

# “The Reign of God Has Come”: Eschatology and Empire in Late Antiquity and Early Islam

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## Abstract

For much of the 20th century, scholarship on Muḥammad and the beginnings of Islam has shown a reluctance to acknowledge the importance of imminent eschatology in earliest Islam. One of the main reasons for this resistance to eschatology would appear to be the undeniable importance of conquest and political expansion in early Islam: if Muḥammad and his followers believed that the world would soon come to an end, why then did they seek to conquer and rule over so much of it? Nevertheless, there is no real contradiction between the urgent eschatology revealed by the Qurʾān and other early sources on the one hand, and the determination of Muḥammad and his followers to expand their religious policy and establish an empire on the other. To the contrary, the political eschatology of the Byzantine Christians during the sixth and early seventh centuries indicates that these two beliefs went hand in hand, offering important contemporary precedent for the imperial eschatology that seems to have fueled the rise of Islam.

## Keywords

Late Antiquity, Early Islam, Eschatology, Apocalyptic Literature, Imperialism, Muḥammad, Christianity, Judaism, Byzantine Empire

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## Résumé

Durant la plus grande partie du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, les études sur Muḥammad et les débuts de l'islam ont manifesté une réticence à reconnaître l'importance de l'eschatologie imminente aux origines de l'islam. L'une des principales raisons de cette résistance à l'eschatologie serait l'importance indéniable de la conquête et de l'expansion politique au début de l'islam : si Muḥammad et les premiers convertis croyaient que le monde prendrait rapidement fin, alors pourquoi auraient-ils cherché à conquérir et à régner sur une si grande partie de celui-ci ? Néanmoins, il n'existe pas de véritable contradiction entre l'urgence de l'eschatologie révélée par le Coran et d'autres sources anciennes, d'une part, et la détermination de Muḥammad et des premiers convertis à développer leur politique religieuse et établir un nouvel empire, d'autre part. Au contraire, l'eschatologie politique des chrétiens byzantins durant le sixième siècle et le début du septième siècle indique que ces deux croyances allaient de pair, offrant un important précédent contemporain pour l'eschatologie impériale qui semble avoir alimenté la montée de l'islam.

## Mots-clés

Antiquité tardive, débuts de l'islam, eschatologie, littérature apocalyptique, impérialisme, Muḥammad, christianisme, judaïsme, empire byzantin

For much of the past century, scholarship on Muḥammad and the beginnings of Islam has shown something of an aversion to eschatology. Despite the eschatological urgency that pulses across the Qur'ān, scholars have often been reluctant to embrace its persistent forecast of impending judgment and the end of the world. There is instead a marked tendency to view earliest Islam as movement that was more "pragmatic" than "apocalyptic". Rather than finding a prophet and his community who believed themselves to be living in the shadow of the *eschaton*, Muḥammad and his earliest followers are presented as having pursued very practical goals that were directed towards effecting social and political change. They aimed to root out social and economic injustice from their city, or to organize an Arab "nativist" movement, or to build an empire, or at some combination of these civic achievements. To be sure, there were religious aspirations as well, and these were certainly important, but these beliefs were thoroughly enmeshed in social concerns, focusing primarily on monotheism and the social ethics of a life and a community that are righteous before God. Indeed, in some modern interpretations, Muḥammad's

religious ideas seem not infrequently subordinate to his broader social agenda.

It is worth noting, however, that this was not always the case. Many of the earliest western scholars of formative Islam, including Snouck Hurgronje, Frants Buhl, Tor Andrae, and, most notoriously, Paul Casanova, saw the imminent judgment of the Hour as the fundamental core of Muḥammad's religious message.<sup>1</sup> Hurgronje, for instance, concluded that the early Muslims regarded Muḥammad's appearance itself as a sign that the end of the world was at hand and did not believe that Muḥammad would die before the Hour's arrival. Accordingly, Hurgronje and many others after him identified the coming end of the world as the primary inspiration and the fundamental theme of Muḥammad's preaching. Other elements of his message were "more or less accessories" to his pressing concern with the world's impending judgment and destruction, which was "the essential element of Muḥammad's preaching".<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in much western scholarship from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there is a clear tendency towards viewing Muḥammad primarily as an eschatological prophet, culminating in Paul Casanova's unfortunately neglected study, *Mohammed et la fin du monde*, an admittedly flawed work that nonetheless overflows with profound insight concerning the beginnings of Islam.<sup>3</sup> Only now after many decades of dismissal has this monograph finally begun to receive the attention that it deserves, as a handful of scholars have recently begun to reconsider the unmistakable and pervasive evidence of imminent eschatological belief lying at the very heart of earliest Islam.<sup>4</sup>

1 See e.g. Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, ("Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion"), 2012, p. 121-127; *id.*, "Muḥammad and the Qur'ān", in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott F. Johnson, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 1078-1108 and 1090-1094.

2 C. Snouck Hurgronje, "Une nouvelle biographie de Mohammed", *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 15/30 (1894), p. 48-70, 149-178, 161-162.

3 Paul Casanova, *Mohammed et la fin du monde: étude critique sur l'Islam primitif*, Paris, P. Gauthier, 1911-1924.

4 This is argued extensively in Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, esp. p. 118-196, and more succinctly in Shoemaker, "Muḥammad and the Qur'ān", p. 1090-1099. See also the brief remarks in David Cook, "Muslim Apocalyptic and Jihād", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 20 (1996), p. 66-105, 66; David Cook, "The Beginnings of Islam as an Apocalyptic Movement", *Journal of Millennial Studies*, 1 (2001); available from <http://www.bu.edu/mille/publications/winter2001/cook.html>; David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, Princeton, Darwin Press ("Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam", 21), 2002, p. 30; Fred M. Donner, "From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community", *al-Abḥāt*, 50-1 (2002),

Nevertheless, recognition of the confidence that Muḥammad and his earliest followers appear to have held in the impending final judgment could seem to stand at odds with their obvious political ambitions and achievements. How, one might ask, could it have possibly made sense for the members of this new religious movement to pledge their lives to the development and expansion of their nascent polity in the world if in fact they believed that the world itself was soon to pass away? What indeed would be the point of all the toil and bloodshed involved in building an empire that they were certain would soon vanish with the coming reign of God? Yet as contradictory as these two convictions may seem to modern readers, when considered within the broader religious context of Mediterranean late antiquity, they are not only seen to be complementary, but they are in fact two sides of the same coin. Earliest Christianity affords one important analog for understanding the eschatology of formative Islam, not in the least for its notion of an impending reign of God that was already beginning to unfold in the formation of the community. Even more immediately relevant, however, is the imperial understanding of eschatology that was widely embraced by the Christians and—from a slightly different angle—the Jews of late antiquity. Simply put, it was relatively commonplace in the Byzantine world to believe that the *eschaton* would be realized through imperial triumph, and the sixth and early seventh centuries in particular saw a dramatic spike in the belief that the Roman Empire’s fortunes signaled the arrival of the end of time. Thus, given the prevalence of such eschatological expectations among contemporary Christians and Jews, it certainly is no surprise to find that earliest Islam was largely defined by a fusion of these two principles: eschatology and empire.

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p. 9-53, esp. p. 10-13; Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Princeton, Darwin Press (“Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam”, 14), 1998, p. 30, n. 78, 46; Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2010, esp. p. 79-82, 97; Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Crisis of Muslim History: Religion and Politics in Early Islam*, Oxford, Oneworld, 2003, p. 145-146; Robert Hoyland, “Early Islam as a Late Antique Religion”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott F. Johnson, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 1053-1077, 1066. Many important works by other scholars, such as Crone, Cook, Lewis, Bashear, and Kister, that were fundamental in redirecting the study of early Islam towards imminent eschatology are noted below in the discussions of this topic.

### The Practical Muḥammad: Social Reformer, Political Organizer, Empire Builder

The twentieth century's turn away from the urgent eschatology of the Qur'ān and other early materials seem to have been inaugurated especially with Richard Bell's 1925 "Gunning Lectures" at the University of Edinburgh, subsequently published as *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*. Bell's influential study radically diminishes the role of eschatology in Muḥammad's preaching in order to conjure forth a pragmatic and profound prophet of ethical monotheism, whose timeless message concerned not the imminent end of the world but was rather a call "to recognize and worship the one true God and show thankfulness for His bounties". According to Bell, Muḥammad admittedly did experiment for a brief time with eschatological warnings, hoping that they might frighten the Meccans into following him, but this too was all a part of his rational and pragmatic strategy for spreading the message of ethical monotheism. Once he had successfully achieved authority over a community of followers in Medina, any concern with the last judgment passed "into the realm of assured dogma in Muḥammad's mind".<sup>5</sup> In this way Bell demotes the powerful eschatological urgency of the Qur'ān to mere remnants of a passing phase in Muḥammad's ministry, making them vestiges of this "pragmatic-minded" prophet's strategic effort to persuade his audience to embrace his message.

Many other scholars since Bell have similarly imagined Muḥammad as a pragmatic and eschatologically patient social reformer who sought primarily to spread belief in a benevolent creator and to promote the virtues of an ethical life lived in accordance with God's merciful providence. Nevertheless, it is perhaps Bell's pupil, Montgomery Watt, who bears the most responsibility for the prevalence of this non-eschatological portrait of Muḥammad. Watt follows his *Doktorvater* closely in assigning a decidedly minimal role to eschatology in Muḥammad's religious system. Like Bell, Watt identifies a handful of Qur'ānic passages as the earliest, and on this basis he determines that Muḥammad's original—and thus most authentic—teachings concerned the benevolence and power of the Creator, without any warnings of proximate divine judgment.<sup>6</sup> And when Muḥammad would later turn to address the theme of divine judg-

5 Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*, London, Macmillan and Co., 1926, p. 102-107.

6 W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1953, p. 62-65. Bell and Watt's chronology of the Qur'ān owes some influence to the widely influential model devised by Nöldeke, who borrowed extensively from Weil, who in turn largely reproduces the received

ment, according to Watt the passages in question do not expect its imminent arrival but rather describe either temporal chastisements or a distant final judgment that will come “at some unspecified future time”.<sup>7</sup> Watt’s effective erasure of imminent eschatology from the Qur’ān thus allows him to transform its eschatological herald into the prophet of social reform for which his work is well known. Rather than warning before the world’s imminent judgment and destruction, Watt’s Muḥammad instead advanced a vision for the world’s transformation and improvement that aimed to bring social and economic justice to those on the margins of society.

Watt’s views have particularly taken hold over much western scholarship on early Islam, to the effect that they reflect a kind of “secular vulgate” concerning the period of origins,<sup>8</sup> and countless authors have continued to replicate his portrait of Muḥammad as a social and economic reformer with little real concern for an imminent final judgment. F.E. Peters and Tilman Nagel, for instance, in their recent biographies of Muḥammad both present him as pursuing a primarily social agenda, interpreting the Qur’ān’s statements about eschatology as referring to events that will take place only in the distant future. It is in fact rather remarkable—and also quite telling—that Peters fails to mention the eschatological Hour in his study *Muḥammad and the Origins of Islam*.<sup>9</sup> The recently published *Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics* portrays Muḥammad as a reluctant warrior, who stands as a model of nonviolent resistance and social reform for the modern world.<sup>10</sup> This tendency is even more pronounced in more popular works on Muḥammad and early Islam, by authors such as Karen Armstrong, Omid Safi, and Asma Afarrudin, where

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chronology of the Islamic tradition. Nevertheless, both Bell and Watt after him are somewhat idiosyncratic in the particular passages that they identify as the earliest. See Theodor Nöldeke and Friedrich Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Leipzig, Dieterich, 1909-1919; Gustav Weil, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in den Koran*, Bielefeld, Velhagen & Klasing, 1844; Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, p. 129-160.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

8 Peter van Sivers, “The Islamic Origins Debate Goes Public”, *History Compass* 1 (2003), ME 058, p. 1-14, 3.

9 F.E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 152-156; F.E. Peters, *Jesus and Muhammad: Parallel Tracks, Parallel Lives*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 105-123, esp. p. 110-111, 113, 115, 123; Tilman Nagel, *Mohammed: Leben und Legende*, Munich, R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2008, e.g. p. 462-463, 844, 909-910.

10 Mahan Mirza, “Muḥammad,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Politics and Islam*, ed. Emad El-Din Shahin, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 86-92, esp. 88, 91.

the Qurʾān's emphasis on imminent eschatology has often been obscured to the point of invisibility. Rather, Muḥammad's clear and persistent message is identified as a call for "egalitarianism and social justice" and a concern for "the suffering of the poor and downtrodden in his society".<sup>11</sup> One would never know from reading such books that the impending judgment of the Hour is in fact the second most prominent theme of the Qurʾān.<sup>12</sup>

This persistent representation of Muḥammad as a champion of social and economic reform at the expense of strong Qurʾānic evidence indicating belief in impending final judgment is in fact highly reminiscent of the nineteenth-century "Liberal" biographies of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> Presumably these portraits of Muḥammad arise from a similar concern to discover a figure who can be more immediately relevant to the modern age, offering an inspiring call to oppose social injustice and establish economic equality instead of a mistaken forecast of impending doom. Yet the study of early Islam has thus far been largely shielded from the kind of historical criticism and skepticism that characterizes the study of formative Christianity, and when we apply the same sort of approaches to the eschatological traditions of the Qurʾān (as seen below), it becomes rather clear that Muḥammad and his earliest followers, like Jesus and the earliest Christians, seem to have believed that they were living in the final moments of history, at the dawn of the *eschaton*. And as is the case with the eschatological sayings of Jesus, the Qurʾān's imminent eschatology, when examined using similar criteria, offers one of the most promising avenues for reconstructing the teachings of the "historical Muḥammad" and the religious beliefs of the community that he founded.

11 Asma Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims: History and Memory*, Oxford, Oneworld, 2008, p. 3; Omid Safi, *Memories of Muhammad: Why the Prophet Matters*, New York, HarperCollins, 2009, e.g. p. 33, 97-101, 115, 123; Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*, New York, HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, p. 91-107, esp. 91.

12 Richard Bell and W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qurʾān*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1970, p. 158.

