Halley's Comet and Judaean 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. 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. As a comet visible over Babylonia would have been


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,
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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 Judaean 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 Judaean 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...
of Av and Elul (and probably also the month of Tishre) of 163 b.c. This comet, like Halley's Comet in 164 b.c., would have been visible over Judaea as well. Thus, the Judaean 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 Judaean freedom. Thus, although a date in the autumn of 164 b.c. for the Judaean 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 Judeans, it is likely that at least some Judeans 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 Judaean Revolts

In a.d. 66 Halley's Comet returned for the third time since the Maccabean revolt, 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 Judeans 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..."
a sword stood over the city; a comet persisted for a long time" (Josephus J.W. 6.5.3 §289). 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.

Although Judeans 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 Judaean revolt against Rome in A.D. 66 knew of a tradition that a comet, or comets, appeared at the time of the Judaean victory over Antiochus IV generations earlier. If so, it is possible that the Judaean 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.

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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 (AIÖ 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 omenology 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.