

Chemically-induced visions in the *Fourth Book of Ezra* in light of comparative Persian material¹

Vicente Dobroruka

Lecturer in Ancient History, Universidade de Brasília

MPhil in History (PUC-RJ)

MSt in Oriental Studies (Oxford)

DPhil in Theology (Oxford)

Among the many visionary experiences referred to in Jewish apocalyptic literature (constituted mostly by texts composed between III BCE - II CE) a small group of episodes is striking because they involve unusual visionary preparatory practices when the rest of the literary corpus is considered. In the text examined (the apocalypse called the *Fourth Book of Ezra*, a pseudepigraphon) more usual means of visionary preparation are present - fasting, mourning, praying - but the chemical episodes stand out in their uniqueness. Such practices are altogether absent in other apocalypses but there are many parallels in Persian texts, which may imply influence of the latter on the Jewish text. On another point we must take into consideration whatever scientific information on the nature of such inducers there is, as well as try to identify the plants in question in Jewish and Persian sources alike. Some work on links between Persian and Jewish apocalyptic visionary episodes has been done but not on the same scale as proposed here: among the research previously done that of Anders Hultgård is in my opinion the most important one and it is from some of the issues he raises that this article sprang from².

It is also hoped that some of the problems related to dating of texts and precedence of Persian lore over Jewish apocalyptic themes may be seen under a different light when examined from the point of view of inducing visionary practices. On another front, attention is given to the actual scientific information conveyed on the effects of hallucinogenic drugs such as those that may lie behind the visionary experiences described

¹ I would like to express my deepest gratitude to a number of scholars who contributed a great deal to this article with their reading, suggestions and insight: to Profs. John J. Collins, Martin Goodman, Steve Mason, Chris Rowland and Dr. Alison Salvesen; a very special thanks is due to Prof. Tessa Rajak for suggesting its publication in the first place.

² "Ecstasy and vision" in: Nils Holm (ed.). *Religious Ecstasy. Based on Papers read at the Symposium on Religious Ecstasy held at Åbo, Finland, on the 26th-28th of August 1981*. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1982.

in 4Ezra and in the Persian sources. This may clarify some of the most difficult issues at stake by allowing of forbidding some inducers as the hallucinogenics eventually responsible for the episodes described - in other words, the discussion on the nature of the species involved in the processes may help in dating texts considered and thus clarify the issue of the precedence of Persian material over Jewish apocalyptic. This discussion has moved from an almost unanimous position in the *Religionsgeschichte* scholars from the beginning of the 20th century, a position that takes for certain that apocalyptic elements in late Judaism are the result of Indo-European (i.e. Persian) influx, and not the other way round. These assumptions have been recently challenged by scholars such as Philippe Gignoux and I hope that discussion on the particular items raised in this article may contribute to the debate.

The term “chemical inducement” should be first defined while dealing with the proposed theme, since ambiguity might arise. By it I understand the text passages where it is clear that the vision described by the seer is a consequence of the ingestion of some substance that, although not always described with the precision the scholar wants, has a mind-altering character in the story subsequently told. Unorthodox dietary practices such as vegetarianism might as well have a mind-altering effect (this is in fact described in Dn 1:8-15 and, surprisingly, in some modern case-studies as we shall see), but since in Jewish texts they are more likely be related to plain *kashrut* laws they shall not be discussed here; fasting can have much the same preparatory effect in the stories told about visions, but likewise shall not be dealt with here³.

In this article I am concerned with apocalyptic passages in which it is clear that the vision described by the seer is a consequence of the ingestion of some mind altering substance, which allows us to speak about “chemical inducement” as a cause-effect relation between that substance and a following visionary experience. Unorthodox dietary practices such as vegetarianism might have a mind-altering effect (this is described in Dn 1:8-15 and, surprisingly, in some modern case-studies as we shall see), but since in Jewish texts they are more likely be related to plain *kashrut* laws they shall not be discussed here.

³ The text of 4Ezra used has been Metzger’s translation in Charlesworth’s edition of the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha (*The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. New York: Doubleday, 2 volumes. 1983-1985; 4Ezra is in the first). “ASC” stands, from now on, for “altered state of consciousness”. The transliteration of Persian sources was left as they stand in the original editions, this accounting for differences in spelling of the same word.

Fasting can have much the same preparatory effect in the stories told about visions, but likewise shall not be dealt with here⁴.

This leaves us with four passages in the corpus of Second Temple Jewish literature where the ingestion of some substance appears to be related to mystical experience: *Fourth Book of Ezra* 9:23-29; 12:51; 14:38-48 and *Martyrdom of Isaiah* 2:7-11. Of those, the last one cannot be properly established as portraying a cause and effect relation in terms of chemical inducement and the seer's vision, and shall be left out of this analysis. The three passages of 4Ezra, on the other hand, provide clear links between the ingestion of substances and experiences undergone thereafter. It should be noted that no significant variations in the passages examined were found in the different readings of the manuscripts, according to the textual discussion by Stone⁵.

The *Fourth Book of Ezra* (4Ezra) is an apocalyptic text of Jewish origin (with the exception of what came to be known in the Vulgate as chapters 1-2 and 15-16 of II Esdras, which are Christian interpolations), that was probably written after 70 CE - because of the importance that the author attached to the fall of the Temple - and the end of the Second Century CE (where the first clear mention of it is to be found in Clement of Alexandria)⁶. The text of 4Ezra is structured around seven different visions, of which the fourth (explanation for the weeping woman) and the seventh (the command to write the 94 books) are the most important for us here. 4Ezra 12:51 is also of importance and is attached to the context of the fifth vision (the eagle), although it in fact introduces the sixth - for after 12:51 the seer sleeps seven days and then gets a vision.

In the first passage, 4Ezra 9:23-29, we have a dialogue between God and Ezra where the seer is still perplexed about the fate of the wicked in relation to the righteous. For God to explain in further detail to Ezra why so many will perish while He is only concerned about the fate of the just, He orders Ezra to go to a field without any human construction

⁴ "ASC" refers henceforth to "altered state of consciousness". The transliteration of Persian sources was left as found in the original editions, thus accounting for different spellings of the same word.

⁵ The mss. of 4Ezra can be divided in two main groups, the first comprising the Latin and Syriac versions, the second the Georgian, Ethiopic and Coptic. Some differences in detail are sometimes found, and shall be noted. Cf. Michael E. Stone. *Fourth Ezra: a Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990. Pp.1-3.

⁶ Idem, p.9. Cf. *Stromateis* 3.16.

and not fast⁷, but instead eat only the flowers of the field and abstain from meat or wine (4Ezra 9:23-25).

But if you will let seven days more pass - do not fast during them, however; but go into a field of flowers where no house has been built, and eat only of the flowers of the field, and taste no meat and drink no wine, but eat only flowers, and pray to the Most High continually - then I will come and talk with you.

Here again the theme of vegetarianism is present (maybe as a reminder of the pre-diluvian diet that man enjoyed once, thus closer to Edenic times), but the reference to the eating of the flowers alone is striking and even absent from some versions of the text⁸; since the Latin and Syriac texts are the best mss of 4Ezra, it looks more plausible that the reference to the flowers was already in the Greek or Hebrew original and eliminated in the less important versions than the other way round - it would make little sense to think of them as later insertions. It should be noted that Nebuchadnezzar also abstains from wine and meat in his madness (in the account of the *Vitae Prophetarum* 79:3-5)⁹.

After this, Ezra goes to a field called Ardat (4Ezra 9:26). This poses a few problems, since there are so many variant readings for the name of the field as to dishearten the search for an actual place; but anyway it is clearly stated that the seer is commanded to go out of his house in Babylon (as we can see from the very beginning of the Jewish section of the apocalypse, 4Ezra 3:1 ff.), and the writer pays great attention to location details in the text, such as the name given to the field¹⁰. However, Ezra apparently does not obey the command strictly, for he admits having eaten flowers *and* the plants of the field (the well-being described by Ezra after eating them echoes Daniel). It would look from this passage that Ezra is undergoing a vegetarian diet, rather than ingesting the flowers alone. However, the reference to vegetables other than the flowers may be casual and Ezra's visions are

⁷ Idem, p.302. Variant readings in the Ethiopic text and in the first Arabic version give a positive command, "do fast"; however, a witness as ancient as Tertullian already dismissed Ezra's practice in the episode as full fasting (*De ieiunio*. 9.1), and called it a "partial" one as in Daniel. Cf. also Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, p.36.

