The Rise of Islam, Time, and the End of Anxiety:
Apocalypse and Apocalypticism in the East Mediterranean at the Beginnings of Islam

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Islam began in an age of anxiety. From well before the birth of Muhammad in 570 C.E. through the beginning of Islam in 610 C.E. to 628 C.E., the Roman (Byzantine) and Persian (Sassanian) empires waged inconclusive and devastating wars throughout the eastern Mediterranean world. All of Arabia was caught up in the conflict as Arabs were camel cavalry for both sides and were subjects of imperial ideologies and religious proselytization. The international trade that had brought wealth to the tribes and towns along Arabia's trade routes was in shambles, and many expected that those terrible events presaged the end of the world. It is little wonder that apocalyptic writing was one of the most popular genres of this age.

Apocalypse as genre and apocalypse as mode of thought had been popular for many centuries before the Quran and the rise of Islam. According to Ernst Käsemann, "*Die Apokalyptik ist die Mutter aller christlichen Theologie gewesen*,"[1] and, while that judgment has been roundly challenged, it cannot be denied that preoccupations with eschatological beliefs have been a powerful force in shaping religious thinking in the varieties of Christianities, Judaisms, and Islams. One difficulty with understanding apocalypticism as a phenomenon is that apocalypticism, while appearing to be nearly universal, at the same time takes on extremely local characteristics, depending on the place, time and particular religious group. So where do we look for the "Islamic Apocalypse" and what is its particular function in Islam? One obvious place to look is the Quran.[2] In this project, I argue that both Wisdom and Apocalyptic discourses are present in the Quran. In addition, I see a literary and social relationship between Quranic apocalypticism and its Late Ancient antecedents, and that Quranic apocalypticism helps shape subsequent Christian and Jewish writings as well as the Islamic apocalypses. By domesticating such figures as the legendary Alexander the Great (Dhû-l-Qarnayn), Gog and Magog, the Quran's presence in the Near Eastern conversations about Apocalypse provided interference that necessitated a response, such as the one we find in Pseudo-Methodius. Additionally, post-Quranic interpretations of the Quran downplayed the Apocalyptic in the Quran for reasons of empire and political power. Jonathan Z. Smith argues that "Wisdom and Apocalyptic are interrelated in that both are essentially scribal phenomena. They both depend on the relentless quest for paradigms, Listenwissenschaft, which are the characteristic activities of the Near Eastern scribe." I would argue that these statements should include Islamic wisdom and apocalypticism as well, insofar as Islamic culture stands as the inheritor of Hellenistic ideas and modes of social thought. Drawing on J.Z. Smith's idea that "Apocalypticism is Wisdom lacking a royal court and patron ... (that therefore) surfaces during the period of Late Antiquity not as a response to religious persecution but as an expression of the trauma of the cessation of native

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[1] Cited by W. Meeks*, "Social Functions of Apocalyptic language in Pauline Christianity*," in D. Hellholm*, Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1979), 11:878.
[2] *Ibid.*

kingship...,” I will explore both the Islamic particularity with respect to the Apocalyptic and its relationships with Mediterranean culture in the Late Antique. For this project, I want to avoid *Quellenforschung*, which has been used to show that later material is derivative and inferior to earlier material, and view instead the role that the Islamic texts played in the social context of the East Mediterranean at the time of the rise of Islam.

In analyzing the social functions of apocalyptic language, Wayne Meeks observes that “’Millenarian,’ or as we may prefer to call them, eschatological beliefs, operate within specific social settings. In order to understand them, we must see what functions they serve for the groups that hold them. Similar verbal formulations may be used for quite different purposes on different occasions or by different groups; in that case, they cannot be said to ‘mean’ the same thing.”[3] But, after that caveat, he gives a useful list of characteristics of apocalypticism that help us compare Islamic usages to those we find in Christianity and Judaism:

- Usually it is the revelations received by one or more individual prophets that provide the ordering complex of beliefs for the movement.
- Characteristically, the eschatological beliefs introduce innovations in a traditional society, making use of the known and accepted traditions in new combinations in the innovative system of beliefs.
- Participants in millenarian movements are frequently persons and groups who have experienced frustration of their access to social power and to the media through which social power is exercised.
- The medium for change in the millenarian movement itself is primarily cognitive. “Social change is preeminently symbol or symbolic change.” This implies that apocalyptic beliefs do not merely constitute a compensation in fantasy for real want of power, goods and status, but first of all provide a way of making sense of a world that seems to have gone mad.
- Success in creating a new “plausibility structure” or “mazeway” can enable a group to discover or obtain social power. The apocalyptic myths, as radical as they may be in “nihilating” the existing world – that is, the “symbolic universe” of the dominant society – may therefore serve a “conservative” and constructive function for the believing group. That is, they may pave the way for new forms of institutionalization. In such a case the “routinization of charisma” may not entail so radical a change as Max Weber believed.[4]

