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**Muhammad the Eschatological Prophet**

It is clear from Stephen Shoemaker's study of traditional narratives of the origins of Islam and the life of Muhammad that these were heavily theologised in order to account for Islam's distinctiveness.<sup>1</sup> Initially the Believers' movement led by Muhammad was an inclusive one concerned for the reform of monotheistic belief in the God of Abraham in preparation for the imminent arrival of the Day of Judgement. Muhammad's followers did not initially distinguish themselves from other Abrahamic monotheists. "Because many, if not most, of the people of the Near East were already ostensibly monotheists, the original Believers' movement can best be characterised as a monotheistic reform movement, rather than as a new and distinct religious confession."<sup>2</sup> Rather, "convinced of the imminence of the Last Judgment, and, feeling themselves surrounded by corruption and sin, they strove to form themselves into a righteous community so as to attain salvation on Judgment Day."<sup>3</sup> One might say that Muhammad had no more intention of establishing a new religion than did Jesus. As with time the Jesus movement felt a need to distinguish itself from its Jewish foundations, so it was with Muhammad's community of believers. And just as Paul would distinguish between the legal requirements of Gentile and Jewish Christians, Muhammad's followers were expected to follow Qur'anic law but Jews could also follow the Torah and Christians the gospel. This chapter will trace an interesting parallelism in the self-understanding of both Jesus and Muhammad as eschatological prophets who would herald the coming of the reign of God and the Day of Judgment.

## **1 Prophets, religious beginnings, and revision**

### **1.1 The Jesus movement**

What the search for the historical Jesus uncovered was the absolute centrality of the notion of Jesus as an eschatological prophet, leading Albert Schweitzer to

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers. At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 87.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

conclude that "The historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma."<sup>4</sup> This is a position that most biblical scholars would hold to this day. However, there remains a tendency among many scholars of the historical Jesus to portray Jesus as a social and ethical reformer in a reflection of the scholar's own values.<sup>5</sup> The same can be said of western scholars who have attempted to present a sympathetic portrait of Muhammad and of Islam to the West.<sup>6</sup> But the idea of Muhammad as an eschatological prophet is just as strange and unfamiliar as is the similar apocalyptic portrait of Jesus. Just as the urgency of Jesus' eschatological message became diminished and reinterpreted with time, so it was with Muhammad's community of believers.

## 1.2 Hagarism

The current revisionism in the study of Islamic origins can trace its beginnings to Patricia Crone and Michael Cook's landmark study *Hagarism*,<sup>7</sup> which although often methodologically flawed has raised questions about the received history of Islam that will not go away. Despite the perceived inadequacy of Crone and Cook's account, its basic thesis seems to stand, putting in doubt the claim that Islam was born in "the full light of history"<sup>8</sup> as the suspicion emerges that traditional historiography was in fact heavily theologised history.

One key indication that early Islamic history has been theologised is its chronology of the Prophet's death, just as in the canonical gospels, where the precise day of Jesus' death makes a theological point. While the synoptic gospels narrate that Jesus died on the day of the Passover so that the Last Supper may be a Passover meal, the Gospel of John describes Jesus' death on the day before, while the Passover lambs are being slaughtered, in order to identify Jesus as the Passover lamb. Similarly with the death of Muhammad, traditional accounts of the life of Muhammad relate that Muhammad died before entering the prom-

<sup>4</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (London: A. & C. Black, 1910), 399.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); Burton L. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995); and Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> In particular one thinks of the works of Karen Armstrong, including *Muhammad: Prophet For our Time* (London: Harper, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. 12 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 464.

ised land, suggesting a strong parallel with Moses. The identification is not accidental, considering that Moses is the prophet mentioned more than any other in the Qur'an. As Shoemaker notes: "Muhammad is frequently modeled directly after the life of Moses, in an effort to shape Muhammad's biography according to the pattern of a biblical prophet."<sup>9</sup> The same tendency is evident in Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as the new Moses handing down the perfection of the Law at the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>10</sup>

## 2 Eschatology in early witnesses to the Believers' movement

Apart from the so-called *Constitution of Medina* there is no extant documentary mention of Muhammad in Arabic for the first seventy years of the Islamic era. According to Donner, the earliest dated inscription mentioning Muhammad is an Egyptian tombstone bearing the date 71 AH.<sup>11</sup> As for the traditional dating of the death of Muhammad, Shoemaker argues that "eleven different sources" from the seventh and eighth centuries, "including one from the Islamic tradition itself, indicate Muhammad's continued survival at the beginnings of Near Eastern conquests."<sup>12</sup>

Although there is a dearth of early texts witnessing to the rise of Islam, those few that we do have from outside of the Islamic tradition give credence to the eschatological character of the early movement. Three of these will be considered below, in very different genres: a Greek apology for Christianity directed at Jews, *The Teaching of James*, recently baptised; a Jewish apocalyptic text, *The Secrets of Rabbi ben Yohai*; and the Armenian *History of Sebeos*. The eschatological content of these Christian and Jewish texts will be compared with the account of the Qur'an.

