gods themselves at work overthrowing the city. The search for antecedents of this passage has uncovered very little except for *Iliad* 5.127ff, where Athena gives Diomedes a similar vision at the beginning of his *aristeia*. In this paper, I will propose an additional, though seemingly unlikely, source for this largely unprecedented scene. I will argue that *Aeneid* 2:605-623 is heavily influenced by Jewish Apocalyptic Literature.

I will show first how the usual Homeric source for this passage is inadequate as the sole inspiration for this passage. In *Iliad* 5.127ff, Athena offers to remove the mist from the eyes of Diomedes allowing him to see both men and Gods. There are several key differences between this passage and *Aeneid* 2. First, the purpose of the vision in *Iliad* 5 is to enable Diomedes to fight more skillfully. In *Aeneid* 2, Aeneas is expected to be persuaded to cease fighting. Vergil has also expanded the scope and scale of the scene from a few lines to a few dozens. In the *Iliad*, Athena simply says that she will remove the mist from Diomedes' eyes. In the *Aeneid*, she shows Aeneas scene after scene of gods at work fighting against Troy.

After discussing the inadequacies of the *Iliad* as sole antecedent, I will then proceed to describe the nature of Jewish apocalyptic literature. Often misunderstood as simply a type of literature describing the end of the world, the essence of Apocalyptic is to be found in the definition of the Greek word at its root. Apocalyptic is at its most basic level a revelation, the removal of a barrier thus allowing access to previously unseen realities. The goal is to show the cosmic significance of worldly events. In fact, in commenting on the scene in *Aeneid* 2, R.D. Williams unintentionally gives a remarkably precise definition of Apocalyptic Literature calling it "a majestic and preternatural vision of giant powers at work."

I will then demonstrate that there is good reason to believe that Vergil was in a position to be influenced by the Jews of Rome and their literature. A Jewish community, centered in Trastevere but spread throughout the city, had existed in Rome since the 2nd century BC. Jewish influence can be seen in the new edition of the Sibylline Books made in 70's BC to replace the ancient book of oracles which had been burned in the fire that consumed the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. Some even see Jewish influence in Vergil's *Eclogue* 4, the so-called Messianic Eclogue. But the most numerous references to the Jews of Rome come in the writings of Vergil's close companion Horace, who makes frequent mention of the Jews through his *Satires*. It has even been argued by some that Horace himself might have some Jewish ancestry, which, if true, would put Vergil close enough to be acquainted with Jewish literature.

Once the connection between Vergil and the Jews of Rome has been established, the categories of Apocalyptic will be applied to *Aeneid* 2 revealing that Vergil has taken his Homeric inspiration and combined it with imagery from Jewish Literature to create a uniquely classical apocalyptic vision. The goal is to shed light on this particular passage and hopefully open a new and fruitful line of inquiry into the study of Vergil and the poets of the Augustan Age.

Bibliography

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