

‘A PEOPLE WILL EMERGE FROM THE DESERT’:
APOCALYPTIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE EARLY
MUSLIM CONQUESTS IN CONTEMPORARY EASTERN
CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

Emmanouela GRYPEOU

The earliest Christian texts, which specifically deal with Islam, belong to the literary genre of the apocalyptic literature.¹ These texts present important sources for the history of apocalypticism as a literary genre as well as the history of the reception of early Islam in Christian lands. Moreover, they elaborate a theological response to the expansion of Muslim political and military power as well as to the overthrow of Byzantine rule and most importantly the – supposedly temporary – loss of a Christian hegemony. In addition, these writings also reflect historical and social conditions of the population of the Eastern Byzantine provinces at the time of the Muslim conquests and their aftermath.

These texts describe the Muslim rule in apocalyptic terms and language. Significantly, they are originally composed in Syriac and most probably in North Mesopotamia. The dating of these writings is a notoriously challenging task. It often remains speculative and as such, in many

1. Previous studies on this literary corpus include: Paul J. Alexander, ‘Historiens byzantins et croyances eschatologiques’, in *Actes du XIIIe Congrès International des Études Byzantines* 2 (Beograd, 1964), pp. 1–8; idem, ‘Byzantium and the Migration of Literary Works’, *Medievalia et humanistica*, n.s. 2 (1971), pp. 47–68; idem, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Berkeley, 1985), pp. 13–60; Harald Suermann, *Die geschichtstheologische Reaktion auf die einfallenden Muslime in der edessenischen Apokalypik des 7. Jahrhunderts* (Europäische Hochschulschriften 256; Frankfurt, 1985); Gerrit Reinink, ‘Early Christian Responses to the Building of the Dome of the Rock’, *Xristiansky Vostok* 2 (2001), pp. 224–41; Francisco Javier Martínez, ‘La literatura apocalíptica y las primeras reacciones cristianas a la conquista islámica en Oriente’, in Gonzalo Anes y Alvares de Castrillon (ed.), *Europa y Islam* (Real Academia de la Historia, Serie Estudios 8; Madrid, 2003), pp. 143–222; Gerrit J. Reinink, ‘From Apocalypitics to Apologetics: Early Syriac Reactions to Islam’, in Wolfram Brandes and Felicitas Schmieder (eds.), *Endzeiten: Eschatologie in den monotheistischen Religionen* (Millennium Studies 16; Berlin–New York, 2008), pp. 75–87; Pablo Ubierna, ‘Recherches sur l’apocalypique syriaque et byzantine au VII^e siècle: la place de l’Empire romain dans une histoire du salut’, *Bulletin du Centre d’Études Médiévales d’Auxerre*, Hors série 2 (2008), pp. 1–28; Robert 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 NJ, 1997), pp. 257–306.

cases highly controversial. I shall focus here on those texts, which were – probably – composed in the second half of the seventh century. The discussion will include texts, such as the *Sermon of Pseudo-Ephraem, On the End of the World*, the so-called *Edessene Apocalypse*, the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* and the *Apocalypse of John the Little* from the *Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*. The *Sermon of Pseudo-Ephraem*² is probably the earliest among these texts, followed by the so-called *Edessene Apocalypse*³ and the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*,⁴ whereas the *Apocalypse of John the Little*⁵ appears to be the latest one. However, all mentioned texts must have been composed during a time period that expands over five or six decades: that is, from the mid or end of the seventh century up to the early eighth century. Accordingly, they reflect Christian reactions to the Muslim conquests as well as to the transition into an established Muslim political rule. The time-frame, the geographical location, the common language and culture and perhaps more importantly the common literary

2. Edmund Beck, (ed.), *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones, III* (CSCO 320–321, Scr. Syri 138–139; Louvain, 1972), pp. 60–71 (ed.); 79–94 (trans.); Harald Suermann, *Die geschichtstheologische Reaktion auf die einfallenden Muslime in der edessenischen Apokalyphtik des 7. Jahrhunderts* (Europäische Hochschulschriften, Reihe XXIII, Theologie 256; Frankfurt am Main–New York, 1985), pp. 12–33; cf. Gerrit J. Reinink, ‘Pseudo-Ephraems “Rede über das Ende” und die syrische eschatologische Literatur des Siebenten Jahrhunderts’, *ARAM* 5 (1993), pp. 437–63.

