INTRODUCTION

The 'apocalyptic imagination,' to lift a useful rubric given currency by John Collins,[1] is an incredibly fluid and fertile mentality. Usually but mistakenly confined by modern biblical scholars to marginalized groups of Jewish nationalists and Christian triumphalists resident in or contiguous to *Eretz Israel* during the two or three centuries surrounding the Roman sack of Jerusalem, it actually operates more or less continuously within the broader ethnic or religious frameworks of the wider Near East, and it surges during those centuries which most historians identify as marking the gradual transition from late antiquity to the early medieval era. During the seventh and following centuries of the Common Era, a number of Jewish, Christian, dualist, and Muslim circles revel in what they perceive to be a deliberately scripted concatenation of natural disasters, military campaigns, historical crises, and oracular utterances. Their collation produced a massive corpus of linguistically diverse yet thematically interlocked narrative emplotments of the episodes and characters whose historical manifestations allegedly signal the triumph of their respective political and religious interests amidst the final days of the present terrestrial order.

Figured as a mentality, the apocalyptic mode of thought is not sterile. It is relentlessly reactive and generative, since by definition it is set in motion by processes whose grounding and authority lie beyond the natural world. The notion of *apokalypsis* signifies an act whereby something previously unknown and which cannot be generated by normal means of research or ratiocination is suddenly uncovered, literally unveiled, for the mind of a percipient. The preeminent characteristic of apocalyptic thought and its concrete realization in discourse—the verbal expression of such thought—is thus its *revelatory* basis, its

---

[1] John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

claim to a certainty or set of truths that are immune from the erosive forces of social domination and corruption, material poverty, and philosophical skepticism. Possessing an unimpeachable authority and intellectual significance, it often forces its conceptual articulation among a wider audience by exploiting those favored vehicles of communication with which a culture expresses its constitutive identity, values, and aspirations. In the centuries prior to and encompassing the coming of Rome, there were a variety of ways in which this task could be and was accomplished; e.g., through royal or societal elite proclamation and epigraphic commemoration, behavioral mimesis, oracular pronouncement, figurative illustration, written composition, or oral catechesis of apprentices, students, disciples, or neophytes. For the Abrahamic religious communities of Near Eastern late antiquity, the vehicle *par excellence* for such dissemination would be the sacred writing or book.

The type of knowledge that is communicated in apocalyptic writings is fundamentally esoteric: its content, character, and essential qualities lie concealed from most members of the social order and rely for their wider dissemination on the willingness of those privileged to receive such knowledge to share it with a broader public. The notion of 'privilege' is in fact a key one, since an initial or what is represented as an exclusive access to this otherworldly wisdom distinguishes both the producer and the producer's circle of consumers as enjoying the special favor of the deity. Explicit restrictions regarding publication or popular access are occasionally asserted in apocalyptic texts, but this element is certainly a rhetorical ploy which had no practical implementation, for the warnings actually function as a sign to later readers that they, like the author, could be counted among the elect of God.[2] The structures of apocalyptic thought and discourse are thus consonant, as David Frankfurter has insightfully observed, with the conceptual and literary conventions employed in gnostic forms of religiosity.[3] Gnosis might even be arguably viewed as the dominant category for Near Eastern apocalypticism, for it necessarily expands the dimensional field of revealed information to include matters pertaining to cosmology, uranography, angelology, physical science, anthropogony, historiosophy, and eschatology. This is a welcome hermeneutical development inasmuch as apocalyptic thought is often confined by modern scholars to the articulation of speculative or symbolic scenarios about what will supposedly transpire at the end of time. While some or even most of

---

[2] E.g., Dan 12:4, 9-13; *4 Ezra* 12:36-38; 14:44-48.
[3] David Frankfurter, "The Legacy of Jewish Apocalypses in Early Christianity: Regional Trajectories," in *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity* (ed. James C. VanderKam and William Adler; CRINT III.4; Assen and Minneapolis: Van Gorcum and Fortress, 1996), 150-62.

the revealed information might focus upon an outline of future events and cosmic woes, it need not do so. The critical criterion is the supernatural mediation of a definitive knowledge, a knowledge moreover that permits a properly nuanced evaluation of the larger forces and tensions at work in the contemporary social order. Apocalyptic therefore cannot be simply equated or conflated with literary compositions which discuss the 'last days' or the eschaton.

Many students of apocalyptic texts, perhaps even the vast majority, situate their genesis and their perennial appeal within a localized malaise or disillusion spawned by the social and historical realities of cultural oppression and subjection. According to this view, social or ethnic persecution and national crisis supply the soil from which apocalyptic springs, and apocalyptic texts are thus reduced to a type of 'resistance literature.'[4] This regrettable interpretative tendency emerges all too readily from an overly insular reading of early Jewish and Christian apocalypses which limits their production and appeal to marginalized 'sects' or disenfranchised 'minority' groups in opposition to the dominant power structures. There is no clear evidence that compels acceptance of apocalyptic as a genre of literary expression that was cultivated exclusively by dissidents, and there is some that speaks against such a simplistic reduction. While some apocalypses admittedly do breathe an atmosphere of factional or cultural hostility,[5] there are others which are designed as vehicles for communicating the material and hence ideological supremacy of the ruling powers. Emperors and caliphs could manipulate and wield the language and imagery of apocalyptic as adroitly as the learned scribe or sage.

---

[4] E.g., Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad, "Introduction," in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, I: Problems in the Literary Source Material* (ed. Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad; Princeton: Darwin Press, 1992), 21-22. See the important critique of the influential ideas of Philip Vielhauer (among others) relative to early Christian apocalypticism supplied by William Adler, "Introduction," in *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage*, 3-8.
[5] Hence John Wansbrough's characterization of apocalyptic as a 'type of polemical literature'; see his *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 115-16.

Entre écriture et apocalypse?[6]

Gilbert Dagron subtitled his important survey of the tense relations between Jews and Christians in

the East during the first half of the seventh century 'Entre histoire et apocalypse.'[7] His dialectical pairing

of the terms 'history' and 'apocalyptic' illustrates the tyranny of an unexamined premise that underlies

almost all modern study of apocalyptic texts; namely, that apocalypses can be read most profitably as a

species of historiography. References to battles, the naming of rulers, cities, or nations, cryptic descriptions

of the rise and fall of certain figures, and numerical counting formulas are to be read as direct reflections of

the author's historical context and concerns, and can thus be utilized as empirical evidence for establishing

the putative chronological and geographic provenance of a given work. This largely reflexive type of

exegesis is very popular among modern scholars who devote themselves to the study and interpretation of

apocalyptic literature, and its results are often used as determinatives for reconstructing the history of the

transmission of particular texts, smaller constituent units of texts, or even the structural conventions and

motifs employed by the texts. On the face of it, as presented, there seems little about this strategy with

which one need quarrel. Apocalyptic texts, like all cultural products, are artifacts integrally embedded

within their material circumstances, and so one might legitimately expect to discern the reverberations of

past and current events within the linguistic coding of the inscribed page. Moreover, the dizzying sequence

of political transition and change in the Near East during the first half of the seventh century—the rapid

Sasanian conquest and roughly two-decade long subjection of Christian Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, abetted

by the partisan unrest in Constantinople and Asia Minor surrounding the violent accessions of Phokas (602)

and Heraclius (610); a suddenly resurgent Byzantine *reconquista* culminating in the triumphant march of

Heraclius into Jerusalem (630); but which in turn was almost immediately trumped by the humiliating rout

of both Byzantines and Sasanians before the Muslim onslaught beginning around 632; and the swift

destruction of the Sasanian Empire and the effective expulsion of Byzantine hegemony from the Near

East—must have impressed many contemporaries as ominously close to programmed schemes of social

---

[6] This and the following section on Isaiah 21 have been published in a revised and expanded form in my "The Muslim Appropriation of a Biblical Text: The Messianic Dimensions of Isaiah 21:6-7," in Kenneth G. Holum and Hayim Lapin, eds., *Shaping the Middle East: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in an Age of Transition 400-800 C.E.* (Bethesda, Md.: University Press of Maryland, 2011), 211-22.