<sup>9</sup> Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, 114.

<sup>10</sup> The five discourses found in Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7 do not seek to do away with the Torah, but can be understood as a thoroughly rabbinic practice as expressed at the beginning of the mishnaic text *Pirkei Avot 1:1* or *Ethics of the Fathers*: "Make a fence for the Torah," the basic thinking being this maxim is to go beyond the Law in order to increase the likelihood that one will not inadvertently infringe upon the Law. "So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48).

<sup>11</sup> Fred M. Donner, "From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community," *Al-Abhath* 50–51 (2002–2003): 9–53 at 41.

<sup>12</sup> Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, 13.

## 2.1 The Teaching of James, recently baptised

The *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati* is the earliest extant non-Muslim text that refers to the upheaval of the Arab conquests.<sup>13</sup> It is a Greek apologetic written in response to the forced baptism of Jews ordered by Heraclius. Its author argues for the appropriateness of forced conversions, making the case that the Jews should persist in their adopted religion, Christianity. Of special interest here is its record of a supposed discussion between Jacob, a forced convert, with other Jews on recent events within the Byzantine Empire.

When the *andidatus* was killed by the Saracens, I was at Caesarea and I set off by boat to Sykamina. People were saying 'the *andidatus* has been killed,' and we Jews were overjoyed. And they were saying that the prophet had appeared, coming with the Saracens, and that he was proclaiming the advent of the anointed one, the Christ who was to come. I, having arrived at Sykamina, stopped by a certain old man well-versed in scriptures, and I said to him: 'What can you tell me about the prophet who has appeared with the Saracens?' He replied, groaning deeply: 'He is false, for the prophets do not come armed with a sword. Truly they are works of anarchy being committed today and I fear that the first Christ to come, whom the Christians worship, was the one sent by God and we instead are preparing to receive the Antichrist. Indeed, Isaiah said that the Jews would retain a perverted and hardened heart until all the earth should be devastated. But you go, master Abraham, and find out about the prophet who has appeared.' So I, Abraham, inquired and heard from those who had met him that there was no truth to be found in the so-called prophet, only the shedding of men's blood. He says also that he has the keys of paradise, which is incredible.<sup>14</sup>

That the prophet should claim to be the keeper of the keys (cf. Matt 16:19) reflects an early Islamic tradition, Shoemaker suggests.<sup>15</sup> The Jews looked with hope to a deliverer. We shall see this supported by *The Secrets of Rabbi Simon ben Yohai*, to be discussed below. The seventh century was a time of escalating polemic against the Jews, beginning with the conflict with Persia, but reaching a new plateau in response to the Muslim conquests. After all, it was not yet clear that Islam was a new religious threat.<sup>16</sup> Neither does it seem, according to the testimony of some sources, that Muslims considered Christians a religious adversary. According to the Nestorian patriarch Isho'yahb III, writing in 650, "The Arabs not

only do not fight Christianity, they even recommend our religion, honour our priests and saints of our Lord, and make gifts to monasteries and churches."<sup>17</sup> The Jews, on the other hand, were an old enemy and the similarities between Jewish and Muslim practices were noted. Explaining how the Saracens had their descent from Sara, Sozomen had almost two centuries earlier observed that:

Such being their origin, they practice circumcision like the Jews, refrain from the use of pork, and observe many other Jewish rites and customs. If, indeed, they deviate in any respect from the observances of that nation, it must be ascribed to the lapse of time, and to their intercourse with the neighboring nations.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, those things that Jew and Muslim held in common, such as circumcision, the direction of prayer, and the veneration of certain objects, were the dominant concerns of Christian anti-Muslim tracts.<sup>19</sup> This is clear from a text attributed to Maximus the Confessor who, although troubled by the forced conversion of the Jews, nonetheless fulminates against those "who announce by their actions the presence of the antichrist," as if they were the reason for the turn of events. "What is more terrifying, I say, for the eyes and ears of Christians than to see a cruel and alien nation authorized to raise its hand against the divine inheritance? But it is the multitude of sins committed by us that has allowed this."<sup>20</sup>

In the wake of the Arab conquest Christianity's version of the doctrine of manifest successes needed to be reversed, and anti-Jewish volleys were part of this new arsenal, even while it maintained its triumphalist tone.<sup>21</sup> The Jews were the punching bag used to help the Christians salvage some semblance of

<sup>17</sup> Isho'yahb Patriarcha III, *Liber Epistolarum* (SSCO, *Scriptores Syri*, ser. III/64, 251). Cited by Donner, "From Believers to Muslims," 49.

