

# THE MUSLIM APPROPRIATION OF A BIBLICAL TEXT

## THE MESSIANIC DIMENSIONS OF ISAIAH 21:6-7

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GILBERT DAGRON SUBTITLED his important survey of the tense relations between Jews and Christians in the East during the first half of the seventh century "Entre histoire et apocalypse."<sup>1</sup> His dialectical pairing of the terms *histoire* and *apocalypse* is actually illustrative of the tenacious grip of a widely accepted premise that underlies almost all modern study of ancient apocalyptic texts, namely, that such works can be read most profitably as a species of historiography. References to battles, the naming of rulers, cities, or nations, cryptic descriptions of the rise and fall of national leaders, and numerical counting formulas are frequently read as direct testimonies to the originating author's historical context and concerns, and these narrative features can thus be utilized as empirical evidence for establishing the putative chronological and geographic provenance of a given work. This largely reflexive type of exegesis has proven to be very popular among those modern scholars who devote themselves to the study and interpretation of ancient apocalyptic literature, and its results are invariably exploited when scholars engage in reconstructing the history of the transmission of particular texts, isolating smaller constituent units of texts, or even analyzing the structural conventions and motifs employed by the texts.

On the face of it, as presented, there seems little about this common interpretative strategy with

which one need quarrel. Apocalyptic texts, like all cultural products, are artifacts integrally embedded within their material circumstances, and so one might legitimately expect to discern the reverberations of past and current events within the linguistic coding of the inscribed page. Moreover, the dizzying sequence of political transition and change in the Near East during the first half of the seventh century—the rapid Sasanian conquest and roughly two-decade-long subjection of Christian Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, abetted by the partisan unrest in Constantinople and Asia Minor surrounding the violent accessions of Phocas (602) and Heraclius (610); a suddenly resurgent Byzantine *reconquista* culminating in the triumphant march of Heraclius into Jerusalem (630), but which, in turn, was almost immediately trumped by the humiliating rout of both Byzantines and Sasanians before the Muslim onslaught beginning around 632; and the swift destruction of the Sasanian Empire and the effective expulsion of Byzantine hegemony from the Near East—must have impressed many contemporaries as being ominously close to the programmed schemes of social and religious turmoil sketched by scriptural sources, such as the biblical Book of Daniel and its Christian imitators.<sup>2</sup> It would be foolish to deny historical events any role in the construction of apocalypses. There are verifiable reasons why Rome

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This essay is a revised and somewhat expanded version of a portion of the "Introduction" to my *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postrabbinic Jewish Apocalypse Reader* (Atlanta and Leiden: Society of Biblical Literature and Brill, 2005), 3–12. I am grateful to those publishers for granting me permission to reutilize some of that material here.

<sup>1</sup> G. Dagron, "Introduction historique: Entre histoire et apocalypse," *Travaux et mémoires* 11 (1991): 17–46.

<sup>2</sup> For an illuminating discussion of the intensity of eschatological thinking during the sixth and seventh centuries in Byzantine circles, see P. 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*, R. Beaton and C. Roueché, eds. (Aldershot: Variorum, 1993), 3–34. The determinative role of the biblical book of Daniel and its conceptual heirs upon Byzantine apocalyptic

in Jewish apocalyptic discourse should bear the derisive moniker of "the evil empire,"<sup>3</sup> or why a particular Arab ruler might be described as a "friend of Israel" or even as "one who waged war on the descendants of Esau."<sup>4</sup> Oppression, hardship, and determined perseverance under adverse circumstances were the tangible conditions of life for Jews under both Christian and Muslim rule, and, as one of the approved cultural expressions of those experiences (among others), apocalyptic literature reflected the emotional peaks and valleys engendered by the seemingly hostile forces of history.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the observations just expressed, it is imperative that greater care be taken in order to avoid the practice of reading the language of an apocalypse as if it were simply supplying descriptive "facts" about the milieu from which it emerged.<sup>5</sup> The product of the apocalyptic imagination, when it was exercised within and for the sake of a literate milieu, was a specific type of written narrative that employed a distinctively formulaic set of conventions, tropes, and figures. Central to the argument of the present essay, and indeed to the larger research agenda with which it is connected,<sup>6</sup> is the notion that Late Antique Near Eastern apocalyptic literature is most properly understood

when it is framed as a closed *textual* universe of discourse. Apocalyptic texts of this period, whether produced by Jews, Christians, or Muslims, feature a characteristic phonology, vocabulary, and syntax that while displaying certain "dialectical" variations are still easily recognizable as a discrete *langue*.<sup>7</sup> The basic structural undercarriage of this particular grammar of linguistic markers and signs is not the linear march of time and the fluctuating events that fill it, but rather is the relatively stable verbal expression of what was widely perceived within diverse religious communities as a uniquely authoritative revelation of the deity. In other words, sacred scripture (*écriture*, if we might adapt the terminology used by Dagron) supplies both the raw material and the guiding rationale for the conceptual elaboration of Late Antique Near Eastern apocalyptic.

Fluency in this particular mode of discourse would seem to presuppose the notion of a fixed scriptural canon, an authoritative collection of writings codifying the central myths, practices, and values of a religious community. It is probably not coincidental that the growing popularity of apocalyptic books within Near Eastern religions was roughly synchronous with the emerging domi-

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cism has been emphasized by J. Wortley, "The Literature of Catastrophe," *Byzantine Studies/Études Byzantines* 4 (1977): 1-17.

<sup>3</sup> This stock epithet stems from the persecutory strictures associated with Rome's suppression of the Second Jewish Revolt and gains additional poignancy with the emergence of a fiercely triumphalist Christian Rome. See, e.g., *b. Ber.* 61b; *b. Sanh.* 98b; Rashi to *b. Sabb.* 15a; also N. R. M. de Lange, "Jewish Attitudes to the Roman Empire," in *Imperialism in the Ancient World: The Cambridge University Research Seminar in Ancient History*, P. D. A. Garnsey and C. R. Whittaker, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 255-81, esp. 269-71.