[7] Gilbert Dagron, "Introduction historique: Entre histoire et apocalypse," *Travaux et mémoires* 11 (1991): 17-46.

and religious turmoil as sketched by scriptural sources like the biblical book of Daniel and its Christian imitators. It would be foolish to deny that historical events play a role in the construction of apocalypses. There are verifiable reasons why Rome bears the moniker of 'the evil empire' (המלכות הרשעה) or why a particular Arab ruler might be described as a 'friend of Israel' (אוהב ישראל) or as 'one who waged war on the descendants of Esau' (עושה מלחמה עם בני עשו). Oppression, hardship, and perseverance under adverse circumstances were the tangible conditions of life for Jews under both Christian and Muslim rule, and being one of the approved cultural expressions of those experiences (among others), apocalyptic literature reflects the emotional peaks and valleys engendered by the seemingly hostile forces of history.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the observations just expressed, it is imperative that greater care needs to be taken in order to avoid the practice of reading the language of an apocalypse as if it were simply supplying descriptive 'facts' about the milieu from which it emerges. The product of the apocalyptic imagination when it is exercised within and for the sake of a literate milieu is a specific type of written narrative which employs a distinctively *formulaic* set of conventions, tropes, and figures. Central to the argument of the present essay, and indeed to the larger work which it serves to introduce, is the notion that late antique Near Eastern apocalyptic literature is most properly understood when it is framed as a closed *textual* universe of discourse. Apocalyptic texts of this period, whether produced by Jews, Christians, or Muslims, feature a distinctive phonology, vocabulary, and syntax which while retaining certain dialectical variations are still easily recognizable as a discrete *langue*. The basic structural undercarriage of this particular grammar of linguistic markers and signs is not the linear march of time and the fluctuating events which fill it, but rather the relatively stable verbal expression of what was widely perceived within discrete religious communities as a uniquely authoritative revelation of the deity. In other words, sacred scripture (*écriture*) supplies both the raw material and the ultimate rationale for the conceptual elaboration of late antique Near Eastern apocalyptic.

Fluency in this particular mode of discourse would seem to presuppose the notion of a fixed scriptural canon, an authoritative collection of writings codifying the central myths, practices, and values of a religious community. It is probably not coincidental that the growing popularity of apocalyptic books within Near Eastern religions is roughly synchronous with the emerging dominance of written texts among polytheist, dualist, and monotheist forms of religiosity in late antiquity. During the early centuries of the

Common Era, the favored means of the authoritative transmission of core teachings or truths gradually but inexorably shifts in Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and diverse pagan currents from orality to textuality and from the spoken word to the immutable book. Such books, whether stemming from a Sibylline oracle or the God of Abraham, are the visible and enduring precipitate of an encounter between an inspired seer or prophet and the divine world. One might term this development a 'textualizing of authority.' The veracity or the trustworthiness of particular teachers or doctrines became tied to 'scriptural' registration, preferably one that located the archetype of the scripture in heaven itself. As the authority of written scripture waxed, a spectrum of interpretive readings and exegetical teachings grew up around the sacred text in order to provide guidance regarding communally endorsed meanings—Zand, midrash, commentaries—and those parascriptural expressions which were most widely endorsed also eventually achieved written form.

This seismic shift in the understanding of the cultural locale of authority becomes most readily apparent when one compares the form and structure of the early Jewish apocalypses authored during the Hellenistic and Roman imperial periods to those produced approximately half a millennium later during the turbulent transition from Sasanian and Byzantine to Muslim rule. Works like Daniel, *1 Enoch*, the Qumran War Scroll, or *4 Ezra* rarely cite or even refer to the biblical text. Several scholars have made the point that these early apocalypses are largely self-authenticating: the revelatory event itself supplies the necessary validation for the information that is revealed to the seer or prophet.[8] The angel who appears to the seer embodies divine speech, an equation that is glaringly apparent in the proto-apocalyptic visions of Zechariah where the angelic intermediary will eerily and suddenly metamorphose into the deity Himself. Neither God nor the angel appeal to scripture to bolster or supplement their cause. By contrast, later Jewish apocalyptic works like *Sefer Zerubbabel* or the *Nistarot* ('Secrets') *of R. Šimʿōn ben Yoḥai* are thoroughly awash with scriptural diction and citation. The revealing agent, who in both of these instances is identified as the angel Metatron—an entity whose supernal credentials and status in Jewish mystical literature is functionally equivalent to that of God Himself—defers to Bible as the paramount authority to which all external circumstances are subservient. In the Jewish apocalyptic mentality of late antiquity, written scripture

---

[8] Adler, "Introduction," 19-21; see also Michael E. Stone, "Apocalyptic Literature," in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus* (ed. Michael E. Stone; CRINT II.2; Assen and Philadelphia: Van Gorcum and Fortress, 1984), 428-29.

becomes the source of revelation. It acts as a surrogate for the Divine Revealer Who once spoke and brought the universe into being.[9]

This enhanced role for Bible in the perception, mapping, and reading of mundane events is not limited to Jewish contexts. It indeed is quite visible within all those religious communities who align themselves among the heirs of the Abrahamic legacy, including most importantly those who eventually coalesce under the banner of the radically monotheist religious movement that became Islam. Biblical characters, narratives, or conceptual complexes figure upon almost every page of the Qur'ān, and early traditionists like Ka'b al-Aḥbār (d. 656) and Wahb b. Munabbih (d. ca. 728) furnished nascent Islam with a rich assemblage of parascriptural interpretative materials. The interest shown by the Prophet and the initial caliphs in Jerusalem and its *sancta* underscores the esteem with which early Islam invested the terrestrial location of the earlier *scriptural* revelations associated with Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Subsequent textualizing of the Prophet's revelation in scriptural form, whatever the precise historical lineaments of that process, cemented its authority and simultaneously aligned its discourse with and distinguished it from that of the earlier scriptures.

What has been up to now largely unappreciated is the crucial role that Bible, as opposed to Qur'ān, plays in the early Muslim appropriation of an apocalyptic discourse. However, according to Uri Rubin, early Muslim collections of hagiographic and didactic sources 'seem to indicate that Muslim reliance on the Bible began much earlier than is usually assumed by Islamicists,'[10] and to whom we might add, 'Biblicists.' Early Jewish and Christian notices of Islam make no mention of a distinctive Muslim scripture,[11] but instead criticize Muslim scholars for their alleged inability to find biblical warrant for the revelatory claims of Islam. When a number of biblical proof-texts are accordingly produced, Jewish and Christian scripturalists attempt to undermine these Muslim readings of Bible. Bible thus emerges as the crucial battleground for textual and social authority.

---

[9] One logical implication of this argument: early Jewish apocalyptic works failed to ground themselves in Bible because there was no canonical entity extant within their eras (roughly 300 BCE to 100 CE) which would have corresponded to modernist notions of the 'Bible.' For further discussion of this particular point, see James E. Bowley and John C. Reeves, "Rethinking the Concept of 'Bible': Some Theses and Proposals," *Hen* 25 (2003): 3-18.

[10] Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 5; Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995), 22.

[11] 'It is, however, worth recalling that those sources which may with some assurance be dated before the end of the second/eighth century … contain no reference to Muslim scripture.' The quotation comes from Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 58.

A recurrent claim advanced by Muslim exegetes is that the advent of Muḥammad and his climactic position as 'seal of the prophets' are already presaged in the earlier scriptures revealed to the Jews and the Christians; namely, the *Tawrāt* (Torah) and the *Injīl* (Gospel), the qur'ānic terms for the two major divisions of the Christian Bible. Among the texts typically referenced in such discussions is a particularly intriguing oracle found in the book of Isaiah (21:6-7). That text in its Masoretic recension reads as follows:

<div dir="rtl">

כי כה אמר אלי אדני לך העמד המצפה אשר יראה יגיד וראה רכב צמד

פרשים רכב חמור רכב גמל והקשיב קשב רב קשב

</div>

> For thus did my Lord say to me: 'Go, station the watchman. Let him report
>
> what he sees. And should he see chariotry of a team/pair of horses/riders,
>
> chariotry of asses, chariotry of camels, he must pay careful attention, a lot of
>
> attention.'

Insight into the Muslim parsing of this biblical oracle into a prefiguration of the future appearance of Muhammad first emerges from an early tradition relayed by Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767) reporting how the 'People of the Book' (a qur'ānic appellation for religions possessing a sacred scripture, usually shorthand for the Bible) anticipated the advent of a prophet 'whom Jesus announced would be riding a camel' (*rākib al-jamal*). Suliman Bashear's recent exhaustive analysis of this theme locates another testimony to this same tradition in the collection of prophetic legends ascribed to 'Umāra b. Wathīma (d. 902), where it is reported that Ibn Isḥāq transmitted a tradition which stated that 'Isaiah was the one who entrusted the children of Israel with the matter of Jesus and Muḥammad … (saying) "there will come to you the one with the camel, meaning Muḥammad (upon whom be peace!)."'[12] The curious confusion in attribution between 'Jesus' (*'Īsā*) and 'Isaiah' (*Iš'iyā*) is one that is easily accomplished in an Arabophone environment, and given the lexical evidence of Isa 21:6-7 versus the silence about 'camel-riders' among the huge assortment of logia

---

[12] Suliman Bashear, "Riding Beasts on Divine Missions: An Examination of the Ass and Camel Traditions," *JSS* 37 (1991): 37-75, slightly emended quotation cited from 41. For the Arabic text, see Raif Georges Khoury, *Les legends prophétiques dans l'Islam: Depuis le Ier jusqu'au IIIe siècle de l'Hégire = Kitāb bad' al-ḫalq wa-qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1978), 300 (text).