As I will argue, Meeks’ list of characteristics will serve as useful tools in placing Islamic apocalypticism in the larger Near Eastern field. But, to this list we must add an additional characteristic that sets apocalyptic thinking apart from other forms of revolutionary change based on ideology. As Vernon Robbins has observed, “Apocalyptic discourse is a ritual that changes all regions of space in the body and in the world into hyperintensified moral places.”[5] One of the strongest driving forces within apocalypticism is its drive to bring moral choice to bear on every moment and every act.

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[3] *ibid.*

[4] *ibid.*

[5] Vernon K. Robbins, “Rhetorical Ritual: Apocalyptic Discourse in Mark 13,” in *Vision and Persuasion: Rhetorical Dimensions of Apocalyptic Discourse*. Edited by Gregory Carey and L. Gregory Bloomquist. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999: 95-121.

There are no neutral, non-moral places, spaces or times when apocalyptic thinking takes hold fully. This characteristic becomes apparent when we look at several chapters of the Quran from the linked perspectives of moral choice and time.

As I have published previously, the tenth chapter of the Quran, *Sûrah Yûnus* (Jonah), is an example in which we can see the collapse of time that transforms the universe into what Robbins describes as hyper-intensified moral space. This chapter weaves through several themes. After an allusion to Muhammad as a warner of God's impending punishment, the next few verses briefly describe Creation. But, this presentation of Creation is not history in the Genesis model. Instead, we learn that "In the difference between night and day and that which God created in the heavens and the earth are signs for those who protect themselves [from evil]" Q 10:6. In verse 23, we get a possible allusion to Jonah's storm-tossed trip, but abstracted, in the usual Quranic fashion, to a timeless, featureless, de-historicized plane, leaving the reader with a sense that the words could apply to the present moment as easily as to the distant past. Starting in verse seventy-five, we get a narrative of Moses and Aaron, following a short mention of Noah and other, unnamed messengers sent "to their people." While the Moses narrative is relatively complete, in Quranic terms, occupying about sixteen percent of the chapter, it, too, has fewer of the details that would make it seem richly historicized to those comparing it with the biblical version. Such a comparison misses the point of the Quranic narrative. It is not meant to historicize, but de-historicize, all the while assuming that the reader knows the historical details or knows that historical details should be there. How much the community knew of the details of the biblical stories has been the subject of countless studies, most of which have aimed at proving that Muhammad and the Muslims "borrowed" the material from Jews and/or Christians. The point here is that listeners to and readers of the Quran have, right from the beginning, known something of the stories of the prominent biblical figures, and the rhetorical differences between the way the stories were known and the way they are found in the Quran is part of the Quranic dissonance that is, itself, a rhetorical feature of the Quran. The unsettling tension between a historical account and the Quran's de-historicized telling focuses the reader's attention on the Quranic message: the *exempla* of the past are guides for choosing a moral path in the present.

After the mention of the community of Jonah, the chapter returns to the themes of warnings and admonitions. One of the commonplace statements about the Quran is that its chapters are not very coherent compilations of the pieces of revelation that came to Muhammad over his lifetime and were stitched together after his death by a committee headed by his personal secretary, Zaid b. Thâbit. Both Muslims and western scholars, in slightly differing perspectives hold this view. But, because the verses in the Quranic chapters can be divided and recombined does not mean that they are inherently disjointed. On the contrary, a close reading of *Sûrah* Jonah shows remarkable thematic unity.

Employing a method of socio-rhetorical analysis shows us that an underlying unifying theme of the chapter is the combination of warning of future punishment and promise of future reward, depending on present choices mixed with references to the

future's beginnings at Creation.[6] As the following chart shows, the repetitive ideas of punishment and reward tie the chapter together:

Sûrah X (Yûnus)