<sup>18</sup> Sozomen, *HE* 6.38.11 (eds. Joseph Bidez and Günther C. Hansen, GCS NF 4.299; trans. Chester D. Hartranft, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 2, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890, online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/26026.htm>).

<sup>19</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 82, notes the presence of these three themes in a number of works, including the late seventh-century Greek apology, *Trophies of Damascus*, and John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa* 4.12, 16 and 25.

<sup>20</sup> Maximus, *Ep.* 8. Cited by Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 78. This text is dubious. See the comments by Sarah Gador-Whyte in her chapter at n. 24.

<sup>21</sup> As Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 80, notes, the *Trophies of Damascus* begins with the words: "Of the divine and invincible church of God." On the notion of invasion as God's punishment, see Abdul-Massih Saadi, "Nascent Islam in the Seventh Century Syriac Sources," in: *The Qur'an in its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2008), 217–22 at 219.

<sup>13</sup> See the more detailed treatment of this text in Sarah Gador-Whyte's chapter in this volume.

<sup>14</sup> *Doctrina Jacobi* VI.6, in Gilbert Dagron and Vincent Déroche, "Juits et chrétiens dans l'Orient du VII<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991): 17–248 at 209. Cited and translated by Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997), 57.

<sup>15</sup> Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, 23.

<sup>16</sup> See the chapter by Bronwen Neil in this volume.

self-esteem. The Jewish interlocutor of the mid to late seventh-century anti-Jewish tract *Trophies of Damascus* ripostes: "If things are as you say, how is it that enslavements are befalling you? Whose are these devastated lands? Against whom are so many wars stirred up? What other nation is [so much] fought as the Christians?"<sup>22</sup> To which Anastasius of Sinai could be replying in his *Dialogue against the Jews*:

Do not say that we Christians are today afflicted and enslaved. This is the greatest thing, that though persecuted and fought by so many, our faith stands and does not cease, nor is our empire abolished, nor are our churches closed. But amid the peoples who dominate and persecute us, we have churches, we erect crosses, found churches and engage in sacrifices.<sup>23</sup>

## 2.2 *The Secrets of Rabbi ben Yohai*

For our purposes the most significant work of Jewish apocalyptic literature of the seventh century is that attributed to one of the great rabbis of the second century, Simon ben Yohai. Two versions of *The Secrets of Rabbi ben Yohai* are incorporated into the *Prayer of Rabbi Simon ben Yohai*, which dates to the Crusades, and into another midrash entitled *Ten Kings*.<sup>24</sup> As for *The Secrets* themselves, Bernard Lewis is convinced that the events and rulers referred to are those of the Umayyad Caliphates.<sup>25</sup> The *Prayer of Rabbi Simon* simply reused the older tradition of the Ishmaelite conquest and reapplied it to the Crusades.

According to *The Secrets*, Rabbi Simon ben Yohai had been hiding in a cave from the Roman emperor when he prayed standing for forty days and nights, beseeching God: "Lord God, how long wilt Thou be angry against the prayer of Thy servant?" (cf. Ps 80:5). It is here that the vision begins. Rabbi Simon is shown two empires: the Kenite, associated with Rome, and Ishmael, with the Arabs.

He saw the Kenite. When he saw the kingdom of Ishmael that was coming, he began to say: "Was it not enough, what the wicked kingdom of Edom did to us, but we must have the

<sup>22</sup> *Trophies of Damascus* II.31.220. Cited by Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 79.

<sup>23</sup> Anastasius of Sinai, *Dialogue against the Jews* (PG 89.1221 C–D). Cited by Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 81.

<sup>24</sup> Bernard Lewis, "An Apocalyptic Vision of Islamic History," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 13/2 (1950): 308–38 at 309.

