Syriac Apocalypticism and the Rise of Islam

Stephen J. Shoemaker

In 1975, at an Oxford colloquium on first-century Islam, Sebastian Brock delivered a brief communication that gestured toward the importance of non-Islamic sources for understanding the beginnings of Islam with a paper entitled "Syriac Views of Emergent Islam."[1] Henceforth, the study of Islamic origins would be changed. In effect, Brock's paper issued a challenge to this discipline to expand its data pool to include the witness of Christian sources contemporary with the events of earliest Islam. No longer could scholars of early Islam remain innocently ignorant of their invaluable testimony, content to reconstruct the rise of Islam on the basis of the Islamic sources alone. This challenge could, of course, simply be ignored, as it so often has been. Yet for those scholars who would embrace it and expand on it to include other non-Syriac and non-Christian sources, the resulting turn to integrate earliest Islam with its late antique milieu would prove transformative.[2] Much of my own research owes an enormous debt to this path-breaking contribution by Malphono Brock, and it is with this in very much in mind that I turn to consider some of the evidence that Syriac apocalyptic writings from the early seventh have to offer for understanding the beginnings of Islam.

The Impending End of the World

From the early sixth century onward, the religious cultures of the late ancient Near East bear steady witness to mounting expectations that the world would soon end. Many Christians, Jews, and even Zoroastrians of this era believed that they were living at the dawn of the eschaton, which would soon come upon the world, bringing history to an end or at least to a decisive turning point. These eschatological hopes, moreover, were in each case intertwined with the idea of a divinely chosen empire whose destiny would be to conquer the world before finally handing over power to God. Not surprisingly, in these

1 Eventually published as S.P. Brock, "Syriac Views of Emergent Islam," in *Studies on the First Century of Islam*, ed. G.H.A. Juynboll (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 9–21, 199–203.

2 Most notably in P. Crone and M.A. Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) and its legacy.

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Jewish and Christian eschatological scripts, Jerusalem is center stage, and its conquest is pivotal in the final events before the eschaton. There, in many accounts, the chosen emperor will ultimately hand over worldly power to God. These potent expectations of an imminent eschatological empire that would subdue the world and hand over authority to God are essential for understanding the rise of Muhammad's new religious movement, the Believers, which was simultaneously imperial in its ambitions and, so it would seem, fueled by a conviction that the world would soon end in the final judgment of the Hour. Not surprisingly, some of the best evidence for this apocalyptic backdrop to the rise of Islam emerges from certain Syriac writings, one of which even appears to have directly influenced the Qur'ān and, one assumes, the beliefs of Muhammad's earliest followers.[3]

In the Christian world, the sixth century opened to widespread expectations that the world was nearing an end, since the year 500, according to contemporary calculations, marked the beginning of the seventh millennium since the creation of the world. The end of course did not arrive, but its delay did little to deflate eschatological anticipations, which remained strong, it would seem, throughout the sixth century. Numerous sources of various genres and from various places indicate that Christians of the sixth century were expecting to witness the End very soon. These eschatological expectations reached their peak in the early seventh century, just at the moment that Muhammad's new religious movement was coming into its own. The tumult of the last Roman-Persian war stoked eschatological hopes across the Near East, and for the Christians, Heraclius' crushing defeat of the Persians and his restoration of the True Cross to Jerusalem intensified convictions that the end of the world was at hand. Indeed, Heraclius's victory and his actions thereafter convinced many that the end of time had truly come upon them. As Cyril Mango notes, his journey to Jerusalem to restore the True Cross to Golgotha should be understood as "a deliberately apocalyptic act."[4]

The Jews and Zoroastrians of Late Antiquity, for their part, shared in the eschatological enthusiasm of the age. Messianic expectations rose sharply among the Jews of Palestine during the early seventh century, largely in reaction

3 For more detailed discussions of this topic, see S.J. Shoemaker, "The Reign of God Has Come: Eschatology and Empire in Late Antiquity and Early Islam," *Arabica: Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 61 (2014): 514–558, and S.J. Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

4 For more on the Christian apocalypticism and imminent eschatological expectations of this era, see Shoemaker, *Apocalypse of Empire*, chapter 3, where the broad secondary literature on this topic is also noted.

