Chapter 21

False Prophet, False Messiah and the Religious Scene in Seventh-Century Jerusalem

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The early Christian figure of Antichrist, like that of Christ, owes much to concepts current among Jews from before the time of Pompey. William Horbury has followed the early traces of the myth of a messianic opponent, which would remain active throughout the Roman period.[1] While the birth of Christianity might well have been the most potent historical consequence of Jewish Messianism, it was certainly not the last. Sometimes dormant, Jewish and Christian eschatological expectations never died out: Jewish messianic movements and Christian intense expectations of the *parousia*, or Second Coming of Christ, have punctuated the history of the two religions. In some cases, a combination of these two phenomena has had an explosive effect and some dramatic consequences. Such a combination occurred in seventh-century Palestine, and bears directly upon the earliest stages of Islam.

The purpose of the following pages is to highlight some aspects of Jewish and Christian late antique eschatological conceptions, in particular the figures of the false prophet and of the false Messiah. More precisely, I shall try to focus on conflicting beliefs and expectations regarding the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

As in our own days, there existed in the seventh century a direct link between Messianism and geo-politics. From the two empires which clashed in the early years of the seventh century, one would disappear before its end, to be replaced by a new one. The Byzantines were able to understand the Islamic invaders only as the bearers of a yet unknown kind of Christian heresy – as is clear from John of Damascus, writing in the first half of the eighth century.[2] The fundamental difficulty for Christian intellectuals to understand Islam on its own terms points to the fact that what we call today the 'clash of civilizations' was also a conflict of interpretations within the monotheistic traditions. This conflict, however, was not simply one between Christians and Muslims; it also involved the Jews, who sat on both sides of the political, cultural and linguistic divide. While we still ignore much of the state of affairs in Arabia, the importance of the presence

1 See Horbury 1998d. For an excellent collection of the early Christian texts on Antichrist, with translation and notes, see Potestà and Rizzi 2005. I should like to thank James Carleton Paget for his useful remarks on the draft of this text.

2 See Sahas 1972; see also G. Stroumsa forthcoming (a).

of both Jews and Jewish religious ideas in pre-Islamic Arabia is now being recognized.[3] While it remains difficult to identify precisely the kind of Judaism involved, it probably did not include only 'orthodox' Rabbinic Judaism (whether one can speak about such a thing in Arabia at all), but also Jewish Christianity, perhaps of different kinds.

Prophecy was one of the central concepts around which polemics raged between the different groups claiming to possess wisdom and truth from divine revelation. For each group, the others' claim to knowledge was a false one, as it was based upon false prophecy. While the concept of prophecy has been much studied, the same cannot be said about its reverse, the idea of false prophecy.[4]

I

From the New Testament on, early Christian texts reflect a constant preoccupation with false prophets.[5] It is however for the Jewish Christians, and in particular for the Ebionites, that the problem of false prophecy was of crucial importance in the economy of salvation. 'They seek to comment on the prophecies with an excessive attention', notes Irenaeus.[6] The idea of prophecy is absolutely essential to Ebionite theology, in particular as it appears in the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*. For the Ebionites, the identity of Jesus is defined by his prophecy. Jesus is for them the last incarnation of the 'True Prophet', who, since Adam, from generation to generation, presents the divine message to mankind. In each generation, however, the True Prophet is preceded by a false prophet, an impostor sent by Satan, who claims to be the True Prophet. Truth and Lie are thus for ever coupled, throughout the ages, in 'syzygies' of opposites. The false prophets are 'the prophets of this world', who remain for ever ignorant of eternal truths.[7] Thus Cain precedes Abel, Ishmael precedes Isaac, Esau precedes Jacob, Aaron precedes Moses, and Paul precedes Peter. False prophets are feminine, and are born from women. False prophecy, indeed, stems from Eve, just as true prophecy stems from Adam. False prophets are impostors, who bring a false doctrine. Hence, a false gospel precedes the revelation of the True Gospel.[8]

3 See for instance Robin 2003. Contemporary research on the Jewish and Christian background of the earliest strata of Islam owes probably more to the iconoclastic approach of Crone and Cook 1977 than to any other single work.