<sup>4</sup> Both of these laudatory characterizations are applied to "the second ruler (after Muḥammad) who will arise from the Ishmaelites," presumably the caliph 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, by the so-called *Tefillah* ("Prayer") of R. Šimōn b. Yoḥai. See A. Jellinek, ed., *Bet ha-Midrash: Sammlung kleiner Midraschim und vermischter Abhandlungen aus der jüdischen Literatur* (6 vols.; Leipzig, 1853-77; reprint Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrman, 1938), 4:120.1-2. This anthology is henceforth referred to as Jellinek, *BHM*. For the traditions about 'Umar's relaxation of the alleged Roman ban against Jewish residence in Jerusalem and his personal interest in the

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Temple Mount, see M. Gil, *A History of Palestine, 634-1099*, E. Broido, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 68-74; A. Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship: Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 29-33. Physical and literary evidence questioning the rigidity of the imperial prohibition is discussed by Y. Z. Eliav, "The Temple Mount, the Rabbis, and the Poetics of Memory," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 74 (2003): 49-113, at 54-56.

<sup>5</sup> In this connection, one might consult the analogous remarks of J. M. Lieu with regard to what she terms "the rhetoric of reprobation," a type of language that "does not invite historical reconstruction"; see her *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 279-86, at 284.

<sup>6</sup> See above.

<sup>7</sup> Note especially the extraordinarily important observations made by D. Frankfurter about apocalyptic discourse as "a literary-ideological idiom" and as "an enclosed symbolic world" in his "Early Christian Apocalypticism: Literature and Social World," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism, 1: The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity*, J. J. Collins, ed. (New York and London: Continuum, 1998), 415-53, at 427, 434.

nance of written texts among polytheist, dualist, and monotheist forms of religiosity in Late Antiquity. During the early centuries of the Common Era, the favored means for the authoritative transmission of core teachings or truths gradually but inexorably shifts in Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and diverse local contexts from orality to textuality and from the spoken word to the immutable book. Such books or "scriptures," whether stemming from a Sibylline oracle, Ohrmazd, or the God of Abraham, were the visible and enduring precipitate of an encounter between an inspired seer or prophet and the divine world. One might term this development a "textualizing of authority."<sup>8</sup> The veracity or the trustworthiness of particular teachers or doctrines came to be tied to a "scriptural" registration, preferably one that located the archetype of the scripture in heaven itself. As the authority of written scripture waxed, a spectrum of interpretive readings and exegetical teachings grew up around the sacred text in order to provide guidance regarding communally endorsed meanings—Zand, midrash, commentaries—and those para-scriptural expressions that were most widely endorsed also eventually achieved written form.

This seismic shift in the understanding of the cultural locale of authority becomes most readily apparent when one compares the form and structure of the early Jewish apocalypses authored during the Hellenistic and Roman imperial periods to those that were produced approximately half a millennium later during the turbulent transition from Sasanian and Byzantine hegemony to Muslim rule. Works like the Book of Daniel, 1 Enoch, the Qum-

ran War Scroll, or 4 Ezra rarely cite or even refer to the biblical text. Several scholars have made the point that these early apocalypses are largely self-authenticating: the revelatory event itself supplies the necessary validation for the information that is revealed to the seer or prophet.<sup>9</sup> The angel who appears to the seer embodies divine speech, an equation that is glaringly apparent in the proto-apocalyptic visions of the biblical prophet Zechariah in which the angelic intermediary will eerily and suddenly metamorphose without warning into the deity Himself.<sup>10</sup> Yet in works such as these, neither God nor the angel appeals to scripture to bolster or supplement his cause. By contrast, later Jewish apocalyptic works like *Sefer Zerubbabel* or the *Nistarot* ("Secrets") of R. Šimōn ben Yoḥai are thoroughly awash with scriptural diction and citation.<sup>11</sup> The revealing agent, who in both of these instances is identified as the angel Metatron—an entity whose supernal credentials and status in Jewish mystical literature is functionally equivalent to that of God himself—normally defers to Bible as the paramount authority to which all external circumstances are subservient. In the Jewish apocalyptic mentality of Late Antiquity, written scripture was thus not only the medium but also the source of revelation. It acted as a surrogate for the Divine Revealer who once spoke and brought the universe into being.<sup>12</sup>

Two textual examples, one Jewish and the other Christian, might serve to illustrate aspects of this point. The first stems from an apocalyptic fragment of uncertain date, the so-called '*Aggadat R. Ishmael*,'<sup>13</sup> portions of which are now encased in certain manuscript versions of *Pirqe R. Eliezer* and *Hekhalot Rab-*

<sup>8</sup> A point rightly emphasized by Frankfurter, "Early Christian Apocalypticism," 438–40.

<sup>9</sup> W. Adler, "Introduction," in *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity*, J. C. VanderKam and W. Adler, eds. (CRINT, 3: Jewish Traditions in Early Christian Literature, 4; Assen and Minneapolis: Van Gorcum and Fortress, 1996), 19–21; see also M. E. Stone, "Apocalyptic Literature," in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus*, M. E. Stone, ed. (CRINT, 2: The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud, 2; Assen and Philadelphia: Van Gorcum and Fortress, 1984), 428–29.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Zech 2:2–4; 3:1 (according to some LXX mss. and Abraham Ibn Ezra *ad loc.*).

<sup>11</sup> For new translations of and commentaries to these works, see the relevant chapters in my *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic*.

<sup>12</sup> One logical implication of this argument might run as follows: early Jewish apocalyptic works failed to ground themselves in Bible because there simply was no canonical entity extant within their eras (roughly 300 B.C.E. to 100 C.E.) that would have corresponded to modernist notions of the "Bible." For further reflections on this particular point and some of its implications, see J. E. Bowley and J. C. Reeves, "Rethinking the Concept of 'Bible': Some Theses and Proposals," *Henoch* 25 (2003): 3–18.

<sup>13</sup> Y. Even-Shmuel, *Midreshei ge'ullah* [Hebrew], 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1954), 148–52, 399–400.