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to Persia's "liberation" of Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the Romans and perhaps even a temporary revival of Jewish autonomy. As with the Christians of Byzantium, imminent eschatological expectations were both prominent and powerful within contemporary Judaism. The Jewish apocalypticism of this period, and of Late Antiquity in general, also envisions worldly empires as having a positive role to play in the events of the end times. In this respect, late ancient Judaism, at least in the Roman Empire, appears to have been influenced by the apocalyptic views of its Christian overlords. Nevertheless, at the same time this Jewish apocalypticism often subverts the Roman triumphalism of the Christian narratives, imagining instead that Rome's power and prosperity, although divinely ordained, were only temporary. Rome enjoyed divine favor only so that it could yield its power to the Messiah at the end of time and allow the final restoration of the kingdom of Israel. Other apocalyptic narratives hope for Israel's liberation through the providential triumph of another empire over the Romans, in some cases, the Iranian Empire, in others the Ishmaelites. Yet in nearly every instance, the *eschaton* is expected to arrive soon through the triumph of some empire or another.[5]

Eschatological expectations were also at a peak in the Sasanian Empire during the late sixth and early seventh centuries: according to the Zoroastrian calendar, the millennium of Zoroaster would come to an apocalyptic end at the middle of the seventh century. Moreover, Zoroastrian eschatology was also thoroughly imperial in nature. Iran's rulers had been chosen to play a special role in the cosmic battle between good and evil, between Ohrmazd and Ahriman. All faithful Zoroastrians were expected to participate in this struggle by resisting evil and doing good. This obligation extended no less so to the ruling authorities, who were uniquely positioned to effect good in the world, and from Zoroastrianism's mythic foundation, Iran's kings were believed to play a significant part in overcoming evil. As a Zoroastrian polity, the Sasanian Empire was a powerful agent of Ohrmazd in the world and was thus one of the most potent vehicles for mobilizing humankind in the struggle against Ahriman and his minions. As in the Roman version of imperial eschatology, Sasanian Zoroastrianism believed that the Iranian Empire would ultimately emerge triumphant and hold universal sovereignty in the world just prior to the end of the millennium. At this point, much like the Christian Last Emperor legend, a mythic king would appear to lead the Iranian Empire in its final triumph over the forces of evil, at least for this millennium. The most

5 Regarding the Jewish apocalypticism and imminent eschatological expectations of this era, see Shoemaker, *Apocalypse of Empire*, chapter 4, where the secondary scholarship on this topic is also noted.

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important of these Zoroastrian messiahs is a figure known as Kay Bahrām, and undoubtedly it is no coincidence that at the end of the sixth century a usurper named Bahrām VI Čōbīn briefly came to power by harnessing the claim that he was in fact the long awaited apocalyptic ruler. The end of the millennium, after all, was known to be coming in the very near future. Thus, we find in Zoroastrianism an actual mobilization of imperial eschatology not long before Muhammad began to organize his new religious polity. Islam, then, it would seem, emerged into a world that was permeated by eschatological anticipation and furthermore expected the end of the age to arrive through the triumph of a divinely chosen empire.[6]

Syriac Sources of Apocalyptic

Some of the most significant evidence of imminent eschatological expectation on the eve of Islam, at the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh century, derives, as we have noted already, from Syriac sources. The lives of two Syriac martyrs, for instance, St. Mihr-Mah-Gushnasp and St Golinduch, bear witness to the strength of such convictions, although, one should note, the latter's martyrdom is now lost in Syriac but is best preserved in Georgian. In both of these narratives, turmoil of the late sixth and early seventh centuries is adduced as evidence that the world is hastening toward its end. St Golinduch even offers a prophecy reflecting the imperial eschatology that was characteristic of Late Antiquity. Toward the end of her life, we are told, Golinduch met the Persian emperor Khosrau II, who like her had taken refuge in Roman territory. She warns the exiled king as follows: "'The king of the Greeks will establish you in your land, but the kingdom of the Persians will remain yours.' Then she also spoke about the Antichrist, for his arrival has drawn near, and he is standing at the very doors (cf. Matt. 24.33), and also about the kingdom of the Greeks, what will befall it, which she kept silent and did not tell anyone."[7]