attributed to Jesus, it is almost certain that 'Isaiah' should be the prophetic name correctly associated with this source.[13]

Confirmation of the centrality of the Isaiah oracle for Muslim prophetology can be gleaned from the writings of Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), an important ninth-century Muslim collector of traditions surrounding biblical characters and events. Under the summary entry for the prophet Isaiah in his *Kitāb al-maʿārif*, he tersely states: 'Isaiah is the one who annunciated the Prophet (upon whom be peace!) and (provided) his description, and he (also) annunciated Jesus.'[14] More pertinent information emerges from his *Dalāʾil al-nubuwwa* or *Proofs of Prophethood* wherein after a recognizable paraphrase of Isa 21:6-9 he deciphers the critical images:

> And in Isaiah it is said: 'I was told, Stand guard as a watchman and watch, and
>
> report what you see. I said, I see two riders approaching, one of them on an
>
> ass, and the other on a camel. One of the two said to the other, Fallen is
>
> Babylon and its graven idols.' The one riding the ass is taken by us and by the
>
> Christians to be the Messiah [i.e., Jesus]. Now, if the one on the ass is the
>
> Messiah, then why should not the man riding the camel be Muḥammad … is
>
> not the Prophet just as well known for his riding the camel as the Messiah is
>
> for riding an ass?[15]

Ibn Qutayba's rendering of Isa 21:6-7 provides a linguistic key for the Muslim parsing of Isaiah's imagery: Hebrew צמד פרשים 'a pair of riders' supplies the 'two riders,' who are then further qualified as riding an 'ass' and 'camel' respectively. Christian exegesis is credited as the source for the messianic identity of the figure riding the ass, an interpretation which indeed garners support from Christian readings of Zech 9:9 and Gospel enactments of this same passage. From the perspective of Islam the name 'Messiah' denotes

---

[13] The identical confusion of attributions (i.e., ʿĪsā/Išʿiyā) is visible in what was originally a ninth-century Muslim polemical tract against Christians, where Jesus is quoted as saying: 'Convert, O Jerusalem, until the time when the one who rides on an ass comes to you. Then will come after him the one who rides a camel.' See Jean-Marie Gaudeul, "The Correspondence Between Leo and ʿUmar: ʿUmar's Letter Rediscovered?" *Islamochristiana* 10 (1984): 139.

[14] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-maʿārif* (ed. Tharwat ʿUkkāsha; 2d ed.; Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1969), 50. Note also Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*: 'Isaiah was the one who annunciated Jesus and Muḥammad (upon whom be peace!)'; text cited by Martin Schreiner, "Zur Geschichte der Polemik zwischen Juden und Muhammedanern," *ZDMG* 42 (1888): 627 n.10.

[15] Translation adapted from that of Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 272.

Jesus, the final prophet sent to Israel. The remaining rider mounted upon a camel and who syntactically and temporally arrives after the ass-rider can be none other than Muḥammad.[16]

These essential points recur in a number of contemporary and later Muslim expositions of this passage in Isaiah. They figure in the interreligious disputation literature which begins to flourish near the end of the eighth century CE. The Nestorian patriarch Timothy I attempts to refute the Muslim interpretation of Isa 21:7 in the course of his fictional debate with the 'Abbāsid caliph al-Mahdī (775-785). In the epistle of Ibn al-Layth, a missionary tract allegedly commissioned by Hārūn al-Rashīd to prompt the conversion of the Byzantine emperor Constantine VI (780-797), Isa 21:6-9 prominently functions as a proof-text for the predicted advent of Muḥammad. The same Isaiah passage also assumes a visible role in the apocryphal correspondence which reportedly transpired between 'Umar II (717-720) and the iconoclast emperor Leo III (717-741), where 'Umar is represented as stating: 'the prophet Isaiah gives testimony to our lawgiver as being the equal and the like of Jesus when he speaks in his vision of two riders, the one on an ass and the other on a camel, so why do you not believe in that?'[17] Later Muslim traditionists knowledgeable in Bible like the Christian convert 'Alī Ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī,[18] the learned polymath Bīrūnī,[19] and the Ismā'īlī propagandist Kirmānī reiterate the significance of Isaiah's testimony, with the last named scholar visibly bolstering the Muslim argument via a meticulous transliteration into Arabic script of a slightly variant Hebrew version of Isa 21:6-7.[20] In every case where Muslim scholars utilize this proof-text, attention is drawn to the 'two riders' mentioned in verse 7, the first of whom is mounted upon an ass and the second upon a camel.

Now this is in fact an unusual reading of the Hebrew text of Isa 21:7, for the Masoretic vocalization of the final two occurrences of the Hebrew grapheme רכב as the collective noun *rekhev* 'chariotry' in fact clashes with the Muslim understanding of this form as a singular participle *rōkhev* 'rider' or 'one who

---

[16] Note the quotation from Tha'labī cited by Martin Schreiner, "Beiträge zur Geschichte der Bibel in der arabischen Literatur," in *Semitic Studies in Memory of Rev. Dr. Alexander-Kohut* (ed. George Alexander Kohut; Berlin: S. Calvary & Co., 1897), 498 n.5: 'behold, the rider of the ass will come to you, and afterwards the one associated with the camel.' See also the lengthy text quoted by Ignaz Goldziher, "Ueber muhammedanische Polemik gegen Ahl al-kitāb," *ZDMG* 32 (1878): 377.

[17] Arthur Jeffery, "Ghevond's Text of the Correspondence Between Umar II and Leo III," *HTR* 37 (1944): 278. Jeffery's study should now be used in tandem with Gaudeul, "Correspondence," 109-57.

[18] See Adang, *Muslim Writers*; Theodore Pulcini, *Exegesis as Polemical Discourse: Ibn Ḥazm on Jewish and Christian Scriptures* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 23-25.

[19] Bīrūnī, *Āthār al-bāqiya 'an-il-qurūn al-khāliya* (ed. C. E. Sachau; repr. Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1923), 19.

[20] Paul Kraus, "Hebräische und syrische Zitate in ismā'īlitischen Schriften," *Der Islam* 19 (1930): 246.

rides.' However, the evidence supplied by the extant Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Aramaic versions of this passage in Isaiah, textual recensions which predate the linguistic labors of the Masoretes upon biblical manuscripts, clearly demonstrates that those who were reading Isaiah in the pre-Masoretic age were pronouncing the consonantal skeleton רכב as *rōkhev* 'rider; one riding' (i.e., as if it were written רוכב) in the latter two of the three occurrences. That this participial reading was in fact the more primitive one for the Hebrew text of Isa 21:7 is confirmed by the graphic evidence supplied by the Qumran Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa[a]) which has רוכב for רכב in both instances.[21]

These considerations suggest the Muslim reading of the grammar of Isa 21:7 is not unusual at all; rather, it is in line with a normative understanding of the linguistic forms registered there in the centuries prior to the activity of the Masoretes. By contrast, it is the Muslim interpretation of the semantic message of this passage that is truly distinctive. What renders it even more distinctive is the fact that no Jewish or Christian scholar prior to the advent of Islam gives special heed to the possible messianic or eschatological dimensions of Isa 21:6-7: it does not figure among the limited number of texts customarily held by either Judaism or Christianity to be expressive of such matters. Instead, when Jewish and Christian writers do display cognizance of the predictive force of Isa 21:6-7, it is always in reaction to its manipulation by Muslims, as in the aforementioned polemical dialogues between Christian prelates or kings and Muslim caliphs, or in the infamous *Iggeret Teiman* of Maimonides. This circumstance makes it likely that the messianic and prophetological reading of Isa 21:6-7 was an original Muslim reading of this biblical text, primarily directed toward a Christian audience in light of its narratological sequencing of the arrivals of 'Christ' (treated as a proper name in Islam) and 'Muḥammad.' Since Jewish messianism by and large looked to the future for its realization, a Muslim argument reliant on an already manifested 'messiah' would have been no more impressive or effective than its synonymous Christian analogues. Finally, non-Islamicate biblical scholars, whether Christian or Jewish, betray no knowledge of the apologetic possibilities discovered by Muslim exegetes in this passage.