VERSE	WARNING SIGN	REWARD OR PROMISE	TEMPORAL LOCATION
2	Warning		
3	Remember Creation		Creation
4	Painful doom	Good tidings	Creation and Day of Judgment
5	Time and Revelations as portents		Creation and history of revelation
6	Portents		Creation
7	Those who do not expect next world		Day of Judgment
8	Home of fire		Day of Judgment
9		Rivers and gardens of delight	Day of Judgment
11			Between past and future
13	Prior generations destroyed after clear proofs		Course of history
15	Retribution for disobedience		Day of Judgment
17	Guilty unsuccessful		
18	No gain for false worship		
21	God's swift retribution		Day of Judgment
22	[Anticipation of story of Jonah]		
23	All return to God		Day of Judgment
25		Abode of peace	Day of Judgment
26		Best reward and more for doers of good	Day of Judgment
27	Punishment for evil deeds; home of fire		Day of Judgment
28-33			Day of Judgment
34-36	Creation as reminder		Creation
37-38	Quran as sign		
39-43	Scriptural history of wrong as a warning		Course of history
44	Humans wrong themselves		
45	Death, Day of Judgment		Day of Judgment

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[6] Newby, G. D. (1998). "Quranic Texture: A Review of Vernon Robbins's *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse* and *Exploring the Texture of Texts*." Journal for the Study of the New Testament **70**: 93 - 100.

46	Muhammad and God as witnesses		
47	Prophets as warners		
48	Promises from God		
49	Appointed time (for judgment)		Day of Judgment
50	Doom		Day of Judgment
51	Belief only after doom befalls		Day of Judgment
52	Eternal torment		Day of Judgment
53	No escape		Day of Judgment
54	Doom		Day of Judgment
55	Creation as God's promise		Creation
56	Death, return to God		Day of Judgment
57		Balm, mercy from God	
58		Mercy	
60	Day of Resurrection	Bounty	Day of Judgment
67	Night and day as signs		Creation
68	[Allegation without proof that God has a son]		
69	No success		Day of Judgment
70	Doom		Day of Judgment
71-74	[Story of Noah and punishing of evil doers]		
75-93	[Exodus story of punishing of Pharaoh and reward of the Children of Israel]		
98	[Allusion to story of Jonah]		
101	All Creation a warning no help for those who disbelieve		
102	Expect punishment		Day of Judgment
103		Believers saved	Day of Judgment
104	Death		Day of Judgment
106	Wrong-doers		Day of Judgment
107	Hurt	Good	Day of Judgment
108	Those who err are guided for error	Those who are good are guided for good	Day of Judgment
109	God is the best of judges		Day of Judgment

From the above list, we can see both the coherence of *Sûrah* 10 and its dominant theme, judgment and punishment. A secondary theme is reward for correct worship. Turning to the temporal substructure of this chapter, we see a juxtaposition of the two

ends of the time spectrum, Creation and the Day of Judgment. Verse three recalls Creation, "Your Lord is God, who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and then established Himself on the Throne, directing [all] things," and reminds us that there are no intermediaries between humans and God. Verse four then takes us to the Eschaton: "To Him is your return, all of you, a promise of God in truth." Verses five and six return us to Creation, while verses seven through ten hurl us back to the end of time. Verse eleven places us in an indeterminate present, telling us that "We leave alone those who have no hope in meeting us to wander about in their excesses." In verse thirteen, we are back in the past when we are told that "We have already destroyed the generations before you when they did wrong, their messengers having come to them with clear proofs, and they were not believing. Thus We reward the evildoers." In fourteen, we are back to the present, with a move toward the future: "We appointed you vicegerents on the earth after them, so that We could see how you would do." Indeed, the whole chapter continues to juxtapose past and future to intensify the decisions we are to make in the present between good and evil. And, finally the whole of the chapter is set in a progressive temporal frame with verse 4 starting at Creation, and the last verse, 110, ending with God's judgment.

My insight that the Qur'an foretells the end of time even from the signs of creation but offers relief from the end-time anxiety by providing the key to a salvific escape from apocalyptic disaster will be the centerpiece of this project. I propose the following chapters for this monograph:

1. *The Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Milieu*: In this chapter I will survey apocalyptic writing in the East Mediterranean from Bar Kochba and the Jewish-Roman wars to Yûsuf Dhû-Nuwâs, the last Jewish king in Arabia before the rise of Islam. The bookend figures, Bar Kochba and Yûsuf Dhû-Nuwâs, were failed messianic figures who came to be understood as pre-figuring the "real" messianic figure, who would usher in the end-time. This failure of messianism heightens and intensifies the anticipation of a messiah figure, which, I argue, helps shape the reception of the Islamic message.