⁸ The reference to the flowers appears only in the Latin, Syriac and Armenian versions. Cf. Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, p.302.

⁹ David Satran. "Daniel: seer, philosopher, holy man" in: George W.E. Nickelsburg and John J. Collins (eds.). *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism: Profiles and Paradigms*. Chico: Scholars Press, 1980. P.39.

¹⁰ The name has so many variants in the versions as to turn actual identification almost impossible; "Arpad" in the Syriac version, "Araab" in the Ethiopic, some Latin texts with "Ardad", "Ardas", "Ardaf" or "Ardaph". Cf. Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, p.304. The location of the field shows that the author is willing to give detail about the experience, and it is another element to be taken into consideration in order to consider it authentic (compare the huge amount of detail offered by Paul on his mystical experience, which gives a more real outlook to it).

apparently attached to the eating of the flowers indeed, because the command and the story themselves are odd (i.e. a command to avoid meat or to observe *kashrut* would not seem strange in the context). After seven days Ezra lies on the grass and finally begins to enquire God about His justice, and then gets the vision of the weeping woman who, in time, turns out to be the heavenly Jerusalem (4Ezra 9:38 ff.).

In the whole complex of preparation for the vision described in the last passages, it must be noted that the seer possibly did not perceive vegetarianism and the eventual inducement by the flowers as separate processes. In this respect too we may have another parallel between Daniel and 4Ezra besides others - both are men whose action takes place in Babylon, one Danielic vision finds its way explicitly in 4Ezra and both would appear to undergo a diet of vegetables.

The field without any human construction (“in campum florum ubi domus non est aedificata”) echoes the stone cut out “not by human hands” of Dn 2:34.

Besides the flowers, God commands Ezra to pray “continually”, also a means of ecstatic inducement present in many other texts (1En 13:6-10; 39:9-14; Dn 9:3; 3Br 1:1-3; Test12Lv 2:3-6 etc.). However, Ezra himself does not mention praying after God’s command - but just states that he went to the field, ate the flowers and the plants and “the nourishment they afforded satisfied me” (4Ezra 9:26); then he speaks to God (this can be understood as a prayer, in the terms it is formulated, but it comes as an effect of having sat in the field and eaten the flowers; this is what makes Ezra’s heart troubled and is the cause of his mouth being opened)¹¹.

Regarding the theme that interests us here, it should be noted that the eating of the flowers, far from casual, is a strict command of God to the seer; while it is not stated that the vision arises as a consequence of eating them (rather, the seer tells us that he was nourished after eating - it could be a metaphor for spiritual fulfillment), it is reasonable to link them both because of the first command. Summing up the story told in 4Ezra:

1. The command comes together with other features (like the need of the flowers to be in a field with no human constructions);
2. God commands Ezra to pray as preparation (which he does, not before as ordered, but rather as a result of “being nourished”);

¹¹ The Ethiopic and the first Arabic versions have it in an active meaning, i.e. Ezra opens his mouth by himself. Cf. Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, p.304.

3. Complete fasting is altogether absent;
4. Vegetarianism is commanded both in the form of abstinence from meat and in the eating of the flowers, but may be related to purity worries and not to health issues (i.e. not to be related to gaining more concentration or mental accuracy);
5. Wine is also forbidden to Ezra, and this is somewhat strange when the reader already knows that he may take it in the seventh vision;
6. Having eaten other unspecified plants together with the flowers, the case for holding the latter responsible for the whole process of preparation in chapter 9 is somewhat weakened, although the reference may well have been casual (i.e. flowers = plants);
7. Nevertheless, whether it is the effect of a proper diet or of chemical inducement, from the seer's point of view it arrives as a consequence of God's command.

The key preparatory themes of chapter 9 are resumed in 4Ezra 12:51: here Ezra consoles the people for his prolonged absence due to the fifth vision (the eagle, explicitly related to Dn 7).

So the people went into the city, as I told them to do. But I sat in the field for seven days, as the angel had commanded me; and I ate only of the flowers of the field, and my food was of plants during those days.

The opposition between city and field location for the visions of the text is present again in Ezra's statement that he would wait seven days more (as the angel commanded him in 12:39) in the field, only eating the flowers (here the text of 4Ezra has "flowers" and "plants" as equivalent terms). While the visionary episodes in 4Ezra 9 most likely describe experiences while awake, the sixth vision in chapter 13 is described by Ezra as a dream. Besides, it should be noted that the relation between the flowers and the vision is far less clear in ch. 12: the angel simply pleads Ezra to wait seven days more to see whatever more God would tell him besides the interpretation of the eagle vision (4Ezra 12:38-39). Cause-effect relation is here less clear than in ch. 9, if at all present.

Finally, the last passage of 4Ezra describing possible inducement for visions by means of mind-altering substances comes in chapter 14. There, in 14:38-48 Ezra is again in the field (the "again" making it clear that it is referring to Ardat or to the field named in a similar way in the versions). Ezra shall not be disturbed for forty days (echoing Moses'

experience¹² and possibly also that of Abraham, although in ApAbr 9:7 the command is not exactly to fast but “to abstain from every kind of food cooked by fire, and from drinking of wine and from anointing [yourself] with oil”¹³); and contrary to most visionary experiences described in apocalyptic texts, Ezra is not alone but has taken five scribes with him¹⁴.

What happens next is not a vision but an auditive experience: Ezra hears a voice that commands him to drink from a cup, this marking the beginning of the visual part of the experience proper (4Ezra 14:38).

So I took five men, as he commanded me, and we proceeded to the field, and remained there. And on the next day, behold, a voice called me, saying, ‘Ezra, open your mouth and drink what I give you to drink’. Then I opened my mouth, and behold, a cup was offered to me; it was full of something like water, but its color was like fire. And I took it and drank; and when I had drunk it, my heart poured forth understanding, and wisdom increased in my breast, for my spirit retained its memory; and my mouth was opened, and was no longer closed. And the Most High gave understanding to the five men, and by turns they wrote what was dictated, in characters which they did not know. They sat forty days, and wrote during the daytime, and ate their bread at night. As for me, I spoke in the daytime and was not silent at night. So during the forty days ninety-four books were written [...]

After having taken it Ezra undergoes a transformation, and three things happen to what we would call Ezra’s “mind”: his heart pours from understanding, his wisdom increases in his breast and his spirit retains his memory¹⁵. His mouth was opened and did not close; Ezra’s companions were also given the gift of understanding by God (the means of which are not stated), so that they might write down what Ezra was saying in “characters that they did not know” (rather than describing some ecstatic phenomenon like glossolalia, speaking in unknown tongues, this reference probably implies the use of square Aramaic script by the scribes¹⁶). We are not told that Ezra ate anything after he drank from the cup (contrary to the scribes who, we are told, ate at night); he does this for forty days, with the final output of 94 books, of which 24 should be made public and the remaining 70

¹² Idem, p.303.

¹³ Cf. also Ithamar Gruenwald. *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*. Leiden: Brill, 1980. P.52.

¹⁴ Gunnel André. “Ecstatic prophesy in the Old Testament” in: Holm, op.cit. p.190 for the idea of the relative “loneliness” of the classical prophet as related to the pagan prophets, going together in groups.

¹⁵ In Jewish apocalyptic writings “heart” can, among other things, represent the intellectual function; “breast” is possibly related to it. Cf. David S. Russell. *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964. Pp.142-144.