*bati*.<sup>14</sup> R. Ishmael, to whom this complex of eschatological traditions was pseudepigraphically ascribed, was an important tannaitic sage reputedly active during the period between the first and second Jewish revolts (70–135 C.E.). His literary persona as “author” and “character” rapidly evolved into a reputation for prowess in apocalyptic lore, and geonic mystical treatises frequently feature him as a favored recipient of communications from angelic revealers.<sup>15</sup> So too in the present case of *'Aggadat R. Ishmael*, in response to the renowned visionary’s earnest entreaties regarding the proper calculation of the years allocated to the final imperial oppressor of Israel that was foreseen by Daniel, a heavenly voice (*bat qol*) solemnly intones: “Seven hundred years is the fixed period for the (kingdom’s) completion . . .” R. Ishmael’s reaction to this instance of direct audition is most instructive:

I responded to the one speaking with me, and I said: “I cannot discover this fixed period for the evil empire [in scripture]!?” [And I heard a *bat qol* come forth and say: “Consider this statement!”] So I examined the books which Daniel had closed and sealed,<sup>16</sup> and I discovered the verse “seventy sabbatical periods have been determined for your people and for your holy city to bring rebellion to an end and to exhaust sin and to atone for iniquity and to introduce eternal righteousness and to seal vision and prophet and to anoint the Holy of Holies” (Dan 9:24).<sup>17</sup>

As one rendering of the *'Aggadat R. Ishmael* complex explains, the “seventy sabbatical periods” (*ševu'im šiv'im*) of Dan 9:24 serve as “a cipher [*remez*] for seven hundred years.” But perhaps what is most interesting about this imagined exchange is the refusal of R. Ishmael to accept the legitimacy of his re-

velatory experience without a suitable scriptural imprimatur. It seemingly makes no difference to the seer that the *bat qol* is a rabbinically sanctioned medium of revelation in a post-prophetic age.<sup>18</sup> For this fragment of apocalyptic lore, Bible functions as the unyielding standard by which all other statements or declarations, regardless of origin, are judged.

A second example comes from a late seventh-century Syriac *memra* “concerning the end, (final) consummation, judgment, and punishment; on the people of Gog and Magog; and about the Antichrist” that is pseudepigraphically ascribed to the famous fourth-century Christian teacher Ephrem Syrus.<sup>19</sup> This eschatological treatise, which has attracted only modest scholarly attention,<sup>20</sup> provides a graphic mapping of the wars and civil tribulations surrounding the establishment of Arab hegemony in Syria and Mesopotamia during middle decades of the seventh century. The resultant disruptions and sufferings of the Christian populace can be blamed, according to Pseudo-Ephrem, on their own rampant dissidence, wickedness, and apostasy. As a result of Christian failings, even the righteous must now endure a series of purgative indignities decreed by God to be administered by the hands of those who, in the mind of the writer, are inveterate sinners, namely, the invading Muslim armies. It is at this point in the Pseudo-Ephrem narrative that the following lines appear:

It is due to this, my beloved ones  
That the final age has arrived.  
Lo, we have observed the signs,  
Just as Christ inscribed (*'ktb*) for us.<sup>21</sup>

The social woes produced by nations and kings warring with one another can be branded as eschato-

<sup>14</sup> For *Pirqe R. Eliezer*, see Cincinnati Hebrew Union College Ms. 75 fols. 38b–39a; for *Hekhalot Rabbati*, see New York (Jewish Theological Seminary) Ms. 8128 *apud* P. Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (TSAJ, 2; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1981), §§130–38.

<sup>15</sup> According to another apocalyptic fragment preserved within at least one manuscript of *Hekhalot Rabbati*, R. Ishmael enjoyed this boon “because your merit (among your contemporaries) is equivalent to that of Aaron the priest (among his).” Quoted from New York (Jewish Theological Seminary) Ms. 8128 of *Hekhalot Rabbati*, Schäfer, ed. §140; note also the parallel version in a Yemenite manuscript published by Even-Shmuel, *Midreshei ge'ullah*, 326.

<sup>16</sup> See Dan 12:4.

<sup>17</sup> *'Aggadat R. Ishmael*, Even-Shmuel, ed., 152.

<sup>18</sup> There is admittedly some ambivalence about the authority of a *bat qol*, particularly in circumstances pertaining to *halakhah*, where logic and the force of tradition tend to trump supernatural audition. R. Ishmael’s initial reluctance, however, does not seem to be grounded in that conceptual context.

<sup>19</sup> *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones*, 3, E. Beck, ed. (CSCO, 320; Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1972), 60–71 (text).

<sup>20</sup> The most important study of this text to date is G. J. Reinink, “Pseudo-Ephraems ‘Rede über das Ende’ und die syrische eschatologische Literatur des siebenten Jahrhunderts,” *Aram* 5 (1993): 437–63.

<sup>21</sup> *Apoc. Pseudo-Ephrem*, Beck, ed., 61.35–38.

logical because they purportedly match the ones that Christ “inscribed”; the reference is apparently to the litany of apocalyptic disasters outlined in New Testament passages like Matthew 24–25 and its synoptic parallels. But what is most arresting here is that the authority of those pronouncements does not rely upon their character as the remembered *ipsissima verba* of a confessionally recognized celestial entity; rather, it would seem to be an indisputable property of their character as *written scripture*. Their “inscription” (via the agency of the gospel writers?) is what guarantees their validity.<sup>22</sup>

The example from Pseudo-Ephrem suggests that an enhanced role for Bible in the perception, mapping, and reading of mundane events during Late Antiquity is not limited to Jewish contexts. It, indeed, is very visible within all those religious communities that aligned themselves among the heirs of the Abrahamic legacy, including most importantly those that eventually coalesced under the banner of the radically monotheist religious movement that became Islam. Biblical characters, narratives, or conceptual complexes figure upon almost every page of the Qur’ān, and early traditionists such as Ka’b al-Aḥbār (d. 656) and Wahb b. Munabbih (d. ca. 728) furnished nascent Islam with a rich assemblage of para-scriptural interpretative materials.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the interest shown by the Prophet and the early caliphs in Jerusalem and its *sancta* underscores the esteem with which early Islam invested the terrestrial location of the earlier *scriptural* revelations associated with biblical characters such as

Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Subsequent textualizing of the Prophet’s revelation in scriptural form, whatever the precise historical lineaments of that process,<sup>24</sup> cemented its authority and simultaneously aligned its discourse with and distinguished it from that of the earlier scriptures.