13 Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, p. 132-3; Shoemaker, "Muḥammad and the Qurʾān", p. 1093-1094. On the portrayal of Jesus in nineteenth-century Protestant Liberalism, see e.g. William Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1992, II (*From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann*), p. 85-136; Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems*, transl. S. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1972, p. 162-184. Regarding Liberalism's strong resistance to the idea of Jesus as an eschatological prophet, see the chapter "The Struggle against Eschatology" in Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, transl. W. Montgomery, London, Adam and Charles Black, 1910, p. 242-269.

A number of other scholars, however, offer a slightly different model for a non-eschatological Muḥammad, whom they present more in the mold of a political visionary and empire builder rather than a prophet of social justice. The two views are of course not entirely incompatible, and many scholars, such as Watt for instance, have offered some combination of these perspectives.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in many respects this political alternative has a great deal in common with the idea of Muḥammad as a champion of social and economic justice. Muḥammad and his early followers still have as their principal goal a very “this-worldly” program that aims at lasting change within the existing social and political order. Yet rather than seeking primarily to uplift the poor and oppressed, Muḥammad instead is cast as a cunning political operator, whose wildly successful plan was to unify the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula into a powerful polity, with aspirations of empire just over the horizon if not already present in his agenda. And while there is perhaps some question as to whether Muḥammad had such a vision of Arab political unity while he was still in Mecca, with the move to Medina, his political genius quickly began to emerge.<sup>15</sup>

Muḥammad’s religious message of course played a pivotal role in this strategy, since this new monotheist ideology and its comprehensive social ethics provided the glue for this new community and, it would seem, the main impetus for its conquests. It is true that earlier scholars once thought that religion played only a marginal role in Muḥammad’s organization of an Arab polity and the ensuing conquest, or more cynically, they questioned Muḥammad’s sincerity and accused him of “using” religion to achieve political goals.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless,

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14 Consider, for instance, the title of W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, London, Oxford University Press, 1961.

15 Compare, for instance, the different viewpoints in Bell, *Origin of Islam*, p. 102-108, 121-124; Frants Buhl, *Das Leben Muhammeds*, transl. Hans Heinrich Schaefer, Leipzig, Quelle & Meyer, 1930, p. 196-197; Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, p. 152-153; W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956, p. 143-146; Rudi Paret, *Mohammed und der Koran; Geschichte und Verkündigung des arabischen Propheten*, Stuttgart, W. Kohlhammer, 1957, p. 151-152, 163-165; Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, New York, W.W. Norton (“Library of World Civilization”), 1971, p. 191-192; Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974, I (*The Classical Age of Islam*), p. 170-180; Fred M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 52-75; Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 241-250; Peters, *Jesus and Muhammad*, p. 137-142.

16 Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, p. 270; Patricia Crone, *God’s Rule: Government and Islam*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 11. See e.g. Leone Caetani, “The Art of War

it now seems widely acknowledged that Muḥammad's religious teachings played at the very least an ancillary role to his political vision. Some scholars, for instance, would identify the role of religion as primarily catalytic, so that, as James Howard-Johnston recently suggests, "Religion acted as a supercharger" and a "bonding agent" in the formation and expansion of the early Islamic polity.<sup>17</sup> Yet others, such as Patricia Crone, have noted that in this particular case it is seemingly a mistake to divide religion from politics. Muḥammad was not, as she explains, "a prophet who merely happened to become involved with politics. His monotheism amounted to a political program."<sup>18</sup> Earliest Islam was a movement whose core beliefs were both political and religious, and the expansion of the community and the pursuit of conquest and even empire were matters of fundamental religious conviction. Thus Muḥammad's new religious movement professed a creed that enjoined his followers to subdue and permanently transform the world according to their religious vision.

For the most part, this scholarly view of Muḥammad and his followers as empire builders does not find much room for the impending end of the world. The eschatological urgency revealed by the Qur'ān (and other early sources) is generally minimized, if not altogether excluded from such perspectives. Presumably, conviction that the world would shortly come to an end is perceived as being somehow incompatible with the determination to establish an Islamic Empire. After all, if the world was soon to pass away, why would they have sought to rule over it? There is certainly no disputing that conquest and expansion and even imperial ambition were central tenets of early Islam. The events of the Near Eastern conquests themselves unmistakably reveal such ambitions at the core of its political and religious ideology. While some have questioned whether Muḥammad himself actually envisioned the campaigns

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of the Arabs, and the Supposed Religious Fervour of the Arab Conquerors", in *The Expansion of the Early Islamic State*, transl. Gwendolin Goldbloom, ed. Fred M. Donner, Aldershot, Ashgate ("The Formation of the Classical Islamic World", 5), 2008, p. 1-14 (originally published in 1911); Henri Lammens, *Le berceau de l'Islam: l'Arabie occidentale à la veille de l'hégire. Ier volume: Le climat-Les Bédouins*, Rome, Pont. Inst. Biblici, 1914, p. 116-121, 174-177; C.H. Becker, "Der Islam als Problem", in *Islamstudien*, Leipzig, Quelle und Meyer, 1924, p. 1-23; Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History*, London, Hutchinson & Co., 1950, p. 55-56.

17 James Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 459-460.

18 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, p. 241, 244-245; Crone, *God's Rule*, p. 11. See also e.g. Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, p. 146-147; Michael Cook, *Muhammad*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 51.

against Rome and Persia that his followers would soon undertake,<sup>19</sup> most scholars, including Donner, Crone, Fowden, and even Watt, would identify Muḥammad as both the architect and the inspiration behind the early Islamic Empire.<sup>20</sup> The reports from the *Sīra* tradition of campaigns directed towards Syria even in Muḥammad’s lifetime would certainly seem to indicate as much.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, the persistent reports from outside of the Islamic historical tradition associating Muḥammad with the invasion of Syria (whether or not they are accurate) would seem to confirm that his preaching advanced the vision of an “Islamic” empire.<sup>22</sup> Yet even if Muḥammad did not himself harbor imperial ambitions for his new polity, almost immediately after his lifetime—at least according to the traditional narratives—the pursuit of empire had in large part come to define the movement that he founded. Moreover, these same traditional narratives are at one in locating the origins of the Near Eastern conquests in Muḥammad’s prophetic mission.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, if Muḥammad’s early followers were driven to establish themselves as an empire, and this impulse came from the very core of their religious faith, how could one imagine them simultaneously believing that they would soon see divine judgment and destruction come upon the world, thus bringing their divinely ordained empire quickly to naught?

19 E.g. Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press (“Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion”), 2009, p. 146. Peters, *Jesus and Muhammad*, p. 141, seems to suggest that Muhammad established his polity and empire almost by accident.

20 Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, p. 8, 52-82, 90, 101-111; Crone, *Meccan Trade*, p. 241-250; Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 6, 18; Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, p. 105-117. See also e.g. Brown, *World of Late Antiquity*, p. 192; Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century*, New York, Longman (“A History of the Near East”), 1986, p. 40-49, 53; Richard A. Gabriel, *Muhammad: Islam’s First Great General*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2007, e.g. p. xx; Chase F. Robinson, “The Rise of Islam, 600-705”, in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, ed. Chase F. Robinson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, I (*The Formation of the Islamic World Sixth to Eleventh Centuries*), p. 173-225, 192-193; G.W. Bowersock, *Empires in Collision in Late Antiquity*, Waltham, Brandeis University Press (“The Menahem Stern Jerusalem Lectures”), 2012, p. 59.

21 Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, p. 106-117.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 18-72.

23 Robinson, “Rise of Islam”, p. 192.

### The Qurʾān and Imminent Eschatology in Early Islam

The compelling evidence that Muḥammad and his early followers believed in the imminent end of the world is not so easily shoved aside. Most important in this regard is the Qurʾān, which, as the oldest surviving piece of Islamic literature and the only literary document from the first century of Islam, presents a precious witness to Muḥammad's religious beliefs as interpreted by his earliest followers. The Qurʾān abounds with eschatological warnings of the impending judgment and destruction of the Hour: one passage after the next repeatedly heralds that the hour has drawn near or is imminent.<sup>24</sup> Other passages refer to certain astronomical events that will signal the Hour's arrival, many of which, it is said, had already occurred and had gone unheeded. Likewise the Qurʾān often responds directly to disbelief in the Hour and its imminent arrival, assuring those among its audience that they will soon see for themselves that the time is indeed short. When the unbelievers mockingly ask to know precisely when the Hour will arrive, in each instance the Qurʾān declares that knowledge of the Hour lies with God alone, although again it is promised to come soon. Elsewhere the Qurʾān explains that for God a day is a thousand years or even fifty thousand years, all the while insisting unrelentingly that the Hour's arrival is indeed imminent. Only a small handful of passages deviate in any way from this persistent eschatological urgency. Four verses introduce a slight note of contingency, warning that "perhaps" the Hour is nigh, but even these still convey a sense that its advent can be expected soon. And just a single passage equivocates concerning the imminence of the Hour, conceding, "I do not know whether that which you are promised is nigh, or whether my Lord will appoint it for a space" (Kor 72, 25).

Comparison with similar evidence from the New Testament gospels is helpful for assessing these slight variations in the Qurʾān's warnings of the Hour's imminence. Like the Qurʾān, the sayings of Jesus in the canonical gospels evidence some diversity of opinion with respect to the *eschaton's* immediacy. The clear majority of Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom of God signal its pressing imminence, but a minority tradition expresses either some uncertainty concerning the Kingdom's timing or a slightly longer interval, and a handful of passages even suggest that the Kingdom was in some sense already present. Indeed, the issue of the *eschaton's* timing is if anything more complex in the gospels than it is in the Qurʾān, and yet scholars have nonetheless been able to come to a fairly solid consensus that Jesus and his earliest followers believed

24 For a more detailed discussion of eschatology in the Qurʾān, see Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, p. 158-171; and Shoemaker, "Muḥammad and the Qurʾān", p. 1094-1099.

that the Kingdom would arrive within the lifetime of some of his disciples.<sup>25</sup> If we follow the same principles in analyzing the Qur'ānic traditions concerning the Hour, there can be little question that Muḥammad and the early Muslims similarly expected this eschatological event within their own generation.

Although there is some very limited divergence concerning the immediacy of the Hour in the Qur'ān, as with the sayings of Jesus, belief in the *eschaton's* pressing imminence clearly predominates.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the responses from unbelievers in the Qur'ān's audience indicate that they had been led to believe that they would soon witness the Hour's arrival (*e.g.* Kor 19, 75; 37, 170-179; 102, 3-5). Perhaps most importantly, however, it is extremely unlikely that the Qur'ān's pervasive forecast of impending judgment is something that was added to the Qur'ānic traditions after Muḥammad's death by the early community, since it was not long thereafter that these urgent warnings of its immediacy would have been falsified by the passage of time. In this case the criteria of embarrassment and dissimilarity (*i.e.* dissimilarity with the experience of the early community)—two fundamental methodological principles in study of the historical Jesus—leave little doubt that the Qur'ān's eschatological urgency originated with Muḥammad and the formative community.<sup>27</sup> Although eschatology would remain a vibrant theme within the later Islamic tradition (as was also the case in Christianity), it seems highly improbable that later Muslims would have invented Qur'ānic traditions such as these that wrongly predict the Hour's advent in the immediate future.<sup>28</sup>

25 See *e.g.* Werner Georg Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfilment: The Eschatological Message of Jesus*, transl. D.M. Barton, London, SCM Press, 1957, p. 15-87 and E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1985, p. 123-156, although one could still explore Johannes Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892 or Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 330-397 on this topic with profit, even at such a chronological distance. For a more popular presentation of the same ideas, see E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, London, Allen Lane, 1993, p. 169-188 and Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 125-139.

26 Cf. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 152-153; Sanders, *Historical Figure of Jesus*, p. 176-177.

27 For a brief presentation of the criterion of embarrassment and the related criterion of discontinuity, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, New York, Doubleday, 1991, I (*The Roots of the Problem and the Person*), p. 168-174. For a more popular presentation, see Ehrman, *Jesus*, p. 91-94. For a more thorough discussion of this criterion and its history within Biblical Studies, see Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, esp. p. 1-171.

28 Cf. Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 360-363; Sanders, *Historical Figure of Jesus*, p. 180.

By contrast, the handful of Qur'ānic passages suggesting a more uncertain timeline are, like the equivalent traditions from the gospels, most likely the result of efforts by the early community to adjust and mitigate the eschatological confidence of Muḥammad and his earliest followers. Yet even these passages, much like those in the gospels, still reflect the urgency of the primitive tradition. The Qur'ān often maintains that knowledge of when the Hour would arrive belongs to God alone, a strategy also familiar from the gospels (Matt 24, 32 to 25, 12). Yet like Jesus, the Qur'ān invokes this divine privilege while continuing to insist on the Hour's pressing imminence (*e.g.* Kor 67, 26-29; 33, 63; 79, 44-46). Likewise when the Qur'ān appeals to the vast differences between divine and human perceptions of time—also familiar from the New Testament, again the Hour's immediacy remains persistent (Kor 22, 47-55; 32, 5; 70, 4-7; cf. 2 Pet 3, 8, referring to Ps 90, 4). As even Bell will acknowledge, however, these passages are quite possibly interpolations, added by the early community “to obviate the difficulty of the delay in the coming event”.<sup>29</sup> Other Qur'ānic verses that introduce a note of uncertainty about the Hour's immediacy are also very likely the product of interpolations, which, as I have argued elsewhere, have dramatically altered what were originally more forceful statements of the Hour's imminence by adding just a word or two.<sup>30</sup> On the whole then, when we consider the eschatological urgency of the Qur'ān in the same terms used to evaluate the eschatological teachings ascribed to Jesus, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Muḥammad and his earliest followers believed that the end of the world would soon come upon them, a perspective that is also importantly confirmed by a number of early eschatological *ḥadīth* (some of which are discussed below).<sup>31</sup>

### Eschatology an the Ideology of Conquest in Early Islam

In light of this eschatological confidence, one may perhaps wonder why on earth Muḥammad's followers would spill blood to establish their dominion over a world that they believed was soon to pass away? One possible explanation is that these two ideas reflect different phases in the historical development of Muḥammad's religious movement. As noted, many scholars hold that Muḥammad's political ambitions were not yet evident during the Meccan phase of his prophetic career. Only after his move to Medina, they propose, did

29 Richard Bell, *The Qur'ān*, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1937-1939, II, p. 604.

30 Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, p. 168-169.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 172-178.

his agenda shift decidedly in the direction of forming a polity and expanding it through conquest. Therefore, one might imagine that while in Mecca Muḥammad preached an eschatological message warning of the Hour's impending arrival, only to shift focus dramatically in Medina to advance a program of establishing God's rule in the world through the expansion of his new community. In this way then the political agenda could be understood as having superseded an earlier eschatological orientation that subsequently was more or less abandoned, as some scholars have suggested.<sup>32</sup> It is of course equally possible that the apparent tension between imminent eschatology and political ambition remained unresolved, so that the juxtaposition of these different perspectives may simply reflect the rapidly unfolding development of a new religious movement that was not particularly concerned with harmonizing such dissonances. Only with the passage of time and the expansion of the community did it eventually become necessary to somehow reconcile these two divergent impulses.<sup>33</sup>

Fred Donner points the way to a better solution, I believe, in his recent provocative and insightful work, *Muḥammad and the Believers*. Here Donner briefly suggests an understanding of the conquests that renders any supposed tensions between eschatology and empire in earliest Islam more apparent than real. In doing so he posits a different motivation for the Near Eastern "conquests" from what has generally been assumed both in the traditional sources and in traditional scholarship. Donner's interpretation of the conquests relies in part on his understanding of earliest Islam as an inter-confessional "community of the Believers" that welcomed Jews and perhaps even Christians to full membership, requiring only a simple profession of faith in "God and the last day". While this hypothesis is not unproblematic, in my opinion it presents a much more persuasive synthesis of the earliest evidence than the traditional Islamic accounts provide. According to Donner, Muḥammad and his followers did not initially conceive of themselves as "a separate religious confession distinct from others" during the first several decades of the movement's existence.<sup>34</sup> Rather, the earliest "Islamic" community appears to have been

32 E.g. Bell, *Origin of Islam*, p. 102-108, 121-124; Bell and Watt, *Introduction to the Qur'ān*, p. 54; Buhl, *Das Leben Muhammeds*, p. 196-197; Paret, *Mohammed und der Koran*, p. 151-152, 163-164.