¹⁶ Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, p.439. Aramaic being also important in Daniel and in the Persian world at large reinforces this idea on the part of the author of 4Ezra.

not). This marks the end not only of the visions of chapter 14 but also of the chapter itself and thus, of the Jewish core of the book besides the last two chapters, of Christian origin. The Syriac text adds two more verses, that say that Ezra was “caught up, and taken to the place of those who are like him, after he had written all these things...”, but this reference alone does little to consider the revelatory experiences described by the author as being essentially concerned with heavenly journeys as e.g. 1En or 3En. In the passage from ch. 14 there is the most clear cause and effect relation in the chemical practices discussed: the seer states clearly that, *when* he drank the liquid his heart poured understanding etc.. The command, the action and the vision are very clearly linked.

As a final balance of the ecstatic experiences described in 4Ezra 14:38-48 we could say that:

1. The experience described involves other people than the apocalyptic seer (the scribes);
2. The ingested substance resembles another one hitherto forbidden (wine);
3. The subsequent experience is not exactly a vision, but a prodigious deed (the writing of the books);
4. The scribes, although playing a secondary role and although we do not have the same amount of information about them, end up inspired in a very similar way to Ezra, albeit with less impressive means and less intensity (for they must stop to eat at night, while Ezra needs not)¹⁷.

The chemically induced experiences described by the apocalyptic seer disguised under the name of Ezra can be roughly divided in two groups: 4Ezra 9:23-29 and 12:51 on one side and 4Ezra 14:38-48 on the other. The first group involves certain foods and abstinence from alcohol, together with prayer which, however, may be playing only a conventional role in the visions described (i.e. while being a major ASC-inducer in other

¹⁷ All the considerations above are subject to one major difficulty permeating the whole issue, namely the pseudepigraphic nature of authorship: thus we cannot discuss properly who had the experience (if there is any indeed), but nevertheless we can analyze the practices described in the passages. For possibilities regarding the relationship between the presumed and actual authors, see Michael E. Stone. “Apocalyptic - vision or hallucination?” in: *Selected Studies in Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha with Special Reference to the Armenian Tradition*. Leiden / New York / Kobenhavn / Köln: Brill, 1991 and Frederik Torm. “Die Psychologie der Pseudonimität im Hinblick auf die Literatur des Urchristentums” in: Norbert Brox (ed.). *Pseudepigraphie in der Heidnischen und Jüdisch-Christlichen Antike*. Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977 (original article from 1932).

texts, it is clearly less underlined than the ingestion of substances in 4Ezra, and not only from the modern scholar's point of view; it looks so stereotyped in 4Ezra that it appears *after* the eating of the flowers, thus not being a cause of inducement).

On the other hand the second group, 4Ezra 14:38-48, involves a more fantastic and elaborate experience. Before trying to find out what the drink was, we should bear in mind that the theme of something "like fire" that gives inspiration may be connected to the Holy Spirit¹⁸. Besides, the mere idea that Ezra was "dictating" sacred books (not yet canonical) implies that the Sinaitic revelation still had room to be enlarged¹⁹, an idea that may reinforce the presence of the Holy Spirit in Ezra as he drank from the cup. The episode has parallels in the scroll eaten by Ezekiel (Ez 2:8-3:3) and thus to the author of the Book of Revelation (Ap 10:9-10), who also claims to have had sensory experiences related to ingestion.

The cup may also have a negative connotation as the means for God to madden peoples or nations (Jr 25:15-16); it may also be a symbol of vocation (MartIs 5:14; Mk 10:38; 14:36). There are also many parallels for describing mystical experience in terms of drunkenness, the best known perhaps being Philo's *De ebrietate* 146-148:

*[...] to many of the unenlightened it may seem to be drunken, crazy and beside itself [...] indeed, it is true that these sober ones are drunk in a sense [...] and they receive the loving cup from perfect virtue*²⁰.

Even if multiple authorship is not involved, the spirit of both groups of visions analyzed is a bit diverse from each other. The theme will be resumed in the "Conclusion" to this article.

The material used in this next section is mainly composed of Persian texts. Persian influence in the theme of preparation for visions in 4Ezra is a reasonable supposition; however, it should be noted that the dating of all the Persian texts listed below is much later than those possible for 4Ezra. This is the greatest single reason that renders impossible any definite conclusion about the influence of Persian sources on the

¹⁸ An association made by many, and well developed by Russell. See *Method*, op.cit. pp.171-172.

¹⁹ Stone, "Apocalyptic", p.424.

²⁰ Translation by F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, in the Loeb Classical Library Edition, vol.III of Philo's works (Cambridge, Mass. / London: Harvard University Press, 1968).

apocalypse text we are examining; it may indeed present an untransposable barrier²¹. A different matter is posed by the dating of the mythical themes contained in them, which will be addressed in the end of this section²².

The sources here quoted derive basically from eight Persian texts, the *Jāmāsp Namag*, the *Wizirkard i Denig*, the *Zardush Nameh*, the “Conversion of Vishtapa”, the apocalypse called *Zand-i Vohuman Yasn*, the experience of Vishtapa referred to in the *Dinkard*, a reference in the *Book of Artay Viraz*, and passages of the *Vidēvdāt*²³.

In the *Jāmāsp Namag* (also a pseudepigraphic text, written in the name of an old sage), Jāmāsp receives from Zoroaster the gift of knowledge by means of a flower. This is also the theme of the Pahlavi text *Wizirkard i Denig* 19 (this text should be from the twelfth century - there is a dated manuscript dated from 1123, referring to another one from 609, whose existence is far from sure -, written in Persian “disguised” as Pahlavi or Middle Persian)²⁴; indeed, the tradition that described the acquisition of mystical knowledge by Jāmāsp resembles very much that of Ezra regarding the flowers, as the drinking of the blessed wine looks like the experience of 4Ezra 14 - the main difference in the passage being the fact that here we have two different seers:

(19) *And behold: One day King Vištāsp, king of kings, (willing) to challenge his [Zoroaster’s] prophetic achievements, asked Zoroaster that he gives him what he would ask: ‘That I may be immortal and exempt from old age, that swords and spears be incapable of hurting my body, that I may know all the secrets of heaven, present, past and future and that I may see, in this life, the better existence of the just!’ Zoroaster said: ‘Ask any of these four things for yourself, and the other three for three other people; the Creator will grant them more easily’. So King Vištāsp wanted to see in this life the better existence of the just. With the help of Lord Ohrmazd, just Zoroaster [performed a sacrifice rite] and laid down milk, a flower, wine and a grenade. After having exalted and invoked the Well-doing Creator, he gave the blessed wine to Vištāsp so that he would fall asleep and see the better existence; he*

²¹ John J. Collins. *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*. Semeia 14, 1979. P.207 ff. As the issue stands, Persian material is more recent than Jewish sources, although the mythical cores of the first most likely antecede the latter. But this cannot be hard-proofed as investigation stands.

²² Examination of Mesopotamian relations to Jewish apocalyptic ecstatic practices showed no similar means of preparation, but rather similar contents of the visions, not to be dealt with here. Cf. Wifred G. Lambert. *The Background of Jewish Apocalyptic*. London: The Athlone Press / University of London, 1978 and Helmer Ringgren. “Akkadian apocalypses” in: Daniel Hellholm (ed.). *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism, Uppsala, August 12-17, 1979*. Tübingen: Mohr, 1983. Pp.379-386.

²³ For a brief overview of the place of these books in relation to the output of Zoroastrian texts, cf. Geo Widengren. *Die Religionen Irans*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1965 and also Sven Hartman. “Datierung der Jungavestischen Apokalypsik” in: Hellholm, op.cit. pp.61-76.

²⁴ Tord Olsson. “The apocalyptic activity. The case of Jāmāsp Nāmāg” in: Hellholm, op.cit. p.32. For the dating, cf. Marijan Molé. *La légende de Zoroastre: selon les textes Pehlevis*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1967. P.9.

*gave the flower to Jamāsp, the best of men and he was taught, by means of visions, about all events present, past and future; he gave the grenade to Spanddāt whose body became sacred and invulnerable to pointed swords; he gave the blessed milk to Pêšôtan son of King Vištāsp who obtained immortality in the field and eternal youth.*²⁵

In the *Zardush Nameh* (after the ninth century, for it quotes the earlier *Dinkard*, and written in Pahlavi²⁶) it is said that Jāmāsp acquired his gift by smelling the flower consecrated by Zoroaster in a ceremony:

*He gave to Jāmāsp a bit of the consecrated perfume, and all sciences became understandable to him. He knew about all things to happen and that would happen until the day of resurrection*²⁷.