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6 This topic also can be explored in more detail, along with references to the secondary scholarship, in Shoemaker, *Apocalypse of Empire*, where the broad secondary literature on this topic is also noted.

7 *The Life of Mihr-Mah-Gushnasp/George*, in P. Bedjan, ed., *Histoire de Mar-Jabalaha : de trois autres Patriarches, d'un prêtre et de deux laïques, Nestoriens* ((Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1895), 475–477); *Passion of St. Golinduch* 17 (K. Kekeliże, ეტიუდები ძველი ქართული ლიტერატურის ისტორიიდან (*Etiudebi żveli k'art'uli literaturis istoriidan* [*Studies in the History of Old Georgian Literature*]), 13 vols. (Tiblisi: Sak'art'velos SSR mec'nierebat'a akademiis gamomc'emloba, 1945–), vol. 3: 226. Regarding the antiquity of the Georgian version in relation to the Greek, see G. Garitte, "La Passion géorgienne de sainte Golindouch," *Analecta Bollandiana* (1956): 405–440 (407–25). I have prepared an English translation of the

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Nevertheless, another Syriac source from the beginning of the seventh century offers particularly compelling testimony to belief that the world would soon end through imperial triumph, namely, the *Syriac Alexander Legend*.[8] This text is all the more important, one should note, on account of its direct literary link with the Qurʾān, as Kevin van Bladel and Tomasso Tesei have both convincingly demonstrated.[9] According to Gerrit Reinink, the *Syriac Alexander Legend* was composed after 628, most likely around 630, but before the Islamic conquest of Mesopotamia in 636, which the text does not seem to know.[10] For reasons that I have explained elsewhere, I am convinced that most of this *Legend* derives from an earlier source that was composed shortly after the year 515 CE and was redacted sometime shortly after 628. Nevertheless, I will not go into the arguments for this here, particularly since the circulation of ideas of imminent imperial eschatology among the Christians of the Near East during the formative years of Muhammad's new religious movement holds paramount significance for the present purpose.[11] And the Qurʾān's direct dependence on this text, the only such specific text that we have yet been able to identify, offers invaluable evidence of direct contact between earliest Islam and the late ancient tradition of imperial apocalypticism.

Georgian version, which will be published with translations of the hagiographical writings of Eustratius Presbyter by A. Cameron and Ph. Booth. The volume will appear in the *Translated Texts for Historians* published by the University of Liverpool Press.

8 Published with English translation in E.A.W. Budge, *The History of Alexander the Great, Being the Syriac Version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: The University Press, 1889).

9 K. van Bladel, "The Alexander Legend in the Qurʾān 18.83–102," in *The Qurʾān in its Historical Context*, ed. G.S. Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2007), 175–203; T. Tesei, "The Prophecy of Ḏū-l-Qarnayn (Q 18:83–102) and the Origins of the Qurʾānic Corpus," *Miscellanea Arabica* (2013–14): 273–290.

10 See, e.g., G.J. Reinink, "Alexander the Great in Seventh-Century Syriac 'Apocalyptic' Texts," *Byzantinorossica* 2 (2003): 150–178 (151–165); G.J. Reinink, "Die Entstehung der syrischen Alexanderlegende als politisch-religiöse Propagandaschrift für Heraklios' Kirchenpolitik," in *After Chalcedon: Studies in Theology and Church History Offered to Professor Albert van Roey for his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. C. Laga, J.A. Munitiz and L. van Rompay, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 18 (Leuven: Deptartement Oriëtalistik/Peeters, 1985), 263–281 (279–280).