3. See Francisco Javier Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius* (Ph.D. Diss. Catholic University of America, Washington DC, 1985), pp. 222–46; Sebastian Brock, ‘The Edessene Apocalyptic Fragment’, in Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Translated Texts for Historians 15; Liverpool, 1993), pp. 243–45.

4. Gerrit J. Reinink, *Die syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius* (ed./trans. 2 Vols., CSCO 540–541, Scr. Syri 220–221; Louvain, 1993); Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period*, pp. 58–205; Suermann, *Die geschichtstheologische Reaktion*, pp. 34–85; cf. Gerrit J. Reinink, ‘Pseudo-Methodius. A concept of history in response to the rise of Islam’, in Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad (eds.), *The Byzantine and early Islamic Near East. I: Problems in the literary source material* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 1; Princeton, 1992), pp. 149–87; idem, ‘Pseudo-Methodius and the Pseudo-Ephremian “Sermo de Fine Mundi”’, in R.I.A. Nip *et al.* (eds.), *Media Latinitas: A Collection of Essays to Mark the Occasion of the Retirement of L.J. Engels* (Instrumenta Patristica et Mediaevalia 28; Steenbrugge–Turnhout 1996), pp. 317–21.

5. James Rendel Harris, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles With the Apocalypses of Each One of Them* (Cambridge, 1900); Han J.W. Drijvers, ‘The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles: A Syriac Apocalypse from the Early Islamic Period’, in Cameron and Conrad (eds.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East. I*, pp. 189–213; idem, ‘Christians, Jews and Muslims in Northern Mesopotamia in Early Islamic Times: The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles and Related Texts’, in Pierre Canivet and Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais (eds.), *La Syrie de Byzance à l’Islam, VII^e–VIII^e siècles. Actes du Colloque international, Lyon - Maison de l’Orient Méditerranéen, Paris -Institut du Monde Arabe, 11–15 Septembre 1990* (Publications de l’Institut français de Damas 137; Damascus, 1992), pp. 67–74.

genre and agenda allow for the study of these texts as a particular concise body of literature. These texts being the products of a particular historical period respond to specific historical and political events and form part of a shared literary discourse. This literary discourse pertains to a long Jewish and Christian apocalyptic tradition evidenced in pre-Islamic apocalyptic texts, which serve as inspiration sources and literary models for the post-Islamic literary production. Thus, the writings in view share a common literary background and demonstrate certain literary and possibly also textual interdependence between them. Significantly, they are related to pre-Islamic apocalyptic texts, such as the *Syriac Daniel Apocalypse*,⁶ the *Syriac Testamentum Domini*⁷ and most importantly, the *Syriac Alexander Legend*⁸ and the *Syriac Song of Alexander*.⁹

The post-Islamic apocalyptic texts can be classified, in terms of literary genre, as political and historical apocalyptic literature.¹⁰ According to the established definitions, historical and political apocalyptic literature employs traditional literary and exegetical symbols and motifs, in order to address urgent political, historical and social issues in the context of an apocalyptic interpretation.

The question of the historicity of the apocalyptic writings remains a bone of contention. P.J. Alexander has long ago discussed the apocalypses as sources for historical information.¹¹ The idiosyncrasy of the

6. See text and translation in: M. Henze, *The Syriac Apocalypse of Daniel. Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 11; Tübingen, 2001), cf. also Brock's contribution in this volume.

7. Ephrem Rahmani, *Testamentum Domini nostri Jesu Christi nunc primum editur, latine reddidit et illustravit* (Mainz, 1899); James Cooper and Arthur John Mac Lean, *The Testament of Our Lord*, trans. into English from the Syriac with Introduction and Notes (Edinburgh, 1902).

8. Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *The Life and Exploits of Alexander the Great* (London, 1896; Amsterdam ed.), pp. 255–75 (text); pp. 144–58 (trans.).

9. Gerrit J. Reinink, *Das Syrische Alexanderlied. Die Drei Rezensionen* (CSCO vol. 455, Scr. Syri 196; Louvain, 1983); Budge, *The History and Exploits of Alexander the Great*.