The form of the text also resembles 4Ezra because of the question-answer form as introduced by Vishtapa (“This pure religion, how long will it last?” etc.). In terms of the visionary process itself, it is remarkable that Jāmāsp interprets for king Vishtapa a dream in much the same fashion that Daniel did it for Nabucodonosor²⁸. Drinking is alluded to also in the Pahlavi *Rivayat* 47 (“Conversion of Vishtaspa”, the *rivayats* have been composed between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, in Pahlavi²⁹), when Vishtapa receives the perception on the ways of religion after a visit by a divine messenger who makes him drink a cup full of wine or haoma³⁰ mixed again with a narcotic, *mang* (whose significance will be discussed shortly):

(27) Ormazd sent Nêrôsang: ‘Go to Artvahišt and tell him: Put mang in the wine and give it for Vištāsp to drink’. (28) Artvahišt did so. (29) Having drunk it, he evaporated into the field. (30) His soul was taken to Garôtmân [Paradise] to show him what he could gain if he accepted the Religion. (31) When he woke up from the

²⁵ Molé, op.cit. p.133.

²⁶ Edwin Yamauchi. *Persia and the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990. P.410. It was probably written in the Thirteenth century.

²⁷ Olsson, op.cit. p.32. In Mary Boyce’s translation (“On the antiquity of Zoroastrian apocalyptic” in: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 47, 1984. P.60) the flower is rendered as “incense”: the mixture of the latter with wine has a maddening effect not on visionaries, but on the elephants of 3Mc 5:45: “Now when the animals had been brought virtually to a state of madness, so to speak, by the very fragrant draughts of wine mixed with frankincense [...]”.

²⁸ Anders Hultgård. “Forms and origins of Iranian apocalypticism” in: Hellholm, op.cit. p.401.

²⁹ Mary Boyce. *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984. P.5.

³⁰ An intoxicating mythical drink whose exact nature has yet to be explained; it is generally identified with soma, or even with other hallucinogenic plants, as we will see below.

sleep, he cried to Hutôs: ‘Where is Zoroaster so that I may accept the Religion?’ (32) Zoroaster heard his voice, came and Vištâsp accepted the Religion.³¹

In the *Zand-i Vohuman Yasn* (the text is in Pahlavi and a *zand* intends to be an interpretation of a lost book of the Avesta, the *Bahman Yasht*³²; it is quite similar in themes to the *Oracle of Hystaspes*, something which may suggest its antiquity) 3:7-8. Zoroaster drinks the water that Ahura Mazda gives to him and acquires his wisdom, in a similar fashion to the cup episode in 4Ezra 14:

4. Zarduxšt, in thought, was displeased. 5. Ohrmazd, through the wisdom of omniscience, knew that he, Spitāmān Zarduxšt of the righteous frawahr, thought. 6. He took the hand of Zarduxšt, he Ohrmazd, the bountiful spirit, the Creator of the world of material beings, holy [...] put his wisdom of omniscience, in the form of water, on the hand of Zarduxšt and said “Drink”. 7. And Zarduxšt drank of it. He blended the wisdom of omniscience in Zarduxšt. 8. Seven days and nights was Zarduxšt in the wisdom of Ohrmazd³³.

In the *Dinkard* 7.4.84-86 Vishtapa drinks a mixture of wine or haoma with some narcotic, possibly henbane. The same episode in the *Zand-i Vohuman Yasn*, a later redaction, has this potation replaced by water as we saw above, possible evidence of the practice being rejected in later times³⁴.

[...] Ohrmazd the creator sent [...] to the residence of Wishtāsp the divinity Nērōsang [...] to cause Wishtāsp to consume the illuminating nourishment which would give his soul eye vision over the spiritual existence, by reason of which Wishtāsp saw great mystery and glory. As it says in the Avesta, ‘Ohrmazd the creator said to the divinity Nērōsang: ‘Go, fly on [...] to the residence of Wishtāsp [...] and say this to Ashawahisht: ‘Powerful Ashawahisht, take the excellent bowl, more excellent than the other bowls which are well made [...] for conveying for our own sake hōm and mang [maybe henbane, see “Conclusion”] to Wishtāsp and cause the lofty ruler Kay Wishtāsp to drink it’³⁵.

³¹ Molé, op.cit. p.121.

³² However, efforts to reconstruct an Avestic *Bahman Yasht* from the late commentaries we have remain problematic: for a full discussion of the many problems involved, cf. Carlo G. Cereti (ed.). *The Zand i Wahman Yasn: a Zoroastrian Apocalypse*. Roma: Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1995. Pp.14 ff.

³³ Cereti, op.cit. pp.150-151. The author suggests the passage implies a reference to psychotropic drugs and refers to the parallel in *Arda Viraz Nāmag* 3.15 (cf. the commentary on the *Bahman Yasht* by Cereti, op.cit. p.179). Ezra also sits in the field for seven days in 4Ezra 12:51, as seen above.

³⁴ Hultgård, “Ecstasy and vision” in: Holm, op.cit. p.222. The *Dinkard* is probably not earlier than the 9th century.

³⁵ David S. Flattery and Martin Schwartz. *Haoma and Hermaline: the Botanical Identity of the Indo-Iranian Sacred Hallucinogen “Soma” and Its Legacy in Religion, Language, and Middle Eastern Folklore*. Ann

The *Book of Artay Viraz* (a late text, possibly late Sassanian, in Pahlavi³⁶) also talks about preparation of the seer by means of taking wine with narcotic, in 2.25-31:

*The priests of the religion filled three golden cups with wine and with henbane of Vištāsp and presented to Vīrāz one cup for the Good Thought, one second for the Good Word and a third for the Good Deed*³⁷.

It must be noted that in the passage above no ascetic practice similar to the ones of 4Ezra occurs (much on the contrary, Viraz prepares himself eating - not fasting - and nothing of the ascetic practices of the seer in 4Ezra seems present).

Finally, in the *Vidēvdāt* 4.14 (the text may have been started during Vologeses III, 148-191, and completed under the Sassanian Khosraw I, 531-579, in Pahlavi)³⁸ old women bring henbane to cause abortion:

Thus this who [is] a girl [looks] for an old woman; these girl-injurers consulted together; this who [is] an old woman brings mang or šēt [one is called that of Vištāsp, one that of Zartušt]; (it is something) that kills [i.e. kills (the fetus) in the womb], or (it is a means to) throwing off [i.e. (the fetus) comes, afterwards dies], or whatever plant which is abortifacient [a sort of drug]; (and she says) thus 'with this (drug) the son is killed'.³⁹

In the passage above we apparently have two different drugs, which may be vision inducing or abortifacient⁴⁰.

It should be noted that the passages above, important as they may be, do not suggest that chemical inducement was the only means by which Persian seers might get prepared for ecstatic experiences: here too such references are comparatively rare - although outnumbering by far the ones in Jewish apocalyptic - and do not replace more traditional

Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989. P.18. An older and slightly different translation can be found at Molé, op.cit. p.59.

³⁶ Walter Belardi. *The Pahlavi Book of the Righteous Viraz*. Rome: University Department of Linguistics and Italo-Iranian Cultural Centre, 1979. P.10.

³⁷ Gignoux considers these three cups are merely symbolic of the fact that Vīrāz observes those three virtues better than anybody else: besides he translates *mang* for henbane (*jusquiam* in the French translation). Cf. translation and notes in "Apocalypses et voyages extra-terrestres dans l'Iran mazdéen" in: Claude Kappler (ed.). *Apocalypses et voyages dans l'au-delà*. Paris: CERF, 1987. P.367. An older version and commentary can be found at Translation and notes in Belardi, op.cit. p..92; cf. also from Gignoux, "Notes sur la rédaction de l'Ardāy Virāz Nāmag" in: *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Supplementa 1, 1969.