4 On false prophets in the Hebrew Bible, see for instance Buber 1964; von Rad 1933; Quell 1952; Osswald 1962. Cf. Mendelssohn 1973, and Paul 1973, who both point out the weakness of the differentiation criteria between true and false prophets as presented by the Deuteronomist.

5 In the New Testament, see in particular Mt. 7.15, 1 Cor. 12.27-28, 1 Jn 2.18, 2 Pet. 2.1. Further references include *Did.* 11: 3-10 (cf. 12: 1-2; 16: 3); Hermas, *Mand.* 11.7–8, 11; Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 69.1; Origen, *Cels.* 7.9. William Horbury has called attention to the symmetry between the behaviour of false prophets and that of itinerant philosophers such as the Cynics; see Horbury 1998d, 111–26.

6 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.26.2; (2, 346–7 Rousseau-Doutreleau).

7 Ps.-Clement, *Hom.* 2.15.4.

8 Ps.-Clement, *Hom.* 2.17.4. Cf. *Hom.* 1.18.1–19.8; 3.17.25.

Although this doctrine of the syzygies is well known, it has been granted too little attention in the context of polemics against false prophets in ancient Christian literature. If the many false prophets are so dangerous for humankind, it is because they mislead men, as they succeed in presenting error as truth, in order to ensure the acceptance of their doctrines (cf. Mt. 7.15). Truth and error thus appear as mixed (*Hom.* 1.19), and a test is necessary in order to distinguish true prophets from impostors (*Hom.* 2.5.10).[9]

A remarkably similar conception is found in a text from Nag Hammadi, the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth.*[10] In this text, Adam, then Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, the twelve prophets, Moses and John the Baptist, are called 'laughing stocks' (*côbe*), as they have been created by the Hebdomad as so many imitations of the true prophets. This text probably reflects the Gnostic reinterpretation of a Jewish-Christian *theologoumenon.*

It is in this context that we must see the Christian perception of Mani, false prophet, magician and impostor (*goès*), who had learned his craft from his master Scythianus, trying in vain to accomplish true miracles. For the heresiologists, his very name reveals his folly, his *mania.*[11] The chain of the true prophets is indeed a Jewish-Christian *theologoumenon,* which is found also in the Manichaean conception of the succession of prophets from Adam to Mani. But the Manichaean conception is more complex, as it involves a *double* chain of prophecy.

A double list of prophets, sent throughout history and to the different regions of the world, is typical of the Manichaean structure of prophecy. On the one hand, there is a diachronic list of prophets, from Adam to Christ to Mani, which includes prophets of the antediluvian times such as Enoch – but not the biblical prophets properly so called. The synchronic list, on the other hand, mentions Buddha in the East, Zarathustra in the central lands, and Jesus in the West, all preceding Mani. Each was sent only to one area of the world, while Mani, the only prophet to offer a total revelation, valid for all peoples, in the entire *oikoumenè*, seals prophecy. The double chain of prophecy, which was known for a long time from various Manichaean texts, is epitomized in a recently published Coptic *Kephalaion.*[12]

The Manichaean double chain of prophecy, both through the ages and through the universe, has always been considered by scholars to be an original theme, devised by Mani himself, the first thinker to have established a consciously

9 On the importance of syzygies in Ebionite theology, see in particular the work of H. J. Schoeps, well synthesized in Schoeps 1969: 88–91.

10 CG VII.2, 62–3.

11 Epiphanius, *Panarion* 66. A similar etymology is found in the *Acta Archelai.*

12 See Tardieu 1988: 153–82. As Tardieu points out, this very important text represents the oldest literary document on the expansion of Buddhism in the Kushan empire. The Kushan empire was from the late first to the third centuries C.E. an important Buddhist power, where Graeco-Roman, Indian and Iranian cultures mixed to a remarkable extent, and known for its widespread cultural, artistic and religious syncretism. Moreover, the *Kephalaion* emphasizes the formative importance of Buddhist influence in the early stages of Manichaeism.

universal religion. If my analysis above is correct, this *communis opinio* should be qualified. The Manichaean double chain of prophecy is highly reminiscent of Tatian's and Clement's conception of two kinds of *barbaros philosophia*, that of the Hebrews and those of the Eastern barbarian peoples. The similarities between these two mythological frames seem too close to be the fruit of chance.[13] The basic structure of Manichaean revelation throughout the generations and among the different cultures appears to have been, rather than a total novelty, a new development, stemming from an already existing Christian scheme. This scheme had been accepted, in particular, by those Christian thinkers who kept a particular interest in traditions of the East.

