



Gog and Magog: the renditions of Alexander the Great from the context of different pre-Islamic to Islamic traditions

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Abstract

This article follows the one published in *Verbum et Ecclesia* (Sukdaven & Ahmed, 2017: 1-10) which is associated with the Timbuktu Project at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. A translated edition of the manuscript 'Qissat Dhul Qurnain: The story of the "Two Horned King" known as Alexander the Great'¹ makes reference to Gog and Magog (Sukdaven et al., 2015: 106-108). This article addresses two issues. Firstly, to place into context the current manuscript within a plethora of other renderings of Alexander the Great within other traditions commonly regarded as the 'Alexander Romance'. Much has been written about the Alexander Romance and this article attempts to summarise the different traditions of the Alexander Romance as a precursor to the article. Secondly, in as much as this manuscript addresses many themes, the article will focus only on the theme surrounding Gog and Magog in the different Alexander Romance stories pre and post Islamic traditions.

Keywords: Alexander the Great, Alexander Romance, Gog and Magog, Timbuktu Manuscript, Judaism, Christianity, Islam.

Introduction

Alexander the Great (356 – 323 BCE) has been a charismatic figure in world history. He has shaped the language and culture of the ancient world and was the focus of many scholars that have attempted to understand this enigmatic figure. Bosworth (2000:1) admitted that in the reconstruction and grappling with archaeological finds, 'the besotting problem is the dearth of contemporary sources (that) has not changed in the last decades'. Bosworth (2000:16) nevertheless suggests that Ptolemy was the propaganda machine which eventually evolved into what has become known as the Alexander Romance. According to Berg (1973:381) the Alexander Romance enjoyed great popularity throughout the Middle Ages and that, due to its wide circulation, it was handled and mishandled that it lost its accuracy.

Boyle (1977:217) aptly captures the sentiments regarding the Alexander Romance:

Since the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C. there has been no age in history, whether in the West or in the East, in which his name and exploits have not been familiar. And yet not only have all contemporary records been lost but even the work based on those records though written some four and a half centuries after his death, the *Anabasis* of Arrian, was totally unknown to the writers of the Middle Ages and became available to Western scholarship only with the Revival of Learning.² The perpetuation of Alexander's fame through so many ages and amongst so many peoples

¹ 1. Sukdaven, M, Mukhtar, A, Fernana, A.H (EDS.). 2015. *Qissat Dhul Qarnayn, the tale of the Two Horned One*. Pretoria: Open Book Press [ISBN: 978-0-620-66863-7]



is due in the main to the innumerable recensions and transmogrifications of a work known as the Alexander Romance or Pseudo-Callisthenes.

Zuwiyya (2012: 205) estimates that the Arabic Alexander Romance survives in probably six full-length versions. They are: *Umara*; the *Rrekontamiento del rrey Allisandre* (the Morisco translation); two Hispano-Arab texts - one known as '*Qissa Dhulqarnayn*' (which is the current manuscript) and the other, '*Hadith Dhulqarnayn*'; *Sira al-Malik Iskandar Dhi'l-Qarnayn*; *Al-Suri* (which is the longest amounting to about 460 pages). The narrator of the current manuscript is Abu Abdel Malek. According to this manuscript Malek received this narration from a list of authentic narrators in the following order; received from Abu Abdul Rahman who narrates from Sulaiman who narrates from Said ibn Masayab, who narrates from Saad ibn Abi Waqqas. Saad ibn Abi Waqqas was one of the close companions of Prophet Muhammad. It can therefore be deduced that, by tracing the narration to Saad ibn Abi Waqqas the manuscript seeks to give this rendition of Alexander the Great credibility. It is not the intention in this introduction to interrogate the authenticity of the narrators as this could possibly be taken up at later stage in the publication of an article, neither would this introduction address the question of whether Alexander the Great and Dhul Qarnain are one and the same person. For the purposes of this introduction it would suffice to acknowledge though that Malek includes the Prophet's close companion as the initial source of the narration thus lending some sort of authenticity to this rendition of Alexander the Great by accepting as a matter of fact that Alexander the Great is Dhul Qarnain who is mentioned in the Qura'n (18: 83-98).