It is therefore of signal interest to note that there is at least one instance where it appears that this potentially compelling Muslim reading of a biblical text was adopted by a Jewish exegete, reformulated, and semantically subverted in order to generate a new insight into the imminence of the messianic age. A

---

[21] PAM 7016 is a photograph of the relevant column.

popular post-Muslim Jewish apocalypse introduced as the *Nistarot* or '*Secrets' of R. Šimʿōn ben Yoḥai*, a

work whose contents span the rise and fall of the Umayyad caliphate, contains in what is arguably its most

primitive redaction[22] a surprisingly positive endorsement of the prophetic mission of Muḥammad and an

intriguing affirmation of the divinely mandated role of Islam in the deliverance of Israel from Byzantine

rule:

> R. Šimʿon answered and said: 'From whence are they ([i.e., Ishmael = Islam]
>
> understood as) our deliverance?' He (Metatron) said to him: 'Did not Isaiah
>
> the prophet speak thusly? "And should he see chariotry of a pair of riders, one
>
> riding an ass, (and) one riding a camel" (Isa 21:7).' Why did he (i.e., Isaiah)
>
> put the 'rider of an ass' before the 'rider of a camel'? Should he not instead
>
> have said 'rider of a camel, rider of an ass'? (No, the textual sequence means
>
> that) when the one who rides the camel (Ishmael or Muḥammad) emerges, the
>
> kingdom ruled by the 'one mounted upon an ass' (Zech 9:9) has manifested
>
> (lit. 'sprouted') by his (i.e., Ishmael's or Muḥammad's) agency. Another
>
> opinion: 'rider of an ass' (means) at the (same) time when he 'rides upon an
>
> ass' (Zech 9:9). Consequently they (Ishmael) are a deliverance for Israel like
>
> the deliverance (associated with) the 'one mounted upon an ass' (Zech 9:9)[23]

In this extraordinary text, R. Šimʿon is represented as being understandably skeptical about the possible

redemptive import of the most recent invasion of the Land of Israel by yet another army of foreigners.

Questioning Metatron, his angelic interlocutor, about Ishmael's allegedly positive role, the angel responds

by quoting Isa 21:7, a favorite passage which Muslim scholars of Bible invoke as proof of Muḥammad's

prefigured advent. Interestingly, the author of this Jewish text accepts the Muslim reading of the 'camel-

rider' as a coded reference to the coming of Islam.[24] Moreover, the 'messianic' decipherment of the 'ass-

---

[22] For a brief discussion of the extant manuscript and print editions of the cycle of apocalypses associated with R. Šimʿon ben Yoḥai, including their interrelationships, see the introductory remarks to the chapter devoted to the *Nistarot* within the present work.

[23] Adolph Jellinek, ed., *Bet ha-Midrasch: Sammlung kleiner Midraschim und vermischter Abhandlungen aus der jüdischen Literatur* (6 vols.; Leipzig, 1853-77; repr., Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrmann, 1938), 3:78.24-30.

[24] Earlier in this same text the author had acknowledged the prophetic status of Muḥammad.

rider' is also retained, but it is recalibrated to accord with Jewish expectations.[25] Since the messiah is associated with events taking place in the future, at the End of Days, and the 'camel-rider' has already or is in the process of arriving now, should not Isaiah have reversed the syntactical order of his epithets so as to match their historical sequence? Did the Messiah actually come prior to the advent of Muḥammad?

Instead of conceding this exegetical point to Islam (and Christianity), the author(s) of the present midrash ingeniously undermine a segmented understanding of the 'riders' by reminding their audience that Isaiah envisioned them as a 'pair': they are not diachronic but synchronic figures. The messianic age dawns, or to employ the terminology of the apocalypse, 'sprouts' at the same time that Ishmael arrives. The military defeat and expulsion of Edom (Christian Rome) by Ishmael (Islam) in seventh-century Palestine creates the necessary conditions for the triumph of Jacob (Israel). The vicissitudes of history would temper and eventually sour this textually based example of Jewish enthusiasm, generating in turn a series of bitter reassessments and recriminations against what was originally a positive view of Muḥammad's prophetic mission and the early Islamic hegemony over Eretz Israel.[26]

Finally it is clear that the 'judaized' interpretation of Isa 21:7 advanced in the *Nistarot*, a work compiled from smaller complexes of apocalyptic traditions emanating from the mid-seventh to the mid-eighth centuries CE, presumes as do all the extant pre-Masoretic versions of this oracle a 'singular' understanding of the animal-riders; namely, one figure riding an ass (רכב חמור(ו)), and another figure riding a camel (רכב גמל(ו)). Given the Islamicate cultural context for the bulk of Masoretic textual activity, it is tempting to argue that the inscribed vocalization of the key word רכב in its final two occurrences in Isa 21:7 as *rekhev* in place of the demonstrably older traditional reading *rōkhev* signals a conscious yet subtle polemical move on the part of the Masoretic enterprise. Even less subtle is the roughly contemporary Arabic 'translation' (*tafsīr*) of Isa 21:7 by R. Saadya Gaon, where the single 'ass-rider' and lone 'camel-rider' of the pre-Masoretic versions become 'peoples (!) who are riders of asses and camels,'[27] a pluralizing rendition which effectively sabotages its prophetological import. Since Isa 21:6-7 had

---

[25] The association of the 'ass' (חמור) with the Davidic messiah has an early basis in biblical texts like Deut 33:17 and Zech 9:9. See, e.g., *Gen. Rab.* 75.6 (Theodor-Albeck, 892-93) and the annotations supplied there.

[26] Note the versions of this portion of *Nistarot* that survive in manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah, as well as the print editions of *'Atidot* and *Prayer*.

[27] קום רכאב חמיר ורכאב גמאל. Judaeo-Arabic text cited from the edition of Yehuda Ratzaby, *Saadya's Translation and Commentary on Isaiah* (Qiryat Ono: Makhon Mishnat ha-Rambam, 1993), 42.

enjoyed some scholarly recognition even within some Jewish circles as a viable proof-text for Islam's

divine mandate,[28] it is not difficult to imagine later generations of textual critics seizing this opportunity to

counter and subvert a culturally influential yet doctrinally 'flawed' textual reading.

Islam and Imperial Eschatology

The synchronic understanding of the relationship between the advent of Islam and the appearance of

the Messiah pioneered by this late antique Jewish interpretation of Isa 21:6-7 received powerful scriptural

support from another influential exegetical motif which is already present in some of the earliest Jewish

apocalyptic compositions. The notion that the world would experience a succession of four world empires

followed by the advent of the eschaton, sometimes referred to as the 'four kingdoms' theory,[29] is one with

deep roots in the apocalyptic mentalities of the eastern Mediterranean world. Its articulation in the dream-

visions reported in Daniel 2 (where the kingdoms are signaled by metals) and Daniel 7 and 8 (where the

kingdoms are symbolized by animals) forms the textual basis for its subsequent elaboration in both the

Jewish and Christian interpretative traditions. As originally conceived, the four kingdoms were correlated

with the 'universal' empires of Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, and Macedonia (alternatively Babylonia, Media,

Persia, and Macedonia), but the social impact of a lengthy Roman domination of the East prompted a

conceptual realignment which came to identify Rome as the fourth and final kingdom which would hold

sway over humanity until the coming of the end.[30]

The advent of Islam and its subsequent territorial expansion and administrative hegemony during

the seventh and following threatened to disrupt the tidy symmetry of this hermeneutical formula. But time

had to pass and recognition of its dominance had to be grudgingly achieved before the Kingdom of Ishmael

could be admitted into an 'official' playbill of wicked empires. Early Christian notices considered the Arab

invasion to be no more than a temporary irruption of barbarian raiders from beyond the boundaries of

---

[28] Moritz Steinschneider, *Polemische und apologetische Literatur in arabischer Sprache zwischen Muslimen, Christen und Juden, nebst Anhängen verwandten Inhalts* (Leipzig, 1877; repr., Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1966), 329.

[29] See the classic study of J. W. Swain, "The Theory of the Four Monarchies: Opposition History under the Roman Empire," *CP* 35 (1940): 1-21.

[30] N. R. M. de Lange, "Jewish Attitudes to the Roman Empire," in *Imperialism in the Ancient World: The Cambridge University Research Seminar in Ancient History* (ed. P. D. A. Garnsey and C. R. Whittaker; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 271.

Roman civilization, at best God's punishment of Christians for their continual doctrinal and behavioral lapses, and at worst a prolepsis of the looming hordes of Gog and Magog poised to sweep across the steppes from the north as part of the endgame of history.[31] The Syriac *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, an extremely influential Christian text dating from the final decades of the seventh century, emphasized that the Muslims were 'a fiery trial for all Christians,' a crucible for purifying the faithful and exposing sinners, opportunists, and apostates.[32] Even when an imperial value was awarded Islam, it was often the case that Islam's domination was judged to be temporary: Rome would eventually overcome and supplant the Kingdom of Ishmael and thus reassume its scripturally preordained place as the final universal monarchy before God restores Israel at the time of the End.[33]

The incorporation of Islam into Jewish expressions of imperial eschatology[34] first emerges textually in a fascinating compilation of aggadic traditions known as the *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*, a work probably emanating from the Land of Israel during the eighth or early ninth centuries CE (more on the character and structure of this collection is contained in the introduction to the section treating the logion of R. Ishmael *infra*). Unexpurgated manuscript editions of this work feature several passages which are harshly critical of the historical realities and ideological claims of Islamic rule. There is however at least one tradition which takes an intriguingly positive view of the arrival of Ishmael which harmonizes with and even extends the common scriptural warrant explored in the previous discussion. The setting for this last tradition is an eschatological exposition of Abraham's 'covenant of the pieces' (Gen 15:7-21), a biblical text whose verbal components had long provided meditative fodder for those exegetes who were convinced, given Abraham's stature as progenitor of Israel, that God must have revealed to him at some point the periods of suffering which his seed would endure at the hands of gentile oppressors.[35] In earlier interpretations of Abraham's

---

[31] Note the testimonies cited by Walter Emil Kaegi, "Initial Byzantine Reactions to the Arab Conquest," *CH* 38 (1969): 139-49.