For the Christian eschatological tradition, the false prophet, who according to Jewish-Christian theology appears at different stages in history, each time preceding the coming of a true prophet, makes a final appearance at the end of times. According to the book of Revelation, (Rev. 13.11-18), the false prophet is the lieutenant of the Antichrist, an enormous beast coming from the earth, but masquerading as a sheep, i.e., taking the appearance of justice. Simulacra, lying prodigies, counterfeit prophecies, reflect the character of this false Messiah, who seeks to imitate, one last time, the deeds of Christ. As shown in the writings of Victorinus of Poetovio, the false prophet, then, is also a central figure of Christian eschatological thought.[14] It is in this eschatological context that one must understand the 'false prophecy' of such figures as Montanus, Mani and Muhammad.

II

After the Montanist crisis, the possibility of Christian prophecy must have been much weakened, and relegated to heretical trends. Yet, the impressive resilience and continued impact of the topic of false prophecy shows that such movements were not quite marginalized. Since, for the Rabbis, too, the age of prophecy was officially closed, one finds in Rabbinic as well as in Patristic literature relatively few discussions on 'the signs of prophecy', the criteria which permit one to distinguish between true and false prophets. Such discussions will become absolutely capital in Islamic theological literature, as Muhammad is defined as a prophet.[15] The main accusation against Muhammad, throughout centuries of Christian anti-Muslim polemics, in the Middle Ages and until the early Modern times, has always been the accusation of false prophecy: for both Christians (and also, to some extent, for Jews), Muhammad was an impostor, who succeeded in appearing as a prophet. In the Qur'an, and then in the Kalam, Muhammad is identified not simply as a prophet, but as the seal of the prophets, the *ḫātam al-nabiyīn*, even if this expression seems to have meant, originally, 'confirmation' rather than 'end' of prophecy.[16] Actually, Muhammad is not the first to have used

13 For a detailed argumentation, see G. Stroumsa 1996.
14 See Dulaey 1993, vol. I: 204–6, vol. II: 101.
15 See S. Stroumsa 1999: 22–4 and nn. 16, 23.
16 See Friedmann 1986.

this expression, which appears already in Manichaean texts, where it is Mani's disciples who are the 'seal' of his prophecy, i.e., its testimony and authentification.[17]

We have seen how the idea of true and false prophecy was absolutely central for the Jewish Christians. Indeed, for them (and for them only) there was an adequacy between the concept of prophet and that of messiah. We have known for some time that some Jewish Christian groups remained in existence quite late, certainly in Palestine, until at least the eighth century, when John of Damascus, sitting in the monastery of Mar Saba in the Judaean wilderness, testifies to their presence on the shores of the Dead Sea.[18] Shlomo Pines, on his side, has argued for the presence of a Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem during the reign of Mu'awwiyah.[19]

The fact that these late Jewish Christians might have been only a small sect does in no way mean that they remained marginalized, having no impact on society at large. Warnings against Judaizing practices were common in seventh-century Christian literature, and might point to the continued presence and influence of Jewish-Christian groups. Thus, the *Doctrina Jacobi* reflects a preoccupation with Judaizers who observed the sabbath as they were expecting the second coming of the Anointed One, i.e., the Messiah. (1.19).[20] It stands to reason, then, to postulate that they may have played some role in the polemic on true and false prophecy and Messianism between Jews and Christians in the seventh century.