³⁸ Yamauchi, op.cit. p.407.

³⁹ Belardi, op.cit. p.114.

⁴⁰ Idem, p.115.

forms of preparation such as prayer or fasting⁴¹. But the insistent mentioning both of wine and plants as means of getting inspired deserves closer attention.

Evidence from 4Ezra checked against Persian data gives us the following items as being possibly chemical stimulants for the visionaries - wine (in 4Ezra 14:38-48, *Zand-I Vohuman Yasn* 3:7-8, *Wizirkard i Denig* 19), wine or haoma with narcotics (*Dinkard* 7.4.84-86; *Book of Artay Viraz* 2.25-28; *Yasna* 10.17; “Conversion of Vishtaspa” 47), henbane (as abortive in *Vidēvdāt* 4.14), unspecified flowers that could be henbane (4Ezra 9:23-29; 12:51; again Jāmāsp in *Wizirkard i Denig* 19; *Zardush Nameh*) and a further reference to haoma/soma in utterly unfavourable terms, that shall be examined below. Since in these references we are generally not guessing what the substance is, but the sources tell us in a much clearer way than in 4Ezra), we should take a look at the possibilities of these mind altering substances being available to the visionary of 4Ezra in the conclusion to this article.

The fact that the Persian texts relate to practices similar to 4Ezra are, without exception, later than the Jewish text does not mean that their mythical cores cannot be older. First of all, the figure of Vishtaspa (or, in its Greek form, Hystaspes) is much older than the earliest Jewish apocalypses themselves (i.e. earlier than III century BCE) and came to be known in a variety of syncretistic guises throughout the Mediterranean⁴². This is no proof of the anteriority of the Persian texts (after all we also have an “earlier” Ezra), but at least assures that the figure of Vishtasp cannot be later than that of Ezra. Secondly, there are a number of other mythical themes portrayed in late Persian texts (like the *Zand* of the *Bahman Yasht*) that are known through earlier sources (like the four ages associated to metals and monarchies, already quoted in Theopompus - fourth century BCE - or in the fragments collectively known as the *Oracle of Hystaspes*). This is indirect evidence that late Persian texts contain cores that can be of earlier date even if not of Persian origin. The

⁴¹ Hultgård, “Ecstasy and vision”, p.224. The voyages described here have a non-historical flavour - i.e. they were supposedly performed by mythical characters. This does not exclude allusions to historical practices, but these should be taken with care - while the visionary is taken to an otherworldly voyage in the *Arday Viraz* passage, by contrast to the historical and earthly explanations given in 4Ezra. Real mystical experiences similar to those described above can be found in ancient Iran and will be discussed below. Cf. Philippe Gignoux. “La signification du voyage extra-terrestre dans l’eschatologie mazdénne” in: *Mélanges d’histoire des religions offerts à Henri-Charles Puech*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974. Pp.64-68 and Shaul Shaked. *Dualism in Transformation: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran*. London: University of London, 1994. P.49.

⁴² We have in fact two different characters that sometimes get mixed up in later tradition - one being the king that protects Zoroaster, the second the father of Darius I. In the texts here discussed we are referring to the first. Cf. Hans Windisch. *Die Orakel des Hystaspes*. Amsterdam: Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam, 1929. P.10.

theme of the cup that gives wisdom, being already present in the *Yasna* 10.17 is much older: the *Yasna* preserves material from the *Gathas* (sacred texts traditionally attributed to Zoroaster himself), including *Yasna* 10.17 - which deals with the theme of the wisdom cup, in this case related to haoma:

Thereupon spake Zarathushtra: Praise to Haoma, Mazda-made. Good is Haoma, Mazda-made. All the plants of Haoma praise I, on the heights of lofty mountains, in the gorges of the valleys, in the clefts (of sundered hill-sides) cut for the bundles bound by women. From the silver cup I pour Thee to the golden chalice over. Let me not thy (sacred) liquor spill to earth, of precious cost.

The dating of the *Yasna* depends on the dating attributed to Zoroaster, but even supposing the prophet to be a figure living as late as the sixth century BCE (unlikely, because of the many parallels of Gathic material to the *Rig Veda*), the *Yasna* is much earlier than 4Ezra⁴³.

For the relation between the flowers and disclosure, however, no earlier parallel than that of the *Jāmāsp Namag* was found (there is one reference to flowers in a similar context in *Yasna* 42.4, related to haoma, but not exactly the same as that of the later texts). It should be noted that, while if the *mang* put in the wine is henbane, we would be deprived of long-duration links were it to be translated as hemp, the latter being present in Scythian rituals reported by Herodotus; this would give us an earlier dating for shared Indo-Iranian ecstatic practices.

As a conclusion to this article I should begin by pointing out that the difficulties in establishing a definite conclusion are overwhelming and that, unless dramatic new evidence changes the current picture, we will be left forever with no certainties on the matter of the relation between 4Ezra and eventual Persian sources.

This being said, I am inclined to accept a relation other than casual between them, for many reasons. First of all, the themes of the flower and the drink that beget knowledge are striking parallels: it is important to notice that, contrary to other quotations of “cups” playing an important part in stories both in the Old Testament and the New, in 4Ezra the cup is part of a revelatory process: the seer becomes enlightened after taking it (or rather does an amazing feat which is in itself some kind of revelation, the writing of the 94 books).

⁴³ Boyce, *Textual sources*, p.2.

These parallels leave us, as always, with three possibilities: they can be either genealogically related, structurally related or it may be simply a coincidence that these themes are shared by our sources.

To say with certainty that there is any kind of genealogical link is out of question, for reasons already stated⁴⁴.

Structurally, it has already been said that different societies attain a similar level of organization by means of different institutions⁴⁵; this would imply that the role of Persian seers and the author of 4Ezra might be analogous and independently achieved. While we know very little about who wrote, read and/or consumed Jewish apocalyptic literature and even less about its Hellenistic counterpart (i.e. Persian, Egyptian and Babylonian apocalypses), it should be noted that both Persian and Jewish visionaries were subject to similar conditions as related to foreign rule and oppression. In this sense the dating of the Persian sources may be less important than in a straight genealogical approach, for even being late redactions the updating they show anomic conditions similar to those experienced by the author of 4Ezra (e.g. the four kingdoms in the *Zand-i Vohuman Yasn*, taken to mean Greek, Byzantine, Muslim and Turkish rules)⁴⁶. It must be stated that we know almost nothing about the seers themselves, both in Jewish as in Persian apocalyptic - while we have much information about *magoi* and Zoroastrians at large, it is not possible to just identify those groups with the seers of the texts examined.

Finally, the Persian seers and the visionary of 4Ezra may have gone through similar experiences by pure chance: taking the same ASC-inducers they had similar frames of visions, although developed in fairly different ways due to the cultural differences between their two worlds; after all, it is culture that changes, not chemistry⁴⁷. I do not think that this should be the case; similarities between hallucinogenic cults both in the Old and in the New World point to a common shared heritage that may go back to the Paleolithic⁴⁸.

⁴⁴ A possible exception would be the shamanistic traces present in the *Testament of Abraham*, according to Gignoux - the whole episode resembling in fact the voyage of Arda Viraz. Cf. Philippe Gignoux. "Les voyages chamaniques dans le monde iranien" in: *Acta Iranica* 21: 244-265, 1981. Pp.263-265. By the same reasoning the use of hallucinogens in Zoroastrian mystical experiences is considered by Gignoux as having a key role to establish a link with Siberian shamanism (op.cit. p.244).

⁴⁵ Ioan M. Lewis. *Ecstatic Religion: an Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971. P.2.

⁴⁶ Samuel K. Eddy. *The King is Dead. Studies in the Near Eastern Resistance to Hellenism 334-31 B.C.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961. P.17 ff; Collins, *Apocalypse*, p.209 ff.

⁴⁷ Peter Furst. *Hallucinogens and Culture*. San Francisco: Chandler & Sharp, 1976. P.17.