33 See also Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1998, p. 114-115. Here Allison notes that in fact it is not at all uncommon for religious communities to believe that the end is near and simultaneously to be concerned with long-term issues, providing some specific examples.

34 Donner, "From Believers to Muslims", p. 9. See also Cook, "The Beginnings of Islam".

a loosely organized confederation of Abrahamic monotheists “who shared Muḥammad’s intense belief in one God and in the impending arrival of the Last Day, and who joined together to carry out what they saw as the urgent task of establishing righteousness on earth—at least within their own community of Believers, and, when possible, outside it—in preparation for the End”.<sup>35</sup> This new religious movement was not, as Donner explains, so much “a new and distinct religious confession” as a “monotheistic reform movement” committed to advancing personal and communal piety in the face of a swiftly approaching final judgment.<sup>36</sup>

Accordingly Donner identifies the underlying motive behind the “expansion of the Believers’ rule” (his characterization of the “Islamic conquests”) not in zeal for spreading a new “Islamic” religious confession, particularly because, as he argues, in these early decades the movement was “not yet a ‘religion’ in the sense of a distinct confession”.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the remarkable success that Muḥammad’s followers experienced as they began to expand their community beyond the Arabian Peninsula would appear to confirm its non-sectarian nature. As Donner observes, “If the Believers already embraced a clearly defined and distinct new creed and had tried to demand that local communities observe it, those populations of the Fertile Crescent would have resisted their arrival stubbornly.” The fact that such a small number of Believers were able to subdue and maintain authority over such a large and diverse population suggests that they were not seeking to introduce a new religious confession, which presumably would have met with greater resistance. Instead, it would appear that the Believers were seeking to extend their political hegemony to include new populations, “requiring them to pay taxes, and asking them, at least initially, to affirm their belief in one God and the Last day, and to affirm their commitment to living righteously and to avoid sin”.<sup>38</sup>

According to Donner, “the early Believers were concerned with social and political issues but only in so far as they related to concepts of piety and proper behavior needed to insure salvation”, thus inverting the relationship between political and religious concerns assumed by many other scholars.<sup>39</sup> And so it

35 Donner, “From Believers to Muslims”, p. 10-11. Hints in certain early Islamic apocalyptic traditions of a primitive self-identity as a sort of “new Israel” also could suggest such a community: Ofer Livne-Kafri, “Some Notes on the Muslim Apocalyptic Tradition”, *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, 17 (1999), p. 71-94, 85-86.

36 Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, p. 87.

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*, p. 108-110.

39 *Ibid.*, p. xii.

would seem that fear before the impending judgment, rather than an interest in political power, inspired Muḥammad and his followers to expand their "community of the saved, dedicated to the rigorous observance of God's laws as revealed to His prophets". Their goal was not so much to acquire earthly might and glory but rather to attain individual and collective salvation in the swiftly approaching judgment of the Hour. In Muḥammad God had raised up one final prophet to warn of the impending last day, and it was thus imperative to spread his message of pious submission to God's commandments as quickly as possible to as many people as possible, by expanding this inter-confessional movement to include righteous members from the other monotheist communities of the late ancient Near East. Likewise the Believers were committed to struggle against those who were unbelievers and the wicked, in order to eradicate sinfulness from the earth and to establish obedience to God's law in advance of the imminent judgment through the dominion of their faithful polity. And through these actions the early Believers seem to have understood that the events of the *eschaton* were already beginning to unfold even in the very formation and expansion of their righteous community.<sup>40</sup>

At one point Donner suggests that this "sounds like a program aimed at establishing 'God's kingdom on Earth,' that is, a political order (or at least a society) informed by the pious precepts enjoined by the Qur'an and one that should supplant the sinful political order of the Byzantines and Sasanians".<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless Donner is quick to remark that the Qur'an never uses the phrase "kingdom of God", and with that he more or less abandons this proposal. It is certainly worth noting, however, that both the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition frequently name the *eschaton* the "*amr* of God".<sup>42</sup> Although this phrase is usually translated as "God's command", the word *amr* can also mean "rule" or "dominion" or even "empire", so that this term could equally be rendered as "God's rule" or "the empire of God".<sup>43</sup> Here then we have in the Qur'an a

40 *Ibid.*, p. 80-82.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

42 *E.g.* Kor 10, 25; 11, 48; 16, 1; M.J. Kister, "A Booth like the Booth of Moses . . .: A Study of an Early *Hadīth*", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 25 (1962), p. 150-155.

43 See Edward William Lane and Stanley Lane-Poole, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, New York, F. Ungar Pub. Co., 1955, I, p. 96c; Francis Joseph Steingass, *The Student's Arabic-English Dictionary*, London, W.H. Allen, 1884, p. 76a; Albert de Biberstein-Kazimirski, *Dictionnaire arabe-français*, Paris, Maisonneuve et cie, 1860, I, p. 54a. See also Khalid Yahya Blankinship, "Imārah, Khilāfah, and Imāmah: The Origins of the Succession to the Prophet Muḥammad", in *Shī'ite Heritage: Essays on Classical and Modern Traditions*, ed. Lynda Clarke, Binghamton, N.Y., Global Publications, 2001, p. 19-44, 27. I thank my colleague Sean Anthony for the latter reference.

reference to the *eschaton* that sounds very much like “the Kingdom of God”. In light of the fact that after Muḥammad’s death his followers were led by someone with the title *amīr al-mu’minīn*, or “commander of the faithful”, it seems even more likely that the approaching *amr Allāh* signifies something along the lines of God’s coming eschatological “reign” or “kingdom”. Such language suggests that the early Believers would have understood the success and rapid expansion of their devout polity not only as a sign of divine favor but also as events that marked the “beginning of the end” and were actually inaugurating the eschatological rule of God.

There is much to recommend this eschatological interpretation of the Near Eastern conquests. More than likely, it was not a mere coincidence that Muḥammad’s followers made their first push outside of the Arabian Peninsula into the Holy Land in Palestine and towards its sacred center at Jerusalem. Of course, Jerusalem is the eschatological nexus of the Abrahamic traditions, including Islam, where the Final Judgment is expected to take place, culminating in the restoration of divine rule. There the Jews of Muḥammad’s era expected the Messiah to restore the Davidic kingship, return Jewish sovereignty to the Promised Land, and rebuild the Temple. The Christians for their part were awaiting the “Last Emperor”, who would vanquish Christianity’s foes, establish righteousness on the earth, and then hand over imperial authority to God at Jerusalem. One imagines that these contemporary apocalyptic scripts exercised a powerful influence over Muḥammad and his followers, and the fact that Islamic eschatological expectations remain to this day firmly soldered to Jerusalem is surely no mere coincidence: Jerusalem’s abiding eschatological significance undoubtedly preserves a vestige of Jewish and Christian influence on emergent Islam. Thus Donner suggests that “[t]he Believers may have felt that, because they were in the process of constructing the righteous ‘community of the saved’, they should establish their presence in Jerusalem as soon as possible.” There, he proposes, they perhaps expected “that the *amīr al-mu’minīn* [the commander of the Believers], as leader of this new community dedicated to the realization of God’s word, would fulfill the role of that expected ‘last emperor’ who would, on the last day, hand earthly power over to God”.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, given centrality of Jerusalem in the eschatological imagination of late ancient Judaism and Christianity, it is only to be expected that Muḥammad and his followers would have likewise set their sights on the Holy Land, where their eschatological hopes would soon meet fulfillment in the coming climax of history.

44 Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, p. 16, 81-82, 96-97, 125, 143-144; quotations at p. 97 and 144.

There is in fact considerable evidence to suggest that the Believers initially understood themselves to have been chosen by God to liberate the Promised Land from Roman rule and reclaim it for the descendants of Abraham. Although such a self-understanding seemingly runs counter to the canonical narratives of Islamic origins, significant traces of this idea remain embedded in the early Islamic tradition.<sup>45</sup> The Qur’ān itself even bears witness to such a notion several times, seeming to confirm that the liberation of the Holy Land and its restoration to Abraham’s descendants were in fact central tenets of the primitive Islamic tradition. Sura 33, 27 proclaims that “He made you heirs to their land [*arḍahum*] (of the ‘people of the Book’) and their dwellings and to a land which you have not yet trodden”, a land named elsewhere in the Qur’ān as “the Holy Land” [*al-arḍa l-muqaddasata*].<sup>46</sup> Sura 10, 13-14 similarly relates: “We destroyed generations before you when they acted oppressively while their apostles brought them proofs, yet they did not believe. Thus do we repay a guilty people. Then we made you successors in the land [*al-arḍi*] after them, so we may see how you behave.”<sup>47</sup> Likewise, sura 21, 105-106, citing Psalm 37, 29, promises, “We wrote in the Psalms, as We did in [earlier] Scripture, ‘My righteous servants will inherit the land [*al-arḍa*].’ There truly is a message in this for the servants of God!”<sup>48</sup> In each of these passages, the Qur’ān addresses Muḥammad’s followers as having been chosen by God to liberate the biblical Holy Land and take possession of them as rightful heirs, events which sura 10, 14 oddly seems to relate as having already occurred. It would appear then that Muḥammad likely exhorted his followers to rise up and seize the Holy Land, which was their rightful inheritance as descendants of Abraham. Important confirmation of this message can be found outside of the Islamic tradition from the Armenian historian Sebeos, whose report seems to derive from a document written in Jerusalem sometime in the first decades of Islamic rule.<sup>49</sup> Restoration of the descendants of Abraham to the Promised Land thus

45 Uri Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur’ān: The Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-image*, Princeton, Darwin Press (“Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam”, 17), 1999, p. 11-35, esp. 35. See also Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, p. 218-240.

46 Robert G. Hoyland, “Sebeos, the Jews, and the Rise of Islam”, *Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations*, 2 (1995), p. 89-102, 97, citing Holyland’s translation. Cf. Kor 5, 21.

47 Transl. from Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, p. 81.

48 Transl. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’ān*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 208, slightly modified: Abdel Haleem has instead, “My righteous servants will inherit the earth,” which disguises the connection to the biblical land of Israel. Ps. 37:29 in the NRSV reads: “The righteous shall inherit the land [ⲡⲚⲪ], and live in it forever.”

49 See Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, p. 199-204; Robert W. Thomson and James Howard-Johnston, *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press

appears to have been a “pillar” of early Islamic belief, and this Holy Land and its liberation figured prominently in the eschatological faith of Muḥammad and his earliest followers.

### Eschatology and Community in Earliest Islam

When we examine the various eschatological scenarios outlined by late ancient Judaism and Christianity more closely, an eschatological understanding of the Near Eastern conquests becomes even more plausible. First, however, perhaps we should look back again to Jesus and the early Christian movement, where we find meaningful precedent for Donner’s suggestion that Muḥammad and his followers may have understood the formation of their community and its expansion as events that marked the beginning of the Hour’s unfolding. We have already noted the chronological tension present in the teachings ascribed to Jesus about the Kingdom of God, with the majority proclaiming the Kingdom’s imminent advent, while a minority tradition reflects some uncertainty. There is, however, another minority tradition in which Jesus relates that the Kingdom of God had already come upon his audience and was manifest particularly in his miraculous works (esp. Matt 12, 28; Luke 11, 20 and Matt 11, 2-6). New Testament scholars are generally agreed that the sayings in question most likely go back to Jesus himself: the only question is, what do they mean? Many scholars, following in the tradition of Albert Schweitzer, have tended to focus instead on the prevailing sentiment that the Kingdom’s arrival was expected in the immediate future, and accordingly they interpret these particular sayings as further indication of the Kingdom’s imminence.<sup>50</sup> Others, however, have followed C.H. Dodd’s lead, by assigning these few passages a hermeneutic privilege so that the Kingdom is understood as having already been realized somehow in Jesus’ own ministry.<sup>51</sup> An alternative approach, which at the moment seems to reflect a fairly broad consensus, combines the two perspectives. While Jesus undoubtedly preached that the *eschaton* was to be expected in the immediate future, at the same time Jesus and his followers also seem to have believed that the beginning of the Kingdom was already

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(“Translated Texts for Historians”, 31), 1999, I, p. lxxviii-lxx; 102 n. 634; and II, p. 238-240; Tim W. Greenwood, “Sasanian Echoes and Apocalyptic Expectations: A Re-evaluation of the Armenian History attributed to Sebeos”, *Le Muséon*, 115 (2003), p. 323-397, 365.