As Shlomo Pines has pointed out, for instance, Abu Isa al-Isfahani (d. *ca.* 750), a leader of a Jewish sect who led a rebellion against the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwan, was probably influenced in his self-conception by Jewish-Christian beliefs when he presented Jesus and Muhammad as true prophets.[21] Pines then asks himself whether 'the views held on the evidence of the *Doctrina Jacobi* at the time of the advent of Islam may be regarded as a form of reaction to this event or may have preceded it', and perhaps at some stage helped to shape the beliefs of the followers of the new religion. He answers that 'in our present state of knowledge, no conclusive answer to this complex of questions is possible.'[22] I propose here to review the evidence, in the hope that it might shed some new light on the question at hand.

Since at least the Iranian conquest of Jerusalem in 614, and the taking of the Holy Cross in captivity, both Jews and Christians in Palestine felt they were living in apocalyptic times. The Apocalyptic trends of early Christianity, which had gone dormant in the aftermath of the Constantinian revolution, were reactivated. The Christian world was rife with expectations of the *Endzeit*, with its traditional imagery of cosmic war between the forces of light and those of darkness. In Averil

17 See G. Stroumsa 1986. See also Colpe 1990. Colpe and I reached the same conclusions simultaneously, and independently of one another. See further R. Simon 1997.

18 See G. Stroumsa 1985.

19 See Pines 1984.

20 The best edition of this capital text is that of Déroche 1991.

21 Pines 1968, esp. 254. Cf. Starr 1937.

22 See Pines 1984: 152.

Cameron's words, 'Islam took shape within a context of extreme religious and cultural tension.'[23]

The new clash between the Christian and the Islamic imperial states was indeed nurtured in the cocoon of the Jewish-Christian conflict of interpretations, which only superficially appear to repeat in essence, and ad nauseam, old arguments over an issue decided long previously. The argumentation of these early polemics, centred upon the interpretation of biblical prophecies, revolved mainly around the figure of Christ as the Messiah announced by the prophets of Israel. For the Jews, the Messiah was yet to come, while for the Christians, he was to return in full glory, and establish his kingdom, at long last, over the earth. For the Chiliasts of the first centuries, most clearly exemplified, perhaps, by Irenaeus, Jerusalem, and in particular the Temple Mount, would become at the end of times the epicentre of dramatic events at the cosmic level (see *Haer.* 5.25–30). The Chiliastic debate which had raged in the first Christian centuries focused on issues of inheritance of the Holy Land and restoration of the Jews to their own land.[24] Early Christian Chiliastic expectations had very strong Jewish roots.[25]

A comparative study of late antique Jewish and Christian eschatology remains a desideratum, which should emphasize the differences as well as the similarities between the two movements: indeed, the political situation of the Jews was vastly different from that of the Byzantine Christians. The former did not have anything to lose from the change of political and religious power. On the contrary, they had much to gain, and it was easier for them to bet on the new, previously unknown force. They could thus easily have placed their hopes of religious and political renewal with the Muslim conquerors.

For Byzantine Christians, the Messiah expected by the Jews would be the last impostor, the Antichrist. From the fourth century on, the Jews, on the other hand, believed that they were ruled by believers in a false Messiah. Victory for one side meant defeat for the other: a zero-sum game, in modern strategic terminology. The clearest expression of a Jewish vindication would be the re-establishment of the Temple. For the Christians, such a threat was tantamount to the coming of the Antichrist, who had been described, in Irenaeus' classical version of the myth, as well as in the slightly later version of Hippolytus, as establishing his throne, for three and a half years, until he would be finally defeated by Jesus Christ, in the Temple itself. For the Christian *psyche*, such a threat did not belong only to the ancient past. The memories of the great anxiety generated by Julian's authorization to rebuild the Temple, and the fact that work had actually started, before a providential earthquake had brought these efforts to naught, do not seem to have quite disappeared for a long time.[26] In the seventh century, with the Iranian violent conquest and its deeply humiliating result, the Holy Cross in

23 Cameron 1991. On this, see de Lange, this volume: 274–84.

24 See Heid 1993.

25 For a recent study of a particularly interesting aspect of early Christian eschatology, see Vianès-Abou Samra 2004. See further Hill 1992.