⁴⁸ Idem, p.2.

In terms of the experience described in 4Ezra, we have the additional difficulty of pseudepigraphy. Thus, even while using O'Brien's categories to understand our object (i.e. if the object confronted by the mystic is definite, if the confrontation is direct and if the experience goes contrary to his/her own cultural frame of mind we should be facing evidence of an authentic experience)⁴⁹ we are still left with very little; however, if these criteria are applied to the text we have, we must bear in mind the unique character of the preparatory practices described, in terms of Second Temple Jewish literature.

The effects of one candidate plant described (henbane) and its spread would make it quite possible that we are referring to an actual preparatory process here⁵⁰. Other possibilities, such as hallucinogenic mushrooms, have been discussed in the past with controversial methods and results⁵¹. However, the use of the term *mang* has been recently proved to refer not particularly to henbane or to hemp, at least in the time of the writing of the later sources, but it appears to be rather a generic term for "psychoactive drug"⁵².

Discussing the substances quoted in the sources, I think that wine should be left out of this analysis as a stand-alone ASC-inducer for the reason that its diffusion, availability and use are nearly universal to Eurasian peoples at the time of the writing of 4Ezra (wine with narcotics is an altogether different matter and shall be examined below); this universality renders it useless as proof. Even if we were dealing with plain wine in 4Ezra 14:38-48, scholars consider it as a comparatively weak ASC-inducer⁵³.

Regarding the other agents cited, we should begin by a definition of what they are and do: hallucinogenic drugs have the power to induce visual or other kinds of hallucinations and of divorcing the subject from reality⁵⁴. Most of these substances derive from plants, hemp being one of the most common; its effects are disputed among modern

⁴⁹ Elmer O'Brien. *Varieties of Mystic Experience: an Anthology and Interpretation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964. Pp.4-6.

⁵⁰ By opposition to the effects of hemp.

⁵¹ It is a pity that this specific theme lacks more bibliography; the only major work devoted to the theme is John Allegro's highly and understandably controversial *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross; a Study of the Nature and Origins of Christianity within the Fertility Cults of the Ancient Near East* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1970). In his book Allegro says nothing about 4Ezra, Persian visionary processes or even henbane at large.

⁵² We cannot know what was the earlier use of the term, but it should be noted that the Arabic *banj* refers to henbane, to datura and to intoxicating plants in general (al-Bīrūnī uses the term in the 11th century to refer to datura). In the 13th century Persia *mang* means both henbane and hashish. Cf. Flattery and Schwartz, op.cit. pp.16-17, 127. Hultgård is also vague on the interchangeable use of hemp and henbane regarding Persian texts; cf. "Ecstasy", p.223 ff.

⁵³ Furst, *Hallucinogens*, p.17.

⁵⁴ Norman R. Farnsworth. "Hallucinogenic plants" in: *Science*, New Series, volume 162, issue 3858, Dec 6 1968. P.1086.

scholars, but ancient testimony gives credit to it as a powerful ASC-inducer⁵⁵. It looks possible (but unlikely) at first sight that the experience described by the Persian seer in the passages listed above is real, and even that Zoroaster's ecstatic experiences have been aided by hemp⁵⁶. It should be noted, however, that the Persian terms *bang*, *banj* or *mang* only came to be used as a reference including hemp after the Arab conquest, possibly in the 12th century: according to Belardi, in the book of *Artay Viraz* this virtually excludes the possibility that the seer is mixing wine with hemp, but rather with henbane⁵⁷.

Wine mixed with hemp has its use well attested in ancient sources: Galen attests to its use mixed with wine after meals as a digestive aid (*De facultatibus alimentarium* 100.49). Pliny says a lot about hemp in the *Natural history* but mostly in therapeutic terms (20.97). However, the most important reference on the issue for our purposes comes from Homer (*Odyssey* 4.220). Being received by Menelaus, Telemachus is having a banquet and there Helen mixes something in the wine which deserves our attention:

*Then Helen, daughter of Zeus, took other counsel. At once she cast into the wine of which they were drinking a drug [nhpenqej] to quiet all pain and strife, and bring forgetfulness of every ill.*⁵⁸

In the sequence of the text it is also stated that this drug, *nepenthes*, had been given to Helen by Polydamna, a woman from Egypt - a land prone to these drugs and where, according to Homer, every man is a doctor. The nature of *nepenthe* is far from clear, the reference to Egypt specially obscure if it is to be understood as hemp, thus matching the effects described by the poet⁵⁹.

⁵⁵ Idem, p.1087; cf. William A. Emboder, Jr. "Ritual use of the *Cannabis Sativa* L.: a historical-ethnographic survey" in: Peter Furst (ed.). *Flesh of the Gods: the Ritual Use of Hallucinogens*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1972. Pp.219-220.

⁵⁶ H. Leuner. "Die toxische Ekstase" in: Theodor Spoerri (ed.). *Beiträge zur Ekstase*. Bibliotheca psychiatrica et neurologica. Basel / New York: Karger, 1968. Pp.87-88. For the textual reasons given below, I find this not to be clear as Leuner puts it; Eliade's explanation, which simply accepts *bangha* and its derivation *mang* to mean "hemp" already at Sassanian times I find even less convincing. Cf. "Ancient Scythia and Iran" in: George Andrews and Simon Vinkenoog (eds.). *The Book of Grass; an Anthology of Indian Hemp*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972.

⁵⁷ Cf. Belardi, op.cit. p.114. So also the newer translation by Fereydun Vahman. *Arda Wiraz Nāmag: the Iranian "Divina Commedia"*. London / Atlantic Highlands: Curzon Press / Distributed in the U.S.A. by Humanities Press, 1986. P.9.

⁵⁸ Translation by A.T. Murray, in the Loeb Classical Library Edition (Cambridge, Mass. / London: Harvard University Press, 1995). Shaked makes the point that in Zoroastrian myth *mang* was also given to *Gayomart*, the primordial ox, to soothe the pains of death; cf. Shaked, *Dualism*, p.45.

⁵⁹ I shall return to this issue of the effects described in the passage; however the interpretation given by Pascal Brotteaux to the whole text is worth mentioning, being so original. He claims that the drug used should be either henbane, datura or belladonna (all of which effectively cause a loss to the mnemonic

But the most important hallucinogenic plant in our context is henbane. It is present in Palestine of the time of 4Ezra (*Datura*, the genus of henbane is present since long millennia BCE all over the world, with the exception of South America)⁶⁰, but is not quoted in the authoritative work on Biblical flora by Crowfoot and Baldensperger⁶¹. In this work extensive reference is made to the mandrake, a plant surrounded by bigger folklore. Mandrake is also used a narcotic⁶², and ancient reference points to its use mixed with henbane and poppy capsules in Diodorus Siculus and with wine in Homer⁶³.

Henbane, besides being available throughout the Near East is also related to the *Atropa belladonna* (Nightshade) and, more important, gives us many instances of its use and effects in first person experiences, old and recent. We should now take a closer look at these.

Hyosciamus niger is the scientific name of henbane and it belongs to the family of the *solanacae*, which includes common plants like potato and tobacco, and that comprehends the most important group of plants used to establish contact with the other world, in terms of diffusion⁶⁴. All plants similar to henbane contain toxic substances in great quantity, one of which may be absorbed via the skin (atropine), this leading to many reports of its use in medieval and modern times in witchcraft trials⁶⁵. The use of henbane and the practice of vegetarianism is even combined in some reports⁶⁶; this is remarkably similar to the pattern of the first group of visions in 4Ezra (9:23-29; 12:51) and may be a technical issue related to enhancing the effects of henbane.

Modern experiences with the use of henbane include those of Kiesewetter (1907) and of Prof. Will-Erich Peukert from Göttingen (1966). Both prepared ointments as Porta

faculties, according to the author), while it should not be hemp - according to him incapable of causing the described effects. This is surprising when it is almost commonsensical lore the effects on memory caused by hemp. Cf. "The Ancient Greeks" in: Andrews and Vinkenoog, *The Book of Grass*, op.cit. pp.27-28.