[32] *Apoc. Ps-Meth.* 11.18; 13.4, following the stichometry of *Die syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius* (ed. G. J. Reinink; 2 vols.; CSCO 540-541, scrip. syri 220-221; Louvain: E. Peeters, 1993), 1:32, 36.

[33] So *Apoc. Ps-Meth.* 13.6-15. This understanding goes beyond the speculative decodings of Daniel's 'four kingdoms' scheme and relies on relatively straightforward readings of biblical texts like Gen 25:26; Ezek 25:14; and Obad 1:18. Note also *b. Yoma* 10a, where Rav argues that the contemporary Sasanian hegemony must be at least temporarily superseded by Rome before the coming of the messianic age.

[34] Islamicate Christian writers (Sebeos; *Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*) begin identifying Islam with Daniel's fourth kingdom in the late seventh and early eighth centuries.

[35] E.g., *Mek*. Yitro, Baḥodesh §9 (Horovitz-Rabin, 236.5-11); *Gen. Rab.* 44.15, 17 (Theodor-Albeck, 437, 439-40).

vision, Rome concludes the list. But one manuscript version of *Pirqe R. El.* §28 proposes the following

scheme:[36]

> R. Eleazar said: The Holy One, blessed be He, showed our ancestor Abraham
>
> (during the covenant) between the pieces the four kingdoms who would rule,
>
> but then pass away, for Scripture says: 'He (i.e., God) said to him, Get Me a
>
> three-year old heifer, etc.' (Gen 15:7). The heifer: this is the kingdom of
>
> Edom, for it was like 'a trampling heifer' (Jer 50:11; cf. Hos 10:11) as
>
> Scripture says: 'fearsome and terrible and very strong, etc.' (Dan 7:7). The
>
> goat: this is the kingdom of Greece, as Scripture says: 'and the he-goat grew
>
> very large, etc.' (Dan 8:8). The three-year old ram: this is the kingdom of the
>
> Medes and Persians, as Scripture says: 'the ram which I saw' (Dan 8:6); (the
>
> reference to) 'horns' (ibid.) means the kings of the Medes and the Persians.
>
> And the turtledove? These are the Ishmaelites, as Scripture states: 'not like[37]
>
> his posterity and not, etc.' (Dan 11:4).[38] It does not express it in the language
>
> of the Torah (i.e., Hebrew) but Aramaic, where תור means 'bull.'[39] Woe to
>
> the land when he yokes male and female: they will open up and break up the
>
> entire earth, as Scripture says: 'the fourth beast will be the fourth kingdom …
>
> it will consume the entire earth, and trample it and crush it' (Dan 7:23). And
>
> the young bird: these are Israel, as Scripture says: 'My dove in the cleft places
>
> of the rocks' (Cant 2:14).

Immediately noticeable in this eschatological reading of Abraham's sacrifice is a contemporary

recalibration of the standard formulaic sequence of four world empires. Unlike its Hellenistic and Roman

prototypes, this new scheme begins with Edom; i.e., Rome, whose imperial hegemony is succeeded in turn

by Greece, Persia, and Ishmael. It is not difficult to discern in this series of biblical labels a tolerably

---

[36] HUC Ms. 75 fol. 38b lines 11-22. It should be noted that portions of the following exposition of Gen 15:7-21 circulate independently in varying recensions in manuscript and print form under the rubric *'Aggadat R. Ishmael*. See, e.g., Yehudah Even-Shmuel, *Midreshey Ge'ullah* (2d ed.; Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1954), 144-52.

[37] Masoretic text reads לאחריתו instead of manuscript's כאחריתו.

[38] See below.

[39] Hebrew תור 'turtledove' does not provide a satisfactory image for the brutal power wielded by the fourth beast!

accurate reproduction of the actual historical progression of foreign dominance over Israel during the first eight centuries of the Common Era. The toponym 'Edom' apparently encodes the western or Latin principate, whereas 'Greece' represents the subsequent eastern or Byzantine suzerainty exercised from Constantinople. The 'kingdom of the Medes and Persians' recognizes the Sasanian domination of the eastern Mediterranean provinces during the early decades of the seventh century, and 'Ishmael' is of course a cipher for the Arabs or Islam.

An even greater historical precision is supplied by the biblical proof-text from Dan 11:4. As is customary in midrash, the entire biblical verse and its surrounding context must be taken into account for an appreciation of its full relevance. According to Dan 11:2, a strong Persian ruler will attempt to wage war against 'Greece' (מלכות יון). This Persian aggression will be successfully opposed by a 'mighty king,' but he will nevertheless be unable to maintain hold upon his domain: it will disintegrate and fall into the hands of those who 'are not his posterity,' and who 'will not rule as he ruled' (11:4). While these verses in Daniel originally pertained to Alexander's victory over the Achaemenid Empire and the contentious succession of the Diadochoi after the world conqueror's premature death in Babylon, they also possess a peculiar resonance for the military and cultural upheavals of the first half of the seventh century CE. The Persian ruler can be seen as Khosroes II, the Greek king as Heraclius, and the latter's non-Greek heirs as the Arab conquerors of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt.

More to the point however is the continuation of this passage from *Pirqe de R. Eliezer* which forms an intriguing exegetical dovetail with the way that the *Nistarot of R. Šim'on ben Yoḥai* interprets Isa 21:7 to synchronize the advent of Islam with the appearance of the messiah:[40]

> R. Joshua said: Abraham took his sword and sliced every one of them into two
> (pieces), as Scripture states: 'he sliced them down the middle' (Gen 15:10).
> And if he had not sliced them, the world could not have endured. Does it
> endure on account of their power? Rather, it is because he sliced them that
> their power was weakened. He offered each piece opposite its corresponding
> half, as Scripture says: 'he placed each of its pieces opposite its corresponding
> half, but the bird he did not divide' (Gen 15:10). And the young bird, the dove

---

[40] HUC Ms. 75 fol. 39a lines 5-17, 22-24.

(גוזל בן יונה), he left alive, as Scripture says: 'the bird (הצפר) he did not divide' (Gen 15:10). You learn from this that the only bird present in the scriptural passage is a single dove, all by itself.[41] The raptor came down upon them (the pieces) to scatter them and destroy them, and the raptor is simply the son of David symbolized as a stained raptor (עיט צבוע), as Scripture says: 'and the raptor came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away' (Gen 15:11). (Also) 'His inheritance was stained for him;[42] the raptor surrounded it. Come, gather every wild animal; bring them to feed' (Jer 12:9). When the sun rose in the east, Abraham sat down and waved his hand to arrange it so that the raptor would not prevail over them <u>until the evening had come</u> (עד שיבא הערב) … <u>it is not before the coming of the evening that Israel's light will emerge</u> (עד שלא יבוא הערב יצמח אורו לישראל), as Scripture states: 'it will come to pass that <u>at the time of evening</u> (לעת ערב) light will come into being …' (Zech 14:7).

It is the concluding assemblage of comments and proof-texts which provide a thematic and perhaps temporal connection with the positive reading of the coming of Islam we encountered above in more primitive versions of the *Nistarot*. Therein occur an arresting series of double entendres which textually juxtapose the redemptive arrival of the messiah (the raptor of Gen 15:11) with the onset of 'evening' (ערב). One cannot fail to notice, however, that the Hebrew character string which is read as 'evening' (*'erev*) is consonantally identical with that for *'arav* 'Arabia' and, if supplemented orally with a single vocalic suffix, could be sounded as *'aravī* 'Arab.' This graphic polyvalence invites us to read the final part of the exposition as follows: '[Abraham] waved his hand to arrange it so that the raptor [= the messiah] would not prevail over them [i.e., the four kingdoms] until Arabia/the Arab had come'; similarly, 'it is not before the coming of Arabia/the Arab that Israel's light [= the messiah] will emerge,' and 'as Scripture states "it will come to pass that at the time of Arabia/(the) Arab light will come into being" (Zech 14:7).'

<hr>

[41] As was sketched in the preceding exposition, the young bird (גוזל), which should be correlated with the dove (יונה) of Cant 2:14, represents Israel. Hebrew תר of Gen 15:9 ('turtledove') might conceivably be another bird, but the use of the singular צפר in 15:10 'proves' that only one bird is present. Therefore the grapheme תר cannot be Hebrew 'turtledove' but must be Aramaic 'bull.'

[42] *Sic*. Masoretic text reads צבוע נחלתי לי.