The classic historian of Alexander the Great from the perspective of the West (especially the Greek version) will certainly differ significantly from this current manuscript; but so also from other Alexander Romance traditions. McGinn (1979: 56) states it very lucidly when he says that 'Historic accounts of Alexander's life were well known in the ancient world, but it was a legendary romance whose original version was composed in Greek at Alexandria probably in the third century A.D. (*sic*) which was the ancestor of the apocalyptic Alexander'. Although the original Greek text was lost, it nonetheless served as a 'source for some eighty later versions composed in twenty-four languages' (McGinn 1979: 56). These eighty versions came to be known as the Alexander Romance.

According to Boyle (1977), this Alexander Romance was sometimes referred to as Pseudo-Callisthenes, from which two Latin versions emanated in the fifth and tenth centuries. From these two versions it found its way to all the vernacular literatures in Western Europe during the Middle Ages. There was an early Armenian translation during the fifth century from the Greek text. While a Middle Persian translation was made during the first half of the seventh century. It did not survive although:

...it formed the basis of a Syriac version which in turn was translated into Arabic, and to this Arabic text, itself unfortunately lost, are to be traced back all the innumerable *rifacimenti* of the Romance in the various Islamic languages from Ottoman Turkish to Malay as well as an Ethiopic version. (Boyle: 1977: 13).

Barletta (2010: 184) weighs in on this discussion by stating that due to the popularity of the Greek Alexander legend, it prompted the fifth century Christian Syriac version which, according to him, found its way into the Qur'an as the story of Dhu al-Qarnayn, and which subsequently found its way into 'popular Ibero-Islamic texts' such as this current manuscript. This explanation unlocks another sensitive discussion on the influence that such renditions have on the development and emergence of the Qur'an. Saifullah (2006) argues that what is deemed to be a fifth century Christian Syriac version should actually be dated as post-Islamic. In this, he defends external influences in the development of the Qur'an.

Gog and Magog

The incident that gave impetus to later Alexander Romance was the identification of the wall or gate which Alexander built in a mountain pass to lock out what he would term 'the barbarian tribes'. During the course of time this 'barbarian tribe' became known as Gog and Magog. This incident led to many apocalyptic traditions of Gog and Magog by the Jews Christians and Muslims. Van Donzel and



Schmidt (2009) provided an excellent insight into Gog and Magog of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic sources.

Gog and Magog seem to find their origin in the late Jewish and early Christian traditions. Only later was it rendered an apocalyptic discourse in Islamic theology. For Van Donzel and Schmidt (2009: xvii) the Islamic traditions are directly related to the Syriac Christian tradition.

Although Magog is to be found in the Old Testament (Genesis 10:2) it did not have any eschatological meaning because Magog was simply the grandson of Noah. Although there were many prophecies in the Old Testament about apocalyptic tendencies of a tribe from the north that will seek to destroy Israel, it was not until in the book of Ezekiel (38-39) that Ezekiel prophesied what role Gog will play in the apocalyptic events surrounding Israel. This prophecy may have become the basis upon which the Alexander Romance with its apocalyptic tendencies had its eschatological discourse in Judaism, Christianity and probably Islam, even though in the earliest Greek renditions Gog and Magog were never mentioned. It is only from the fifth century that Syriac renditions of the Alexander texts began to include in depth narratives describing the 'imprisonment' of Gog and Magog. The eschatological discourse in Judaism, Christianity and probably Islam is undeniable. Gow (1998: 64) confirms that 'Not only did versions of these canonical texts continue to circulate until well past the Reformation, the stories they contained seeped into all manner of medieval exegetical and literary works. Gog and Magog became a *topos* of salvation history'.

A closer examination of the sources for these apocalyptic discourses will assist in providing some form of chronology as to the development of pre-Islamic and Islamic eschatological assumptions.

Gog and Magog in Jewish literature

Although no Greek historians make mention of a meeting between Alexander the Great and the Jews, there are stories of Alexander the Great and accounts of his life that are to be found in Jewish sources from antiquity and the Middle Ages. According to Bonfils (1962: 1) the Jewish sources of antiquity are the material ascribed to Hellenistic Jewish writers which is to be found in the Pseudo-Callisthenes and serves as the basis for most of the Alexander legends. Together with this are the writings of Josephus and the Talmudic literature. According to Peek (1996: 105) the 'tradition behind Josephus's (*sic*) narrative is obscure at best. It is possible that Alexander visited Jerusalem but the preserved descriptions of his visit are almost certainly fictional, "ex post facto legends".' Peek (1996: 105) nevertheless concedes that irrespective of the facts, Josephus does afford a glimpse of the relationship between the Jews and the Greeks.