26 See Wilken 1992.

enemy custody, and the new wave of successful invasion by the barbarian Arabs, the old questions were raised again, with a new urgency.[27] Who could these Arabs really be, the Christians asked themselves, who stemmed from their Southern desert, claiming to follow the lead of their prophet? Might they not really represent, in disguise, the powerful arm of the Jews, sent to reclaim their pretensions on the Holy Land and in the Holy City? Paradoxically, the great fear of the Christians had more to do with the shadow of the Jews than with the Arab invaders.

For the Jews, the end of Christian domination offered a chance, or so they thought, to rebuild the Temple.[28] This possibility could not have been envisaged with equanimity by the Christians, for whom such an event would be tantamount to the belated victory of the despised old religion. Such a victory would announce the coming of the Antichrist before Christ's *parousia* at the end of times – an eschatological imagery inherited from the earliest stages of Christian literature. It is often assumed that the coming of the Arabs meant the end of the Jewish hopes in the city.[29] Such a view, however, reflects the eventual outcome of Islamic rule, compressing and flattening the dramatic events of the seventh century. For some time, at least, it seems that the Arab invasion presented the Jews with a new chance of finally getting rid of the hated Byzantines, and an opportunity to rebuild their Temple.

A generation ago, Michael Cook and Patricia Crone showed, in their groundbreaking *Hagarism*, the extent to which earliest Islam must be understood as the product of the preaching of Judaic Messianism in a Gentile environment.[30] In recent years, important epigraphic studies have done much to sharpen our perception of the Jewish element in the Arabian background of Muhammad's preaching. Christian Robin notes the importance, as revealed by these findings, of both Jewish presence and Jewish ideas in the Arabic peninsula as early as the fourth century. For him, this weakens the need for appeal to Jewish ideas imported from Palestine, as proposed by Cook and Crone.[31] Here, adopting another perspective, I wish to emphasize the cross-fertilization of Jewish and Christian beliefs in the Holy Land, with particular reference to the eschatological expectations of both Jews and Christians around the Temple Mount.[32]

The Byzantines were slow in understanding the true faith of their new conquerors. The Arabs remained for them, for too long, barbarians coming from the desert, and Muhammad was perceived as a false prophet, whose faith could be understood only in the categories of Christian theology, namely, as a heresy.[33] Although it would

27 See Kaegi 2003: 79–80 and 204–7.

28 On the state of Byzantine Jewry in the seventh century, Starr 2003 is still valid.

29 See for instance Cameron 1998, esp. 204.

30 Crone and Cook 1977.

31 See Robin 2003.

32 On the Temple Mount and its complex and highly charged religious significance, see G. Stroumsa forthcoming (b).

33 See Hoyland 1997. On Muhammad, see esp. John of Damascus, *Adv. Haer.*, Heresy 101 (the last and worst heresy, according to the author, invented by the false prophet Muhammad, who, having learned some elements of biblical religion, convinced the pagan Arabs by simulating piety).

eventually settle down, for centuries, there was a deep-seated political and religious conflict, sometimes more overt, sometimes relatively dormant, which started as a 'big bang', epitomized, more than anything else, by Omar's conquest of Jerusalem and the ensuing dramatic changes in the religious topography of the city.

In recent years, much scholarly effort has been spent on analysing the complex relationship between Jews and Christians in seventh-century Byzantium.[34] In a series of important publications, distinguished Byzantinists such as Gilbert Dagron, Averil Cameron, Cyril Mango or Vincent Déroche have done much to provide us with a clearer understanding of the complex interface between Jews and Christians in the seventh century, in particular from the perspective of the Greek texts.[35] These and other scholars have underlined the renewed importance of disputes between Jews and Christians in the Eastern Roman Empire of the seventh century. In particular, they have highlighted the centrality of the Holy Land, of the Holy City, and of its core, the Temple Mount, in these disputes, as well as their direct impact on the earliest stages of Islam. The spiritual demotion of *vetus Israel* by *Verus Israel* had been symbolized by the relocation of the sanctified *locus*, from the Temple Mount, whose emptiness should remain striking, visible to all, by the new basilica of the *Anastasis*. Oleg Grabar has called this process of relocation an *eislithosis*,[36] while Annabel Warthon has referred to the Byzantine *erasure* of the Jewish dimension of Jerusalem.[37]