<sup>25</sup> Lewis, *ibid.* For Graetz's argument, see Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart, aus den Quellen neu bearbeitet*, vol. 5, *Geschichte der Juden vom Abschluss des Talmud* (500) bis zum Aufblühen der jüdisch-spanischen Kultur (1027) (Magdeburg: Druck und Verlag von Albert Falckenberg & Co., 1860), Note 16 at 489–97.

kingdom of Ishmael too? At once Metatron the prince of the countenance answered and said: 'Do not fear, son of man, for the Holy One, blessed be He, only brings the kingdom of Ishmael in order to save you from this wickedness. He raises up over them a Prophet according to His will and will conquer the land for them and they will come and restore it in greatness, and there will be great terror between them and the sons of Esau.'<sup>26</sup>

The revelation continues as Rabbi Simon asks Metatron: "How do we know that they are our salvation?" Metatron responds by referring Rabbi Simon to the prophet Isaiah's vision of the two riders (Isa 21:6–7) as a prophecy of messianic deliverance through this Ishmaelite prophet. Metatron also cites Zechariah's prophecy that Israel's salvation shall come riding on an ass (Zech 9:9). Muhammad is clearly identified therefore with the fulfillment of Jewish messianic hopes and corroborates the report of *Doctrina Jacobi* that "the prophet had appeared, coming with the Saracens, and that he was proclaiming the advent of the anointed one, the Christ who was to come."<sup>27</sup> Shoemaker makes an interesting observation that the grammatical ambiguities in the Hebrew text do not make it clear whether it is God or the prophet who is to conquer the land. Shoemaker argues persuasively that Lewis is simply following tradition in ascribing the conquest to God, but that based on the text alone it would be more reasonable to ascribe the conquest to the prophet.<sup>28</sup>

## 2.3 *The History of Sebeos*

Our third text of interest is the Armenian history attributed to Sebeos, bishop of the Bagratunis, writing around the year 660. Sebeos is the first non-Muslim author to present an exposition of the rise of Islam that "pays attention to what Muslims themselves thought they were doing."<sup>29</sup> Hoyland cites as evidence of Sebeos' trustworthiness as a chronicler his occasional use of documentary material and his apparent access to privileged information.<sup>30</sup> Sebeos sees the Arab conquests as part of the salvation history. As descendants of Abraham, Muhammad

<sup>26</sup> Adolf Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash*, vol. 3 (Leipzig: Vollrath, 1855), 78. Cited and translated by Lewis, "An Apocalyptic Vision," 321–322.

<sup>27</sup> *Doctrina Jacobi* V.16, 209. Cited by Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 57.

<sup>28</sup> Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, 27–30.

<sup>30</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 125–26.

and his followers could rightly lay claim to the promised land.<sup>31</sup> "I shall speak of the stock of Abraham, not of the free one but of that born from the handmaiden concerning which the divine word was fulfilled: 'his hands on all, and the hands of all on him!'"<sup>32</sup> Sebeos believed the kingdom of Muhammad and his followers to be the fourth of the successive kingdoms prophesied by Daniel.<sup>33</sup> In this he differs from the more widespread Christian view that saw the sons of Hagar as a tool of God's wrath for the chastisement of Christians.<sup>34</sup>

Sebeos describes how the Jews gathered in the city of Edessa after the departure of the Persians and were subsequently besieged by Heraclius' army. Realising that they could not hold out, the Jews negotiated their peaceful departure. Theophilius of Edessa (695–785), writing a century after Sebeos, gives us a slightly different account, although Hoyland clearly finds his reconstructed account of Theophilius more convincing than that of Sebeos, which he describes as "garbled."<sup>35</sup> The sources using Theophilius describe how Shiroi (Shroes), having murdered his father the Shah Khosrau and become emperor himself, made peace with Heraclius and agreed to restore all Byzantine lands seized by Persian troops. Heraclius and his brother Theodore were marching to Syria to reclaim those cities. When Theodore reached Edessa and informed them of what had happened, the Persians replied: "We do not know Shiroi and we will not surrender the city to the Romans." The Jews of Edessa, standing on the walls with the

<sup>31</sup> See the commentary by Howard-Johnston in *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, Robert W. Thomson and James Howard-Johnston, with Tim Greenwood, TTH 31, 2 vols. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), vol. 2, 238.

<sup>32</sup> Sebeos, Ch. 42 (trans. in Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *The Armenian History*, vol. 1, 95). Sebeos is here citing Gen 16:12, which continues with the statement that Ishmael "shall be a wild ass of a man."

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 239. Dan 2:36–45, elaborated as the four beasts of the last judgement in Daniel 7.

<sup>34</sup> John bar Penkayē writes from Mesopotamia: "We should not think of the advent (of the children of Hagar) as something ordinary, but as due to divine working. Before calling them, (God) had prepared them beforehand to hold Christians in honour, thus they also had a special commandment from God concerning our monastic station, that they should hold it in honour... God put victory into their hands in such a way that the words written concerning them might be fulfilled, namely: 'one man chased a thousand and two men routed ten thousand' (Deut. 32:30). How otherwise could naked men riding without armour or shield have been able to win, apart from divine aid, God calling them to destroy by them 'a sinful kingdom' (Amos 9:8) and to bring low through them the proud spirit of the Persians." Trans. Sebastian Brock, "North Mesopotamia in the Late Seventh Century: Book XV of John bar Penkayē's *Rish Melle*," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987): 51–75 at 57–58.