As previously in the *Nistarot*, here also the timing of messianic redemption for Israel can be read as being directly dependent upon the success of the Muslim conquest.

It is surely the case that the competing vocalizations of *'arav(ī)* 'Arabia, Arab' for *'erev* 'evening' in the above instances predate an exegetical identification of Daniel's fourth kingdom with Ishmael. There exists otherwise a disturbing tension between the notion of the Arabs as the climactic brutal empire which the messiah is expected to destroy and that of the Arabs as the longed-for harbingers of the messianic age. The resemblance of this latter evaluation of the eschatological import of the seventh-century Arab invasion to that put forward in early versions of the *Nistarot of R. Šim'on ben Yoḥai* suggests their common indebtedness to and perhaps origin among Near Eastern Jewish circles who were inclined to read the emergence of Islam through the lens of Jewish messianism.[43] But, as in the case of the revisionist editions of the *Nistarot*, pessimism overtakes subsequent generations who suffer the vicissitudes of Muslim hegemony and generates fresh readings of the scriptural charters which emend and reject the earlier interpretations. The reluctant branding of 'Ishmael' as the 'fourth kingdom' is undoubtedly the most important of these negative reactions. Perhaps the apex of this development is reached in the attachment of a terse exclamation to the identification of Ishmael as the fourth kingdom found in another later midrashic collection: 'they (i.e., the Ishmaelites) were created solely as fuel for stoking Gehinnom (!)'[44]

The Architectonics of Near Eastern Apocalyptic

Near Eastern Jewish, Christian, and Muslim apocalypses of late antiquity and the early medieval era exhibit a series of remarkable structural correspondences which reach across the permeable boundaries of ethnic and religious affiliation. Despite the inevitable individual doctrinal variations, these apocalypses reveal a number of common motifs, dramatis personae, and discursive sequences (see table on following page). One explanation for their relative univocality is undoubtedly the largely shared Abrahamic; i.e., 'biblical' substrate which undergirds the apocalyptic ideology of this region and epoch. Another influential

---

[43] Fundamentally important in this regard is the impressive series of arguments brought forward by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). See also Uri Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur'ān: The Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-Image* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 17; Princeton: Darwin Press, 1999), esp. 11-52 on 'Judeo-Muslims.'

[44] *Yal. Šim.* Torah §76.

factor shaping a common scriptural culture involves the phenomenon of textual commerce, whereby the

literary products of one culture are appropriated, tweaked, adapted, adjusted, and rebutted by others who

are themselves the producers and/or consumers of competing apocalypses. Individual conversions to the

dominant religious affiliation provided a vehicle for the parallel movement of writings and teachings from

one community to another, thereby augmenting (often via linguistic translation from Hebrew and Syriac

into Arabic) the scriptural and parascriptural resources available for apocalyptic reasoning and speculation.

A prominent example underscoring the fundamental importance of textual dynamics for the

explication of signal apocalyptic personages and themes can be found among the tangled morass of

traditions which surround the clone-like characters of Armilos and the Dajjāl, two dark and sinister figures

who mimic the role of the Christian Antichrist within Jewish and Muslim apocalyptic respectively (see

table). While the figure of the Antichrist has garnered its share of scholarly attention over the past two

Structural Comparison of Near Eastern Apocalyptic

Christian	Jewish	Muslim
1. deterioration of society & nature a. wars between the 'kingdoms' b. pestilence, famine, earthquakes, etc.	1. deterioration of society & nature a. wars between the 'kingdoms' b. pestilence, famine, earthquakes, etc.	1. deterioration of society & nature a. wars between the 'kingdoms' b. pestilence, famine, earthquakes, etc.
2. advent of Gog & Magog a. more animal than human b. eat corpses, drink blood, etc.	[2. advent of Gog & Magog (although its position varies)]	[2. advent of Yajūj wa-Majūj (although its position varies)]
3. Rome reigns supreme a. necessary for eschaton b. Last Emperor abdicates c. in Jerusalem	3. Rome/Ishmael reigns supreme a. necessary for eschaton b. advent of Messiah b. Joseph c. comes to Jerusalem d. sometimes restores Temple	3. Final clash of Rome/Ishmael a. fall of Constantinople b. aided by Jewish 'tribes' d. recovery of Temple vessels
4. advent of Antichrist a. conceived of a foul union involving Satan & Jews in Palestine b. assumes royal power in or near Jerusalem (sometimes restores Temple) c. decrees he must be worshiped	4. advent of Armilos a. conceived of a foul union involving Satan, gentiles, & a statue in Rome b. comes to Jerusalem c. decrees he must be worshiped	4. advent of Dajjāl a. either of human or demonic origin; sometimes termed a 'Satan' b. advances on Jerusalem

as God d. many are deceived by him, especially the Jews e. holds sway for 3 ½ years	as God d. many are deceived by him, especially the gentiles	d. many are deceived by him, especially the Jews[45]
5. mission of Enoch & Elijah a. refute & denounce the Antichrist b. are slain by him	5. confrontation with Messiah b. Joseph a. refutes & denounces Antichrist b. is slain by him	5. parousia of ʿĪsā al-Masīḥ b. slays the Dajjāl
6. parousia of Christ a. accompanied by angels & Cross b. resurrection of Enoch & Elijah c. general resurrection of the faithful d. slays Antichrist with 'breath' e. all malefactors & Satan dispatched to hell f. faithful rewarded with eternal life	6. advent of Messiah b. David a. accompanied by angels & Elijah b. resurrection of Messiah b. Joseph c. general resurrection of faithful plus ingathering of the exiles d. slays Armilos with 'breath' e. rewards & punishments for faithful and apostates f. new heaven, new earth, new Temple, etc.	6. advent of Mahdī

centuries of critical scholarship,[46] less attention has been directed by students of apocalyptic to this entity's analogues within Jewish and Muslim eschatology. It is nevertheless certain that a distinctively Christian construct—i.e., the Antichrist—forms the conceptual fountainhead for the subsequent portrayals of the villainous Jewish Armilos and the deceptive Muslim Dajjāl.

References to the character 'Armilos' (ארמילוס) begin to surface in Hebrew liturgical poetry of the late sixth or early seventh centuries CE. His initial appearance within the narrative stream of a Jewish apocalypse is in *Sefer Zerubbabel*, a Hebrew pseudepigraphon rooted within the bitter wars of the 620s between Heraclius and the final Sasanian rulers for possession of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. The name of Armilos also recognizably figures in geographically contiguous Christian sources: the roughly contemporary (634?) *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati* calls the maleficent 'little horn' of Dan 7:8 'Satan' and 'Erēmolaos' (Ἐρημόλαος), a Greek neologism which etymologically connotes 'destroyer of a people,' while the late seventh-century Syriac *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* wields this same name

---

[45] The 'misguided' joining of the *beney Mosheh* to Abū ʿĪsā (cf. Maimonides, *Iggeret Teiman*) probably belongs here.

[46] Wilhelm Bousset, *The Antichrist Legend: A Chapter in Christian and Jewish Folklore* (trans. A. H. Keane; London: Hutchinson, 1896; repr., Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999); Gregory C. Jenks, *The Origins and Early Development of the Antichrist Myth* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991); Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

(ܐܪܡܝܠܘܣ) for the 'king of Rome.'[47] R. Saadya Gaon in the tenth century dubs the Jewish Armilos legend

an 'ancestral teaching,' phraseology he uses elsewhere when introducing talmudic citations, but here

intended probably to refer to *Sefer Zerubbabel*.[48] Physical descriptions of Armilos are plentiful and borrow

from the same lexicon of the grotesque which was previously exploited by Christian authors in their vivid

depictions of the Antichrist:[49] of monstrous height and girth, he is also bald, leprous, sometimes sporting

two heads, but with bloodshot crossed eyes. He is usually deaf in one ear, endowed with misshapen or

malformed limbs, and often exhibits the curious attribute of 'green' feet. He is the wicked entity usually

blamed for the slaying of the Messiah of the lineage of Joseph, an initial redemptive figure who has briefly

given Israel hope that the time for national deliverance has dawned, and Armilos superintends a final brutal

persecution of Israel prior to the triumphant emergence of the Messiah of the lineage of David, the hero

who effortlessly dispatches Armilos with but a single piercing glance or lethal exhalation (cf. Isa 11:4).

These peculiar motifs actually mirror similar discursive stages in the plot of contemporary eastern Christian

apocalypses, where the Antichrist murders his irritating prophetic critics Enoch and Elijah and engages in a

persecution of the faithful prior to a final climactic denouement with Jesus who, like his analogue the

Messiah ben David, easily vanquishes his ominous foe.[50]

It is widely accepted among scholars that 'Armilos' is simply a Hebrew approximation of Latin

'Romulus,' the name of the mythical founder of the city of Rome. His prominent role in late antique

Jewish apocalyptic is frequently read as an imaginative representation of the final Roman ruler to exert

imperial control over the Land of Israel; namely, Heraclius (610-641 CE).[51] Having suffered military

setbacks at the hands of the Avars and the Persians and threatened by their combined siege of the capital

---

[47] *Apoc. Ps-Meth.* 9.4-5.