11 Interested readers can find the relevant arguments in Shoemaker, *Apocalypse of Empire*, chapter 3. See also, however, the earlier arguments by W. Bousset, "Beiträge zur Geschichte der Eschatologie I," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 20 (1899): 103–131 (114–115), and K. Czeglédy, "The Syriac Legend concerning Alexander the Great," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 7 (1957): 231–249.

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The Syriac Alexander Legend

In its vision of the quickly approaching end times, the *Syriac Alexander Legend* both echoes earlier traditions from the *Tiburtine Sybil*, a fourth-century apocalyptic text, and foreshadows the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius* from later in the seventh.[12] In the *Legend*, Alexander, who here as in other related texts prefigures the Roman emperor, promises that if the Messiah does not come in his days, he will "carry this throne, which is a seat of silver upon which I sit, and will place it in Jerusalem, that, when the Messiah comes from heaven, He may sit upon my kingly throne." Likewise, Alexander decrees that when he dies, his "royal crown shall be taken and hung upon the seat which I have given to the Messiah," as is to be done with the crowns of all the kings that will follow him.[13] The links between imperial authority, royal headgear, Jerusalem, and the coming Kingdom of God found in the *Tiburtine Sybil* and *Ps.-Methodius* are all present here as well. In addition, the *Legend* shares with these texts an interest in the prophecy of Gog and Magog, whom it identifies with the Huns, predicting that they will break forth from the north through the Caspian Gates and ravage the land just before the appearance of a final king and the end of time.[14] Then, the *Legend* maintains, "so shall the power of the kingdoms melt away before the might of the kingdom of the Greeks which is that of the Romans…; and what remains of them the kingdom of the Romans will destroy…; and there shall not be found any among the nations and tongues who dwell in the world that shall stand before the kingdom of the Romans."[15]

The *Legend* concludes on this same note with a prophecy given by the court astrologers of Tubarlak, Alexander's Persian opponent. The astrologers warn their king "that at the final consummation of the world, the kingdom of the Romans would go forth and subdue all the kings of the earth; and that whatever king was found in Persia would be slain, and that Babylonia and Assyria would be laid waste by the command of God." Tubarlak writes the prophecy down and gives it to Alexander, with a prediction "that Persia should be laid

12 Regarding the relation of these texts, see, in addition to Shoemaker, *Apocalypse of Empire*, chapter 3; S.J. Shoemaker, "The *Tiburtine Sibyl*, the Last Emperor, and the Early Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition," in *Forbidden Texts on the Western Frontier: The Christian Apocrypha in North American Perspectives*, ed. T. Burke (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 218–244; S.J. Shoemaker, "The *Tiburtine Sibyl*: A New Translation and Introduction," in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, ed. T. Burke and B. Landau, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 506–521.

13 Budge, *History of Alexander*, 257–258 (Syr) and 146–147 (trans.).

14 Budge, *History of Alexander*, 268–269 (Syr) and 154 (trans.).

15 Budge, *History of Alexander*, 270 (Syr) and 155 (trans.).

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waste by the hand of the Romans, and that all the kingdoms be laid waste, but that that [kingdom of the Romans] should stand and rule to the end of time, and should deliver the kingdom of the earth to Christ who is to come."[16] The name "Tubarlak" appears to be unique to this text, and according to Reinink, this prophecy was composed specifically with reference to Heraclius and his recent victory over Persia, with Tubarlak standing in for Khosrau II. This certainly is a possibility, but I am not convinced that it is the only one, and other scholars, particularly those who would date the text to the sixth century, have not reached the same conclusion as Reinink. It certainly may be that this prophecy was specifically added to the *Legend* in the light of Heraclius's recent victory. But it could just as well have been part of the sixth-century version, inasmuch as it comports with other elements of the text's imperial eschatology and with the historical Alexander's victory over the Persians. In this latter case, one imagines that the prophecy would have taken on new meaning in the context of Heraclius's triumph, when the earlier text was revised. Indeed, perhaps this prophecy was not so much inspired by the last Roman-Persian war, but instead the war itself inspired newfound interest in this text following Rome's triumph.