<sup>35</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 635 n. 28. In an excursus (631–71), Hoyland explains that his reconstruction of the lost chronicle of Theophilius of Edessa is based on the agreement of extant authors who seem to have used his text as their main source for the history of the period.

Persians, taunted the Christians, thereby provoking Theodore's assault on the city. Persian resistance was crushed, leading them to accept a pledge of safe return to their country. A Jew by the name of Joseph, fearing for his people, escaped from the city in order to find Heraclius, whereupon he successfully urged the king to forgive his fellow Jews and to send an envoy to restrain his brother from extracting vengeance.<sup>36</sup>

In Sebeos' account the Jews then went to the sons of Ishmael and informed them of their blood relationship through the testament of scripture, asking for aid. But although the Muslims were persuaded of their close relationship, yet they were unable to agree amongst themselves, because their cults were divided from each other. At this point Muhammad enters the narrative:

At that time a certain man from among those same sons of Ismael whose name was Mahmet, a merchant, as if by God's command appeared to them as a preacher [and] the path of truth. He taught them to recognize the God of Abraham, especially because he was learned and informed in the history of Moses. Now because the command was from on high, at a single order they all came together in unity of religion. Abandoning their vain cults, they turned to the living God who had appeared to their father Abraham. So Mahmet legislated for them: not to eat carrion, not to drink wine, not to speak falsely, and not to engage in fornication. He said 'With an oath God promised this land to Abraham and his seed after him forever. And he brought about as he promised during that time while he loved Israel. But now you are the sons of Abraham, and God is accomplishing his promise to Abraham and his seed for you. Love sincerely only the God of Abraham, and go and seize your land which God gave to your father Abraham. No one will be able to resist you in battle because God is with you.'<sup>37</sup>

Just as Rabbi Simon understood the rise of the kingdom of Ishmael as divine providence, Jewish messianic expectations were encouraged by Arabs building on the Temple Mount. According to Sebeos, the Jews, "after gaining help from the Hagarenes for a brief while, decided to rebuild the temple of Solomon. Finding the spot called Holy of Holies, they rebuilt it with base and construction as a place for their prayers. But the Ishmaelites, being envious of them, expelled them from that place and called the same house of prayer their own."<sup>38</sup>

Jerusalem and especially the Temple Mount were of high significance to the believers due to the expectation that the key scenarios of the Day of Judgement would take place at the Temple Mount. It was on the Rock that "God had chosen

<sup>36</sup> *Chronicle* 1234 1235–36 (trans. in *Theophilius of Edessa's Chronicle and the Circulation of Historical Knowledge in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, trans. Robert G. Hoyland, TTH, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011, 80–81). See also Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 635.

<sup>37</sup> Sebeos, 135. Ch. 42 (trans. Thomson and Howard-Johnston, vol. 1, 95–96).

<sup>38</sup> Sebeos, 139. Ch. 43 (trans. Thomson and Howard-Johnston, vol. 1, 102).

as His throne and from which He ascended to Heaven (sic). On this Rock, God will judge mankind and on this Rock, the Scales will be placed.”<sup>39</sup> Given then the centrality of Jerusalem for eschatological expectation, its conquest was especially significant.<sup>40</sup>

### 3 The Qur’an: The prophet of the Hour

The Qur’an abounds in eschatological imagery. Sura 16 begins with the pronouncement that “The command of Allah is coming”<sup>41</sup> or, more literally, the rule or reign of God is coming. Although only Allah knows the hour “It may be that the Hour is nigh” (33.63). It is possibly even “nearer” than a “winking of the eye” (16.77). It is Muhammad’s mission to “warn them of the Day” (40.18); for “The threatened Hour is nigh” (53.57); “the Hour is surely coming” (20.15). Of that “there is no doubt” (22.7). “The doom of thy Lord will surely come to pass” (52.7). “Their reckoning draweth nigh for mankind, while they turn away in heedlessness” (21.1) for “most of mankind believe not” (40.59). People will not recognise the signs for what they are. “The Hour has come near, and the moon has split [in two]. And if they behold a portent they turn away and say: ‘Prolonged illusion!’” (54.1–2). “The judgment will indeed befall” (51.6), “casting down some and exalting others” (56.1–3); and when it does “the disbeliever will cry: ‘Would that I were dust!’” (78.40). To those who disregard the warning the Qur’an threatens that “they behold that which they were promised” (19.75). Some of the most poetic texts in the Qur’an describe the Day of Judgement, accompanied and anticipated by a range of astronomical phenomena and terrestrial cataclysms.