10. On this definition, see John J. Collins, 'Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre', in idem (ed.), *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, *Semeia* 14 (1979), pp. 1–20; According to the classification proposed in *Semeia*, 'the "historical" type includes a review of history, eschatological crisis and cosmic and/or political eschatology' (Collins, 'Introduction', p. 13); cf. Adela Y. Collins, *Early Christian Apocalypses*, in ibidem, pp. 121–61; John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids MI, 1998²), pp. 1–32.

11. See Paul J. Alexander, 'Medieval Apocalypses as Historical Sources', *The American Historical Review* 73 (1968), pp. 997–1018 (p. 1018: 'Medieval apocalypses, then, are chronicles written in the future tense and deserve close attention on the part of the historians of the Middle Ages'); John Iskander, 'Islamisation in Medieval Egypt: The Copto-Arabic "Apocalypse of Samuel" as a source for the social and religious history of medieval Copts', *Medieval Encounters* 43 (1995), pp. 219–27.

genre that is characterised by literary conventions, descriptions of exaggerated emotions and mythological symbols would actually disqualify these texts as historical sources. Clearly, the apocalypses were not intentionally written down as openly historical reports. Rather, the intentionality of apocalyptic writing focused on the theological explanation of history.

However, the historical value of apocalyptic writing should be considered, if we acknowledge that these texts as literary products of a given time reflect the actual historical period and that they express certain feelings, thoughts and experiences of at least a part of the population. They are thus valuable witnesses of the reaction and reception of certain strata of the population to the Arab conquests and the early Islamic rule. Accordingly, we may also include the apocalyptic writings to the historical sources of that period, as subjective witnesses of dramatic historical events. New historical circumstances would equally affect the perception of eschatological symbols.¹²

The narrative frame of the apocalyptic visions is varied. Commonly the Muslim rule is described as a sign for the nearing end of the world, regardless of the specific literary genre. The end of times is clearly associated with the end of the time of the so-called Ishmaelites, that is, the end of the rule of the Muslims. The Muslim Arabs become part of the traditional eschatological drama. They often represent the first act of the apocalyptic drama, which is the most urgent and tragic one in the chronological accounts of the respective narratives. The basic pattern of the typical deterministic view of world history predicts – according to our texts – the end of the Muslim rule and the following restoration and world dominion of the Christian Byzantine Empire. These texts intentionally operate between history and theology, visionary literature and moralistic exhortation

12. Thus, for example the figure of the Antichrist in the post-Islamic apocalypses is added on as a literary device, in order to complete the eschatological scenario, whereas in texts of the fourth or fifth century the same figure might have been the main protagonist of the story, reflecting actual ruler figures, who were perceived as tyrannical or ungodly. See, for example, the apocalyptic use of the figure of the emperor Julian (the Apostate), cf. Christian Badilita, *Metamorphoses de l'Antichriste chez les pères de l'Église* (Théologie historique 116; Paris, 2005); Wilhelm Bousset, *Der Antichrist in der Überlieferung des Judentums, des neuen Testaments und der alten Kirche* (Göttingen 1895); Osvalda Andrei, 'Aspetti del costruirsi della (e di una) identità cristiana: l'Anticristo di Ippolito', *Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi* 20/1 (2003), pp. 75–110; Emmanouela Grypeou, 'Ephraem Graecus, *In Adventum Domini*: A Contribution to the Study of the Transmission of Apocalyptic Motifs in Greek, Latin and Syriac Traditions in Late Antiquity', in Samir Khalil Samir and Juan Pedro Monferrer Sala (eds.), *Græco-latina et orientalia. Studia in honorem Angeli Urbani Sexagenarii* (Beirut 2013), pp. 165–79.

Apocalyptic thinking permeates the literature of the time as is documented in a number of contemporary homiletical and historiographical works. The apocalyptic approach to contemporary events was expressed in a wide variety of literary genres, such as homilies, poems, historiographical works and hagiography.

Traditionally, apocalyptic writings are considered to have existed in the margins of the theological literary establishment. However, their wide circulation attests to their considerable popularity. It is perhaps exactly their marginality that explains their popularity, since they often appear to express feelings and anxieties of broader strata of the population that were not officially connected with the political and ecclesiastical establishment.

The most famous and popular text of all, the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, was soon translated from Syriac into Greek and Latin and later also into many other languages. It transmitted local perceptions of Islam far beyond the Syriac-speaking provinces until late in the Middle Ages.¹³ Notably, there are nearly 190 attested manuscripts of the text only in Latin.¹⁴ The most immediate experience of the Christian population with the Muslim conquests acquires a diachronic value, as it contributes to the formation of popular beliefs about the Moslems for centuries to come in East and West.