50 Perhaps the best example is Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 131-141; and Sanders, *Historical Figure of Jesus*, p. 175-178.

51 See esp. C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936.

present in his teachings and miracles.<sup>52</sup> Thus these verses indicate not so much the full presence of the Kingdom in Jesus' ministry, since clearly for Jesus the Kingdom was soon to come with power (Mark 8, 38). Nevertheless, the Kingdom's arrival was also believed to be so imminent that in some sense it had already begun, and with his words and deeds Jesus himself was inaugurating the eschatological reign of God. It was as if it had not yet arrived into the world, but the process of its birthing had begun, or like a dawn that had broken with the sun still yet to rise.

The similarities then between the eschatology of primitive Christianity and what Donner has proposed for the early Believers of Islam are unmistakable. Like Jesus and the earliest Christians, Donner suggests that Muḥammad and his *umma* saw themselves as harbingers of the *eschaton*, who through the formation of their community and its progress and advancement of righteousness in the world were actually initiating the events of the Hour's arrival. The roots of such an idea lay deep within Judaism and Christianity, as the Jesus movement attests, and so it is plausible that Muḥammad and his followers possessed an equivalent understanding of their role in the eschatological drama that was beginning to unfold through their actions. The Qur'ān itself suggests as much, for instance, with its clear echo of Jesus' proclamation that "the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt 12, 28 and Luke 11, 20) in the opening words of sura 16: "The reign of God has come." Likewise it warns that the portents of the Hour have already come, according to sura 47, 20, and among these tokens surely must have stood the splitting of the moon that had recently been witnessed, as related in sura 54, 1. Thus the heavens themselves were telling that the end had in fact begun.

A number of particularly early eschatological *ḥadīths* offer perhaps even more compelling evidence that Muḥammad and his followers understood his prophetic mission to be concurrent with the Hour's arrival. Muḥammad is reported to have said as much, declaring according to a number of sources

52 The first to propose this seems to have been Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfilment*, first published in 1945. More recently, see e.g. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, New York, Doubleday, 1994, II (*Mentor, Message, and Miracles*), p. 237-506, esp. 451-454, 1042-1046; James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, Grand Rapids, W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2003, p. 466-467; Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, transl. John Bowden, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1998, p. 252-278. Sanders allows that it is certainly possible that Jesus believed this about himself and his ministry, but he maintains that the evidence cannot establish it as probable: Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 131-141; and Sanders, *Historical Figure of Jesus*, p. 175-178. Regarding the status of this view as reflecting the current consensus, see Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, p. 244; and Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, p. 467.

that “My coming and that of the Hour are concomitant; indeed, the latter almost arrived before me.”<sup>53</sup> This *ḥadīṭ* is often coupled with a similar statement by Muḥammad that he had been “sent on the breath of the Hour”.<sup>54</sup> A passage from Ibn Sa’d’s *Ṭabaqāt* similarly notes of Muḥammad that “he has been sent with the Hour, in order to avert you from a severe punishment.”<sup>55</sup> In other traditions Muḥammad proclaims that he “was sent in the presence of the Hour”.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps the most well-known of these eschatological *ḥadīṭs* is the widely-circulated *ḥadīṭ* of the “two fingers”. According to this tradition, as cited by Ibn Ḥanbal for instance, Muḥammad said to the faithful: “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”, joining them together to illustrate their coincidence.<sup>57</sup> The two fingers *ḥadīṭ* also circulated often together with Muḥammad’s statement that he had been “sent on the breath of the Hour”, as well as his remark that the Hour was so near that it had nearly outstripped his own arrival.<sup>58</sup> Another tradition, identified by Suliman Bashear, reports that Muḥammad described himself in relation to the Hour as “somebody sent to his people as a watchman. Seeing a sudden swift raid already on the move and worrying that he would be surpassed by it, he started to wave his shirt/sword to his people.”<sup>59</sup> Muḥammad then continues to explain again that the Hour had nearly outstripped his own arrival.

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- 53 Casanova, *Mohammed*, p. 18; Aḥmad b. ‘Alī l-Maqrīzī, *Description historique et topographique de l’Egypte*, transl. Paul Casanova and U. Bouriant, Paris, E. Leroux (“Mémoires publiés par les membres de la Mission archéologique française au Caire”, 17), 1900, III, p. 18.
- 54 Kister, “A Booth like the Booth of Moses”, p. 152; Suliman Bashear, “Muslim Apocalypses and the Hour: A Case-Study in Traditional Reinterpretation”, *Israel Oriental Studies*, 13 (1993), p. 75-100, 78.
- 55 Muḥammad b. Sa’d, *Ṭabaqāt* [*Biographien Muhammads, seiner Gefährten und der späteren Träger des Islams, bis zum Jahre 230 der Flucht*], ed. E. Sachau, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1904-1928, I.1, p. 65.
- 56 E.g. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, Beirut, al-Maktab al-islāmī li-l-ṭibā’a wa-l-naṣr, 1969, II, p. 50, 92; transl. Bashear, “Muslim Apocalypses”, p. 80, where other sources are indicated.
- 57 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, III, p. 310-311.
- 58 Muslim b. al-Ḥaǧǧāǧ, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Beirut, Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1995, IV, p. 1794-1795. See also the various other examples of this tradition cited in Casanova, *Mohammed*, p. 15-17, 196-199; and Bashear, “Muslim Apocalypses”, p. 76-80.
- 59 E.g. ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak, *Kitāb al-Zuhd wa-l-raqā’iq*, Beirut, Muḥammad ‘Afif al-Zu’bi, 1971, p. 554; transl. Bashear, “Muslim Apocalypses”, p. 79, where other sources are indicated.

There is little question that these *ḥadīṭ* are early, probably originating within the first decades of the community if not even from Muḥammad himself. It is highly improbable that someone from a later generation would have invented such pronouncements and placed them in Muḥammad's mouth, when they were so plainly contradicted by the flow of history. Only shortly after his death this melting of the Hour with Muḥammad's mission would have already become sharply dissonant with the reality of the Hour's delay. Yet the endurance of such traditions is itself a testament to the currency of this idea within earliest Islam, corroborating the similar evidence from the Qur'ān. The fact that the Qur'ān signals the Hour's actual onset in only a few passages is not especially unusual, inasmuch as the contents of the Qur'ān generally do not concern themselves with the affairs of Muḥammad and the early community.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, incongruities that such proclamations of the Hour's onset pose with the later tradition would certainly have discouraged their preservation, making it all the more remarkable that even a handful have slipped past the censors' filter. For comparison, in the gospels there are similarly only a couple of passages suggesting that the Kingdom was becoming present through Jesus' ministry, and yet it is precisely the exceptional status of these passages that alerts scholars to their exceptional historical value. Likewise, while some of these eschatological *ḥadīṭ* may appear in only a handful of sources, their occasional exclusion from the canonical collections is again quite understandable, and their survival at the margins of the tradition affords invaluable evidence of the early community's belief that final events of the Hour had indeed begun in Muḥammad's preaching and the victories of their righteous polity against its sinful opponents. Thus Donner's suggestion stands as more than a mere possibility. There is in fact significant evidence from the early Islamic tradition, from both the Qur'ān and early *ḥadīṭ*, indicating that Muḥammad and his followers likely understood the formation and success of their community as having already set into motion the final judgment of the Hour.

### Imperial Eschatology and Rome: Byzantine *Reichseschatologie*

As for the notion that the Believers understood themselves to be inaugurating the eschatological Hour through the expansion of their polity into an empire and through military triumph, there is strong precedent for these ideas among the Christians and Jews of the Near East on the eve of Islam. The sixth and

60 *E.g.* "Muḥammad and his prophethood are very much in the background in the Qur'ān, overshadowed by other figures and themes." Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, p. 51.

early-seventh centuries saw the rise of increasingly intense eschatological expectations in the Byzantine world, a fact which in itself forms an important backdrop for the urgent eschatology of primitive Islam. For many Christians, the beginning of the sixth century marked the end of the sixth millennium since the creation of the world. According to a widely held belief adopted from early Judaism, the world was expected to last for six “days” of a thousand years each, following the analogy of the six days of creation and the Bible’s remark that a day is like a thousand years in God’s sight (Ps 90, 4; 2 Pet 3, 8). Since Christ had been born in the middle of the last day, according to the prevailing chronology, this meant that the beginning of the sixth century would also occasion the end of the world. There is in fact significant evidence that many Christians expected to witness the end of the world in the opening decade of the sixth century.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, as the world endured into its seventh millennium, imminent eschatological expectation did not abate but instead even intensified: as Paul Magdalino notes, “the turn of the cosmic millennium [in 500] was not a single crisis moment, but marked the entry into a time zone where the end would come at any moment.”<sup>62</sup> The reign of Justinian was especially marked by concern for the approaching end of the world, and

61 Cyril A. Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980, p. 203-204; Paul Magdalino, “The History of the Future and Its Uses: Prophecy, Policy, and Propaganda”, in *The Making of Byzantine History: Studies Dedicated to Donald M. Nicol*, ed. Roderick Beaton and Charlotte Roueché, Aldershot, Variorum (“Centre for Hellenic Studies, King’s College London, Publications”, 1), 1993, p. 3-32, 4-5; Paul J. Alexander, *The Oracle of Baalbek: The Tiburtine Sibyl in Greek Dress*, Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies (“Dumbarton Oaks Studies”, 10), 1967, p. 118-120; Wolfram Brandes, “Anastasios ὁ δίκαιος: Endzeiterwartung und Kaiserkritik”, *Byzantische Zeitschrift*, 90 (1997), p. 24-63, 26-32, 39-40, 53-63; Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Remembering Pain: Syriac Historiography and the Separation of the Churches”, *Byzantion*, 58 (1988), p. 295-308, 298-302; Oliver Nicholson, “Golden Age and End of the World: Myths of Mediterranean Life from Lactantius to Joshua the Stylite”, in *The Medieval Mediterranean: Cross-Cultural Contacts*, ed. Marilyn J. Chiat and Katherine L. Reyerson, St. Cloud, North Star Press of St. Cloud (“Medieval Studies at Minnesota”, 3), 1988, p. 11-18; Wolfram Brandes, “Die apokalyptische Literatur”, in *Quellen zur Geschichte des frühen Byzanz (4.-9. Jahrhundert)*, ed. Friedhelm Winkelmann and Wolfram Brandes, Amsterdam, J.C. Gieben Verlag, 1990, p. 305-322, 308; Yuri Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies of the True Cross: The Sasanian Conquest of Jerusalem in 614 and Byzantine Ideology of Anti-Persian Warfare*, Wien, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (“Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, Sitzungsberichte”, 819; “Veröffentlichungen zur Iranistik”, 61), 2011, p. 55, 62.

62 Paul Magdalino, “The Year 1000 in Byzantium”, in *Byzantium in the Year 1000*, ed. Paul Magdalino, Leiden, Brill (“The Medieval Mediterranean”, 45), 2003, p. 233-269, 238.

eschatological apprehensions appear in a variety of different literary genres, ranging from historiography to philosophy, as well as in the liturgy and iconography.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps there is no finer example of this apocalyptic *Zeitgeist* than Romanos the Melode's hymn *On the Ten Virgins*, composed in the middle of the 550s: "The last day is nigh, Now we behold those things; they are not at the door, they are the very doors. They have arrived and are present."<sup>64</sup> Here we find not only the eschatological urgency that pervaded much of early Byzantine culture, but also an understanding of the *eschaton* as having already arrived and being present in some sense, much like, it seems, Muḥammad and his followers similarly understood the Hour to have dawned upon them.

By the early seventh century, this eschatological anticipation reached its peak, culminating in the dramatic events of the emperor Heraclius' reign. Heraclius came to the throne by rescuing the empire from the illegitimate and severe rule of Phocas (602-10), only to face the dire threats posed by the Persian and Avar invasions. The Persians in particular took advantage of the political chaos in Byzantium during the first two decades of the seventh century, so that by 620 they were in control of Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and parts of Asia Minor. Surely among the most traumatic events of the Persian invasion must have stood the capture of Jerusalem in 614 and the resulting Persian seizure of the True Cross. The Christian Holy City had fallen into the hands of infidels, through the connivance of the Jews (or so the reports indicate), and the Cross, the symbol of the Christian Empire, had been hauled off to the Persian capital. Many Christians understandably began to expect the end of the Roman Empire, and with it, the end of the world. Eschatological fervor grew even more pitched, and several contemporary sources forecast the world's impending doom with newfound urgency.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps the most interesting of these is the prediction ascribed to Khosrau II in Theophylact of Simocatta's *History*.

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- 63 The best discussion of this topic is to be found in Roger D. Scott, "Justinian's New Age and the Second Coming," in *Byzantine Chronicles in the Sixth Century*, Farnham-Burlington, Variorum (« Variorum collected studies series », 1004), 2012, XIX, p. 1-22; and see in the same I, p. 47; II, p. 43; V, p. 6-7; VII, p. 76, 82-83; IX, p. 107-109; XIII, p. 26. See also Magdalino, "History of the Future", p. 5-9, 15-18; Brandes, "Anastasios ὁ δῖχορος", p. 39-46.
- 64 Romanos the Melode, *Hymn 51: On the Ten Virgins*, dans *Romanos le Mélode: Hymes*, ed. José Grosdidier de Matons, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf ("Sources chrétiennes", 99, 110, 114, 128, 283), 1964-1981, V, p. 302; transl. from Magdalino, "History of the Future", p. 6. On eschatology in Romanos' hymns, see also Brandes, "Anastasios ὁ δῖχορος", p. 41-43.
- 65 Magdalino, "History of the Future", p. 18-19; Gerrit J. Reinink, "Heraclius, the New Alexander: Apocalyptic Prophecies during the Reign of Heraclius", in *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation*, ed. Gerrit J. Reinink and Bernard H. Stolte, Leuven, Peeters, 2002, p. 81-94; Cyril Mango, "Le temps dans les commentaires byzantines

According to Theophylact, Khosrau II prophesied that “the Babylonian race will hold the Roman state in its power for a threefold cyclic hebdomad of years [591-612]. Thereafter the Romans will enslave the Persians in the fifth hebdomad of years [619-26]. When these very things have been accomplished, the day without evening will dwell among men and the expected fate will achieve power, when the transient things will be handed over to dissolution and the things of the better life hold sway.”<sup>66</sup> The similarities of this prophecy to Kor 30, 2-5 are striking (at least according to the most widely accepted vocalization), particularly when one recalls that “the Command” (or “dominion, reign”: *al-amr*) is a Qur’ānic term for the *eschaton*: “The Greeks have been vanquished in the nearer part of the land; and, after their vanquishing, they shall be the victors in a few years. To God belongs the Command before and after, and on that day the believers shall rejoice in God’s help.”<sup>67</sup> Although the eschatological reference to “the Command” is a bit cryptic here, the parallels between this prophecy from a Byzantine history written in 630 and the Qur’ān are certainly remarkable. If nothing else, perhaps their correspondence shows just how widespread eschatological anticipation had become in the wake of the Persian conquest of the Near East.