<sup>39</sup> Meir Jacob Kister, “Sanctity Joint and Divided: On Holy Places in the Islamic Tradition,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 20 (1996): 18–65 at 62.

<sup>40</sup> As Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 143–44, writes: “The Believers’ ambition to establish the writ of God’s word as widely as possible was apparently given special urgency by the conviction that the Last Judgement was imminent. The mood of apocalyptic expectation – in which presumably, they followed the lead of Muhammad himself – made it important to get on with the business of creating a righteous order so that, when the End came, those who would be counted amongst the Believers would attain paradise. This may also explain the early Believers’ desire to extend their domains to Jerusalem, which many apocalyptic scenarios depicted as the place where the events of the Last Judgement would be played out. They may also have believed that the *arabi al-mu’minin* as leader of this new community dedicated to the realisation of God’s word, would fulfil the role that expected the ‘last emperor’ who would, on the Last Day, hand earthly power over to God.”

<sup>41</sup> Translations from the Qur’an are by Marmaduke Pickthall.

When the sun is overthrown, and when the stars fall. When the hills are moved, and when the camels big with young are abandoned, and when the wild beasts are herded together, and when the seas rise, and when souls are reunited, and when the girl-child that was buried alive is asked for what sin she was slain. And when the pages are laid open when the sky is torn away, and when hell is lighted, and when the Garden is brought nigh, (then) every soul will know what it hath made ready. (81.1–14)

It seems likely that Muhammad expected to see the Day of Judgement in his own lifetime. The problem here is that sura 3.144 of the Qur’an states that the prophet would die. However Al-Tabari’s history describes an episode that suggests that this text might be a later interpolation. Ibn Ishaq’s *Life of the Prophet* recounts the episode as follows, with Umar (who will be the second Caliph) protesting at the news that the prophet has died.

Some of the disaffected will allege that the prophet is dead, but by God he is not dead: he has gone to his Lord as Moses b. Imran went and is hidden from his people for forty days returning to them after it was said that he had died. By God, the apostle will return as Moses returned and will cut off the hands and feet of men who allege that the apostle is dead.<sup>42</sup>

Clearly Umar believes that the prophet will not die before the Day of Judgement arrives. But Abū Bakr (who is about to become the first Caliph) rebukes Umar saying:

‘O men, if anyone worship Muhammad, Muhammad is dead; if anyone worship God, God is alive and immortal.’ Then he recited this verse: ‘Muhammad is nothing but an apostle. Apostles have passed away before him. Can it be that if he were to die or be killed you would turn back on your heels? He who turns back does no harm to God and God will reward the grateful.’ (3.144) By God, it was as though the people did not know this verse (concerning the apostle) had come down until Abū Bakr recited it that day. The people took it from him and it was (constantly) in their mouths.<sup>43</sup>

Al-Tabari gives an alternative account whereby after Abū Bakr’s recitation of sura 3.144 prompted some of the companions of the prophet to affirm “that they had never heard those verses before Abū Bakr spoke them on that day.”<sup>44</sup> Shoemaker argues that “In all likelihood, the alarmingly unfamiliar Qur’anic verse placed in Abū Bakr’s mouth at Muhammad’s death was in fact a later interpolation de-

<sup>42</sup> Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: a translation of Ibn Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 682.

<sup>43</sup> Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 683. Cf. Al-Tabari, *The History of Al-Tabari*, trans. Ismail K. Poonawala, vol. 9 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 184–85.

<sup>44</sup> Al-Tabari, *The History of Al-Tabari*, vol. 9, 187–88.

signed to adjust the early community's eschatological calendar around their leader's unanticipated passing.<sup>45</sup> There are in fact a number of *hadith* that suggest that Muhammad's ministry was intimately connected with the Hour's imminent arrival. This finds expression in the tradition cited by Ibn Hanbal that Muhammad explained to his followers that "The hour has come upon you; I have been sent with the Hour like this", and he showed them his two fingers, the index finger and the middle finger,<sup>46</sup> joined so as to indicate their concurrence. Al-Tabari's history reconciles the two-finger tradition by observing that the index finger is shorter than the middle finger, calculating that from the total length of the world's existence the Hour would arrive 500 years after the prophet.<sup>47</sup>