However, part of the appeal of the apocalyptic texts lies in their focus on contemporary concerns. These texts address current issues and urgent questions of Christian life under Muslim rule, which were ostensibly of immediate relevance for the Christian communities, such as, for example, how would they be treated by these new rulers, what their living conditions would be like, and perhaps most importantly of all: how long will this non-Christian rule last and how and when will it come to an end? Significantly, the apocalyptic scenario offered the deterministic reassurance that this new rule will not last for ever and that the final triumph of Christianity is near.

13. The Syriac text is preserved in three manuscripts of two redactions, see Reininik, *Die syrische Apokalypse I*, pp. xiv–xxi; the Greek text is extant in 15 mss, the oldest of which dates to the 14th cent.; see W.J. Aerts and G.A.A. Kortekaas, *Die Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius: Die ältesten griechischen und lateinischen Übersetzungen*, vol.1 (Louvain, 1998), pp. 38–48; Anastastios Lolos lists ca. 45 mss extant or fragments of four redactions, see A. Lolos, *Die dritte und vierte redaktion des Ps.-Methodios* (Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie 94; Meisenheim am Glan, 1978) pp. 26–36.

14. See Daniels Verhelst, *Advo Dervensis. De ortu et tempore Antichristi, necnon et tractatus qui ab eo dependunt* (Turnhout, 1976), p. 139, n. 1; Juan Pedro Monferrer Sala, 'Pseudo-Methodius (Latin)', in David Thomas *et al.* (eds.), *Christian Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History: Vol. 1 (600-900)* (Leiden, 2009), p. 250: 'there are no fewer than 190 Latin manuscripts, four of them go back to the 8th century, and one can perhaps be dated to the late 7th century'.

ISHMAELITES THE ROBBERS

Traditionally, the Ishmaelites were associated in Christian literature with robbery activities. This stereotype refers to an established biblical exegetical category.¹⁵ *Pseudo-Ephraem* stresses that all the peoples will be defeated and humiliated in front of the ‘robber people’. Consistent to their ‘robber’ character, it is added that they shall loot and devastate the earth.¹⁶

However, it should be stressed that in the post-Islamic apocalyptic literature of that period this stereotype is specifically linked with the taxation imposed upon the Christian population by the early Caliphate.¹⁷ The motif of the heavy and exceedingly oppressive tribute becomes a *topos* in all the apocalyptic texts of the period – and not only of that period – with no exception.¹⁸

The taxation is described by *Pseudo-Ephraem* in highly dramatic language as a hitherto unheard tribute, an injustice that will rise on earth and even cover the clouds.¹⁹ According to *Pseudo-Methodius*, paralleled by the *Edessene Apocalypse*, the Ishmaelites will take everything valuable of the natural revenue but also gold, precious gems, sacred garments and food.²⁰

The practical consequences of the taxation on the lives of the population are expressed in very emotional scenes that describe how the people will wake up in the morning to find four tax-collectors at their doors, so that they will have to sell even their burial shroud or even their own sons and daughters and will hate their lives.²¹

15. Interestingly, the Ishmaelites as a ‘nation of robbers’ appears as a common motif in the rabbinic literature, see *Genesis Rabbah* 45:9; *Pesiqta Rabbati* 21:2/3; *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* 41; *Targum Pseudo Jonathan* on Gen 21:12; *et al.* For a discussion of this motif, see Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling, *The Book of Genesis in Late Antiquity: Encounters between Jewish and Christian Exegesis* (Jewish and Christian Perspectives 24; Leiden–Boston, 2013), pp. 243–45.

16. Beck, *Sermones*, p. 82.

17. See Chase F. Robinson (ed.), *The Rise of Islam, 600-705: The Formation of the Islamic World, Sixth to Eleventh Centuries* (The New Cambridge History of Islam 1; Cambridge, 2011), p. 219; Drijvers, ‘Christians, Jews and Muslims’, p. 67.