In these ways, then, the *Syriac Alexander Legend* retrojects the eschatological role of the Roman Empire, its emperor, and its victories back into the life of Alexander, the original king of the Greeks (and Romans). Alexander's kingdom, as a symbol of Rome, will bridge the present world with its eschatological future, delivering the kingdom of the world up to Christ.[17] The *Legend*'s revision and circulation at the beginning of the seventh century provides evidence of the dramatic increase in eschatological urgency and imperial eschatology in the wake of Heraclius's victory over the Persians and the restoration of the Cross. Numerous contemporary Greek sources also confirm this sharp rise in imperial eschatological expectations in conjunction with these events.[18] Moreover, one finds similar ideas in another roughly contemporary apocalypse, the Latin Ps.-Ephrem *On the End of the World*. In this text the conflict between Rome and Persia is once again painted in eschatological colors, and the end of the world is identified with the completion of the Roman Empire,

16 Budge, *History of Alexander*, 275 (Syr) and 158 (Eng, slightly modified). See also Reinink, "Die Entstehung," esp. 268–279; G.J. Reinink, "Heraclius, the New Alexander: Apocalyptic Prophecies during the Reign of Heraclius," in *The Reign of Heraclius (610–641): Crisis and Confrontation*, ed. G.J. Reinink and B.H. Stolte (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 81–94 (84–86); Reinink, "Alexander the Great," 158–161.

17 See A.M. Sivertsev, *Judaism and Imperial Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 35.

18 Again, see on this subject Shoemaker, *Apocalypse of Empire*, chapter 3.

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so that the consummation of the world will come "when the kingdom of the Romans begins to be fulfilled by the sword."[19] Even in the kingdom of Axum, it would seem, on the eve of Islam there is evidence of belief in imperial eschatology, in the so-called *Vision of Baruch* or 5 Baruch. This apocalyptic vision of the end times, which Pierluigi Piovanelli has convincingly dated to the early seventh century, concludes with the emergence of a righteous emperor, whose reign intersects with the rule of the Antichrist. Once God has removed the Antichrist, after he has ruled for seven years, this righteous emperor then "will say to the Cross: 'Take away all this,' and the Cross will take it and ascend to Heaven."[20] Then after a period of rule by the demonic powers, Michael will finally sound the horn, and the dead will be resurrected to meet their reward or punishment.

Such texts, and most significantly the *Syriac Alexander Legend*, reveal that at the very moment when Muhammad's religious movement was coming into its own, there was simultaneously a dramatic surge of belief that the Kingdom of God would soon be established on the earth and would be ushered in through imperial triumph, in this case the victory of the Roman Empire. On its own this development in the religious culture of Late Antiquity would surely be significant. Yet the fact that we can demonstrate the direct influence of the *Syriac Alexander Legend* on the traditions of the Qurʾān leaves little doubt that Muhammad's new religious movement was aware of and in contact with the imperial eschatology of Christian Late Antiquity. The patterns of agreement between the *Legend* and Qurʾān 18:83–102 make any explanation other than direct influence highly improbable.[21] Accordingly, the *Legend* provides, as it were, a very important "smoking gun," indicating a direct connection between late ancient imperial eschatology and formative Islam.

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19 Ps.-Ephrem, *On the End of the World*, in D. Verhelst, "Scarpsum de dictis sancti Efrem prope fine mundi," in *Pascua Mediaevalia: studies voor Prof. Dr. J.M. de Smet*, ed. J.M. de Smet, et al., Mediaevalia Lovaniensia, sereries 1, studia 10 (Leuven: Universitaire pers Leuven, 1983), 518–528 (523). Concerning the date, see esp. P.J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 142–147; and B. McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages*, Records of Civilization, Sources and Studies 96 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 60.

