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Halley's Comet and Judaeen Revolts Revisited

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THE RETURN OF HALLEY'S COMET in the fall of 1985 was celebrated by modern historians and astronomers with a series of studies that examined records of previous visitations of the comet in the premodern world. Foremost among these was the British Museum publication *Halley's Comet in History*, in which a team of scholars joined together to study visitations of Halley's Comet from 240 B.C. until its return in A.D. 1682, when it was identified by Edmund Halley, whose name it now bears.¹ In *Halley's Comet in History*, the cuneiformists published two Babylonian astronomical diary tablets for the second half of the year 148 of the Seleucid Era (= 164/163 B.C.) recording observations of Halley's Comet in the sky over Babylonia in the autumn of 164 B.C.² As a comet visible over Babylonia would have been

¹ H. Hunger, F. R. Stephenson, C. B. F. Walker, and K. K. C. Yau, *Halley's Comet in History* (London: British Museum Publications, 1985) 52-60. On comets in ancient Mesopotamia see R. Chadwick, "Identifying Comets and Meteors in Celestial Observation Literature," *Grazer morgenländische Studien* 3 (1993) 161-84.

² For Babylonian observations of Halley's Comet in 164 B.C. in these diaries and later goal-year texts see Hunger et al., *Halley's Comet in History*, 18-21; J. Koch, *Neue Untersuchungen zur Topographie des babylonischen Fixsternhimmels* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1989) 142-54; F. R. Stephenson, K. K. C. Yau, and H. Hunger, "Records of Halley's Comet on Babylonian Tablets," *Nature* 314 (1985) 587-92; Chadwick, "Identifying Comets and Meteors," 177. An observation of the return of Halley's Comet in 87 B.C. is also preserved in a Babylonian astronomical diary (see Hunger et al., *Halley's Comet in History*, 36-40, 52-53, and the references for 164 B.C. just cited). For an introduction to Babylonian astronomical diaries, see A. Sachs and H. Hunger,

visible over Judaea at the same time, this means that Halley's Comet shone in the sky over Jerusalem during the autumn of 164 B.C., when Judaea was in revolt against the Seleucid Empire and its king Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

I. Halley's Comet in 164 B.C. and Judaea

The present article is in response to two recent articles by A. Wolters in which he examines the impact of the return of Halley's Comet in 164 B.C. on the history of Judaea and the origins of the Hanukkah festival.³ In these articles, Wolters argues for 164 B.C. as the date of the culminating events of the Maccabean Revolt. He argues that the liberation of Jerusalem, the subsequent rededication of the temple, and the death of Antiochus IV Epiphanes all occurred during the autumn months of 164 B.C., when Halley's comet shone in the sky.⁴ He also suggests that the appearance of the comet in the skies over Judaea, at such a momentous moment in Judaeian history, was understood by contemporary Judaeans as a portent of their victory over the Seleucid Empire. Wolters then concludes that the "extraordinary coincidence" of the Judaeian victory and the appearance of the comet became part of the background of the Jewish Hanukkah Festival, the very festival that has celebrated the resanctification of the temple on the twenty-fifth of Kislev, from as early as the time of Josephus, as the "Feast of Lights."⁵

II. The Comet of 163 B.C.

New evidence which was not available to Wolters now demonstrates that a comet (not Halley's Comet, of course) was visible in the sky over the ancient Near East in 163 B.C., the year after the return of Halley's Comet in 164 B.C. This evidence, from the British Museum's exemplar, BM 33850, of a Babylonian astronomical diary for the year 149 of the Seleucid Era (= 163/162 B.C.), shows that this comet was visible over Babylon during the summer months

Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia 1: Diaries from 652-262 B.C. (Denkschriften, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse 195; Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1988) 11-36. Cf. M. Kamiński, "Halley's Comet in the Time of Hammurabi" and "Unknown Comet about 2008 B.C. Was Probably Halley's Comet," *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* 70 (1960) 304-13, 314-17.