18. On the impact of the heavy taxation on the Christian population, see Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, *Chronicle*, 2.881, in Witold Witakowski, *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, Chronicle: Known Also as the Chronicle of Zuqnin*, Part 3 (*Translated Texts for Historians Series* 22; Liverpool, 1996), p. 44; cf. John Lamoreaux, ‘Early Eastern Christian Responses to Islam’, in J.V. Tolan (ed.), *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam: A Book of Essays* (London–New York, 1996), pp. 3–31; D.C. Dennett, *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam* (Harvard Historical Monographs 22; Cambridge MA, 1950).

19. See Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 260.

20. Ps.-Methodius, *Apocalypse*, ch. XIII.

21. Cf. *The Apocalypse of John the Little* (Harris, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*), p. 37; Pseudo-Athanasius, *Apocalypse*, IX.9–10 (Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic*, pp. 529–30).

These dramatic scenes become standard motifs of the post-Islamic apocalyptic literature. Furthermore, they are paralleled in historiographical texts, as well. According to the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, AG 1003:

'Abd al-Malik made a census and ordered that everyone should be registered together with his vineyards, cattle, sons, etc. From this time the poll-tax (Ar. *Jizya*) began to be levied on the skulls of adult males. From this all (sorts of) evils began to well up against the Christian nation. ... From this point onwards the Sons of Hagar began to subject the Sons of Aram to Egyptian slavery. But it is our own fault: because we sinned, slaves have become our masters.²²

According to these testimonies, the tax reforms that were introduced by 'Abd al-Malik (690/91) have caused much despair among the population and with no doubt triggered some of the apocalyptic feelings that inspired the composition of these texts.²³ Importantly, according to a number of sources, the taxation urged some Christians to conversion to Islam.²⁴ The defection from the Christian faith presents an additional major incentive for the composition of these apocalyptic texts. Moreover, these texts fulfil an important pastoral function by expressing a tenacious exhortation for perseverance in the Christian faith.

The writings in view describe with dramatic and horrific images the brutality of the Muslim military conquests. According to the apocalyptic 'prophecy' of *Pseudo-Ephraem*, these wars will be the most horrible on earth. The earth will be filled with blood. The children will be trampled

22. Trans. Palmer, *The Seventh Century*, p. 60.

23. See Reinink, 'Ps.-Methodius: A Concept of History in Response to the Rise of Islam', p. 180.

24. Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*, (Cambridge MA, 1979); 'Process and Status in Conversion and Continuity' and 'Conversion Stories in Early Islam', in Michael Gervers Aand Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (eds.), *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Papers in Mediaeval Studies 9; Toronto, 1990), pp. 1–12, 123–33; Jean-Marie Fiey, 'Conversions à l'Islam de Juifs et de Chrétiens sous les Abbassides d'après les sources arabes et syriaques', in Johannes Irmscher (ed.), *Rapports entre Juifs, Chrétiens et Musulmans. Eine Sammlung von Forschungsbeiträgen* (Amsterdam, 1995), pp. 13–28; Nehemia Levtzion, 'Conversion to Islam in Syria and Palestine and the Survival of Christian Communities', in M. Gervers and R.J. Bikhazi (eds.), *Conversion and Continuity*, pp. 289–311; Muhammad Shaban, 'Conversion to Early Islam', in Nehemia Levtzion (ed.), *Conversion to Islam* (Michigan, 1979), pp. 24–29; Martin Tamcke, 'Vom Dialog, interreligiös und intrareligiös: zwei syrische Lieder zur Konversion', in idem (ed.), *Christians and Muslims in Dialogue in the Islamic Orient of the Middle Ages* (Beiruter Texte und Studien 117; Beirut-Würzburg, 2007), pp. 9–18; Gerrit J. Reinink, 'Following the Doctrine of the Demons. Early Christian Fear of Conversion to Islam', in Jan N. Bremmer, Wout J. Van Bekkum, and Arie L. Molendijk (eds.), *Cultures of Conversion* (Groningen Studies in Cultural Change 18; Louvain, 2005), pp. 127–38.

under the hoofs of the horses and the camels.²⁵ The Muslim conquerors are depicted as cruel, merciless and arrogant.²⁶ *Pseudo-Methodius* stresses how all regions conquered by the Muslims will be delivered to ruin and destruction, distress and affliction, captivity and sword and concludes: 'Utter desolation will be all over the world'.²⁷