More work, however, is needed for a careful synoptic analysis of both the Christian and the Jewish sources, in Hebrew and Aramaic as well as in Greek and Syriac. The Jewish sources, in particular, are much less understood than the Christian ones. For some of the most important ones (such as the *Book of Zerubbabel*), we even lack a critical edition, and the texts are difficult to date with precision.[38] A comparative view of all the available sources relevant to the renewed tensions between Jews and Christians in seventh-century Jerusalem could shed new light on the cultural and religious tensions which were in the background of the emergence and early development of Islam.[39]

The Islamic conquest of Jerusalem in 638 at once rekindled the fears of the Christians and the hopes of the Jews, bringing them to new levels of intensity. The conquerors, seeking to do what we could call, in the Hegelian sense, an *Aufhebung* of both Judaism and Christianity, moved back its sacred core from the Basilica of the *Anastasis* to the Temple Mount. For the Byzantine historiographer Theophanes, it was Omar's devilish pretence which made him seek to emulate Solomon.[40]

34 See for instance Stemberger 1999.
35 See for instance Dagron and Déroche 1991; Mango 1999; Déroche 1999.
36 Grabar 1999.
37 Warthon 2000.
38 See Lévi 1915–35. See further Dan 1998 and Himmelfarb 1990.
39 Cameron 2002.
40 See De Boor 1883, and Mango and Scott 1997.

Indeed, other sources indicate that the Muslim building activity on the Mount was at first perceived by some Jews and some Christians, as an attempt at rebuilding the Jewish Temple.[41] Anastasius of Sinai refers to 'those who think and say that it is the Temple of God (*naos theou*) being built now in Jerusalem'.[42] This perception is reflected very early in both the Coptic *Apocalypse of Shenute*, and the *Secrets of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai*.[43] Of course, what was perceived as a tragedy by the Christians was considered a divine miracle by the Jews.

It should come as no surprise that for both Jews and Christians, architectural structures on the Temple Mount erected in the name of the God of Abraham would be understood to be the direct successors of Solomon's Temple. What is more striking is that these structures were understood in the same way by the Muslims. A number of early Islamic sources indicate quite clearly that the Muslims attempted to rebuild the Temple as a mosque, and that in the Umeyyad period, up to the early ninth century, the Temple Mount was considered to be both the Temple rebuilt and the Mosque of Jerusalem. As shown by Andreas Kaplony, it is only with the Abbasids that the conception of the Temple fell into oblivion, the Haram thus losing some of its charisma.[44] Until then, the very architecture stressed the direct relation of the Haram to the Temple, for instance by integrating pieces of bedrock and ruins, and in particular inside the Dome of the Rock, which was 'specially loaded with Temple traditions'. Kaplony stresses that the assertion that the Haram is the rebuilt Temple continues the Byzantine idea that the emperor builds a new Temple, thereby declaring himself the legitimate heir of King David. This is certainly true. Kaplony adds, however, and this is more directly relevant to my argument, that the rebuilding was directly aimed at a Jewish public, who was expecting the eschatological Temple at the end of time. The Caliph, in such a mindset, could also be perceived by the Jews as their expected Messiah. Attitudes changed when it became clear, however, that the Muslims did not intend to rebuild the Jewish Temple, but rather to build a structure of their own. For the Jews, the construction of a new kind of Temple, rather than the reconstruction of Solomon's Temple, would not have been perceived as less shocking than the Christian total lack of interest in the Temple Mount and the transfer of the sacred place to the Basilica of the *Anastasis*. Moreover, as the *Anastasis* remained standing, it would retain its sacredness (although a lesser one, of course, under the Islamic regime). Building activity, however, did not remain the privilege of the conquerors. The seventh-century Armenian historian Sebeos, one of our best sources, indicates that the Jews started to build a synagogue on the Temple Mount in the first years after the conquest. It is only later that the first Al-Aqsa mosque seems to have been built.[45]

41 Déroche 1999: 158; cf. Flusin 1991: 408.

42 Anastasius of Sinai, *Narrationes*, C3, quoted by Hoyland 2000: 289 and n. 54. The testimony of Anastasius is significant, as he was then living on the Mount of Olives.