Bearing in mind Peek's comments above, there are six known Hebrew versions of the Alexander Romance. Bonfils (1962: 27) lists these as follows:

- (1) The Alexander Romance as found in Yosippon.
- (2) Ms. Cod. Heb. 671.5, Bibl. Nad., Paris.
- (3) Ms. 145, Jews' College, London.
- (4) Ms. LIII, Bibl. Estense, Modena; Ms. Cod. Heb. 2797.10, Bodleian, Oxford; Ms. Damascus, subject of a study by A. Y. Harkavy, *Neizdarmaya Versiya romana obu Alexandre* (St. Petersburg, 1892).
- (5) Ms. Cod. Heb. 1087, Bibl. I. B. deRossi, Parma.
- (6) Ms. Cod. Heb. 750.3, Bibl. Nad., Paris, the subject of our study.

It is in the Talmudic literature that a list of Alexander's episodes is found. Bonfils (1962: 2) lists eleven such episodes. This is listed in no particular order: (1) Alexander's visit to Jerusalem. (2) Alexander and the elders of the south. (3) Alexander and the women. (4) Alexander and his descent into the sea. (5) Alexander and King Kazia. (6) The journey of Alexander to the regions of darkness. (7) Alexander and the bones of Jeremiah. (8) Alexander at the gate of the Garden of Eden. (9) Alexander and the throne of Solomon. (10) Alexander as the arbiter in the dispute between the Jews and the Gentiles and, (11) Alexander and his ascent into the air.



It is recorded that Alexander arrived during the reign of Simon the Just,² This is recorded in the Babylonian Talmud (3 - 6 CE). According to Josephus, Alexander entered Jerusalem during the reign of Jaddus, who was then the High Priest.³ These are some of the contradictions that can be regarded as *ex post facto*. Confusion even exists as to which Simon is referred to above. Was it Simon the Just or Simon 1? Beckwith (2001: 193) seems to suggest that it could most likely be Simon 1, because *Mishna Aboth* 1:2 places Simon the Just as the last members of the Great Synagogue, which is dated about the 1 BCE, whereas Simon 1 was a 'near-contemporary of Alexander the Great'. This was nevertheless, an encounter of the Jews with Alexander the Great. It is interesting to note that when Alexander the Great did not destroy or subjugate the Jews, because of an arrangement made with the Jews of being loyal vassals and paying taxes to Alexander the Great, the Jews named every child born the following year 'Alexander' or 'Sender' for short which is still common even today.

In considering the theme of Alexander the Great and the issue around Gog and Magog, this mysterious reference to Gog and Magog permeated most of the monotheistic religious traditions. In briefly viewing Gog and Magog in the Jewish literature and according to Van Donzel and Schmidt (2009:6) it was only from the 2 BCE that Gog appears in the Jewish tradition. A Jewish apocryphal text that had a great influence in the Gog motif was the Book of Jubilees (170-150 BCE). Although the Book of Jubilees does not have any eschatological reference, it does provide a clue though as to the geographic direction where Gog could be situated – in the north. In the 3rd book of *Sibylline Oracles*, compiled by Jewish and Christian writers between 160 BCE - 5 CE, are two sayings specifically related to Gog and Magog with a warning but not of apocalyptic proportions. The prophecies regarding Gog and Magog in an apocalyptic thought though occurs in the Targumim. Although there is no indication of when an eschatological war would take place, there are references in the Targumim that 'ascribe the defeat of Gog to some Messianic figure... and numerous rabbinical texts in Talmud, Mishnah and Midrashim [that] refer to Gog and Magog as evil enemies attacking the faithful in the messianic age'. (Van Donzel & Schmidt, 2009: 8).