Of course, Khosrau’s prophecy more or less came true, at least in part. Heraclius’ campaign began in earnest in 622, with a crushing defeat of the Persians, and after some delays occasioned by the need to deal simultaneously with the Avars, the Byzantine army began its invasion of Persia. In 628 the Persians surrendered to Heraclius, who had reached Seleucia-Ctesiphon, giving him the relic of the True Cross that they had stolen. Heraclius returned to Constantinople with the Cross in triumph, and his six-year campaign was

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de l’Apocalypse”, in *Le temps chrétien de la fin de l’antiquité au Moyen Age III<sup>e</sup>-XIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1984, p. 431-438, 435-436.

- 66 Theophylact of Simocatta, *History* V.15 (Carl de Boor and Peter Wirth, eds, *Theophylacti Simocattae Historiae*, rev. ed., Stuttgart, Teubner (“Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana”), 1972, p. 216-217; transl. Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta: An English Translation with Introduction and Notes*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, p. 153). See the discussions of this prophecy in Paul J. Alexander, “Historiens byzantins et croyances eschatologiques”, in *Actes du XIII<sup>e</sup> Congrès international d’études byzantines, Ochride 10-16 septembre 1961*, Belgrade, Comité yougoslave des études byzantines, 1964, II, p. 1-8, 4-5; and Gerrit J. Reinink, “Alexander the Great in Seventh-Century Syriac ‘Apocalyptic’ Texts”, *Byzantinorossica*, 2 (2003), p. 150-178, 159-160; Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies*, p. 63-64.
- 67 Regarding the vocalization and interpretation of this passage, see esp. Nadia Maria El Cheikh, “Sūrat al-Rūm: A Study of the Exegetical Literature”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 118/3 (1998), p. 356-364.

likened to the six days of Creation, so that his victory would correspond with the divine Sabbath. Then in what Cyril Mango describes as “a deliberately apocalyptic act”, Heraclius journeyed to Jerusalem to restore the True Cross to Golgotha.<sup>68</sup> In doing so his actions must certainly have called to mind the apocalyptic legend of the Last Roman Emperor, who at the end of time would surrender his earthly authority to God by laying down his crown at Golgotha, just before the Antichrist’s appearance and second coming of Christ. Indeed, Heraclius’ victory and his actions thereafter convinced many that the end of time had truly come upon them.<sup>69</sup> The panygerics of his court poet, George of Pisidia, portray Heraclius and his victories in boldly eschatological terms, and the historians of this period, such as Theophylact of Simocotta and George of Choziba, saw the events of their day as presaging the impending final judgment and the end of time.<sup>70</sup> Yet while these events and their interpretation reveal the eschatologically charged atmosphere within which Islam first emerged, no less importantly they also disclose the extent to which Byzantine eschatology viewed the Empire itself as positive eschatological agent. And this notion, that the Kingdom of God was somehow beginning to be realized through success of the Roman Empire, is crucial for understanding the mixture of eschatology and empire in primitive Islam.

As early as Origen of Alexandria (d. 254), Christian exegetes began to take a more positive view of the Roman Empire, through whose existence Divine Providence had afforded conditions of peace and stability in which the Christian mission could be fulfilled.<sup>71</sup> The real watershed, however, came with the conversion of Constantine and, ultimately, the Empire to Christianity during the fourth century. In this context Eusebius of Caesarea emerged as the architect of a political ideology that would have far-reaching consequences for the history of Christian Rome. Eusebius articulated a new mixture of divine

68 Mango, *Byzantium*, p. 205; Reinink, “Heraclius”, p. 83-84.

69 Magdalino, “History of the Future”, p. 19; Reinink, “Heraclius”, p. 83-94; Reinink, “Alexander the Great”, p. 160-161; Brandes, “Anastasios ὁ δίκροτος”, p. 47-50; 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, p. 17-40, 35; Jan Willem Drijvers, “Heraclius and the *Restitutio Crucis*: Notes on Symbolism and Ideology”, in *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation*, ed. Gerrit J. Reinink and Bernard H. Stolte, Leuven, Peeters, 2002, p. 176-190, 186-188; Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies*, p. 62, 66-67.

70 Reinink, “Heraclius”, p. 83-84; Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, p. 421-422.

71 Gerhard Podskalsky, *Byzantinische Reicheschatologie: die Periodisierung der Weltgeschichte in den vier Grossreichen (Daniel 2 und 7) und dem tausendjährigen Friedensreiche (Apok. 20) Eine motivgeschichtliche Untersuchung*, Munich, W. Fink, 1972, p. 11.

authority with political authority that focused on the person of the emperor and the role of the Christian Empire as a divinely elected polity. The Romans were now God's chosen people, by means of whom God's rule would extend throughout the earth, so that by the seventh century, the Byzantines had come to call themselves the "new Israel".<sup>72</sup> The result, as Gerhard Podskalsky explains, was effectively to merge the Roman Empire with the Kingdom of God: while the two were not exactly one in the same, the Empire in some sense overlapped with and had inaugurated God's Kingdom.<sup>73</sup> This vision is most vividly related in Eusebius' *Panegyric on Constantine*, in which, as Timothy Barnes summarizes, "the empire of Constantine is a replica of the kingdom of heaven, the manifestation on earth of that ideal monarch which exists in the celestial realm."<sup>74</sup> Eusebius also drew inspiration from the prophecies of Daniel, which perhaps more than any other text influenced the development of Byzantine eschatology. He identified Rome with the fourth kingdom, the kingdom of iron, from Daniel 2, explaining that it would be the last world empire, after which would follow the Kingdom of God.<sup>75</sup> Such sentiments were not limited to the Greek world. Aphrahat, the Persian Sage, also wrote in the middle of the fourth century that Rome was the fourth Danielic kingdom, and as such it would remain unvanquished until the second coming of Christ. God, he explains, had given over his rule to the Romans ("the children of Esau"), and accordingly God will preserve Rome until the end of time, when "He should come Whose it is" and the Romans "will deliver up the deposit to the Giver".<sup>76</sup>

This idea, that Rome was the last worldly empire, uniquely chosen to pave the way for the Kingdom of God, became a centerpiece of Byzantine

72 David Olster, "Byzantine Apocalypses", in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, ed. John J. Collins, Bernard McGinn, and Stephen J. Stein, New York, Continuum, 1999, II, p. 48-73, 53-55.

73 Podskalsky, *Byzantinische Reicheschatologie*, p. 11-12.

74 Timothy David Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 254; cf. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Panegyric on Constantine 2-6*, in Ivar A. Heikel, ed., *Eusebius Werke*, Leipzig J.C. Hinrichs ("Die Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte", 7), 1902, I (*Über das Leben Constantins; Constantins Rede an die heilige Versammlung; Tricennatsrede an Constantin*), p. 199-212.

75 Eusebius of Caesarea, *Demonstratio Evangelica* 15, frag. 1, in Ivar A. Heikel, *Eusebius Werke*, Leipzig, J.C. Hinrichs ("Die Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte", 23), 1913, VI (*Die Demonstratio evangelica*), p. 493-494.

76 Aphrahat, *Demonstration 5: On Wars 13-14, 24* in R. Graffin et al. (eds), *Patrologia syriaca*, Paris, Firmin-Didot et socii, 1894, I, p. 207-212; 233-234; transl. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds), *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Second Series*, New York, The Christian Literature Company, 1890, XIII, p. 361.

eschatology, even among those writers who did not identify Rome with the last of Daniel’s four kingdoms.<sup>77</sup> One such individual was Kosmas Indikopleustes, an early sixth-century Alexandrian merchant and geographer, who articulated the union between the Empire and the Kingdom of God perhaps more emphatically than any other early Byzantine thinker since Eusebius. While Kosmas did not see Rome in any part of the statue from Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, he nonetheless found Rome elsewhere in Daniel’s prophecy, in his promise that “God will establish a kingdom that will not be destroyed forever” (Dan 2, 44). “But he says ‘God will raise up a Kingdom of Heaven which will not be corrupted unto eternity.’ Speaking here about the Lord Christ, he cryptically includes the kingdom of the Romans which arose at the same time as Christ our Lord . . . The Empire of the Romans shares in the honours of the Kingdom of Christ Our Lord, surpassing all other kingdoms as far as is possible in this life, and remaining undefeated until the end . . . For I would venture to say that, although barbarian enemies may rise up against the Roman Empire for chastisement on account of our sins, yet by the strength of the preserving power, the empire remains undefeated, so that Christianity may not be confined, but spread.”<sup>78</sup> While Kosmas is perhaps more direct in relating the Empire to the Kingdom of Christ than some of his contemporaries, his views are by no means idiosyncratic. Quite to the contrary, Magdalino maintains that Kosmas here reflects the “official” imperial position on the eschatological connection between the Empire and the coming Kingdom of Christ, which is simultaneously “both imminent and immanent”.<sup>79</sup>

*The Last Emperor: Imperial Eschatology in Byzantine Apocalyptic Literature*

The apocalyptic literature of early Byzantium shares this same eschatological vision of the Empire and its emperor as earthly precursors of the Kingdom of God. Perhaps the most important witness to the early Byzantine apocalyptic tradition is a text known as the *Tiburtine Sibyl*, one among a number of early Jewish and Christian *Sybilline Oracles* that were cast after the model of the ancient Greek and Roman Sibyls.<sup>80</sup> While this Sibylline apocalypse remains

77 Olster, “Byzantine Apocalypses”, p. 54.

78 Kosmas Indikopleustes, *Christian Topography*, II.73-5 in Wanda Wolska-Conus (ed.), *Cosmas Indicopleustès, Topographie chrétienne*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf (“Sources chrétiennes”, 141, 159), 1968, I, p. 387-391; transl. Magdalino, “History of the Future”, p. 11.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

80 See the general discussions of this literature and some examples in John J. Collins, “The Jewish Transformation of the Sibylline Oracles”, in *Sibille e linguaggi oracolari: mito, storia,*

fairly obscure today, even among scholars of late antiquity, during the Middle Ages its influence surpassed that of the canonical Apocalypse, and its influence on medieval Christianity was perhaps exceeded only by the Bible and the writings of the Church Fathers.<sup>81</sup> Although it was written in Greek sometime around the end of the fourth century, the *Tiburtine Sibyl* has a highly complex transmission and is best known from a Latin translation that was realized soon after its composition. The text responds to the tumultuous events experienced by the “orthodox” Christians during the reigns of the Arian emperor Constantius II (337-361) and Julian the Apostate (361-363) and the defeat of the emperor Valens by the Goths at Adrianople (378). It is at this point that the sibyl begins to predict the future, foretelling that a Greek emperor named Constans will rise up over the Greeks and the Romans and devastate the pagans and their temples, executing those who refuse conversion. Toward the end of his long reign the Jews will convert, at which point the Antichrist will appear and the peoples of Gog and Magog will break loose. The emperor will vanquish them with his army, after which he will travel to Jerusalem and lay down his diadem and robes, relinquishing authority to God. The Antichrist then will briefly reign, sitting in the House of the Lord in Jerusalem. Before long, however, the Lord will send the Archangel Michael to defeat him, thus preparing the way for the Second Coming.<sup>82</sup>

The role played by the Empire and its ruler in bringing about the fulfillment of the ages is unmistakable in this scheme. The emperor and his army subdue the world for Christ, bringing all the earth to confess the Christian faith and defeating the final enemies among the peoples of Gog and Magog. Then the emperor transfers sovereignty over to God in Jerusalem, leaving the Antichrist’s defeat in the hands of God. Thus the Empire and its conquests are again instrumental in realizing the *eschaton*, in a way that would seem to make sense of the similar combination of eschatology and empire in early Islam. This drama of imperial eschatology is perhaps somewhat better known from its inclusion in

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*tradizione : atti del convegno, Macerata-Norcia, settembre 1994*, ed. Ileana Chirassi Colombo and Tullio Seppilli, Pisa, Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali, 1998, p. 369-387; and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. and transl. R.McL. Wilson, Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991-2 (rev. ed.), II, p. 652-685.

81 Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1970 (rev. and expanded ed.), p. 32-33. See also Olster, “Byzantine Apocalypses”, p. 51-52; Magdalino, “History of the Future”, p. 20.