³ A. Wolters, "Halley's Comet at a Turning Point in Jewish History," *CBQ* 55 (1993) 687-97; "Zōhar hārāqīā' (Daniel 12.3) and Halley's Comet," *JSOT* 61 (1994) 111-20. For this issue and further issues concerning the historiography of the Maccabean revolt arising from historical notices in Babylonian astronomical diaries for 169-163 B.C. see D. Gera and W. Horowitz, "Antiochus IV in Life and Death: The Babylonian Astronomical Diaries," *JAOS* (in press). The author would like to thank Dr. David Satran of The Hebrew University for his help in the preparation of this article.

⁴ On the alternate dates of autumn 165 B.C. and autumn 164 B.C. for these events, see Wolters, "Halley's Comet at a Turning Point," 692-94; Gera and Horowitz, "Antiochus IV in Life and Death" (forthcoming), n. 28.

⁵ See Wolters, "Halley's Comet at a Turning Point," 696, for Josephus *Ant.* 12.7.7 §325.

of Av and Elul (and probably also the month of Tishre) of 163 B.C.⁶ This comet, like Halley's Comet in 164 B.C., would have been visible over Judaea as well. Thus, the Judaeen victory over the Seleucids was marked not only by the appearance of Halley's Comet in 164 B.C. but also by the appearance of a second comet the very next year.

This extraordinary set of circumstances strengthens Wolters's argument that the appearance of the comet(s) became part of the background of the Jewish Hanukkah Festival, a festival which celebrated Judaeen freedom. Thus, although a date in the autumn of 164 B.C. for the Judaeen victory over the Seleucids, accepted by Wolters, remains in dispute, and neither the Books of Maccabees nor the writings of Josephus offer firm proof that the appearance of Halley's Comet or of the comet of 163 B.C. was even noticed by the victorious Judaeans, it is likely that at least some Judaeans saw the appearance of the Halley's Comet not only as a portent of the current victory (if one assumes 164 B.C. as the year of the liberation of Jerusalem), or as a sign of the victories of the previous year (if one assumes 165 B.C. as the year of the liberation of Jerusalem), but also as a portent of further victories to come, a portent that would have been strengthened by the appearance of the second comet in 163 B.C.

III. Halley's Comet in A.D. 66 and Judaeen Revolts

In A.D. 66 Halley's Comet returned for the third time since the Maccabean revolt,⁷ shining over Jerusalem in the winter and early spring of that year, just months before the outbreak of the Jewish war of A.D. 66–73 against Rome. If Wolters is correct in his supposition that at least some Judaeans saw the appearance of the comet, or comets, as a sign from God at the time of the Maccabean revolt, then the reappearance of a comet in A.D. 66 may also have been interpreted as a sign from God. In fact, the return of Halley's Comet in A.D. 66 is apparently noted by Josephus as one of the portents leading up to the revolt against Rome: "And so it was that a star resembling

⁶ The two passages referring to comets in this diary are excerpted in Chadwick, "Identifying Comets and Meteors," 178 (text 4): "[. . .] the 25th (of Av), the first part of the night a comet became visible [. . .] 2/3(?) cubit above α Coronae, its tail to the south . . . ; [. . .] comet [x] cubits above α Coronae, its tail. . . ." An edition of BM 33850 will be published in the third volume of A. Sachs and H. Hunger, *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia* (forthcoming). For further observations of comets in Babylonian astronomical diaries for the years 157, 138, 120, and 110 B.C., see Chadwick, "Identifying Comets and Meteors," 178–79.