What has been up to now largely unappreciated is the crucial role that Bible, as opposed to Qur’ān, played in the early Muslim appropriation of an apocalyptic discourse. However, according to Uri Rubin, early Muslim collections of hagiographic and didactic sources “seem to indicate that Muslim reliance on the Bible began much earlier than is usually assumed by Islamicists,”<sup>25</sup> to which latter group we might take the liberty of adding “biblicists.” Early Jewish and Christian notices of Islam make no mention of a distinctive Muslim scripture,<sup>26</sup> but instead criticize Muslim scholars for their alleged inability to find biblical warrant for the revelatory claims of Islam. When a number of biblical proof-texts are obligingly produced, Jewish and Christian scripturalists attempt to undermine these Muslim readings of Bible. Bible thus emerges as the crucial battleground for textual and social authority.

#### *The Messianic Dimensions of Isaiah 21:6–7*

A recurrent claim advanced by Muslim exegetes is that the advent of Muḥammad and his climactic position as “seal of the prophets” were already presaged in the earlier scriptures revealed to the Jews and the Christians, namely, the *Tawrāt* (Torah) and the *Injil* (Gospel), the qur’ānic terms for the two major di-

<sup>22</sup> For another instance in Syriac literature in which a canonical writing is ascribed to Jesus, see Aphrahat, *Demonstratio* 21.1, wherein a Jewish sage (*ḥkym*) is represented as quoting a passage from the gospel of Matthew “that Jesus, the one whom you call your teacher, wrote (*kitb*) for you.” See I. Parisot, “Aphraatis Sapientis Persae: Demonstrationes,” in *Patrologia Syriaca: Pars Prima*, R. Graffin, ed. (Paris, 1894; reprint Turnhout: Brepols, 1980), 932.10–15.

<sup>23</sup> The literature on this topic is enormous. Important recent studies on the influx of *Isrā’iliyyāt* (“Jewish lore”) into nascent Islam are those of R. Firestone, “Jewish Culture in the Formative Period of Islam,” in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, D. Biale, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 267–302; R. Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur’ān and Muslim Literature* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2002); and B. M. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran: An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis* (London and New York:

Continuum, 2002). See also the various essays collected in J. C. Reeves, ed., *Bible and Qur’ān: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality* (Society for Biblical Literature Symposium Series, 24; Leiden/Atlanta: Brill/Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> See especially G. Böwering, “Chronology and the Qur’ān,” in *EncQur*, 1:316–35.

<sup>25</sup> U. Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, 5; Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995), 22.

<sup>26</sup> “It is, however, worth recalling that those sources which may with some assurance be dated before the end of the second/eighth century . . . contain no reference to Muslim scripture.” The quotation comes from J. Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 58.

visions of the Christian Bible.<sup>27</sup> This assertion already figures within the Qur'ān itself: "... the 'ummī prophet (i.e., Muḥammad) whom they find mentioned in their Torah and Gospel..." (7:157). Lengthy catalogs of allegedly prognostic biblical passages are provided or transmitted by a number of Muslim scholars and apologists, a corpus of texts that naturally engaged the combative attentions of their Jewish and Christian defenders.<sup>28</sup>

Among the texts typically referenced in such discussions is a particularly intriguing oracle found in the Book of Isaiah (21:6–7). That text in its Masoretic recension reads as follows:

For thus did my Lord say to me: "Go, station the watchman. Let him report what he sees. And should he see chariotry—a pair of riders,<sup>29</sup> chariotry of asses, chariotry of camels, he must pay careful attention, a lot of attention."

Insight into the Muslim parsing of this biblical oracle into a prefiguration of the future appearance of Muḥammad first emerges out of an early tradition relayed by Ibn Ishāq (d. 767), reporting how the "People of the Book" (a Qur'ānic appellation for religions possessing a sacred scripture, usually shorthand for the Bible) anticipated the advent of a prophet "whom Jesus announced would be riding a camel" (*rākib al-jamal*). Suliman Bashear's recent exhaustive analysis of this theme locates another testimony to the same tradition in the collection of pro-

phetic legends ascribed to 'Umāra b. Wathīma (d. 902), where it is reported that Ibn Ishāq transmitted a tradition that stated that "Isaiah was the one who entrusted the children of Israel with the matter of Jesus and Muḥammad ... (saying) 'there will come to you the one with the camel, meaning Muḥammad (upon whom be peace!)'"<sup>30</sup> The curious confusion in attribution between the names "Jesus" ('Īsā) and 'Isaiah' (Śa'yā) is one that might easily transpire in an Arabic language environment, and given the lexical evidence of Isa 21:6–7 versus the resounding silence about "camel-riders" among the huge assortment of logia and agrapha attributed to Jesus, it is virtually certain that "Isaiah" should be the correct prophetic name to associate with this source.<sup>31</sup>

Confirmation of the centrality of the Isaiah 21 oracle for Muslim prophethology can be gleaned from the writings of Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), an important ninth-century Muslim collector of traditions surrounding biblical characters and events. Under the summary entry for the prophet Isaiah in his *Kitāb al-ma'ārif*, he tersely states: "Isaiah is the one who announced the Prophet (upon whom be peace!) and (provided) his description, and he (also) announced Jesus."<sup>32</sup> More explicit information emerges from his *Dalā'il al-nubuwwa* ("Proofs of Prophethood") wherein, after a recognizable Arabic paraphrase of Isa 21:6–9, he deciphers the critical images:

<sup>27</sup> A recent exploration of this subject is provided by J. D. McAuliffe, "The Prediction and Prefiguration of Muḥammad," in Reeves, ed., *Bible and Qur'ān*, 107–31.

<sup>28</sup> For representative lists of such passages, see Ign. Goldziher, "Ueber muhammedanische Polemik gegen Ahl al-kitāb," *ZDMG* 32 (1878): 372–79; M. Schreiner, "Zur Geschichte der Polemik zwischen Juden und Muhammedanern," *ZDMG* 42 (1888): 601, 626–27; C. Brockelmann, "Muhammedanische Weissagungen im Alten Testament," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 15 (1895): 138–42.

<sup>29</sup> Or "a team of horses" (Hebrew *šemed parašim*).

<sup>30</sup> S. Bashear, "Riding Beasts on Divine Missions: An Examination of the Ass and Camel Traditions," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 37 (1991): 37–75, slightly emended quotation cited from 41. For the Arabic text, see R. G. Khoury, *Les légendes prophétiques dans l'Islam: Depuis le I<sup>er</sup> jusqu'au III<sup>e</sup> siècle de l'Hégire=Kitāb bad' al-ḥalq wa-qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1978), 300 (text).