20 J. Halévy, *Tĕʾĕzâza sanbat* (*Commandements du sabbat*)*, accompagné de six autres écrits pseudo-épigraphiques admis par les Falachas ou Juifs d'Abyssinie*, Bibliothèque de l'École des hautes études Sciences historiques et philologiques 137 (Paris: É. Bouillon, 1902), 95–96; trans., in W. Leslau, *Falasha Anthology*, Yale Judaica Series 6 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), 75–76. Regarding the date, Piovanelli persuasively argued this in a paper entitled "The Visions of Baruch and Gorgorios: Two 'Moral' Apocalypses in Late Antique Ethiopia," at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature in Chicago (19 Nov 2012). The foundation of the argument is the text's failure to make any mention of the Islamic conquests or any other event beyond the end of the sixth century.

21 Van Bladel, "Alexander Legend"; Tesei, "Prophecy."

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Ps-Ephrem on the End Times

Immediately on the other side of the Islamic conquests, one finds evidence of sustained belief in an imminent imperial eschatology, in the Syriac *Homily on the End Times* falsely ascribed to Ephrem. This apocalypse, whose true author is unknown, seems to have been written not long after Muhammad's followers swept in and swiftly seized control of much of the Roman and Sasanian Near East, probably sometime around 640 or not long thereafter. Indeed, for the better part of a century, there was a solid consensus that this document, at least, as we have it now, was composed sometime after the beginning of the Muslim conquests, but not very long thereafter. Nevertheless, Reinink has recently proposed a much later dating for this text proposing its composition after 640 but before 683, since the text does not seem to be aware of the Second Civil War (*fitna*) among Muhammad's followers, which began in that year.[22] Even more recently, Robert Hoyland notes that while there has long been some consensus around 640 for dating this apocalypse, perhaps its references to the payment of tribute and building roads could invite a later dating, possibly during the reign of ʿAbd al-Malik, who is known to have introduced new fiscal practices and seen to the building of roads.[23] Indeed, Edmund Beck, the text's most recent editor had already suggested that the text should be placed in the second half of the seventh century, since it refers to the existence of the *jizya*, the Islamic poll tax on non-Muslim subjects.[24] Harald Suermann likewise has more recently proposed a date for this section of the apocalypse that mirrors Reinink's suggestion, pointing in this instance to the construction of roads as likely indication of a more recent composition sometime between 640 and 680.[25]

Despite these recent waverings, the most likely date of this apocalypse in fact remains sometime during the early stages of the invasions by Muhammad's followers, and sometime around 640 still seems like a good approximation. As Michael Kmosko and other earlier scholars as well have noted, its chaotic

22 G.J. Reinink, "Pseudo-Ephraems 'Rede über das Ende' und die syrische eschatologische Literatur des siebten Jahrhunderts," *Aram* 5 (1993): 437–463 (455–462).

23 R.G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 13 (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1997), 263.

24 E. Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones III*, CSCO 320–321, Scr. Syri 138–139 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1972), 2:ix.

25 D. Thomas and B. Roggema, eds., *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History, Volume 1 (600–900)*, History of Christian-Muslim Relations 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 160–161. Michael Penn too, presumably for similar reasons, favors a dating to generally sometime before 680: M.Ph. Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 39.

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account of their incursions suggests a time not long after the collapse of the Roman army and before the consolidation of authority and establishment of governance by the Believers.[26] In fact, only at the very end of this apocalyptic account are the invaders said to actually take control of the region's cities: prior to this they are raging through the land, conquering and plundering. The supposed reference to building of roads is clearly a misinterpretation of the Syriac, in my judgment. Although the words in question could legitimately be interpreted as reference to road building, this is not their only possible or even most obvious meaning, and in fact, their immediate context strongly suggests otherwise.