2. *Reactions to Early Islam:* Two major works, the writings of the Syrian Christian Pseudo-Methodius, and the Jewish author of Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer (PRE), characterize the early responses to the Arab conquest and the beginnings of Islam. Pseudo-Methodius describes the destruction wrought by the Arabs framed as a prediction of millennial proportions that act as a cleansing of the world of sinners and making way for the righteous and the return of Jesus. Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer makes a similar claim from a Jewish perspective, describing the world from pre-Creation to a post-Messianic "Age of Esther" and the creation of a new Jerusalem. An interesting feature of Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer is that it is the first narrative midrash, and this chapter will address issues of narratology as characteristic of the charismatic apocalypticism featured in this text.[7]

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[7] M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981; Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Toronto: University of

3. *Apocalyptic Trajectories*: This chapter will survey the varieties of important apocalyptic writings in the seventh and eighth centuries C.E. Some of these are the "Secrets of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai", the "'Otôt ha-Mashiah," the "Apocalypse of Zorobabel," the various works ascribed to "Enoch," and a Jewish apocalyptic poem, "On that Day" on the Arab conquests.

4. *The Qur'an, Apocalypse, and Anxiety's End*: This chapter will explore the rich apocalyptic character of the Qur'an and the ways in which it adopts and adapts apocalyptic arguments and figures, such as the legendary Alexander the Great and the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, to re-valorize apocalyptic fears into faith in God and his prophet, Muhammad.

5. *The Age of Commentary*: This chapter will explore the roles of commentators in the reshaping of the Qur'anic message to fit first the early period of Arabo-Islamic conquest and then to attenuate and diminish the force of apocalyptic energies to support the program of an Islamic, as opposed to Arab, empire under the late Umayyads and the Abbasids. The opposition of traditionists like Ibn Abbâs and Abû Hurayrah to Ka'b al-Ahbâr and Wahb b. Munabbih will demonstrate how radical ideas were domesticated and routinized into imperial rule.

6. *Contemporary Echoes*: Muslims in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have returned to some of the Qur'an's earliest apocalyptic ideas to support their radical political programs. This chapter will examine some of the uses and misuses of Qur'anic apocalypticism in contemporary Islamic societies. One feature of this chapter will be an examination of how the internet has deracinated long-standing Islamic ideas and values.

In summary, this project will connect with the rising body of literature about Islam and apocalypticism and frame current discussions against the originating sources. For example, the University of California press is just releasing a new book titled *Apocalypse in Islam* by Jean-Paul Filiu, in which the author shows the current relationships of Muslim, Jewish and Christian apocalypticism but starts with texts from the fifteenth century.[8] I argue that viewing the texts from the sixth and seventh centuries and tracing their histories through the classical period of Islam will help us better understand their modern usage and the current apocalyptic fervor.

I am proposing this project at this time as I am transitioning out of nearly two decades of academic administration at Emory. Since becoming department chair in the fall semester of 1992, I have served as chair of what is now the Department of Middle eastern and South Asian Studies continuously except for a three-year period when I served as the Executive Director of the Institute of Comparative and International Studies. During that time, I have had only one semester "off," when I was excused from teaching one course but had to keep my administrative duties. This has meant that a

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Toronto Press, 1985; Don H. Bialostosky, "Dialogics, Narratology, and the Virtual Space of Discourse," *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1989), pp. 167-173.
[8] J. Filiu. *Apocalypticism in Islam*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

number of projects have been drastically slowed or made to lie fallow. As I move into full-time teaching and writing, I would like to cap my administrative period and start my next phase by completing this much-delayed and long-anticipated monograph. By coupling the URC award with a semester's service leave granted by the College, I feel that I can realize this dream for my transition and finish this project within the award period.

Project time-line:

June – September 2011: Collection of materials not currently in my personal library or in the Emory libraries. Recent work by various groups in the Islamic world has made materials available in on-line format (usually PDF), so that an electronic search will yield those Arabic texts that I do not currently have in my possession. The Jewish and Christian apocalypses are currently available in the Emory libraries. This material will form the basis for chapters 1, 2 and 3.

October – December 2011: I will expand my articles on the Qur'an to include a socio-rhetorical analysis of the temporal and apocalyptic features of the Qur'an, which will constitute chapter 4 of the work.

January – March 2012: Through an analysis of the *Sîrah* (the traditional biography of Muhammad), classical commentary on the Qur'an (*tafsîr*) sponsored by the Islamic imperial regimes, I will write chapter 5.

April – May 2012: I will survey the contemporary uses of the classical apocalyptic ideas in Islam for chapter 6, the conclusion of the project.

June – August 2012: final writing and editing. I will seek publication of this monograph first through the Islamic Studies series at the University of South Carolina Press, the publisher of two of my books.