<sup>31</sup> The identical confusion of attributions (i.e., 'Īsā/Śa'yā) is visible in what was originally a ninth-century Muslim polemical tract against Christians, in which Jesus is quoted as saying: "Convert, O Jerusalem, until the time when the one who rides on an ass comes to you. Then will come after him the one who rides a camel." See Jean-Marie Gaudeul, "The Correspondence Between Leo and 'Umar: 'Umar's Letter Re-discovered?" *Islamochristiana* 10 (1984): 139.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-ma'ārif*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Tharwat 'Ukkāsha, ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1969), 50. Note also Ṭabatī, *Ta'riḫ al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*, M. J. de Goeje et al., eds. (15 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1879–1901), 1:638: "Isaiah was the one who announced Jesus and Muḥammad (upon whom be peace!)" text cited also by Schreiner, "Zur Geschichte der Polemik," 627, n. 10. See also A. Rippin, "Isaiah," *EncQur*, 2:563.

And in Isaiah it is said: "I was told: Stand guard as a watchman and watch, and report what you see. I said: I see two riders approaching, one of them on an ass, and the other on a camel. One of the two said to the other: Fallen is Babylon and its graven idols" [cf. Isa 21:9]. The one riding the ass is taken by us and by the Christians to be the Messiah [i.e., Jesus]. Now, if the one on the ass is the Messiah, then why should not the man riding the camel be Muḥammad . . . is not the Prophet just as well known for his riding the camel as the Messiah is for riding an ass?<sup>33</sup>

Ibn Qutayba's rendering of Isa 21:6-7 provides a linguistic key for the Muslim parsing of Isaiah's imagery: Hebrew *šemed parašim*, "a pair of riders," supplies the "two riders," who are then further qualified as riding an "ass" and "camel" respectively. Christian exegesis is credited as the source for the messianic identity of the figure riding the ass, an interpretation that, indeed, garners support from Christian readings of Zech 9:9 and gospel enactments of this same passage (e.g., Matt 21:4-5, John 12:14-15). From the perspective of Islam the title "Messiah" denotes Jesus, the final prophet sent to Israel. The remaining rider mounted upon a camel and who syntactically and temporally arrives after the ass-rider can then be none other than Muḥammad.<sup>34</sup>

These essential points recur in a number of contemporary and later Muslim expositions of this par-

ticular passage in Isaiah. They figure in the inter-religious disputation literature that begins to flourish near the end of the eighth century C.E. The Nestorian patriarch Timothy I attempts to refute the Muslim interpretation of Isa 21:7 in the course of his fictional debate with the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Mahdī (775-785).<sup>35</sup> In the epistle of Muḥammad b. al-Layth, a missionary tract allegedly commissioned by Hārūn al-Rashīd to prompt the conversion of the Byzantine emperor Constantine VI (780-797), Isa 21:6-9 prominently functions as a proof-text for the predicted advent of Muḥammad.<sup>36</sup> The same Isaiah passage also assumes a visible role in the apocryphal correspondence that reportedly transpired between 'Umar II (717-720) and the iconoclast emperor Leo III (717-741), where 'Umar is represented as stating: "the prophet Isaiah gives testimony to our lawgiver as being the equal and the like of Jesus when he speaks in his vision of two riders, the one on an ass and the other on a camel, so why do you not believe in that?"<sup>37</sup> In light of the aforementioned confusion in attribution between an almost homophonic "Jesus" and "Isaiah," it is of interest to note that 'Umar II's epistle identifies the content of Isa 21:7 as an utterance of Jesus.<sup>38</sup> Later Muslim traditionists knowledgeable in Bible, such as the Christian convert 'Alī Ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī,<sup>39</sup> the learned polymath Bīrūnī,<sup>40</sup> and the Ismā'īlī propagandist Kirmā-

<sup>33</sup> Translation adapted from that of C. Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 272.

<sup>34</sup> Note the quotation from Tha'labī cited by M. Schreiner, "Beiträge zur Geschichte der Bibel in der arabischen Literatur," in *Semitic Studies in Memory of Rev. Dr. Alexander-Kohut*, G. A. Kohut, ed. (Berlin: S. Calvary & Co., 1897), 498, n. 5: "behold, the rider of the ass will come to you, and afterwards the one associated with the camel." See also the lengthy text quoted by Goldziher, "Ueber muhammedanische Polemik," 377.

<sup>35</sup> A. Mingana, "The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch Before the Caliph Mahdi," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 12 (1928): 137-298, at 173-74, 246-47 (text); R. Caspar, "Les versions arabes du dialogue entre le catholico Timothy I et le calife al-Mahdī (II<sup>e</sup>/VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle) 'Mohammed a suivi la voie des prophètes,'" *Islamochristiana* 3 (1977): 107-75, at 138-39 (text), 163-64; see also H. Putman, *L'église et l'Islam sous Timothée I (780-823): Étude sur l'église nestorienne au temps des premiers Abbāsides avec nouvelle édition et traduction du Dialogue entre Timothée et al-Mahdī* (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq, 1975), 27-31 (text), 243-47. The Nestorian

Christian's argument that the two riders of Isa 21:7 refer to Darius the Mede and Cyrus the Persian is an eerie precursor to Rashi's commentary *ad loc*.

<sup>36</sup> D. M. Dunlop, "A Letter of Hārūn ar-Rashīd to the Emperor Constantine VI," in *In Memoriam Paul Kahle*, M. Black and G. Fohrer, eds. (Beiträge zur Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 103; Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1968), 106-15; M. Chokr, *Zandaqa et zindīqs en Islam au second siècle de l'Hégire* (Damas: Institut français de Damas, 1993), 102; Adang, *Muslim Writers*, 21, 143-44.

<sup>37</sup> A. Jeffery, "Ghevond's Text of the Correspondence Between Umar II and Leo III," *Harvard Theological Review* 37 (1944): 278. Jeffery's study should now be used in tandem with Gaudeul, "Correspondence," 109-57.

<sup>38</sup> Gaudeul, "Correspondence," 139.

<sup>39</sup> See Putman, *L'église et l'Islam*, 197; Adang, *Muslim Writers*, 144-48, 264; T. Pulcini, *Exegesis as Polemical Discourse: Ibn Hazm on Jewish and Christian Scriptures* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 23-25.