82 Ernst Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte und Forschungen: Pseudomethodius, Adso und die tiburtinische Sibylle*, Halle, M. Niemeyer, 1898, p. 185-186. Concerning the date and the mention of Valens, see Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, p. 49, 63-64.

the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius*, a work composed in northern Mesopotamia around the middle of the seventh century in response to the Islamic conquest of Syria.<sup>83</sup> Originally written in Syriac, this work circulated very widely in the

83 Paul J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985, p. 24-28; cf. Harald Suermann, *Die geschichtstheologische Reaktion auf die einfallenden Muslime in der edessenischen Apokalyphtik des 7. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang (“Europäische Hochschulschriften Reihe XXIII, Theologie”, 256), 1985, p. 159-161, which similarly argues for a date between 644 and 674. Although some specialists on Syriac literature have more recently favored a date towards the end of the seventh century, I continue to find Alexander’s dating more persuasive on the basis of the textual tradition of the *Apocalypse*. Both Sebastian Brock and Gerrit Reinink (and following them, Robert Hoyland) suggest that Ps.-Methodius’ forecast that the Muslims will rule for ten weeks of years (X, 6; XIII, 2) means that 70 years must have elapsed: e.g. Sebastian P. Brock, “Syriac Views of Emergent Islam”, in *Studies on the First Century of Islam*, ed. G.H.A. Juynboll, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1982, p. 9-21, 199-203, 19; Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in West-Syrian Chronicles*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press (“Translated Texts for Historians”, 15), 1993, p. 225; Gerrit J. Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius: A Concept of History in Response to the Rise of Islam”, in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: Papers of the First Workshop on Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, ed. Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad, Princeton, Darwin Press, 1992, p. 149-187, 150, 178-184; Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Princeton, Darwin Press (“Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam”, 13), 1997, p. 264, n. 17. Counting from 622, this gives 692, and so they assume that the author must have been writing just before 692. Nevertheless, all that we know is that the author is writing sometime before the prophesied interval has elapsed, since, as is clear, the prophecy was not fulfilled. There is no reason, as I see it, to assume that the text was written just before the deadline would expire. It is just as reasonable to imagine that the text was written in 660 but had predicted that the tables would turn in a few more decades. But there are far more serious problems with this argument. Only a single manuscript reads “ten” weeks of years: all of the other witnesses read instead “seven” weeks of years, which would place the anticipated turn of events in 671, following the same principles. This would seem to rule out the possibility of the *Apocalypse’s* composition after 670. No clear reason is given for adopting the unique reading of this single manuscript (which was long the only known Syriac manuscript), and in fact Brock, in his translation of the final sections of Ps.-Methodius, translates “seven” weeks of years, noting “ten” as a variant from this single manuscript: Palmer, *Seventh Century*, p. 230, 236. Hoyland proposes that the “substitution” of seven weeks instead of ten “is easily explained as the preference for a more charismatic number and symmetry with the seventh millennium” (Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 264 n. 17). Yet, such charisma and symmetry seem just likely to have influenced the original author’s decision as that of an interpolator, and after all, seventy (ten weeks) is a pretty charismatic and symmetrical number in its own right. To the contrary then, it seems more likely to me that “ten” has been substituted here by someone not long after the text’s composition

middle ages, in Greek, Latin, and Church Slavonic translations. This apocalyptic vision also concludes with the appearance of the “Last Emperor” from among the Greeks, who in contrast to the *Tiburtine Sibyl*, defeats the Muslims and drives them out from the lands that they have invaded, finishing them off, it seems noteworthy, with the liberation of the Promised Land. When the peoples of the North (*i.e.* Gog and Magog) appear, it is not the emperor but an archangel that overcomes them. Then emperor travels to Jerusalem and lays his crown on the Cross, which then ascends into heaven, transferring authority from the emperor back to God. The rule of the Antichrist immediately follows, ending with his final defeat by Christ.<sup>84</sup>

There is, however, one should note, some doubt as to whether or not the tradition of the Last Emperor was present in the original fourth-century version of the *Tiburtine Sibyl*, since it is largely absent from the Greek and other versions of this text.<sup>85</sup> It is certainly possible that it might have been

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but after the 49th year had passed, in order to extend the deadline. This single Syriac manuscript quite possibly reflects changes of this sort in its earliest antecedent. And it certainly makes more sense to suppose that this one manuscript reflects a change made to the original text, rather than assuming that the other Syriac manuscripts and both the Greek and Latin translations (which also have seven weeks of years) have deviated from the original. Alexander recognized this even before the Syriac manuscripts reading seven weeks had been discovered, and it is not at all clear to me why these other scholars have ignored his compelling reasoning, particularly in light of this new evidence: Paul J. Alexander, “Medieval Apocalypses as Historical Sources”, *American Historical Review*, 73 (1968), p. 997-1018, 1001; Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, p. 52-53. Brock and Reinink additionally point to eschatological fervor, the threat of apostasy, and tax increases as motives for the *Apocalypse's* composition. Yet eschatological fervor and the threat of apostasy seem just as relevant to the middle of the seventh century as the end, and the suggestion of a response to ‘Abd al-Malik’s tax increases, while not impossible, is highly speculative.

84 *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius* 13, 11-14, 6 in Gerrit J. Reinink, ed., *Die Syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius*, Louvain, Peeters (“Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium”, 540-541, “Scriptores Syri”, 220-221), 1993, p. 38-45 (Syr) & 63-74 (Germ); English translation in Palmer, *Seventh Century*, p. 237-240.

85 Paul J. Alexander, “Byzantium and the Migration of Literary Works and Motifs: The Legend of the Last Emperor”, *Medievalia et Humanistica*, n.s. 2 (1971), p. 47-68, 67 n. 35; John Wortley, “The Literature of Catastrophe”, *Byzantine Studies/Études byzantines*, 4 (1977), p. 1-17, 16-17; Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages*, New York, Columbia University Press (“Records of Civilization, sources and studies”), 1979, p. 44; *id.*, “*Teste David cum Sibylla*: The Significance of the Sibylline Tradition in the Middle Ages”, in *Women of the Medieval World: Essays in Honor of John H. Mundy*, ed. Julius Kirshner and Susan F. Wemple, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1985, p. 7-35, 26-27; Bernard McGinn, “Oracular Transformations: The ‘Sibylla Tiburtina’ in the Middle Ages”, in *Sibille*

interpolated into the Latin version at some later point in its transmission, but even if this were the case, it seems clear that the Last Emperor tradition is older than the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius*. The differences between these two early accounts are such that it is evident that *Tiburtine Sibyl* has not borrowed from the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius*, and the version from the *Tiburtine Sibyl* lacks any reference to the Arabs or the Islamic conquest, which, among other elements, appears to ensure the legend's circulation already prior to the invasions of the seventh century.<sup>86</sup>

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*e linguaggi oracolari: mito, storia, tradizione: atti del convegno, Macerata-Norcia, settembre 1994*, ed. Ileana Chirassi Colombo and Tullio Seppilli, Pisa, Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali, 1998, p. 603-644, 607, 609, 613. More recently, composition of this legend early in the reign of Constans II (641-668) has been proposed by Gian Luca Potestà, “The Vaticinium of Constans: Genesis and Original Purposes of the Legend of the Last World Emperor”, *Millennium-Jahrbuch*, 8 (2011), p. 271-290. Some specialists on Syriac and the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius* seem to have looked past the *Tiburtine Sibyl*, without affording it any consideration: presumably, they have decided that it is derivative and not of any particular importance. See e.g. Gerrit J. Reinink, “Die syrischen Wurzeln der mittelalterlichen Legende vom römischen Endkaiser”, in *Non Nova, Sed Nova: Mélanges de civilisation médiévale dédiés à Willem Noomen*, ed. Martin Gosman and Jaap van Os, Groningen, Bouma's Boekhuis (“Mediaevalia Groningana”, 5), 1984, p. 195-209; Gerrit J. Reinink, “Pseudo-Methodius und die Legende vom römischen Endkaiser”, in *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages*, ed. W. Verbeke, D. Verhelst, and A. Welkenhuysen, Leuven, Leuven University Press (“Mediaevalia Iovaniensia. Series 1, Studia”, 15), 1988, p. 82-111, esp. 82-83; Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius: A Concept of History”, esp. p. 153-155, 165-178; Suermann, *Die geschichtstheologische Reaktion*, p. 208; Harald Suermann, “Der byzantinische Endkaiser bei Pseudo-Methodius”, *Oriens Christianus*, 71 (1987), p. 140-155, esp. 144-145.

- 86 Sackur noted this from the very beginning: Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, p. 170-172. Alexander, “Byzantium and the Migration”, p. 67 n. 35 is often cited as evidence that Alexander believed that the Last Emperor tradition in the *Tiburtine Sybil* was a much later addition to the text that was borrowed from Ps.-Methodius. Nevertheless, Alexander's views clearly moved in the other direction shortly thereafter. See Paul J. Alexander, “The Medieval Legend of the Last Roman Emperor and Its Messianic Origin”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 41 (1978), p. 1-15, 14-15, where Alexander refrains from any firm conclusions, although the strong implication seems to be that the tradition from *Tiburtine Sibyl* is pre-Islamic. A little later, in Paul J. Alexander, “The Diffusion of Byzantine Apocalypses in the Medieval West and the Beginnings of Joachimism”, in *Prophecy and Millenarianism: Essays in Honour of Marjorie Reeves*, ed. Ann Williams, New York, Longman, 1980, p. 53-106, 58, 63-64, and esp. 93-94 n. 9, Alexander writes that the Last Emperor tradition in the *Tiburtine Sybil* “cannot be interpolated from Pseudo-Methodius where the details given differ on a number of points.” In this instance Alexander acknowledges especially the persuasive arguments to this effect offered by Maurizio Rangheri, “La

As noted above, during the reign of Heraclius, on the eve of the Islamic conquests, this imperial eschatology was at a high point, as were expectations of world's imminent end, particularly in the wake of Heraclius' triumph over Persia. There was a sense that the conquered Persians would now be converted from "paganism" to Christianity, with the result that the gospel would have gone forth to all the nations and the end will come (cf. Matt 24, 14).<sup>87</sup> The forced baptism of the Jews also seems to have been undertaken with such eschatological expectations in mind. Even Heraclius' decision to change his title from *autokrator* to *basileus*, "king", seems to reflect the shortly anticipated intersection of the Roman kingdom with the Kingdom of God.<sup>88</sup> This eschatological transfer of authority from the emperor and the Empire to God is again envisioned in a contemporary text, the *Syriac Alexander Legend*, which seems to have been composed around 630 in celebration of Heraclius' triumph over the Persians. Here after Alexander's victory over his Persian opponent, Tubarlaq, the Persian astrologers inform Tuberlaq "that at the final consummation of the world the kingdom of the Romans would go forth and subdue all the kings of the earth; and that whatever king was found in Persia would be slain, and that Babylonia and Assyria would be laid waste by the command of

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« Epistola ad Gerbergam reginam de ortu et tempore Antichristi » di Adsoni di Montier-en-Der e le sue fonti", *Studi medievali*, 14 (1973), p. 677-732, p. 708-709 n. 79, who argues that the Last Emperor episode of the Latin *Tiburtine Sybil* is from the fourth century. See also in this regard Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, p. 162-163, 171-172, esp. n. 74, as well as an editorial footnote at p. 163, n. 44, which records Alexander's marginalia in the manuscript: there he rejects a fourth century origin for the tradition but likewise does not explain the tradition as necessarily derived from Ps.-Methodius. See also Robert Konrad, *De ortu et tempore Antichristi: Antichristvorstellung und Geschichtsbild des Abtes Adso von Montier-en-Der*, Münchener historische Studien, Kallmünz, Opf., Michael Lassleben ("Abteilung mittelalterliche Geschichte", 1), 1964, p. 43-53, which argues for a fourth-century date for the *Tiburtine Sybil*'s Last Emperor tradition, and for a more recent discussion, see Hannes Möhring, *Der Weltkaiser der Endzeit: Entstehung, Wandel und Wirkung einer tausendjährigen Weissagung*, Stuttgart, Thorbecke ("Mittelalter-Forschungen", 3), 2000, p. 39-44, 49, which concludes that the Last Emperor material is not dependent on Ps.-Methodius and is from the later fourth century. In a forthcoming article entitled "The *Tiburtine Sibyl*, the Last Emperor, and the Early Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition" I have argued in more detail that the Last Emperor tradition of the *Tiburtine Sibyl* is in fact pre-Islamic and does not depend on the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius*. The article is to appear in the proceedings of the 2013 York Christian Apocrypha Symposium.

87 Cyril Mango, "Deux études sur Byzance et la Perse sassanide: II. Héraclius, Šahrvaraz et la Vraie Croix", *Travaux et mémoires*, 9 (1985), p. 105-118, 117; Magdalino, "History of the Future", p. 19.

88 Magdalino, "History of the Future", p. 19; see also Reinink, "Alexander the Great", p. 160.

God”. The prophecy is then put into writing and given to Alexander, with the prediction “that Persia should be laid waste by the hand of the Romans, and that all the kingdoms be laid waste, but that that [kingdom of the Romans] should stand and rule to the end of time, and should deliver the kingdom of the earth to Christ who is to come”.<sup>89</sup> Here then the role of the Empire and its victories in realizing the impending arrival of the Kingdom of God have been retrojected into the life of Alexander, the original king of the Greeks (and Romans), in order to provide an ancient prophecy befitting the circumstances of the early seventh century.

Similar ideas appear in another roughly contemporary apocalypse, the Latin Ps.-Ephrem *On the End of the World*. Here the conflict between Rome and Persia is again painted in eschatological colors, and the end of the world is identified with the completion of the Roman Empire, so that the consummation will come “when the kingdom of the Romans begins to be fulfilled”.<sup>90</sup>

89 E.A. Wallis Budge, *The History of Alexander the Great, Being the Syriac Version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes*, Cambridge, The University Press, 1889, p. 275 (Syr) & 158 (Eng, slightly modified). See also Gerrit J. Reinink, “Die Entstehung der syrischen Alexanderlegende als politisch-religiöse Propagandaschrift für Heraklios’ Kirchenpolitik”, in *After Chalcedon: Studies in Theology and Church History Offered to Professor Albert van Roey for his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. C. Laga, J.A. Munitiz and L. van Rompay, Leuven, Departement Oriëntalistiek-Peeters (“Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta”, 18), 1985, p. 263-281, esp. 268-279; Reinink, “Heraclius”, p. 84-86; Reinink, “Alexander the Great”, p. 158-161.