43 See Hoyland 1997: 279–82 (*Ps. Shenute*) and 308–12 (*Secrets of Sh. Bar Yohai*).

44 Kaplony 2002.

45 Badrosian 1985, ch. 31.

The Jews could have perceived Muhammad either as a prophet or as the Messiah. Both these titles, indeed, had been attached in the Hebrew Bible to non-Israelite figures, such as the prophet Balaam or King Cyrus, who had been called 'God's anointed'. The Jewish sources from Arabia are scarce and difficult to interpret, but it seems that some Jews, at least, did see in Muhammad, at first, a messianic (or a pre-messianic) figure. Now, according to the *Doctrina Jacobi*, a crucial Greek document from the very first days of the Islamic conquests, the Jews considered Muhammad to be a false prophet (*pseudoprophètès*). In this text, we read that 'the Jews speak of a prophet from the Saracens, and consider him a false prophet, because of his massacres.' In the same passage, Abraham, a Palestinian Jew, says that 'a false prophet has appeared among the Saracens. He is proclaiming the advent of the anointed one who is to come.'[46]

It is of course possible to understand this literally, although it seems that in the seventh century, the Jews thought more in messianic than in prophetic terms. Indeed, the concept of a false prophet seems to be absent from rabbinic literature. And in the mid-seventh century, the *Sefer Zerubbabel* uses a very rare term, *mashiaḥ sheker*, false Messiah.[47] The Syriac *Apocalypse* of Pseudo-Methodius, a contemporary text destined to exert a powerful influence, East and West, also mentions how the 'son of perdition, false Messiah (*meshiha degala*) will enter Jerusalem and sit on God's throne'.[48] *Degala*, here, seems to be at the origin of the figure parallel to the Antichrist in Islamic eschatological texts, the *Dajjāl*.[49] Similarly, the *Edessene Apocalyptical Fragment* (dating from 683) refers to the appearance, at the end of time, of the son of perdition, who is named 'false Messiah'.[50] The Antichrist of early Christian literature had become the false Messiah of the late antique Jewish sources.

One may then suggest also another possible interpretation of this testimony. Some Jews might have considered Muhammad, at first, to be the Messiah, later to call him a false Messiah, when they realized that he did not bring about a fulfilment of the promises. The Christians could not possibly understand what the term 'Messiah' meant, since Christos was the name of the Saviour, and might have understood this term as identical to 'false prophet'. For the Christians, Muhammad could only be a *pseudoprophētēs*. Thus Theophanes relates how some Jews took Muhammad, the leader and false prophet (*archegos kai pseudo-*

46 Déroche 1991: 203–9.

47 See Lévi 1914–35. We possess only remnants of what must have been a whole Jewish literature dealing with the Messiah from that period. See for instance Marmorstein 1906.

48 I quote according to Reinink 1993. On Pseudo-Methodius' *Apocalypse*, see Reinink 2005. See also Palmer 1993. On the powerful and long-lasting influence of this text on Western Medieval eschatology, see Möhring 2000.

49 See Rabin 1957, esp. 120.

50 See Palmer 1993: 243–53, esp. 247.

prophētēs) of the Saracens, to be 'the Messiah who is expected by them'.[51] The language of this passage shows quite clearly that the Christians could think of Muhammad only within the category of prophecy, while for the Jews, it was the Messianic expectation which was most pregnant.[52]

The main thrust of the debates between Jews and Christians, then, had evolved, since the second century, when Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* emphasized the idea of prophecy. In the seventh century, the focus was not so much on true prophecy as on messianism: the *Endzeit* was now of more immediate importance than that of the past. While in its earlier stages, Jewish-Christian polemics had dealt with false prophecy, it aimed now at identifying the false Messiah, the impostor of the end-times. The mythological images inherited from the earliest Christian texts emerged with renewed power. The son of perdition sitting in the Temple of the Lord (2 Thess. 2.4) became a direct inspiration of the Pseudo-Methodius *Apocalypse.*