<sup>40</sup> Bīrūnī, *Āthār al-bāqiya 'an-il-qurūn al-khāliya*, C. E. Sachau, ed. (Leipzig, 1878; reprint Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1923), 19.

nī reiterate the significance of Isaiah's testimony, with the last named scholar visibly bolstering the Muslim argument via a meticulous transliteration into Arabic script of a slightly variant Hebrew version of Isa 21:6-7.<sup>41</sup> In every case in which Muslim scholars utilize this proof-text, attention is drawn to the "two riders" mentioned in verse 7, the first of whom is mounted upon an ass and the second upon a camel.

Now this is, in fact, an unusual reading of the Hebrew text of Isa 21:7, for the Masoretic vocalization of the final two occurrences of the Hebrew grapheme *rkb* as the collective noun *rekhev*, "chariotry," in fact clashes with the Muslim understanding of this form as a singular participle *rōkhev*, "rider" or "one who rides." However, the lexical evidence supplied by the extant Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Aramaic versions of this passage in Isaiah, textual recensions that predate the linguistic labors of the Masoretes upon biblical manuscripts, clearly demonstrates that those who were reading Isaiah in the pre-Masoretic age were pronouncing the consonantal skeleton *rkb* as *rōkhev*, "rider, one riding" (i.e., as if it were written *rvkb*) in the latter two of its three occurrences.<sup>42</sup> That this participial reading was, in fact, the more primitive one for the Hebrew text of Isa 21:7 is visually confirmed by the graphic evidence supplied by the Qumran Isaiah Scroll (IQIsa<sup>a</sup>), which inscribes *rvkb* for *rkb* in both instances.<sup>43</sup>

These considerations suggest the Muslim reading of the grammar of Isa 21:7 is not unusual at all; rather, it is firmly in line with a normative understanding of the linguistic forms registered there in the centuries prior to the activity of the Masoretes. By contrast, it is the Muslim interpretation of the semantic message of this passage that is truly dis-

tinctive. What renders it even more distinctive is the fact that no Jewish or Christian scholar prior to the advent of Islam gives special heed to the possible messianic or eschatological dimensions of Isa 21:6-7: it does not figure among the limited number of texts customarily held by either Judaism or Christianity to be expressive of such matters. Instead, when Jewish and Christian writers do display cognizance of the messianic force of Isa 21:6-7, it is always in reaction to its manipulation by Muslims, as in the aforementioned polemical dialogues between Christian prelates or kings and Muslim caliphs, or in the much later *Iggeret Teiman* of Maimonides.<sup>44</sup> This reflexive, even reactionary, circumstance makes it likely that the messianic and prophetological reading of Isa 21:6-7 was an original Muslim reading of this biblical text, one that was primarily directed toward a Christian audience in light of its narratological sequencing of the arrivals of "Christ" (treated as a proper name in Islam) and "Muhammad." Since Jewish messianism, by and large, looked to the future for its realization, a Muslim argument reliant on an already manifested "messiah" would have been no more impressive or effective among Jewish hearers than its synonymous Christian analogues. Finally, it should be noted that non-Islamic biblical scholars,<sup>45</sup> whether Christian or Jewish, betray no knowledge of the apologetic possibilities discovered by Muslim exegetes in this passage.

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

<sup>41</sup> P. Kraus, "Hebräische und syrische Zitate in ismā'ilitischen Schriften," *Der Islam* 19 (1930): 246.

<sup>42</sup> P. Crone and M. Cook have argued that this reading betrays an exegetical reliance upon the targumic rendering of the verse (see their *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977], 153, n. 13). Bashear ("Riding Beasts," 43) similarly speculated that Muslim tradents may have "used an exegetical commentary." These suggested solutions, however, are unnecessary: consonantal *rkb* can easily be pronounced as if it were spelled *rvkb* in the pre-Masoretic age. Note too the more cautious critique of R. G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Studies in

Late Antiquity and Early Islam, 13; Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1997), 309, n. 159.

<sup>43</sup> The relevant column appears on the Palestine Archaeological Museum (now the Rockefeller Museum, Israel Antiquities Authority) plate PAM 7016.

<sup>44</sup> H. Lazarus-Yafeh surprisingly exaggerates when she bluntly states that Isa 21:6-7 was "well known for its messianic connotation in Jewish literature." Yet every instance she cites postdates the advent of Islam and certainly responds to the provocative Muslim appropriation of this biblical text. See her *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 101.

<sup>45</sup> I.e., those not subject to Islamic political or cultural suzerainty.

alypse introduced as the *Nistarot*, or “Secrets,” of R. Šimōn ben Yoḥai,<sup>46</sup> a work whose contents span the rise and fall of the Umayyad caliphate, contains in what is arguably its most primitive redaction<sup>47</sup> a surprisingly positive endorsement of the prophetic mission of Muḥammad and an intriguing affirmation of the divinely mandated role of Islam in the deliverance of Israel from Byzantine rule:

R. Šimōn answered and said: “From whence are they (i.e., Ishmael=Islam) understood as) our deliverance?” He (Metatron) said to him: “Did not Isaiah the prophet speak thusly ‘And should he see chariotry—a pair of riders, one riding an ass, (and) one riding a camel’ [Isa 21:7]?” Why did he (i.e., Isaiah) put the “rider of an ass” before the “rider of a camel”? Should he not instead have said “rider of a camel, rider of an ass”? (No, the textual sequence means that) when the one who rides the camel (Ishmael or Muḥammad) emerges, the kingdom ruled by the “one mounted upon an ass” [Zech 9:9] has manifested [lit. “sprouted”] by his (i.e., Ishmael’s or Muḥammad’s) agency. Another opinion: “rider of an ass” (means) at the (same) time when he “rides upon an ass” [Zech 9:9]. Consequently they (Ishmael) are a deliverance for Israel like the deliverance (associated with) the “one mounted upon an ass” [Zech 9:9].<sup>48</sup>

In this extraordinary text, R. Šimōn is represented as being understandably skeptical about the possible redemptive import of the most recent invasion of the Land of Israel by yet another army of foreigners. Questioning his angelic interlocutor Metatron about Ishmael’s allegedly positive role, the angel responds by quoting Isa 21:7, a favorite passage that (as we have seen) Muslim scholars of Bible repeatedly

invoke as scriptural proof of the prophet Muḥammad’s prefigured advent. Interestingly, the author of this Jewish text accepts the Muslim reading of the “camel-rider” as a coded reference to the coming of Islam.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the “messianic” decipherment of the “ass-rider” is also retained, but it is recalibrated to accord with Jewish expectations.<sup>50</sup> Since the messiah is associated with events taking place in the future, at the End of Days, and the “camel-rider” has already or is in the process of arriving now, should not Isaiah have reversed the syntactical order of his epithets so as to synchronize with their historical sequence? Did the Messiah actually come prior to the advent of Muḥammad?