90 Ps.-Ephrem *On the End of the World* in D. Verhelst, “Scarpsum de dictis sancti Efre[m]e prope fine mundi”, in *Pascua Mediaevalia: studies voor Prof. Dr. J.M. de Smet*, ed. R. Lievens, Erik Van Mingroot et al., Leuven, Universitaire pers (“Mediaevalia Lovaniensia. Series 1, studia”, 10), 1983, p. 518-528, 523. Concerning the date, see esp. Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, p. 142-147; and McGinn, *Visions of the End*, p. 60. Reinink maintains that this text shows clear dependence on the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius*, an opinion previously expressed very briefly by Sackur: Gerrit J. Reinink, “Pseudo-Methodius and the Pseudo-Ephremian ‘Sermo de Fine Mundi’”, in *Media Latinitas: A Collection of Essays to Mark the Occasion of the Retirement of L.J. Engels*, ed. R.I.A. Nip, H. Van Dijk et al., Turnhout, Brepols (“Instrumenta Patristica”, 28), 1996, p. 317-321; and Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, p. 93, n. 3. Nevertheless, I do not find Reinink’s argument very persuasive. Firstly, the emphasis in this text on the conflict between Rome and Persia very strongly suggests its composition in the immediate context of the dramatic war between these two powers during the early seventh century. Likewise there is no mention at all of the Arabs or anything to indicate their significance in the unfolding eschatological drama. I find these qualities extremely hard to reconcile with the hypothesis that this text was composed only well after the Arab conquests and under the direct influence of the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius*. It is perhaps also worth mentioning that two of the manuscripts preserving this text are themselves from the eighth century. According to Reinink et al., the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius* was written only at the end of the seventh century, and then it was translated first into Greek

Likewise, on the other side of the Islamic conquests we find another apocalypse attributed to Ephrem, the Syriac Ps.-Ephrem *Homily on the End*, a text composed just after the conquests had begun, sometime around 640.<sup>91</sup> This apocalypse begins with the war between the Romans and the Persians, noting that after Rome's victory the descendants of Hagar, the Ishmaelites, will drive the Romans from the Holy Land. The peoples of Gog and Magog will then be unleashed, and after their defeat by the archangel Michael, "once again the empire of the Romans will spring up and flourish in its place." Then, with the Roman Empire resurgent and "possessing the earth and its boundaries" and with "no one existing who opposes it", the Antichrist will appear, setting in motion the final events of the *eschaton*.<sup>92</sup> In the decades that followed, this conviction that the Roman Empire's triumph and dominion would inaugu-

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and then later into Latin during the eighth century (see the discussion in Möhring, *Weltkaiser der Endzeit*, p. 101-104). Furthermore, Reinink identifies this allegedly clear dependence in Ps.-Ephrem *On the End of the World* 4-5 and the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius* 13, 19-14, 5. Despite some similarities in expression, I simply do not see clear evidence of any dependence, and I would invite readers to compare the passages for themselves. In particular, Reinink calls attention to Ps.-Ephrem's use of the phrase *Christianorum imperium* and the implicit reference to 1 Cor 15, 24 in section 5 as "decisive" evidence of borrowing. Nevertheless, while Ps.-Methodius does frequently use the term "kingdom of the Christians", it is seemingly significant that the text does not use this phrase in the passage that was supposedly borrowed, nor is this decisively distinctive jargon, in my opinion. Moreover, if we are to suppose that Ps.-Ephrem could not have independently derived the idea of this kingdom being handed over to God the Father from 1 Cor 15, 24 (cf. Alexander, "Byzantium and the Migration", p. 67, n. 35), then it seems reasonable that he could have derived both this interpretation and the language "*Christianorum imperium*" from the equivalent traditions of the *Tiburtine Sibyl*, which, as noted above, clearly seem to be older than the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius*. Here one finds, "... relinquet regnum christianorum Deo patri...": Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte*, p. 186. Finally, one should generally note that Reinink's work shows a clear tendency—whether rightly or wrongly—to relate and subordinate many of these early medieval apocalypses to the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius*, which he edited, and, secondarily, to the Alexander legends, on which he has also published significantly.

- 91 There is some debate as to whether the bulk of this text may in fact be even earlier: some scholars have proposed that the section concerning Islam was later inserted into an apocalyptic homily from the later fourth century. Nevertheless, there is a fairly broad consensus that the work as it presently stands was produced c. 640. The main exception to this consensus would seem to be Reinink (and Hoyland?), who considers 640 a *terminus post quem*, finding a *terminus ante quem* in 683. See Gerrit J. Reinink, "Pseudo-Ephraems 'Rede über das Ende' und die syrische eschatologische Literatur des siebten Jahrhunderts", *Aram*, 5 (1993), p. 437-463, esp. 439-441, 455-463; and Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 261-263.
- 92 Ps.-Ephrem, *Homily on the End* 8 (Suermann, *Die geschichtstheologische Reaktion*, p. 25).

rate the end of the world remained powerful and if anything gained strength in territories of the emerging Islamic Empire. As much is evident not only from the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius* mentioned above, but also from other texts that would soon follow in its wake, such as the *Edessene Ps.-Methodius Fragment* and the *Apocalypse of John the Little*, both from around the turn of the eighth century. Drawing their inspiration from Ps.-Methodius' vision of the Last Emperor, these two texts similarly portend eschatological fulfillment and deliverance through the Roman Empire's victory and sovereignty.<sup>93</sup> And also in the kingdom of Axum, it would seem, on the eve of Islam there is evidence of belief in imperial eschatology, in the so-called *Vision of Baruch* or 5 Baruch. This apocalyptic vision of the end times, which Pierluigi Piovanelli has convincingly dated to the early seventh century, concludes with the emergence of a righteous emperor, whose reign intersects with the rule of the Antichrist. Once God has removed the Antichrist, after he has ruled for seven years, this righteous emperor then “will say to the Cross: ‘Take away all this’, and the Cross will take it and ascend to Heaven.”<sup>94</sup> Then after a period of rule by the demonic powers, Michael will finally sound the horn, and the dead will be resurrected to meet their reward or punishment.

Now if Muḥammad and his early followers were at all influenced by the religious and political ideas then current among the Christians of Byzantium, these undoubtedly must have included both imminent eschatological belief and an eschatological understanding of empire. For over a century before the

93 Texts and translations in *ibid.*, p. 86-97 and 98-109. Concerning the texts and their dates, see *ibid.*, p. 162-191; Gerrit J. Reinink, “Der edessenische Pseudo-Methodius”, *Byzantische Zeitschrift*, 83 (1990), p. 31-45; Han J.W. Drijvers, “The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles: A Syriac Apocalypse from the Early Islamic Period”, in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: Papers of the First Workshop on Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, ed. Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad, Princeton, Darwin Press, 1992, p. 189-213; András Kraft, “The Last Roman Emperor Topos in the Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition”, *Byzantion*, 82 (2012), p. 213-257, esp. 219-223; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 267-270.

94 5 Baruch in J. Halévy, *Těžžâza sanbat (Commandements du sabbat), accompagné de six autres écrits pseudo-épigraphiques admis par les Falachas ou Juifs d'Abyssinie*, Paris, É. Bouillon (“Bibliothèque de l'École des hautes études Sciences historiques et philologiques”, 137), 1902, p. 95-96; transl. in Wolf Leslau, *Falasha Anthology*, New Haven, Yale University Press (“Yale Judaica Series”, 6), 1951, p. 75-76. Regarding the date, Piovanelli recently presented his arguments in a paper entitled “The Visions of Baruch and Gorgorios: Two “Moral” Apocalypses in Late Antique Ethiopia”, at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature in Chicago (19 Nov 2012). The foundation of the argument is the text's failure to make any mention of the Islamic conquests or any other event beyond the end of the sixth century.

rise of Islam, the Byzantine Christians had been expecting the impending end of the world, which they believed would be achieved through the triumph and expansion of the Christian Roman Empire. During the years in which Muḥammad was active in founding his new religious movement, these beliefs had only intensified, reaching their peak, it would seem, during the reign of Heraclius. Accordingly, the immediate political and religious context offered by the Christians of the late ancient Near East for the beginnings of Islam indicates that both imminent eschatology and belief in the realization of eschatology through empire and conquest were widely prevalent. One would only expect that these ideas had a significant impact on the eschatological beliefs of Muḥammad and his early followers, as well as on their understanding of the religious significance of their empire and conquests.

### Eschatology and Empire in Late Ancient Judaism

Equally important is the prevalence of some very similar ideas among the Jews of the late ancient Near East. In the early seventh century, messianic expectations had taken hold of the Jewish communities of Byzantium, and the end of the world was accordingly believed to be quite near. The Persian invasions in particular seem to have stoked the Jewish apocalyptic imagination, and the “liberation” of Jerusalem especially seems to have sparked renewed interest in restoration of the Temple. Several Jewish apocalyptic texts from both immediately before and shortly after the Islamic conquests indicate belief in the impending *eschaton*, an event that would be inaugurated by Rome’s defeat and expulsion from the land that had been promised to Abraham and his descendants: precisely the inverse, in effect, of the Roman view of the Empire’s eschatological valence. At the beginning of the seventh century there are two main Jewish apocalypses, the *Sefer Zerubbabel* and the *Sefer Eliyyahu*, as well as several apocalyptic *piyyutim*, that is, Jewish liturgical poems, all of which appear to belong to the period of Persian rule over Jerusalem.<sup>95</sup>

95 Concerning the dating of these texts, see *e.g.* Robert Louis Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 207; Avraham Grossman, “Jerusalem in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature”, in *The History of Jerusalem: The Early Muslim Period, 638-1099*, ed. Joshua Prawer and Haggai Ben-Shammai, New York, New York University Press, 1996, p. 295-310, esp. 300-301; Günter Stemberger, “Jerusalem in the Early Seventh Century: Hopes and Aspirations of Christians and Jews”, in *Jerusalem: Its Sanctity and Centrality to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Lee I. Levine, New York, Continuum, 1999, p. 260-272, 266-270; Wout Jac. van Bekkum, “Jewish

The *Sefer Eliyyahu* relates, rather interestingly, its own peculiar version of the Byzantine legend of the Last Emperor, affording important confirmation that this tradition had already begun to circulate before the Islamic conquest. Following a brief cosmic tour, the text identifies a king who will arise in the last days and fight an eschatological war. At first this king is seemingly identified with “Armilos”, a common figure in medieval Jewish apocalyptic, who more or less corresponds to the Antichrist of the Christian tradition. The name would appear to derive from Romulus, the legendary founder of Rome, and in late ancient Jewish apocalyptic Armilos is understood as the “terrifying final ruler of ‘great Rome’”, a figure whose representation seems to have been especially inspired by Heraclius.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, the *Sefer Eliyyahu* then immediately raises the question of the king’s name, giving several alternatives that would identify him as possibly either Roman or Persian and ultimately seeming to decide in favor of a Persian king—undoubtedly a sign of the tumultuous political circumstances in which the text was produced. This last Persian king will war against the last Roman king, whose hideous appearance is described in terms suggestive of the Antichrist, and he will defeat the Romans, who are identified with the Daniel’s fourth beast, “the most oppressive of empires, which precedes the eschaton”, after which the messiah’s appearance soon will follow, occasioned by the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem complete with a restored Temple.<sup>97</sup>

The *Sefer Zerubbabel* is similarly set against the backdrop of the last Persian-Roman War, and it is both more forceful in its criticism of Rome and more explicit in assigning the Empire and its emperor specific eschatological roles. When Zerubbabel asks, “[How will] the form of the Temple come into existence”, God brings him to Rome (*i.e.* Constantinople), where he meets the first of the text’s two messiahs, in this case the Davidic messiah.<sup>98</sup> The Archangel Michael then appears to reveal Rome’s leading role in the eschatological drama

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Messianic Expectations in the Age of Heraclius”, in *The Reign of Heraclius (610-41): Crisis and Confrontation*, ed. Gerrit J. Reinink and Bernard H. Stolte, Leuven, Peeters, 2002, p. 95-112, 106-111; Martha Himmelfarb, “*Sefer Eliyyahu*: Jewish Eschatology and Christian Jerusalem”, in *Shaping the Middle East: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in an age of transition, 400-800 C.E.*, ed. Kenneth G. Holum and Hayim Lapin, Bethesda, University Press of Maryland, 2011, p. 223-238, 224-225.

96 See *e.g.* van Bekkum, “Jewish Messianic Expectations”, p. 107-108; John C. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postrabbinic Jewish Apocalypse Reader*, Leiden, Brill, 2006, p. 20; Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies*, p. 53-54.

97 Himmelfarb, “*Sefer Eliyyahu*”, p. 229-230; van Bekkum, “Jewish Messianic Expectations”, p. 107-108; transl. in Reeves, *Trajectories*, p. 31-39.

98 *Ibid.*, p. 51-54.

that is about to unfold. Before long, he leads Zerubbabel to a “house of filth”, that is, a church, where he beholds “a marble statue in the shape of a maiden: her features and form were lovely and indeed very beautiful to behold”, presumably a statue of the Virgin Mary, as others have noted.<sup>99</sup> Michael explains, “This statue is the [wife] of Belial. Satan will come and have intercourse with it, and a son named Armilos will emerge from it. . . . He will rule over all (peoples), and his dominion will extend from one end of the earth to the other. . . . No one will be able to withstand him, and anyone who does not believe in him he will kill with the sword. . . . He will come against the holy people of the Most High.”<sup>100</sup> Here once again is the figure of the legendary Last Emperor, albeit as seen through the inverted lens of Jewish apocalyptic in the guise of Armilos.

In the end times, this eschatological emperor will defeat the king of Persia and “ascend with his force and subdue the entire world. . . . [H]e will begin to erect all the idols of the nations on the face of the earth and . . . will take his mother—(the statue) from whom he was spawned—from the ‘house of filth’ of the scorned ones, and from every place and from every nation they will come and worship that stone, burn offerings before her, and pour out libations to her . . . Anyone who refuses to worship her will die in agony (like?) animals.”<sup>101</sup> Particularly interesting here and elsewhere in the apocalypse is the close association of this Last Emperor and Rome with the Virgin Mary, who had recently emerged as the patroness of both Constantinople and Rome.<sup>102</sup> Apparently her new imperial status was not lost on the Jews of the Empire, so that the Virgin Mary was also drawn into the Jewish apocalyptic imaginary as an eschatological symbol of Rome. Armilos will kill the messiah descended from Joseph, but the Davidic messiah will raise him up and then slay Armilos by breathing in face, setting in motion the final conflict, in which God

99 E.g. Israel Lévi, “L’Apocalypse de Zorobabel”, *Revue des Études Juives*, 68-69-71 (1914-1919-1920), p. 129-160; 108-121; 57-65, 58-61; Martha Himmelfarb, “Sefer Zerubbabel”, in *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature*, ed. David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky, Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 1990, p. 67-90, 68-69; Martha Himmelfarb, *The Apocalypse: A Brief History*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 121-122.