Just as the urgency of Jesus' eschatological message became diminished and reinterpreted with time, so it was with Muhammad's community of believers. I follow Donner in his argument that the followers of Muhammad did not initially see themselves as constituting a distinct confessional identity. Muhammad's own self-understanding is that of a reformer of monotheism. What mattered to the Believers was not a person's confessional identity, but whether he or she shared their belief in the One God, Creator of the World and Judge at the end of time, and their conviction that the Day of Judgement was near, or at least rapidly nearing. To ensure their salvation in the face of the imminent Day of Judgement, the Believers strove to create a community (*umma*), submitting themselves to a life of piety lived in strict accordance with the divine law that had been revealed repeatedly throughout history. What was essential was belief in the one God of Abraham and in the Last Day. Otherwise Muhammad's followers did not initially distinguish themselves from other Abrahamic monotheists.<sup>48</sup>

Lo! those who believe, and those who are Jews, and Sabaeans, and Christians – Whosoever believeth in Allah and the Last Day and doeth right – there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve. (Sura 5.69)

This is affirmed by the *Constitution of Medina*,<sup>49</sup> which only mentions one set of religious beliefs in which it states that "it is not lawful for any *Mu'min* who has

45 Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, 183.

46 Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad* 3.310–11. Cited by Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, 174–75.

47 Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, 173.

48 See Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 69ff.

49 R.B. Seijean, 'The 'Sunnaḥ Jāmi'ah', Pacts with the Yathrib Jews, and the 'Yathribi' of Yathrib: Analysis and Translation of the Documents Comprised in the So-Called 'Constitution of Medina', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 41/1 (1978): 1–42 at 8, describes the *Constitution of Medina* as consisting of "treaties establishing the confederation between the Quraysh Muhajirūn seeking protection at Yathrib and the tribal Sup-

affirmed what is on this sheet and/or believes in God and the Last Day, to support or shelter an aggressor or innovator."<sup>50</sup> The *Constitution of Medina* gives witness to the inclusion of Jews as a distinct group within the community. The only doctrinal requirement of the *Constitution* is belief "in God and the Last Day." Thus Christians and Jews could continue to follow their own scriptures under Islamic rule. While some Jews and Christians seem to have joined Muhammad's community while retaining their confessional identities, others clearly rejected it, or did not live up to the Qur'anic standard of piety, or rejected the imminence of the Day of Judgment.<sup>51</sup>

The Nestorian monk John bar Penkāyē of northern Mesopotamia, writing in the late 680s, confirms that the Arab raiders demanded tribute, but were content for each of the subject peoples to remain in their faith of choice. He also suggests that there were Christians, both monophysites and Nestorians, amongst the raiders.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, recent evidence suggests that some of the earliest mosques were established on the place of worship of "the people of the book," the best known being the Church of St John in Damascus but also, it would seem, in part of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, before a mosque was established on the Temple Mount.<sup>53</sup> Of course the anti-Trinitarian polemic remains an obstacle for the inclusion of Christians, as Trinitarian faith was seen as a threat to Islamic monotheism. Most early Muslim believers, however, probably had little knowledge of the Qur'an.<sup>54</sup> Doctrinal clarity became more significant later as the identity of the community of believers evolved.<sup>55</sup>

All of this is consistent with what we know about the first community of believers at Yathrib, which included at least some "people of the book" (*al-Kitāb*), certainly some Jews. Patricia Crone and Michael Cook note that "the Jews appear in the 'Constitution of Medina' as forming one community (*umma*) with the be-

porters (Ansar) of Muhammad [that] have been lumped together with later agreements and transmitted as a single document known to European scholars as the 'Constitution of Medina' – a misnomer in that it relates the treaties to a locality rather than to tribes. From the historical viewpoint it is not less in importance than the Qur'an itself and, though slightly jumbled in transmission, it is patently authentic."

50 C3a. Translation by Seijean, "The 'Sunnaḥ Jāmi'ah', " 23.

51 Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, 208.

52 Text of John bar Penkāyē in: Alfons Mingana, *Sources Syriacques* (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, for Imprimerie des Peres Dominicains a Mossoul, 1907–8), vol. 1, 147, lines 1–6. Cited by Donner, "From Believers to Muslims," 44.

53 *Ibid.*, 51.

54 Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 77.

55 Shoemaker *The Death of a Prophet*, 209–210.

liens despite the retention of their religion.<sup>56</sup> The question of whether any other groups of monotheists belonged to Muhammad's community is unable to be answered as clearly by traditional sources.<sup>57</sup> According to the *Constitution of Medina*: "The Jews of Band 'Awf are a confederation (umamah) with the Mu'minin, the Jews having their religion/law (din) and the Muslimūn/Mu'minin having their religion/law, their clients (mawālī) and their persons, excepting anyone who acts wrongfully (zalama) and commits crime/acts treacherously/breaks an agreement, for he but slays himself and the people of his house."<sup>58</sup> Similarly, the *Constitution* further affirms that "the Jews of the Aws, their clients and themselves, are on the same (basis) as the people of this sheet."<sup>59</sup>