⁷ No Babylonian observations of either of the two returns of Halley's Comet in 12 B.C. and A.D. 66 have been recovered, although the latest surviving Babylonian astronomical diaries can be dated ca. 40 B.C. (see Hunger et al., *Halley's Comet in History*, 53), and astronomers, at Babylon at least, produced cuneiform astronomical texts as late as A.D. 74/75 (see A. Sachs, "The Latest Datable Cuneiform Texts," *Cuneiform Studies in Honor of Samuel Noah Kramer* [AOAT 25; ed. B. L. Eichler, J. W. Heimerdinger, and A. W. Sjöberg; Kevelaer: Butzon & Becker, 1976] 379–98).

a sword stood over the city; a comet persisted for a long time" (Josephus *J.W.* 6.5.3 §289).⁸ Here, the description of "a star resembling a sword" standing over Jerusalem in A.D. 66 is strikingly similar to the appearance of Halley's Comet in a photograph of the comet over Arizona in 1910.⁹

Although Judaeans of the first century A.D. could not have known that the "star" that they saw was the same one that their fathers had seen a quarter of a millennium before, one might wonder if the advocates of the Judaeen revolt against Rome in A.D. 66 knew of a tradition that a comet, or comets, appeared at the time of the Judaeen victory over Antiochus IV generations earlier. If so, it is possible that the Judaeen revolutionaries of A.D. 66 understood the appearance of a comet in their own generation to be both a reminder of the victories of their fathers and a sign of victories to come in their own generation's struggle against Rome.¹⁰

⁸ On the return of Halley's Comet in A.D. 66 in the writings of Josephus, see Hunger et al., *Halley's Comet in History*, 53, where the authors already speculate that Josephus alludes to Halley's Comet.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 63, for the published photograph. See Wolters, "Halley's Comet at a Turning Point," 690-91, for a possible poetic reference to the comet and a sword in *Sib. Or.* 3.334-36.

¹⁰ Compare F. Rochberg-Halton, "Fate and Divination in Mesopotamia," *Vorträge gehalten auf der 28. Rencontre assyriologique internationale in Wien, 6-10 Juli 1981* (AfO Beiheft 19; Horn, Austria: F. Berger, 1982) 366: "Assuming that omen apodoses provided the material for real predictions, the principle by which the omen text was interpreted could be stated as follows: if x occurred in the past and y was its consequence (or correlation), then each time x occurs, y can be expected."

This theory, when applied to the appearance of comets over Judaea in both 164 B.C. and A.D. 66, would yield the following result: a comet appeared in 164 B.C., and Judaea succeeded in her revolution against Antiochus IV Epiphanes; thus, the appearance of a comet in A.D. 66, indicates that Judaea will again succeed in a revolution against her enemies, Rome this time. Such a theory of ominology apparently lies behind the preservation of "historical omens" in ancient Mesopotamia, that is, omens whose apodoses refer to historical events in the past that are associated with the protases, rather than to future events predicted by the protases (see A. Goetze, "Historical Allusions in Old Babylonian Omen Texts," *JCS* 1 [1947] 253-65; I. Starr, "The Place of Historical Omens in the System of Apodoses," *BiOr* 43 [1986] 628-42). This theory may even explain the very practice of recording historical notices in Babylonian astronomical diaries (see Gera and Horowitz, "Antiochus IV in Life and Death" [forthcoming]; W. Horowitz, "An Astronomical Fragment from Columbia University and the Babylonian Revolts against Xerxes," *JANES* 23 (1994) 63-64).

On the survival of Babylonian astronomical and astrological traditions among Judaeans of the Roman period, see, for example, J. Greenfield and M. Sokoloff, "Astrological and Related Omen Texts in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic," *JNES* 48 (1989) 201-14; O. Neugebauer, "The 'Astronomical' Chapters of the Ethiopic Book of Enoch (72 to 82)," an appendix in M. Black, *The Book of Enoch or I Enoch: A New English Edition with Commentary and Textual Notes* (SVTP 7; Leiden: Brill, 1985) 386-414; and this author's forthcoming article "The 360 and 364 Day Year in Ancient Mesopotamia," *JANES* (in press). One might also ponder the astronomical or astrological significance of the name Bar-Kochba, "Son of the Star," in this context.