The verb that others have here rendered as "build," from the root DRŠ, is more properly translated here as "tread, open up." Moreover, the word that is interpreted as referring to actual roads, *urḥātā* is used not only for roads, but also with the meaning of "way" or "course," while the word for "paths," *šbile*, which also can mean simply "way," does not seem to designate actual roads. Indeed, such language does not seem to me indicative of actual road construction but something more akin to "make their way" in English. Accordingly, the passage in question should be interpreted as stating that "they [the descendants of Hagar] will make their way through the mountains and blaze paths across the plains," as translated also by Edmund Beck, for instance ("Sie werden Wege in den Bergen bahnen …").[27] Such an interpretation is further indicated by the opening of section four, which subsequently says that "the marauders will spread across the land, over plains and mountaintops." Surely this is a parallel expression. Moreover, the fact that in this account the invaders have yet to seize control of the cities makes it rather unlikely that road construction is here in view. Instead, this line of the homily is presumably meant to indicate the haste and frenzy with which the marauders ran throughout the land. As for the imposition of tribute, while it is not entirely impossible that this could refer to the *jizya* poll tax, it is far more likely that the homily's reference to tributes instead indicates payments on the part of cities and local authorities in acknowledgment of their submission to the invaders and in exchange for peace. Payment of such tribute by the defeated parties to the Believers was in fact quite common during the early stages of their conquest of the Near East

26 Published posthumously in K. Czeglédy, "Monographs on Syriac and Muhammadan Sources in the Literary Remains of M. Kmosko," *Acta Orientalia* 4 (1954): 19–91 (34–35). See also, e.g., T. Nöldeke, Review of Thomas Joseph Lamy, *Sancti Ephraem Syri hymni et sermones*, vol. III, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 4 (1890): 245–251 (246); and E. Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte und Forschungen: Pseudomethodius, Adso und die tiburtinische Sibylle* (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1898), 34.

27 Beck, ed., *Sermones III*, 2:84.

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and is well in evidence.[28] And, for what it is worth, not only are the events of the Second Civil War absent, as Reinink notes, but so too are those of the First Civil War, which began in 656. Thus, a date of around 640 remains the most likely date of composition for this piece, despite these recent vacillations.

This apocalypse opens by describing the general conditions that portend the coming end of the world. Nation will war against nation as wickedness proliferates throughout the world. Plague and famine will encompass the earth. Lawlessness will reign supreme, and the righteous will be beset by the wicked. The recent occurrence of such events offers clear signs that "the end times have arrived," as the author explains at the beginning of section two. Our visionary then "predicts" a coming war between the Romans and the Persians. After Rome's victory in this conflict, the descendants of Hagar, the Ishmaelites, will drive the Romans from the Holy Land. In this way, the apocalypse interprets the recent conquests by Rome and the Ishmaelites as a single, connected apocalyptic harbinger of an imperial eschaton. Following these linked events, however, the author genuinely begins to predict the future, warning that the peoples of Gog and Magog will be then unleashed, coming to a conclusion with the Roman Empire resurgent and "possessing the earth and its boundaries." With "no one existing who opposes it," that is, the Roman Empire, the Antichrist will appear, setting in motion the final events of the *eschaton* and the Antichrist's arrival.[29] Thus, the imperial eschatology of the pre-Islamic period is extended across these conquests and is sustained under the new hegemony of Muhammad's followers. Accordingly, this apocalyptic homily attributed to Ephrem establishes an important continuity between the eschatological expectations surrounding the Roman reconquest of the Near East and the conquests by Muhammad's followers, as well as the other Syriac apocalypses forecasting eschatological deliverance through Roman triumph, such as, for instance, the much more widely circulated and studied *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius*.

28 See, e.g., the specific examples of exactly such payment of tribute by the defeated parties to the Believers in R.G. Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 44, 47, 54–55, 74, 79, 83, 90, 96–97, etc.

29 Ps.-Ephrem, *Homily on the End* 8, ed., H. Suermann, *Die geschichtstheologische Reaktion auf die einfallenden Muslime in der edessenischen Apokalyptik des 7. Jahrhunderts*, Europäische Hochschulschriften Reihe XXIII, Theologie 256 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1985), 25.

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