⁶⁰ Richard E. Schultes and Albert Hoffman. *Plants of the Gods: Origins of Hallucinogenic Use*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979. Pp.27-28.

⁶¹ Grace M.H. Crowfoot and Louise Baldensperger. *From Cedar to Hyssop: a Study in the Folklore of Plants in Palestine*. London / New York / Toronto: The Sheldon Press / The Macmillan Company, 1932.

⁶² Idem, p.118.

⁶³ Emboden, Jr. op.cit. pp.218-219. In Diodorus, it appears in the *History* 1.97, and in Homer in the *Odyssey* passage, if we should understand *nepenthe* to be identical to it.

⁶⁴ Michael Harner. "The role of hallucinogenic plants in European witchcraft" in: Michael Harner (ed.). *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*. New York / London: Oxford University Press, 1970. P.128.

⁶⁵ Idem, 135-137. This explains the connection of witches with the broom, something that may have phallic connotations because of its use to apply the henbane ointment in the vagina. There are also accounts like the one by Nider (1692) and Laguna (1545), which tell of the use of henbane by suspects who claimed to travel to Sabbaths. Fray Diego Durán, an early witness of Spanish rule in Mexico, (*Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*) establishes a link in terms of their effects between henbane and the magical agaric of the Mexicans, *teotlacuali* ("flesh of the gods"). Cf. Furst, *Hallucinogens*, pp.13-14.

⁶⁶ See the reports by Porta, colleague of Galilei. Harner, op.cit. p.138.

suggested in the seventeenth century, and claimed to have had ecstatic experiences similar to those described by witches; Schenk breathed the smoke of burning henbane and said he felt his body separated from his soul, and had visions of rivers of molten metal (remarkably similar to the Persian experience regarding the Final Judgment, e.g. in *Jāmāsp Namag* 17.14)⁶⁷. It should be noted that the experiences described are notably similar even taking into account that medieval reports have been informed via inquisitorial processes and contemporary not; there is also a difference in pattern regarding witchcraft / shamanism, for while both practices purport encounters with the other world, witches, contrary to shamans, would not manipulate spirits while in trance⁶⁸.

Apart from hemp and henbane, there is a third group of ASC-inducing plants that must be dealt with here, namely fly agaric (*Ammanita muscaria*). This must be done - even if briefly - for the reference in 4Ezra 9:23-25 to the flowers in the field could mean the agaric. We should remember that 4Ezra 12:51 takes “flowers” to be synonymous to “plants”⁶⁹.

There is a number of references in Persian literature that also point to the mushroom, namely the parallel between the Indian passage in the *Rig Veda* 8.4-10 and the *Yasna* 48.10 - both point to the drinking of urine, a practice known from Chinese Manicheans⁷⁰. It consists basically in the ingestion of the urine of people who had taken the fly agaric previously, and is attested in Siberian shamans; the Persian passage in the *Yasna* condemns it while the *Rig Veda* says that Indra was urinating soma. It is known that Indians have for

⁶⁷ Harner, op.cit. p.139. On this issue it should be noted that, while not everybody has the same experiences with the same drugs (people who took LSD in controlled experiments in the Fifties claimed to have had no experience at all, in contrast to the then fashionable accounts by Huxley; cf. Ernst Arbman. *Ecstasy or Religious Trance. In the Experience of the Ecstasies and from the Psychological Point of View*. 3 volumes. Stockholm: Bokförlaget, 1963-1970. Volume 1 - Vision and Ecstasy. P.196). The visions described are seldom - if ever - much different from the cultural environment of the seer. This means that, knowing exactly why they were taking henbane, modern scholars were consciously or unconsciously bound to have visions similar to the medieval witches. This accounts at the same time for the stereotyped visions of apocalyptic literature in general and specifically of 4Ezra and gives an explanation for the same stereotype - the ancient seer, like the modern, could only “see” what his cultural environment allowed him to.

⁶⁸ Harner, op.cit. p.146.

⁶⁹ Cf. above, p.13.

⁷⁰ Robert G. Wasson. “What was the soma of the Aryans?” in: Furst, *Flesh*, pp.204-206. So in the *Yasna* passage, “When, O Mazda, will the nobles understand the message? When will thou smite the filthiness of this intoxicant, through which the Karapans evilly deceive, and the wicked lords of the lands with purpose fell?” (F. Max Müller (ed.). *The Sacred Books of the East*. Vol.31. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1887. Translation by L.H. Mills).

long used mushrooms for hallucinogenic purposes, and it is possible then that the Persian and Indian passages relate to this usage⁷¹.

We have seen that cross-cultural parallels offer pictures where inductive processes similar to the ones reportedly undergone by the seer in 4Ezra are abundant. The question remains, however, if these help explain something of the nature of the story told about the quoted vision episodes in 4Ezra.

All these parallels in themselves do not prove direct borrowing by Jewish apocalypticists from external sources. When it comes to Persian issues some specific points of disagreement arise.

The sharpest criticism of the idea of a Persian origin for Judeo-Christian apocalyptic is laid out in the famous article by Philippe Gignoux⁷². In the text, Gignoux points out the greatest obstacles in tracing a direct - i.e. genealogical - line from Persian to other apocalyptic forms. The major issues risen in the article are that on one hand the content of the so-called “Persian apocalypses” is composite, and on the other the dating offered even by the defendants of the influence-theory is problematic⁷³. Besides, Gignoux raises the always relevant issue about apocalyptic as a genre, something unheard of in Antiquity. This gets worse when it comes to Persian apocalypses, due to their lateness - Gignoux suggesting even that the trajectory of the common *topoi* may have been quite the reverse, i.e. Jewish-Christian ideas influencing Persian texts⁷⁴.

Taken seriously, Gignoux’s objections apparently make no distinction between the text as manuscript and as meaningful, cultural artifact - no matter how late the manuscripts of a given tradition may be, the ideas therein may be much older. Homeric epic may be the most famous stance of oral tradition put down in writing centuries after its composition, although Gignoux has some right in claiming that a continuity between 1.400 BCE (an eventual early date given for Zoroaster) and 900 CE (when a great part of the Zoroastrian texts had already been put down in writing), as proposed by Mary Boyce, may be an

⁷¹ Farnsworth, op.cit. p.1089. The article also points to the possible identification of soma with *Ammanita muscaria*.

⁷² “L’apocalyptique iranienne est-elle vraiment la source d’autres apocalypses?” in: *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 31 (1-2): (1988).

⁷³ Idem, p.71.

⁷⁴ Id. ibid. This is also the theme of Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin’s article, “Apocalypse juive et apocalypse iranienne” in: Ugo Bianchi and Maarten J. Vermaseren (eds.). *La soteriologia dei culti orientali nell’Impero romano: atti del Colloquio internazionale su la soteriologia dei culti orientali nell’Impero romano, Roma, 24-28 settembre 1979*. Leiden: Brill, 1982. Cf. sp. p.759.

exaggeration⁷⁵. Even as we consider the latest evidence in the texts here dealt with, we would only end up with a second-century reference for the *Vendidad* - more likely to be from the fourth -, which is very little to speak with certainty about Persian influence on the preparatory processes of 4Ezra, a First or at latest Second-Century text.

Another issue which we just hinted at above is that of the non-historical character of the experiences described, both for 4Ezra and for the Persian sources. A different and important source altogether is provided by four inscriptions, dated between 290-293 CE, which describe in detail the otherworldly journey taken by a priest called Kirdir. He asks for a visionary experience to reinforce his beliefs, and is granted a tour of Heaven and Hell; stereotyped as the theme is in ancient literature, here we have dated evidence for people who claim to have undergone similar experiences⁷⁶. The inscription is in a sorry state so we cannot know exactly what preparations Kirdir underwent before his voyage⁷⁷, but we can at least hint that they should not be dismissed, as a whole, as late additions to Persian apocalyptic.

As it has been pointed out, the change from fasting to the eating of flowers marks a decisive stage in Ezra's acquisition of understanding⁷⁸. This takes us to the process described in 4Ezra itself, which is surprisingly overlooked in Gignoux's article - we have a description of practices that lead to visions, something specially important when it comes to the use of the cup in 4Ezra 14:38-42.