The intense discussion between Jews and Christians reflected in the *Doctrina Jacobi* is not on prophecy, but on the coming of the Messiah and on the Messiahship of Jesus. For Ioustos, who comes 'from the East', the first coming of Christ meant the end of prophecy (3.8). For the author of this work, as for the *Trophies of Damascus*, a text from the late seventh century, the Jews still expect 'their Christ'.[53] A similar view is expressed by Jacob of Edessa, in his *Letter to John the Stylite* (written around 708). The figure of the Messiah (*mashiḥā*) is fundamental for Jews, Christians and also Muslims. The Jews, however, contend that he has not yet come, while the Muslims do not consider Jesus to have been the Son of God, but rather a prophet, announced by the prophets.[54]

In his *Letter 14*, dated from 634, Maximus Confessor expects the imminent coming of the Antichrist, who will announce the *parousia* of Christ. Another of his letters, from 632, is replete with eschatological context.[55] The so-called Coptic *Apocalypse of Shenute* (from about 644) mentions that a figure arising from the sons of Ishmael will hound the Christians and will seek to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, announcing the end of times, while the Jews will expect the deceiver.[56] Toward the end of the century, the Syriac *Apocalypse* of Pseudo-Ephrem (probably written after 692) mentions the messenger (*izgadā*) of the son of perdition among the offspring of Hagar, while John of Damascus refers to the people-deceiving cult (*thrēskeia*) of the Ismaelites, a forerunner of the Antichrist.[57]

51 *ton par auton prosdokomenon Christon*, 333 de Boor. See also Mango and Scott 1997: 464–5.

52 Cf. Lewis 1976.

53 *ho Christos auton erchomenos*, IV.2; *ho erchomenos elimmenos humon*, IV.3. I quote according to Bardy 1927: 242–3.

54 See Hoyland 1997: 160–7.

55 On both these letters, see Dagron in Dargon and Déroche 1991: 38–41.

56 Hoyland 1997: 308–12.

57 *De Haeresibus* 60–1.

Some Jewish sources concur in perceiving Muhammad as a prophet announcing the redemption of Israel. In the *Secrets of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai* (probably written after 680), the archangel Metatron is quoted as saying: 'In order to save you from Edom, God raises over the Ismaelites a prophet according to his will ... The second king who arises from Ishmael will be a lover of Israel ... he restores their breaches and the breaches of the Temple. He hews Mount Moriah, makes it level and builds a mosque *hishtaḥawaya* (ritual prostration) there on the Temple rock.'[58] Indeed, Sunni and Shi'i sources relate that a Yemenite Jew named 'Abdallah b. Saba' was the first to publicly proclaim that Muhammad himself was the Messiah who would return at the end of times.[59]

Our sources, then, do not offer a single and clear-cut image of Muhammad, who can be perceived either through the category of prophet or through that of Messiah. As we have seen, however, there was one – and only one – group whose theology retained a place for the coming of a false prophet, announcing the last and true prophet, the Messiah, at the end-times: the Jewish Christians, in particular the Ebionites and the various groups which succeeded them. In this respect, the 'Jewish-Christian' formulations and Docetic conceptions in the Qur'an deserve fresh consideration. The perception of Muhammad as a false prophet in an eschatological context suggests, then, that this theologoumenon was developed in a Jewish-Christian milieu.

In the intense revival of competition for the holy places (and in particular for the Temple Mount) between Jews and Christians, what was a Messianic hope for some represented the threat of eschatological nightmare for others. What is of special interest in our present context is the interplay between the eschatological visions of both Jews and Christians.[60] The preceding pages have sought to show, through a particularly pregnant example, the historical recurrence of mythical thought patterns inherited from early Jewish eschatology and Messianism.

58 See Hoyland 1997: 308–12.

59 See Wasserstrom 1995: 55, who refers to studies by J. Van Ess and I. Friedländer.

60 See Irsai 2000.

Redemption and Resistance

The Messianic Hopes of Jews and Christians in Antiquity

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