[48] Saadya, *Kitâb al-Amânât wa'l-I'tiqâdât von Sa'adja b. Jûsuf al-Fajjûmî* (ed. S. Landauer; Leiden: Brill, 1880), 238.18; Even-Shmuel, *Midreshey Ge'ullah*, 122 n. *s.v.* הקדמונים. Within the present volume, Armilos appears in the following works: *Sefer Zerubbabel*; *Nistarot* and *Prayer of R. Šim'ōn ben Yoḥai*; the responsum of R. Hai Gaon; *'Otot of R. Šim'ōn ben Yoḥai*; *Ten Signs*; *'Otot ha-Mašiaḥ*; and *Midrash Wa-yosha'*.

[49] See the material cited in Bousset, *Antichrist Legend*, 156-57 and *passim*; also Michael E. Stone and John Strugnell, *The Books of Elijah: Parts 1-2* (SBLTT 18; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979), 28-39.

[50] Similarly it is usually Jesus whom Muslim tradition makes responsible for slaying the Dajjāl. Enoch and Elijah (reading 'Ilyās' in place of the text's 'Idrīs') also harass the Dajjāl in at least one early Muslim eschatological tradition; see Nu'aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-fitan* (ed. S. Zakkār; Beirut: Dār al-Fikr lil-Ṭibā'ah wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 1993), 329-30.

[51] For a summary of the arguments, see Joseph Dan, *Ha-Sippur ha-'ivri be-yemey ha-beyanim: 'Iyyunim be-toldotav* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 40-43.

Constantinople in 626, Heraclius narrowly averted disaster and managed to deal a series of crushing blows to the Sasanian aggressor, thereby reclaiming the eastern provinces lost to Byzantium during the previous two decades. His successful recovery of the holy relic of the True Cross, captured during the Persian looting of Jerusalem in 614, culminated in his personal restoration of it to the city in 630, an event around which highly charged Christian legends would flourish over the following centuries.[52] His infamously personal involvement *à la* his predecessor Constantine with the resolution of ultimately intractable theological issues, including a controversial decree mandating the forced conversion of his Jewish subjects, augments the likelihood that nationalist memory of a seemingly intractable opponent like Heraclius was instrumental in the Jewish construction of the profile of 'Armilos the wicked' (ארמילוס רשיעא).

A prominent scriptural image nourishing the murderous figure of Armilos is that of the treacherous Balaam, the pliable gentile prophet hired to pronounce destructive imprecations upon the newly emergent nation of Israel (Numbers 22-24). David Berger has persuasively demonstrated that Greek 'Erēmolaos' (Ἐρημόλαος) or 'destroyer of a people' is the *philological* (as opposed to the phonetic resemblance with Romulus or the folkloric memory of Heraclius) source for Hebrew 'Armilos,' a linguistic correlation that is signaled by the Oxford *Yeraḥmeel* manuscript version of *Sefer Zerubbabel* (ויחריב עם) and a stock talmudic word-play (*b. Sanh.* 105a) on the name 'Balaam' (בלע עם).[53] Berger further points out that Balaam is in fact textually assimilated to the city-founder Romulus by *Tg.* 1 Chr 1:43, a midrash which identified Belaʿ son of Beʿor (cf. Gen 36:32), the first king of Edom (= Rome), with 'the wicked Balaam son of Beʿor … who joined with the progeny of Esau in order to destroy Jacob and his descendants ….'[54] These textual considerations suggest that the apocalyptic character 'Armilos' is essentially the product of an internal exegetical process whereby the originally Christian type of the Antichrist was lifted, scripturally

---

[52] See Wolfram Brandes, "Heraclius Between Restoration and Reform: Some Remarks on Recent Research," in *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation* (ed. Gerrit J. Reinink and Bernard H. Stolte; Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 35-36; Jan Willem Drijvers, "Heraclius and the *Restitutio Crucis*: Notes on Symbolism and Ideology," in ibid., 175-90.

[53] David Berger, "Three Typological Themes in Early Jewish Messianism: Messiah son of Joseph, Rabbinic Calculations, and the Figure of Armilus," *AJSR* 10 (1985): 155-62. This solution was first proposed in the modern era by Heinrich Graetz ; see Jacob Levy, *Chaldäisches Wörterbuch über die Targumim und einen grossen Theil des rabbinischen Schrifttums* (2 vols.; Leipzig: Baumgärtner, 1867-68), 1:66.

[54] Note also *Tg. Ps.-J.* Gen 36:32 and the commentary of Abraham Ibn Ezra *ad loc.* (see Asher Weiser, ed., *Perushey ha-Torah le-Rabbenu Abraham Ibn Ezra* [3 vols.; Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1977], 1:106).

plotted, and conceptualized, and that the prevalent 'historical' speculations about the possible origins and significance of Armilos are at root fundamentally misplaced.

Nowhere is this tension more evident than in the recent scholarly theorizing surrounding the peculiar mode by which Armilos is said to originate. According to the Jewish texts, Armilos is the product of a foul sexual congress between a demonic entity (Satan or Belial) and a stone statue of a beautiful maiden, usually said to be located in Rome. When the narrative stage is set for his emergence, the stone bursts open and Armilos steps forth, ready to embark on his mission of mayhem and destruction.[55] It has lately become fashionable to see in this birth prodigy a deliberate polemical distortion of contemporary (i.e., seventh-century) Christian iconic imagery:[56] the stone image is most likely a marble statue of Mary; the stone's unnatural intercourse with Satan is probably a parody of the virgin birth; and the wicked Armilos functions as an antitype of the Christian Son of God as world savior. Aside from the final posited correspondence, there is very little concrete evidence to support these proposals and much that smacks of circular reasoning. The prevailing uncritical assumption that apocalyptic texts *must* parrot historical realities has impelled scholars to sift the Christian literary and archaeological remains of the period in a valiant attempt to demonstrate that the figure of Mary, and especially material representations of the Virgin, *must* have played a special role in the imperial ideology of Heraclian Byzantium.

If a more balanced recognition is accorded the textual and specifically scriptural dynamics at work in the narrative construction of late Near Eastern apocalypses, a different and potentially more fruitful hermeneutic emerges. Discerning and identifying the biblical and parascriptural substrates governing their formation and shape could plausibly explain the contextual presence of particular motifs, themes, or characters. With regard to the figure of Armilos, the ominous villain born of a stone, a variant recension of a Hebrew apocalypse entitled *'Otot R. Šimʿōn b. Yōḥai* ('Signs of R. Šimʿōn b. Yōḥai') provides a crucial

---

[55] For certain folkloristic aspects of this episode, see already Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin: S. Calvary & Co., 1902; repr., Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1994), 216-17.
[56] This idea was in fact first elaborated by Israel Lévi, "L'apocalypse de Zorobabel et le roi de Perse Siroès (3)," *REJ* 71 (1920): 58-61. It has been revived and broadened by Martha Himmelfarb, "Sefer Zerubbabel," in *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature* (ed. David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 67-90; and further developed by David Biale, "Counter-History and Jewish Polemics Against Christianity: The *Sefer toldot yeshu* and the *Sefer zerubavel*," *Jewish Social Studies* n.s. 6 (1999): 130-45, and Peter Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 212-16. Of related interest, but which must be used with caution, is the essay by Paul Speck, "The Apocalypse of Zerubbabel and Christian Icons," *JSQ* 4 (1997): 183-90.

interpretative key: 'Armilos b. Satan will come to the wilderness of Moab: this is the Armilos spawned from a stone <u>of whom scripture speaks</u>: '*and he produced the wicked one with the stone*' (Zech 4:7).'[57] The highly cryptic scriptural phrase והוציא את האבן הראשה 'and he will bring out the headstone' from Zech 4:7, a clause which has generated a wide diversity of interpretations among the classical Jewish and Christian commentators, seems to be the ultimate source for the mythogenesis of Armilos. By deliberately sounding the word הראשה (*ha-ro'šah* 'the head, chief') as if it were written הרשע (*ha-raša'* 'the wicked one') and by ignoring its immediate context within the original prophecy of Zechariah,[58] probably an oracle exalting the status of the historical Zerubbabel, an alternate reading can be generated along the lines of the one italicized above. With the accusatory figure of Satan lurking in the immediate narrative vicinity (cf. Zech 3:1-2) of the scriptural prophecy, the already ambiguous actor who performs what the biblical verb והוציא possibly signifies can don an appropriately sinister mask.