The cup, in every significant stance where it appears in the Old Testament and also in the New has all kinds of meanings - but never the revelatory role ascribed to it in the passage above.

Vegetarianism as cleansing practice or as *kashrut* prescription also is not related to the ingestion of flowers, as in 4Ezra 9 and 12. And resuming the issue of the wine mixed with *nepenthe*, the author of 4Ezra is at pains to make it very clear that whatever the supposed experience he went through (or claims to have been through), *he retained the memory of it*. This can be understood as a negative conclusion regarding the use of hemp,

⁷⁵ Idem, p.76.

⁷⁶ Gignoux, "La signification du voyage extra-terrestre", p.65.

⁷⁷ Shaul Shaked. "Jewish and Iranian visions in the Talmudic period" in: Isaiah M. Gafni et al (eds.). *The Jews in the Hellenistic-Roman World: Studies in Memory of Menahem Stern*. Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History / The Historical Society of Israel, 1996 (in Hebrew). P.481; for the inscription itself cf. Prods O. Skjaervø. "Kirdir's vision: translation and analysis" in: *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 16, 1983. Pp.296-306.

⁷⁸ Earle Breech. "These fragments I have shored against my ruins: the form and function of 4 Ezra" in: *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92, 1973. P.272.

whose physiological effects, regardless of other opinions seen above, include partial loss of memory⁷⁹. The passage may be a clue to the idea that the experience described is real and involves actual ASC-inducing substances, whose nature the author tries to disclose. In some of the medieval cases quoted by Harner⁸⁰, the “witch” claimed to have gone to orgies while intoxicated with henbane ointment, but since there were sober witnesses around, they could ascertain to the “witch” that she did not go anywhere but in fact stayed all the time still and unconscious. The “witches” claimed to “remember” being away in the Sabbath and not staying in the actual place where they sat; this would be a very different use of memory. But bearing in mind that henbane - if it is the flower of chapters 4Ezra 9 and 12 and a mixer at 14 - is effectively hallucinogenic and not a mere memory eraser, the emphasis of the author to tell us about the persistence of memory could have a different meaning, showing that he regarded the visionary experience as so real that he could not forget it. In any case, in 4Ezra we have a very different experience and claim from that of Helen in Homer, which suggests that we are dealing with different mixtures (wine with hemp in Homer, wine with henbane in 4Ezra).

Taking seriously the hypothesis that there is no relation whatsoever between 4Ezra and Persian sources is rendered more difficult due to the fact that practices like the ones examined above seem out of place and rare in both Testaments - by comparison, much more common in the Persian texts. A derivation of the idea, namely that it could have been the practices described in 4Ezra that influenced Persian texts, looks even more remote and leaves us with the question of how such dim references to these preparatory practices would have made their way to the Zoroastrian world, and why the all-conquering Persians would be so interested in Jewish practices and not the other way round. In this sense, it is symptomatic that the pseudepigraphic author of the apocalypse that bears most resemblances to Persian practices should be someone so closely related to Persia as Ezra; and while every location has been suggested as birthplace of the text - including Rome itself -, due to the insistent reference to wisdom and its granting it could well be that 4Ezra was originally composed in the sapiential milieu of Palestine or Babylon⁸¹. This would be another way of focusing on the issue of the relations between Persian religion and Jewish apocalyptic in 4Ezra, but may in fact be the same - the appropriation of the pseudepigraphic authorship, the echoes of actual ecstatic practices and the writing in an

⁷⁹ Cf. above and the discussion on the mixed wine taken by Helen in the *Odyssey*.

⁸⁰ Harner, *op.cit.* pp.135-137

⁸¹ Hultgård, “Figures messianiques”, p.743.

environment familiar with Persian thinking making sense when taken together, although this is far from constituting definitive proof of Persian influence on 4Ezra.

The whole theme of the possible relationship between the practices described in 4Ezra and similar ones in Persian sources depends, of course, on the nature of actual contact between Jews and Persians (if we are not to assume structural similarities, which by their own nature are independent of direct borrowing, or mere coincidence). Such contacts are more than guesses, and in fact pose many different possibilities. Jews lived beyond the Euphrates at least since the big deportations of Assyrians and Babylonians, and after the Persian conquest came in direct contact with Iranian culture. Jewish communities also knew Persian neighbours in Asia Minor during the greatest extent of the Persian Empire and even before⁸²; in later times, the community that lived in Parthia was big enough to deserve the attention of leading characters in the Jewish Revolt such as Titus and Josephus. Before that, for a short time (40-37) Judaea was even occupied by the Parthians⁸³.

The idea that we may have here a reverse process, i.e. that the practices described in fact traveled from West to East (originally part of Jewish or Greek religion appropriated by Persians) I find rather improbable - we should have more instances of the practices described in 4Ezra to see them make way to another complex and old religious system as Zoroastrianism (although this is by no means obligatory). Also we have seen that, even if the texts which have come down to us are quite recent, the mythical complexes herein contained are not. All this tends to support the idea that the two mythical themes examined that find way in 4Ezra (namely, that of the cup and that of the flower, both of which bestow wisdom) were, both by their antiquity and their frequency, primarily Persian ecstatic practices that found themselves echoed in a Jewish apocalypse.

As last considerations, I would like to summarize the arguments for and against Persian influence on the theme of chemical induction in 4Ezra. Supporting the idea, it must be pointed out that:

⁸² This being another possible way of explaining the meeting and exchanging of ideas between Persians, Jews and Greeks early on. Cf. Eddy, op.cit. pp.13; 65 ff.

⁸³ For the issues above see, among others, Emil Schürer. *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C – A.D. 135)*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979. 3 volumes (Rev. by Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, Martin Goodman and Matthew Black). Vol.IIIa, p.5 ff. The diffusion of Jews throughout the Mediterranean world is well attested in many ancient sources, sufficing it to quote Philo (*In Flaccum* 7) and Acts 2:9-11, which specifically speak about Jews in Media.

1. The preparation procedures in 4Ezra are quite odd in the general picture of Second Temple Jewish literature;
2. The choice of Ezra as pseudepigraphed, a character well-acquainted with Persian things, may point to intentional absorbing of Persian lore;
3. The parallels occur, in Persian sources, both for the flower and the drink;
4. Evidence for chemical induction, as we have in 4Ezra, is just what was left over in the course of time in terms of survival of texts (i.e. in theory there could have been many more apocalypses with the same practices, but only 4Ezra came down to us). However, we cannot deal with “ifs” here and the same criteria should apply (even more so) to Persian texts - where the references are far more common. It makes sense to think that, if this practice were more common in Second Temple Jewish literature, we could perhaps have more examples of it.

Against the influence between them, we must bear in mind that:

1. The dating of the Persian texts poses a formidable barrier; even when there are parallels in earlier myths, to posit the existence of e.g. a pre-CE *Bahman Yasht* does nothing to prove conclusively that Persian texts anteceded 4Ezra;
2. There is no direct mentioning of the relation between those sets of texts, either in 4Ezra or in commentators (like the citing of Daniel, which makes it clear that 4Ezra must be later);
3. Strange as the idea of Jewish influence may initially seem (a very odd Jewish preparation practice finding its way to become quite popular in Persian circles), the episode of the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene (a Parthian buffer-state) shows that West-East adoption of Judaism, in part or whole, was a very real possibility in a period roughly corresponding to that of the redaction of 4Ezra.

Even with the limitations above stated, I tend to favour the idea of Persian influencing 4Ezra and not the other way round - the theme appears with much greater frequency in Persian texts than in Second Temple Jewish literature (remembering that in both cases we have but a sample of a larger output), the mentioning of the cup in the *Yasna* passages puts the myth of the enlightening drink way back from 4Ezra (and it is not present in the OT at all) and the name of the pseudepigraphic writer (even more if 4Ezra was

indeed written in Babylon) suggest the link with Persia being a clear one. The dating of most texts, however, forbids any definite conclusion.