Gog and Magog seemed to find its way into the Josephus' writings. It is to be found in his *Antiquities* where he associates Magog with an enemy from the north. In his *Jewish War*, he associates the biblical Gog and Magog with the popular Hellenistic Alexander-tradition where he refers to Alexander closing the mountain pass by erecting iron gates. In this account, Alexander marches eastwards and came across wild and unclean people who ate human flesh and practiced morally unpleasant customs. He therefore builds this iron gates to imprison them. Gow (1998: 62-63) elaborates further by suggesting that, 'This story found its way not only into later versions of the Alexander legend, but also into the Qur'an and the influential Greek Revelations of Pseudo-Methodius, which date from the end of the seventh century. Around 700 CE, this latter text was translated into Latin by the monk Peter in Merovingian Gaul and very widely disseminated in the west, where it became a standard of Christian apocalypticism'.

Van Donzel and Schmidt (2009: 12) concludes with the Jewish source of Gog and Magog with the following: It is evident that Gog and Magog and Alexander by the first century A.D. (*sic*) had definitely entered the literary race scene, from where the motif was to develop further.

Other non-canonical reference to Gog and Magog is found in 1 Enoch 45:5, 'And I saw all the fights and wars that Gog and Magog will fight with Israel in the days of Messiah, and all that the Holy One, blessed be He, will do with them in the time to come'. This non-canonical work of Enoch was a version of an Ethiopic translation of what is presumed to be a Greek translation made in Palestine. Most of the works of Enoch are apocalyptic in nature and hence this reference to Gog and Magog being

² Mishna Aboth 1:2

³ Josephus *Antiquities* 11:335



Gog and Magog in the Early Christian Literature

Earlier in this introduction, reference was made to Magog as being the grandson of Noah. There was certainly no reference here to an apocalyptic event. There are though a few Old Testament traditions with reference to Gog and Magog which provide the basis for a later apocalyptic conception (Aune, 2003: 49). These are to be found in the books of Ezekiel:38-39 where Ezekiel seems to speak about an unrepentant nation; where reference is made to the enemy from the north, is to be found in Jeremiah 1:13-15 and a reference to the 'little horn' in Daniel:7-8. In the New Testament Gog and Magog is found in Revelations 20:8.

The Greek and Latin Fathers became the most important transmitters and interpreters of the Gog and Magog motif for the above Christian literature as well as the works of Josephus from the fifth century onwards.

Van Donzel and Schmidt (2009:15) aptly concludes the early Christian literature on Gog and Magog as follows:

Up to the 7th century, Josephus, St Jerome and Isidore can be considered to be the principal authors who have made the Western Roman Empire familiar with the idea of a barrier-gate built by Alexander at the Caspian or Caucasian Gates. From the 7th century onwards ideas in the West about Alexander's gates were inspired by Syriac traditions translated into Latin. The same Syriac Tradition played an important role in passing the Gog- Magog and Alexander motif on to the world of Islam.

Henceforth the Alexander Romance motif began to be combined with apocalyptic events in relation to Gog and Magog among the Syrian Christians in Northern Mesopotamia in the late fourth century and early fifth century (Van Donzel & Schmidt, 2009).

As to the apocalyptic nature of Gog and Magog, Augustine (1998:994) held the view that Gog and Magog were nations that will persecute Christians as part of the eschatological events. Even Jerome (347-420) drew the conclusion that Alexander's wall, which imprisoned Gog and Magog, had eschatological significance (Greisiger, 2016:65) even though Jerome translated the word Gog to mean in Hebrew, 'roof' and Magog to mean, 'under the roof' (Emmerson, 1981:85).

There is a plethora of literature available if one ventures to speculate on the reference of Gog and Magog with regards to its apocalyptic symbolism. It is not the intention of this article to venture into these discussions although, suffice to state that many of the symbolic and deductive connotations renders the idea of Gog and Magog to the anti-Christ or particular nations, such as Russia and other nations whose intent, it is believed, to destroy Israel.⁴

Gog and Magog in the Islamic Tradition

In the Islamic tradition Gog and Magog appear simultaneously in the Qur'an (18:83-98) with Dhul Qarnayn, especially in 18:94. Translation Ali Ünal.