Instead of conceding this exegetical point to Islam (and Christianity), the author(s) of the present midrash ingeniously undermine a segmented understanding of the “riders” by reminding their audience that Isaiah envisioned them as a “pair”: they are not diachronic but synchronic figures. The messianic age dawns—or to employ the terminology of the apocalypse, “sprouts”—at the same time that Ishmael arrives. The military defeat and expulsion of Edom (Christian Rome) by Ishmael (Islam) in seventh-century Palestine created the necessary conditions for the triumph of Jacob (Israel). Islam and its Prophet are indeed harbingers of the messianic age. The vicissitudes of history would eventually temper and sour this textually based example of Jewish enthusiasm, generating in turn a series of bitter reassessments and recriminations against what was originally a positive view of Muḥammad’s prophetic mission and the early Islamic hegemony over Eretz Israel.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> “These are the secrets that were revealed to R. Šimōn ben Yoḥai.” The 1743 Salonika *editio princeps* was reproduced by Jellinek, *BHM*, 3:78–82, and Even-Shmuel, *Midreshey ge’ullah*, 401–3; an abridged version with an important commentary is included in A. Z. Aescoly, *Messianic Movements in Israel, 1: From the Bar-Kokhba Revolt until the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain*, Y. Even-Shmuel, ed. (2nd ed.; Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1987), 133–38.

<sup>47</sup> For a brief discussion of the extant manuscript and print editions of the cycle of apocalypses associated with R. Šimōn ben Yoḥai, including their interrelationships, see the introductory remarks to the chapter devoted to the Šimōn ben Yoḥai cycle within my *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic*.

<sup>48</sup> Jellinek, *BHM*, 3:78.24–30.

<sup>49</sup> Earlier in this same text the author had explicitly endorsed the prophetic status of Muḥammad: “He (i.e., God) will raise up over them (i.e., Ishmael) a prophet in accordance with His will (*navi kiršōnō*)” (translated from Jellinek, *BHM*, 3:78.23).

<sup>50</sup> The association of the “ass” with the Davidic messiah has an early basis in biblical texts such as Zech 9:9. See, e.g., *Gen. Rab.* 75.6 (Theodor-Albeck, ed., 892–93) and the critical annotations supplied there by the modern editors.

<sup>51</sup> Note the versions of this portion of *Nistarot* that survive in manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah, as well as the print editions of the chronologically later versions of this same apocalypse known as the *‘Atidot* and the *Prayer of R. Šimōn ben Yoḥai*. Most of these “revisions” are presented and discussed in my *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic*.

Now it is clear that the "judaized" interpretation of Isa 21:7 advanced in the *Nistarot*, a work compiled from smaller complexes of apocalyptic traditions emanating from the mid-seventh to the mid-eighth centuries C.E. presumes as do all the extant pre-Masoretic versions of this oracle a "singular" understanding of the animal-riders, namely, one figure riding an ass (*rukb hmyr*) and another figure riding a camel (*rukb gml*). Given the Islamicate cultural context for the bulk of Masoretic textual activity, it is tempting to argue that the inscribed vocalization of the key word *rk* in its final two occurrences in Isa 21:7 as *rekhev* in place of the demonstrably older traditional reading *rōkhev* signals a conscious yet subtle polemical move on the part of the Masoretic scribal enterprise. Even less subtle is the roughly contemporary Arabic "translation" (*tafsīr*) of Isa 21:7 by Rav Saadya Gaon, where the single "ass-rider" and lone "camel-rider" of the pre-Masoretic versions become "peoples[!] who are riders of asses and camels,"<sup>52</sup> a pluralizing rendition that effectively sabotages its prophetological import. Since Isa 21:6–7 had enjoyed some scholarly recognition even within some Jewish circles as a viable proof-text for Islam's divine mandate,<sup>53</sup> it is not difficult to imagine later generations of partisan textual critics seizing this prime opportunity to counter and subvert a culturally influential yet doctrinally flawed textual reading.

#### Concluding Remarks

One might be tempted to question the historical likelihood of whether the "official" vocalization of a scriptural word, phrase, or verse could be manipulated or even altered by certain interest groups or factional parties for the purpose of establishing readings favorable to their cause or in order to undermine those who lent support to their opponents. Nevertheless a conceptual mechanism for facilitating such a rhetorical tactic had been in existence within midrashic hermeneutics for several centuries prior to the emergence of Islam and the various schools of biblical Masoretes. The exegetical rule "‘al tiqra’ X ‘ela Y" ("read Y instead of X") furnishes

a theoretical warrant for transforming what once simply functioned as an imaginative extension of scholastic inquiry ("how many different ways can this consonant string be read?") into a versatile tool for creating and popularizing authoritative political or religious statements via the phonetic manipulation of prophetic scriptures. On the other hand, a social situation of intense rivalry and conflict will not tolerate the egalitarian, almost playfully polyvalent discourse endorsed by the academic exercise of midrash. This, in turn, suggests that even the aural aspects of the reading traditions growing around the consonantal skeletons of the sacred texts can harbor a wealth of exegetical virtuosity and argument.