100 Reeves, *Trajectories*, p. 58-59.

101 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

102 E.g. Averil Cameron, “The Theotokos in Sixth-Century Constantinople”, *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S. 29 (1978), p. 79-108; Averil Cameron, “Images of Authority: Elites and Icons in Late Sixth-Century Byzantium”, *Past and Present*, 84 (1979), p. 3-35, 22-23; Averil Cameron, “The Virgin’s Robe: An Episode in the History of Early Seventh-Century Constantinople”, *Byzantion*, 49 (1979), p. 42-56; Vasiliki Limberis, *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople*, London, Routledge, 1994.

will destroy the forces of Armilos together with Gog and Magog. Then with the Romans defeated and destroyed, "Israel will take possession of the kingdom", and "the Lord will lower to earth the celestial Temple which had previously been built", allowing for the resumption of sacrifice to the Lord.<sup>103</sup> In fact, some scholars have suggested partly on the basis of the *Sefer Zerubbabel* that sacrifices on the Temple Mount were briefly resumed during the Persian occupation.<sup>104</sup>

Similar themes echo in several *piyyutim* from the early seventh century. One anonymous *piyyut*, for instance, describes an eschatological war between "the king of the West and the king of the East", in which the armies of the former "will show strength in the land". This last Roman Emperor, "Harmalyos", will stab the messiah, but then "the [other] Messiah will come and he will revive him", and Israel will no longer be "kept far from the house of prayer", and the kings of Edom, that is, Rome, "will be no more".<sup>105</sup> Another *piyyut* by the early seventh-century hymnist Elazar Qilir proclaims that the time has come for the messiah to rise up against Rome, "[and Ass]ur will come over her, and will plant its tabernacle in her territory. . . . And the holy people will have some repose because Assur allows them to found the holy Temple; and they will build there a holy altar and offer sacrifices on it. But they will not be able to erect the sanctuary because the 'staff from the holy stump' has not yet come."<sup>106</sup> Another seventh-century hymnist, Yohanan ha-Kohen, similarly declares, "Dispossess the mountain of Seir and Edom, speak to Assur: he has to make haste and hurry, to plough down a godless nation by your mighty scepter,

<sup>103</sup> Reeves, *Trajectories*, p. 62-63, 66.

<sup>104</sup> F.E. Peters, *Jerusalem: The Holy City in the Eyes of Chroniclers, Visitors, Pilgrims, and Prophets from the Days of Abraham to the Beginnings of Modern Times*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 172-173; Gilbert Dagron and Vincent Déroche, "Juifs et Chrétiens dans l'Orient du VII<sup>e</sup> siècle", *Travaux et mémoires*, 11 (1991), p. 17-273, 26-28; Wilken, *Land Called Holy*, p. 212-213; Averil Cameron, "The Jews in Seventh-Century Palestine", *Scripta Classica Israelica*, 13 (1994), p. 75-93, 80; Averil Cameron, "Byzantines and Jews: Some Recent Work on Early Byzantium", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 20 (1996), p. 249-274, 254-255; Hagith Sivan, "From Byzantine to Persian Jerusalem: Jewish Perspectives and Jewish/Christian Polemics", *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, (2000), p. 277-306, 291-292.

<sup>105</sup> Yosef Yahalom, "Al Toqpan shel Yetsirot Sifrut ke-Maqorle-Berur She'elot Historiyot", *Cathedra*, 11 (1979), p. 125-133 (in Hebrew), p. 130-132; transl. in van Bekkum, "Jewish Messianic Expectations", p. 108.

<sup>106</sup> Cited in Stemberger, "Jerusalem in the Early Seventh Century", p. 268; see additional references there.

to tread them down by the kingdom of the wild ass."<sup>107</sup> Whether or not Assur is Persia or the Arabs who would follow them a few years later is not entirely certain; what is clear, however, is the faith in a messianic liberation from the Romans, through the military intervention of another people, along with a related hope for the restoration of the Temple.

This eschatological vision would in fact persist into the early Islamic period, as we see especially in the *Secrets of Rabbi Shim'on b. Yoḥai*. This text ascribes the rise of the "Kingdom of Ishmael" and its rule over the Holy Land to Divine Providence, seeming to draw on an earlier source that originally interpreted the Arab conquest within a messianic context.<sup>108</sup> Although in its present form this apocalypse dates to sometime around the 'Abbāsid revolution, scholars are widely agreed that its account of the Arab conquests preserves a much earlier source that is seemingly contemporary with the invasion itself. The rather positive assessment of Muḥammad and his followers in this initial section seems to demand such an early composition, as does the contrast with more negative complaints against the oppressive rule of the Muslims later in the document. As the vision begins, the angel Metatron explains that "the Holy One, blessed be He, is bringing about the kingdom of Ishmael only for the purpose of delivering you from that wicked one (*i.e.* Edom [Rome]). He shall raise up over them a prophet in accordance with His will, and he will subdue the land for them; and they shall come and restore it with grandeur. Great enmity will exist between them and the children of Esau."<sup>109</sup> When Rabbi Shim'on asks for further clarification, the angel explains by invoking the traditional messianic interpretations of Isaiah 21, 6-7 and Zechariah 9, 9 concerning "the rider of an ass" and "the rider of a camel" so that they reveal this Ishmaelite prophet as a messianic deliverer.<sup>110</sup> The angel continues to explain that a "second king who will arise from Ishmael will be a friend of Israel", apparently referring to

107 Cited in van Bekkum, "Jewish Messianic Expectations", p. 110; see additional references there.

108 Bernard Lewis, "An Apocalyptic Vision of Islamic History", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 13 (1950), p. 308-338; Patricia Crone and M.A. Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 4-5; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 308-312.

109 *Secrets of Rabbi Shim'on b. Yoḥai* in Adolph Jellinek (ed.), *Bet ha-midrash: Sammlung kleiner Midraschim und vermischter Abhandlungen aus der ältern jüdischen Literatur*, Leipzig, F. Nies, 1853-1877, III, p. 78; transl. Reeves, *Trajectories*, p. 78-80, slightly modified.

110 *Secrets of Rabbi Shim'on b. Yoḥai* in Jellinek (ed.), *Bet ha-midrash*, III, p. 78; transl. Reeves, *Trajectories*, p. 80. See also in this regard Suliman Bashear, "Riding Beasts on Divine Missions: An Examination of the Ass and Camel Traditions", *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 37 (1991), p. 37-75.

‘Umar, and here we see continued concern with the restoration of Temple. “He will repair their breaches and (fix) the breaches of the Temple and shape Mt. Moriah and make the whole of it a level plain. He will build for himself there a place for prayer [שתהויה] upon the site of the ‘foundation stone’ [אבן שתיה].”<sup>111</sup> The vision then continues to recount the rule of the Umayyads, ending with a reference to the ‘Abbāsid revolution and the fallen dominion of “the children of Ishmael in Damascus”. After this will follow a brief period of rule by the “wicked kingdom” (*i.e.* Rome), which will see several messiahs arise to defeat “Armilos” (Rome) in a final confrontation, resulting a two-thousand year messianic rule that will end in the final judgment.<sup>112</sup>

Yet another medieval Jewish apocalypse, the *Signs of Rabbi Shim‘ōn b. Yoḥai*, relates the Byzantine Last Emperor tradition with surprising fidelity to the accounts of the Christian sources. In this brief inventory of the ten signs that will precede the messiah’s appearance, the seventh sign concerns the Last Emperor, who will defeat the Muslims and then turn over his crown to God in Jerusalem. According to the *Signs*, after driving the “Ishmaelites” from the Holy Land, “the king of Edom [*i.e.* Rome] will return to Jerusalem a second time. He will enter the sanctuary, take the golden crown off his head, and place it on the foundation-stone. He will then say: ‘Master of the Universe! I have now returned what my ancestors removed.’”<sup>113</sup> The resemblance here to Christian accounts of the *Tiburtine Sybil* and *Ps.-Methodius* is truly striking, and only the focus on the foundation stone of the Temple reveals a distinctive Jewish influence. In the *Signs of Rabbi Shim‘ōn* then, the echoes of Christian imperial eschatology that one finds in the *Sefer Eliyyahu* and the *Sefer Zerubbabel* emerge as a leitmotiv of Jewish eschatology, largely intact in their Christian form. Nevertheless, the description of this sign concludes with a warning that “There will be trouble during his time”, presumably an indication that, unlike the second Ishmaelite king of the *Secrets of Rabbi Shim‘ōn*, this Roman king will not “be a friend of Israel”. In the eighth sign, Nehemiah, the messiah from the line of Joseph, will then take up the crown left by the Last Emperor, only then to perish himself at the hands of Armilos, seemingly a separate figure

111 *Secrets of Rabbi Shim‘ōn b. Yoḥai* in Jellinek, ed., *Bet ha-midrash*, III, p. 79; transl. Reeves, *Trajectories*, p. 81-82.

112 *Secrets of Rabbi Shim‘ōn b. Yoḥai* in Jellinek, ed., *Bet ha-midrash*, III, p. 79-80; transl. Reeves, *Trajectories*, p. 84-85.

113 *Signs of Rabbi Shim‘ōn b. Yoḥai* in A. Marmorstein, “Les signes du Messie”, *Revue des études juives*, 52 (1906), p. 176-186, 182-183; transl. Reeves, *Trajectories*, p. 113.

from the Last Emperor, whose appearance is reckoned as the ninth sign in this apocalypse.<sup>114</sup>

Unfortunately, as John Reeves notes, it is difficult to date this and other similar texts recounting the “ten signs of the Messiah” beyond only the most general observations: *i.e.* “Byzantine or post-Islamic”.<sup>115</sup> The text’s editor has proposed a date of “between 628 and 638”, maintaining that the Ishmaelites of the seventh sign should in fact be understood as the Persians. Nevertheless, as others have noted, there is no basis whatsoever for this interpretation, and the Ishmaelites are almost certainly to be identified with the Arabs, thus placing this apocalypse sometime after the Arab conquests.<sup>116</sup> Hoyland even suggests a date as late as the late eleventh century, “for only in the time of the Crusades did the Muslims flee before the Romans from Jerusalem”.<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless, such reasoning seems largely to miss the point: the text refers here not to an actual Muslim flight from Jerusalem before the Romans sometime in the past, but rather to an eschatological event involving their defeat prior to the end of time at the hands of the Last Emperor. This theme had clearly begun to circulate widely by the middle of the seventh century, and likely even earlier, without the Muslims of course, as evidenced especially by the *Tiburtine Sibyl*. Accordingly, this text could date to any time after the Arab conquests and before the production of the manuscript itself, leaving a broad window of time that unfortunately limits its relevance somewhat for the matter at hand.

In any case, we can be certain that the Jews of the later Roman Empire and the early Islamic period shared with the Christians a conviction that they were living in the last days, on the verge of the climax of history. Jerusalem was the main stage for this emerging apocalyptic cycle, so much so that in Jewish apocalyptic the city’s fortunes and the events that would take place there commanded more attention than the actual process of redemption itself.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, like the Christians, the Jews similarly believed that the Roman Empire and its emperor would play starring roles in the eschatological drama that was soon to open. Of course, in Jewish eyes, the Empire and the Emperor were maleficent actors, opposed to the divine will and doomed to destruction. As in Christian eschatology, however, both were central to the unfolding

114 *Signs of Rabbi Shim’ôn b. Yoḥai* in Marmorstein, “Les signes du Messie”, p. 183-184; transl. Reeves, *Trajectories*, p. 113-115.

115 *Ibid.*, p. 106.

116 Marmorstein, “Les signes du Messie”, p. 177-180; cf. Reeves, *Trajectories*, p. 113, n. 36; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 318.

117 *Ibid.*, p. 318.

118 Grossman, “Jerusalem in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature”, p. 298.

divine plan for the end of time. In addition, we find in Jewish eschatology an expectation of divine deliverance through the military intervention of another people, whom God would raise up to liberate them and their land from Roman oppression. This, they believed, would ultimately lead to the restoration of the Temple, the eschatological reign of God, and the final judgment.

### Conclusion

The broader religious and political context of the Near East on the eve of Islam shows that there is in fact no contradiction whatsoever between the urgent eschatology revealed by the Qurʾān and other early Islamic sources on the one hand, and the determination of Muḥammad and his followers to expand their religious polity and establish an empire on the other. To the contrary, the political eschatology of the Byzantine Christians during the sixth and early seventh centuries indicates that these two beliefs went hand in hand. For this reason we may take even greater confidence that Muḥammad and his followers saw themselves as living in the waning moments of history and believed that the Hour's arrival would soon be upon them. Belief in the impending end of the world was pervasive in Byzantium during the sixth and seventh centuries, among both Christians and Jews, so that imminent eschatological expectation permeated the religious atmosphere in which Islam formed. On general principles alone one would almost expect this new religious movement to share in the prevailing mood of the times, and the Qurʾān certainly does not disappoint. Moreover, as Donner proposes, it seems likely that Muḥammad and his followers understood the formation of their righteous community as actually initiating the events that would lead to the *eschaton*. The eschatology of Jesus and his early followers offers important precedent for Qurʾān's proclamation that God's reign had already come as well as for Muḥammad's assertions that he and the Hour were concomitant. The Byzantines likewise believed that their empire intersected and was inaugurating God's Kingdom, and certain emperors, including Justinian and even more probably Heraclius, seem to have understood their actions as playing a role in the unfolding arrival of the Kingdom of God. Muḥammad and his followers must have similarly viewed their conquests and the expansion of their polity into an empire as eschatologically active, serving to advance righteousness throughout the world ahead of the impending judgment. The Byzantines certainly had such an opinion of their own military conquests and expansion, which they believed were playing a role in realizing the imminent Kingdom of God. Finally the fact that Muḥammad and his followers had set their sights on the Roman Empire and

more specifically on the Holy Land in Palestine undoubtedly shows the influence of contemporary Jewish eschatology. The Jewish apocalyptic literature of this era anticipated divine deliverance at the hand of another people, whom God would raise up to expel the Romans and liberate the children of Abraham and their Promised Land from Roman oppression. The early Islamic focus on the religious significance of Jerusalem and Palestine is itself evidence that the sons of Ishmael shared in the Jewish reverence for the Promised Land and in the hope of its liberation from the rule of the unrighteous.

And so in light of the broader religious context within which Muḥammad's movement emerged, Donner's tentative proposals concerning the eschatological valence of the early Islamic conquests seem more than credible: they seem likely. Presumably Muḥammad started out in Mecca preaching a message centered on the impending final judgment and the Hour's imminent arrival. As his religious movement progressed and emerged as a polity, this urgent eschatology was augmented by ambitions for conquest and expansion, which were seen as in some way realizing this eschatology. Certainly, any contact that Muḥammad and his followers had with contemporary Jewish and Christian religious ideas would have led them in this direction.