92. *Then they followed another way.*

93. *Until, when he reached (a place) between two mountain-barriers, he found before them a people who scarcely understood a word.*

94. *They said: 'O Dhul Qurnain! Gog and Magog are causing disorder in this land. May we pay you a tribute so that you set a barrier between us and them?'*

⁴ For a more detailed analysis, refer to Railton, NM. 2003. *Gog and Magog: the History of a Symbol*. Evangelical Quarterly 75 (1) Pg. 23-43



95. *He said: 'What my Lord has established me in (the power that He has granted me on this earth) is better (than what you offer). So help me with strength (manpower) and I will set a strong rampart between you and them.'*
96. *'Bring me blocks of iron.' Then, when he had filled up (the space between) the two mountain sides, he said: '(Light a fire and) work the bellows!' At length when he made it (glow red like) fire, he said: 'Bring me molten copper that I may pour upon it.'*
97. *And the (Gog and Magog) were no longer able to surmount, nor were they able to dig their way through (the barrier).*
98. *Dhul Qurnain said: 'This is a mercy from my Lord. Yet when the time of my Lord's promise comes. He will level it down to the ground; and my Lord's promise is ever true.'*
99. *On that day we will leave people to surge like waves on one another; and the Trumpet will be blown, then we will gather them all together.*

Based on these verses many scholars of exegesis would expand on who Gog and Magog are, where they reside and so forth. Consequently, from the very first commentators of the Quran, whose works have survived and are available, like Ibn Abbas, Tabbari and others, would expand on these messages from the Quran.

These scholars would look at a verse, or a collection of verses, and decipher the message. They would look at Prophetic narration and tradition and ascertain the importance with regard to law, social, economy and or other branches of implementation.

The story of Gog and Magog is not one of core belief, neither does it lay down any laws that need to be followed. Thus, the scholar would then go to earlier traditions in the Abrahamic faith line to complete the narrative. The chances that Jewish and Christian folk tale finding itself in the Islamic tradition thus do exist. Bearing in mind the Prophetic narrations regarding Gog and Magog and the verses of the Quran, the amount that would be taken from the other traditions are negligible. The amount of authentic Prophetic narrations are many, although some may be regarded as weak by many scholars, are detailed and present a complete picture to the reader.

One important fact to be borne in mind is that this chapter was revealed in Mecca. (Ibn Kathīr, 1999, 5/133) The reason that this becomes important is the number of Jews in Mecca were negligible, compared to those in Madina that were large communities. More than a third of the inhabitants in Madina were Jewish. This is important in the formation of the tradition of Gog and Magog.

Ibn Kathir in his exegesis of the Quran (Al-Mubarakpuri, 2000) relates a tradition that is to be found in both the collections of Bukhari and Muslim that Gog and Magog are the descendants of Adam from the children of Yāfith, one of the sons of the Prophet Noah (Al-Hākim, 1990). The Islamic sources provide some detail on Gog and Magog more so since they feature again among the major signs of the Last Day (Muslim, 2006).

Ibn Hisham, the author of the manuscript, continued the work of Al Bakkai, who continued the work of Ibn Ishaq. Ka'ab Al Ahbar, a prominent Jewish scholar from Yemen, was one of the earlier converts to Islam, and it has been reported that he used the Torah after his acceptance to Islam. He however does not find himself in any of the chain of narrators with regard to the Gog and Magog tradition. The renowned Ḥadīth specialist and commentator on Sahih al-Bukhari, Ibn Hajr al-Asqalani did mention some narrations attributed to Ka'ab (al-Asqalani, 1986).

Conclusion

From the manuscript, it is interesting to note how the narrator, Abdul Abdel Malek, switches from Dhul Qarnain to Alexander. I quote a section from the manuscript where Malek says, 'It is also narrated that he is Alexander the Great, a Roman (European) who built a huge city named after him



'Alexandria', and lived there in a great palace' (Sukdaven et al.:2015:4). When his early years are described in the manuscript, he is referred to as Alexander.

Therefore, gleaning from the different traditions and their claims on Alexander the Great and a reading of the manuscript, especially the tradition from the Islamic Tradition, the rhetorical question needs to be asked, 'Who is Alexander the Great and who is Dhul Qarnain?' Where is Gog and Magog? Has the original tradition of the Alexander stories developed into the Alexander Romance to such an extent that it has been so badly distorted that Judaism, Christianity and Islam have interpreted the Romance to suit their own objectives? With the plethora of scholarly work being considered, and the disagreements between scholars, Gog and Magog will remain a mystery to many, speculative to some and truism to the assured! But to all relevant purposes, it is upheld as an apocalyptic genre in all three monotheistic religions.

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