Two final examples illustrate how an alternative vocalization of a scriptural passage can drastically change the "received" meaning of a prophetic scripture. A biblical oracle addressed by the deity to the fierce eschatological foe Gog makes reference to earlier predictions of the latter's military advance against an unsuspecting Israel by "my servants the prophets who prophesied in those days *šanim*" (Ezek 38:17). The Hebrew word *šanim* ("years") is syntactically awkward in this context: most English translations follow the targumic rendering and the Jewish medieval commentator Radaq in treating the word as an elliptic expression of the phrase "for many years," as in "prophets who prophesied in those days *for many years*." This widely accepted grammatical solution, however, does not succeed in dispelling a potentially disruptive conceptual circumstance. Apart from Balaam, who is after all a gentile prophet, there is no Israelite prophet prior to Ezekiel who explicitly speaks of the threatening advent of an adversarial Gog at the eschaton! Justifiable concern for the maintenance of prophetic integrity in an age that had elevated the status of the "prophet" to supernatural proportions mandates the generation of an alternative reading of the same grapheme to resolve this difficulty: "Rav Nahman taught . . . do not read *šanim* 'years' but *šnayim* 'two.'<sup>54</sup> And who were these two prophets who prophesied a single oracle about one subject? Eldad and Medad!" (*b. Sanh.* 17a). The reference in this alternative reading

<sup>52</sup> *Qum rk'b hmyr wrk'b jm'l*. Judaeo-Arabic text cited from the edition of Y. Ratzaby, *Saadya's Translation and Commentary on Isaiah* (Qiryat Ono: Makhon Mishnat ha-Rambam, 1993), 42.

<sup>53</sup> M. Steinschneider, *Polemische und apologetische Literatur in arabischer Sprache zwischen Muslimen, Christen und Juden, nebst Anhängen verwandten Inhalts* (Leipzig, 1877; repr., Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1966), 329.

<sup>54</sup> Applying the exegetical "rule" 'al tiqra' X 'ela Y.

is to Num 11:26, where the camp-bound Eldad and Medad are numbered among the seventy elders providentially granted a share of the prophetic charisma of Moses, and who at the time of their investiture, according to tradition, intoned a series of successive oracles about the fate of Moses, the future miraculous gift of quail (cf. Num 11:31–34), and the coming of Gog and Magog at the end of days.<sup>55</sup> In this example, a variant vocalization of a problematic lexeme clears up potentially troubling grammatical and conceptual difficulties resident in the “received” reading of the verse.

A second relevant example of phonetic manipulation in the service of eschatology occurs in conjunction with the initial lines of the qur’ānic *Sūrat al-Rūm* (chapter 30), a section usually interpreted as providing an *ex eventu* acknowledgment of the Sasanian seizure of Byzantine holdings in Syria and Palestine during the early seventh century C.E., but then offering a bold prediction of Byzantine resurgence and victory over Persia after a short period of time. The pertinent verses are traditionally read as follows:

The Greeks have been vanquished (*ghulibat*) in the nearest part of the land; but after their vanquishing, they shall vanquish (*sa-yaghlibūn*) in a few years. Allah’s is the command before and after; and on that day the believers shall rejoice in Allah’s support. He supports whom He wills; and He is the All-Mighty, the Merciful.<sup>56</sup>

With this reading, these qur’ānic lines furnish a valuable historical witness to the clash of empires in the eastern Mediterranean during the first two decades of the seventh century. They also afford a glimpse as to how this confrontation was viewed by an external group residing beyond the imperial frontiers. According to the Prophet, the Persian triumph was merely temporary: Rome would soon reclaim its strength and recover its lost Asian holdings. This

qur’ānic pronouncement can be and, of course, was viewed by later commentators as a remarkably prescient forecast of the successful eastern campaigns of Heraclius, which would culminate in his military subjugation of Persia and the emperor’s personal reclamation of Jerusalem in 630. Their seeming fulfillment in subsequent events effectively underscored Muḥammad’s status as a true prophet of God.

There is, however, a well-attested variant reading of these same verses whose effect is to shift their semantic focus away from the plane of contemporary history to that of apocalyptic.<sup>57</sup> It is accomplished by subtly altering the vocalization of forms of the crucial verb *ghalaba*, “vanquish,” which appear in verses 2 and 3, from the passive to the active voice (in verse 2) and vice versa (in verse 3). The result reads as follows: “the Greeks vanquished (*ghalabat*) in the nearest part of the land, but after their vanquishing, they shall be vanquished (*sa-yughlabūn*) in a few years.” This alternative rendering of Q 30:2–5 thus constructs a future confrontation between *al-Rūm* and Muslim believers whose inevitable result will be a stunning victory for the latter partisans of God; it becomes, in other words, an eschatological promise of the final triumph of Islam over Byzantium and Christianity. Such a reading coheres well with the frequent predictions of Rome’s fall contained in the early Muslim collections of *fitān* (“strife,” “disorders”) that assemble and catalog the various “signs” and terrestrial events that would mark the arrival of the final Hour.

It will prove interesting to see if future careful analysis of interreligiously contested passages within Jewish and Christian scriptures might unveil further examples of this scribal phenomenon, whereby a sacred text of one tradition might be appropriated, domesticated, and redirected in the partisan service of another, but then reclaimed and linguistically

<sup>55</sup> *Frg. Tg. and Tg. Ps.-J.* Num 11:26 record all three oracles, the last of which (on Gog and Magog) they utter together; Rashi and Radaq *ad* Ezek 38:17 reference Eldad and Medad as the “two prophets” who foresaw Gog and Magog prior to Ezekiel. The oldest form of this legend however does not seem to know the eschatological tradition; see Pseudo-Philo *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* 20.5; also *Sifre* Num (ed. Horowitz, 96) §95: “What did they [i.e., Eldad and Medad] say? ‘Moses will die, and Joshua will bring Israel into the Land!’” This particular midrash, of course, arises out of Joshua’s sudden outburst in Num 11:28.

<sup>56</sup> Q 30:2–5. The translation cited has been slightly adjusted from that of M. Fakhry, *An Interpretation of the Qur’an: English Translation of the Meanings, A Bilingual Edition* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 406.

<sup>57</sup> For this example, I am indebted to N. M. El Cheikh, “*Sūrat al-Rūm: A Study of the Exegetical Literature*,” *JAOS* 118 (1998): 356–64; *idem*, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs* (Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs, 36; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 24–33.

“secured” against future “abuse” by its “original” custodian.<sup>58</sup> Such a philological study possesses the potential to cast new light on the manifold literary

intersections among Jews, Christians, Muslims, and other religious groups during the initial centuries of the Islamicate period.

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<sup>58</sup> There may thus be more currency to the frequent charge of *tahrif*, “scriptural alteration, forgery,” than modern scholars are accustomed to granting.

SHAPING THE MIDDLE EAST  
JEWS, CHRISTIANS, AND MUSLIMS  
IN AN AGE OF TRANSITION 400–800 C.E.

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