Similarly the Muslim *Doppelgänger* of Armilos—the Dajjāl—exhibits clear markers of a heritage which extends backward into the Christian depictions of the Antichrist and laterally to invoke connections with the evolving Jewish myth. Unknown to the Qur'ān, this entity's manifestation as the final deceiver or 'liar' within history serves as one of the signs of the End of Days. Numerous traditions expound the circumstances surrounding his emergence and nefarious exploits, many of which align him with Jewish interests and concerns.[59] As with Armilos and the Antichrist, the Dajjāl is a physical freak: 'the Dajjāl will have pudgy arms, short fingers; (he will be) lacking a neck; lacking an eye; written between his eyes will be *kāfir* ("unbeliever").'[60] Commentators are at odds as to whether he is actually a human or demonic creature (*šayṭān*). A particularly interesting complex of traditions holds that he is currently housed in quarantine on a distant island restrained by a set of iron chains: as the doomsday clock relentlessly ticks

---

[57] Or alternatively 'the wicked one (re)produced with the stone.' Text cited from Arthur Marmorstein, "Les signes du Messie," *REJ* 52 (1906): 184; see also Even-Shmuel, *Midreshey Ge'ullah*, 313.

[58] It seems significant to note that according to a tradition recounted by the learned convert Ka'b al-Aḥbār, the Dajjāl 'is mentioned in the books of the prophets.' See Nu'aym b. Ḥammād, *K. al-fitan* (ed. Zakkār), 329.

[59] For some representative presentations of these traditions, see Armand Abel, "al-Dadjdjāl," *EI*² 2:76-77; Neal Robinson, "Antichrist," *EncQur* 1:107-11; and now especially David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 21; Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), 93-120.

[60] Nu'aym b. Ḥammād, *K. al-fitan* (ed. Zakkār), 328. Note also ibid., 317: 'The Prophet of God said: the Dajjāl will be blind in his left eye; on his forehead will be written *kāfir*, and above his eye will be a thick claw.'

down, 'God breaks a chain every year.'[61] This arresting theme of a sequestered Dajjāl is strikingly

reminiscent of the legendary episode about the 'gates' constructed by Alexander in the far north which

effectively confine the barbarous hordes of Gog and Magog (Arabic Yājūj wa-Mājūj) 'until my Lord's

promise comes to pass' (Q 18:98). Moreover this distinctive story about an enchained eschatological actor

is surely a dark parody of the odd Jewish tradition about an 'imprisoned Messiah' who currently bides his

time in a secluded chamber within Gan Eden:

> The fifth chamber … and there dwell the Messiah of the lineage of David,
>
> Elijah, and the Messiah of the lineage of Ephraim … Elijah takes hold of his
>
> head and allows it to rest on his chest. He encourages him and says to him:
>
> 'Bear the torment and judgment of your Lord while He punishes you for the
>
> sin of Israel, for scripture says "he is pierced for our rebellions, crushed for our
>
> transgressions" (Isa 53:5)—until the time when the End (הקץ) arrives.' Every
>
> Monday, Thursday, Sabbath, and festival day the ancient patriarchs, Moses,
>
> Aaron, David, Solomon, the entire royal line, the prophets, and the pious ones
>
> come to greet him and weep together with him. They express gratitude to him
>
> and say to him: 'Bear the judgment of your Lord, <u>for the End has almost</u>
>
> <u>arrived, and the chains which are on your neck will be snapped off</u> and you
>
> will go forth to freedom!'[62]

When he finally appears, the Dajjāl will purportedly delude and mislead an expanding army of

gullible followers by a convincing exhibition of a series of wondrous miracles. Like Armilos and his

legions, the Dajjāl and his minions will march against the holy sites (including Mecca and Medina) with the

aim of seizing universal dominion, but will finally suffer defeat and extirpation when ʿĪsā (Jesus) descends

from heaven and kills him.[63]

The foregoing example must suffice for the present as an instructive illustration of how a close

study of this literature in tandem with its scriptural substrates can illuminate the varied interdependencies

and thematic echoes which emerge from the apocalyptic texts produced and consumed by Jews, Christians,

---

[61] Nuʿaym b. Ḥammād, *K. al-fitan* (ed. Zakkār), 329.

[62] *Midrash Konen*, from Jellinek, *BHM* 2:29.20-33. Compare also ibid., 2:50.5-9.

[63] Some commentators find an allusion to his *parousia* in the ambiguous opening of Q 43:61: 'he (i.e., Jesus) furnishes knowledge of the (final) Hour.'

and Muslims during the second half of the first millennium of the Common Era. It is an important area of research that has been largely uncultivated by modern western scholars, and hence a comparative study across the religious boundaries of the confessional corpora remains very much in its infancy. One of the more important tasks awaiting students of Near Eastern apocalyptic involves the systematic identification, collation, and publication of the massive number of late antique and early medieval apocalyptic texts lurking in manuscript collections of libraries and research institutes around the world.[64] While the current renascence in interest in the Cairo Genizah manuscripts bodes well for the continued discovery and recovery of Jewish manuscript resources, no analogous effort governs the cataloging and publication of Syriac and Arabic language sources. The recent important publications by Matthias Henze and David Cook exemplify the valuable nature of the textual currency which repays a diligent researcher.[65]

At the same time, a discerning reader cannot fail to recognize the structural role of the Bible in the generation and elaboration of late antique and early medieval Near Eastern apocalyptic scenarios. As has been repeatedly stressed in the foregoing remarks, the external events and actors of mundane existence are mapped upon its textual template, and it is this resultant inscribed pattern that creates meaning in history. For Jews, Christians, and Muslims during Islam's formative period, Bible provides the essential conceptual scheme for locating and reading the signs of the hour.

In order to exemplify these assertions, the next section of the reader presents a gallery of Jewish apocalypses and anthological compilations of end-time events which emanate from around a six hundred year period extending from the Sasanian expansion during the initial decades of the seventh century to approximately the twelfth or thirteenth centuries CE. It incorporates what most scholars recognize to be the most important and influential Jewish specimens of the genre. Unlike their forebears from the Hellenistic and Roman periods of Jewish history, these apocalypses explicitly frame their message in a biblical idiom, thus signaling their conceptual affinity with yet another kind of Jewish exegetical and literary expression widely cultivated during this same period—that of the aggadic midrash. The Bible's centrality to the

---

[64] Two excellent places to start: (1) the various Paris manuscripts of Muslim apocalypses cited by Abel in his *EI²* article on the Dajjāl; and (2) the extensive list of manuscript and early print resources, most of which pertain to and expand upon the biblical Daniel, cited by Moritz Steinschneider, "Apokalypsen mit polemischer Tendenz," *ZDMG* 28 (1874): 647-59; 29 (1875): 163-66.

[65] Matthias Henze, *The Syriac Apocalypse of Daniel: Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 11; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001); Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*; idem, "An Early Muslim Daniel Apocalypse," *Arabica* 49 (2002): 55-96.

midrashic process is well known and universally acknowledged by students of Jewish literary history. An analogous acknowledgement of its equivalent value for postrabbinic apocalyptic compositions is long overdue.

A Note on the Translations

Almost all of the annotated translations which comprise the bulk of the present work were prepared from standard printed and hence easily accessible Semitic language editions of these Jewish apocalypses. The base texts for each rendering are signaled within the introductory remarks to the individual works, and interested readers should consult those editions for continuous versions of the Hebrew or Aramaic text. Occasional variant readings or emendations are included in the translation notes: they stem in large part from suggestions contained in these same editions or from those which are offered in the secondary literature. A limited number of manuscript copies and fragments were consulted by the author during the course of his research, but he has made no systematic attempt to gather all or even most of the extant textual witnesses for any of the compositions featured herein. These translations should therefore not be construed as 'critical' or even 'canonical' editions of these titles, but they can provide some preliminary guidance regarding whether the preparation of such editions might eventually prove feasible. The titles are arranged in roughly chronological order, ranging from the Persian incursions into the Roman Near East during the initial decades of the seventh century to the period of the Crusades (approximately the twelfth or thirteenth centuries CE).

Finally it is surely worth noting that most of the 'later' compilations of apocalyptic lore found in the latter half of Part IV and advertised under titles like *Pirqey* (or *Pereq*) *Mašiaḥ* or *'Aggadat ha-Mašiaḥ* are largely derivative anthologies of talmudic and midrashic discussions of eschatological and messianic themes. They do not exhibit the same kind of compositional integrity that is still visible—in spite of recensional variations—in 'earlier' works like *Sefer Zerubbabel* or the *Nistarot of R. Šimʿon ben Yoḥai*. Medieval manuscripts and early print editions in fact incorporate a fairly hefty number of concise treatises bearing incipits or superscriptions like those listed above, which apart from their basic outline, exhibit few genetic relationships with one another. The question therefore arises whether it is possible, even

intelligible, under such circumstances to make reference (for example) to 'the postrabbinic apocalypse entitled *Pirqey Mašiaḥ*.' Given the physical situation that there are *many* distinct postrabbinic apocalypses which utilize this name, it seems a wiser course to cite the specific manuscript or print edition of *Pirqey Mašiaḥ* (or an analogous anthology) that one is using. This minimalist procedure is adopted when required in the present work.