We find some intriguing confirmation of the inter-confessional nature of the first community of believers in an unlikely source two centuries later. We have in the teachings of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (d. 855), founder of the conservative Hanbali school of religious law (*fiqh*), reports that the question of whether the early community (*umma*) included Jews and Christians remained a matter of great concern. Ibn Hanbal responded with vehemence to the repeated questions on this issue, exclaiming: "This is a filthy question, and one must not discuss it." Ibn Hanbal seems utterly perplexed when the question continues to come up and is surprised to learn that anyone could possibly claim such a thing.<sup>60</sup>

In the wake of Islamic rule messianic hopes ran high amongst all the conquered peoples. But even when Islam began to establish clear boundaries between its own identity and that of other monotheists, as exemplified by the anti-Trinitarian inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock – a monument to victory over the Christians<sup>61</sup> – the eschatological strain began to reassert itself in new ways. Amongst those marginalised within Islam we can see the development of the same messianic expectation of the Mahdi, "the rightly guided one," the restorer of religion and justice who, according to a widely held Muslim belief, will rule before the end of the world.<sup>62</sup> The concept of the Mahdi first appeared in the contexts of sectarian rivalries and confessional disputes of the first civil war when the title was applied variously to the caliphs Uthman, Ali, and Ali's

56 Clone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 7.

57 Donner, "From Believers to Muslims," 29.

58 Cza (trans. Seifert, "The 'Sunnah Jāmi'ah,'" 27).

59 G6 (trans. Seifert, 33).

60 Al-Khālālī, *Ahī al-nīāl* 1:54–55. Ibn Hanbal's response on this topic occupy 1:53–62 of this collection. Cited by Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, 216.

61 Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 200.

62 Wilfred Madelung, "al-Mahdi," in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Brill Online, 2013, [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-mahdi-COM\\_0618](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-mahdi-COM_0618) (accessed 14 Feb. 2013).

son al-Husayn, by their supporters.<sup>63</sup> After the death of Mu'āwīya, the term came first to be used for an expected ruler who would restore Islam to its original perfection.<sup>64</sup> An interesting variation on the role of the Mahdi that reflects an earlier inclusiveness can be found in a tradition attributed to Ka'b al-Ahbār, an early Yememie Jewish convert to Islam who, al-Ṭabarī relates, accompanied Umar to Jerusalem in 636 and revealed to him the site of the Temple Mount.<sup>65</sup> According to this tradition, the Mahdi was so called because he would find the original texts of the Torah and the gospel concealed in Antioch. As transmitted by Abū-l-ḥāh Bisṭr al-Kaṭhamī from Kufa:

The Mahdi will send (an army) to fight the Rūm, will be given the knowledge of ten, and will bring forth the Ark of the Divine Presence from a cave in Antioch in which are the Torah which God sent down to Moses and the Gospel which he sent down to Jesus, and he will rule among the People of the Torah according to their Torah and among the People of the Gospel according to their Gospel.<sup>66</sup>

## 4 Conclusion

In considering the earliest sources documenting the rise of Islam I am struck by parallels in the development of both Christianity and Islam. Both founding figures understand themselves to be the prophet who would usher in the *eschaton*. Both movements originally sought to be as inclusive as possible within the constraints of what was considered the necessary requirement of preparation for the Day of Judgement. When the *eschaton* failed to arrive and the fires of the apocalyptic imagination died down, both communities adjusted their expectations and self-understanding. They constructed their identities by consolidating a tradition and developing institutions by which to maintain and nourish what was new and distinct in each. Both communities were supersessionalist in the manner in which they established boundaries and constructed a clear identity from the other from which they emerged. The Christian church, divorced from the synagogue, sought to distance itself ever further from Judaism even as it claimed Ju-

63 Hayretin Yücesoy, *Messianic Beliefs and Imperial Politics in Medieval Islam: The Abbasid Caliphate in the Early Ninth Century* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 19.

64 Madelung, "al-Mahdi."

65 Shari Lowin, "Ka'b al-Ahbār," in: *Encyclopaedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, exec. ed. Norman A. Stillman, Brill Online, 2013, [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-jews-in-the-islamic-world/kab-al-ahbar-SIM\\_0012450](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-jews-in-the-islamic-world/kab-al-ahbar-SIM_0012450) (accessed 14 Feb. 2013).

66 Madelung, "al-Mahdi."



daiism's legitimacy as heir of the covenant for itself. Islam, similarly, as the instrument of God's justice, sought to distinguish itself from the embarrassment of feuding factions of monotheisms by establishing itself as *the* straight path.

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