Apart from the heavy taxation, another major theme associated with the Muslim conquests, was the misery caused to the Christian population on account of the captivity and slavery suffered. John bar Penkaye refers to 'their robber bands (that) went annually to distant parts and to the islands, bringing back captives from all the peoples under the heaven'.²⁸

Pseudo-Ephraem describes highly emotional separation scenes between families caused by slavery raids.²⁹ Similar scenes are also described in the historiographical texts. Dionysius of Tel Mahre recounts: 'After a few days ... they embarked their human loot in the ships. What misery and lamentation were seen then! Fathers were separated from their children, daughters from their mother, brother from their brother, some destined for Alexandria, others for Syria' [§ 97].³⁰

25. Beck, *Sermones*, p. 83; cf. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 260. The camel functions also here as a 'cultural signifier' for the Arab nomads. As J. Retsö remarks, the camel becomes a symbolic animal of Arab culture only in Late Antiquity: 'In the Old Testament the association between camels and the *'arab* is less evident. ... Camels appear regularly together with the Arabs in later ages. ... Later, camels and Arabs are mentioned together by Clement of Alexandria and Ammian. ... Judging from the picture given by the sources, the handling of the camel was the main and most exotic characteristic of the Arabs as seen by the surrounding communities' (*The Arabs in Antiquity, Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* [London–New York, 2003], pp. 581–82). On the role of the camels in the Qur'an and early Islam, see Sarra Tlili, *Animals in the Qur'an* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 154–59.

26. See *The Apocalypse of John the Little*: 'everybody shall be afraid and shall tremble and be terrified' (Harris *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, p. 36).

27. Ps.-Methodius, *Apocalypse*, ch. XI.

28. Trans. Brock, 'North Mesopotamia in the Late Seventh Century', p. 61, The identification of the Arabs as slave traders is already alluded to in pre-Islamic Syriac literature, such as the *Cave of Treasures*: 'And Ishmael made a mill of the hands (i.e. a hand-mill) in the desert, a mill of slavery (i.e. a mill to be worked by slaves)' (Erwin Alfred Wallis Budge [trans.], *The Book of the Cave of Treasures* [London, 1927], p. 157).

29. Beck, *Sermones*, pp. 82–83; cf. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 263; Cf. also Pseudo-Methodius, *Apocalypse*, ch. XI: 'The path of their advance will be from sea to sea, and from the East to the West and from the North to the desert of Yathrib. It will be a path to calamities; old men and women, rich and poor, will travel on it while they hunger and thirst, and suffer with heavy chains to the point that they will bless the dead' (trans. Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic*, p. 143).

30. This episode refers to the invasion of Cyprus by Muawiya in the mid seventh century, see Palmer, *The Seventh Century*, p. 175; moreover, Dionysius of Tel-Mahre also reports of many instances of plundering and ravaging by the foraging Muslim armies, see *ibidem*, §§83–84: 'Muawiya besieged Caesarea – and laying it waste – until he conquered by the sword. All those in the city, including 7000 Romans sent there to guard it, were put to death. The city was plundered of vast quantities of gold and silver and then

Thus, the time of the Muslim conquests is univocally described in our sources as a time of utter tribulation and distress.³¹ According to the *Apocalypse of John the Little*: ‘in the end of their times they shall do evil to all flesh’.³²

GODLESS SARACENS

The Muslims are stereotypically described as the godless Saracens in these texts. They are an ungodly people with no respect for the Christian religion. The *Apocalypse of John the Little* mentions that they shall persecute the Christians because they have a particular hatred against Christianity: ‘they will afflict all of those who confess our Lord Christ, because they shall hate to the very end the name of the Lord – they will bring to nought his covenant’.³³ This claim is paralleled in Theophanes’ *Chronicle*, in which the Arabs are understood as ‘deniers of Christ’ (*Chronicle*, A.M. 6164). Early on, the Muslim conquests were perceived as a direct attack against Christianity.

Sophronius of Jerusalem, in his famous sermon ‘On the Epiphany’ writes:

Why do barbarian raids abound? Why are the troops of Saracens attacking us? Why has there been so much destruction and plunder? ... Why have churches been pulled down? Why is the cross mocked? Why is Christ, who is the dispenser of all good things and the provider of this joyousness of ours, blasphemed by pagan mouths?³⁴

The disrespect of the Ishmaelites towards the Christian faith and institutions is epitomised by *Pseudo-Methodius*:

They will sacrifice the ministers within the church and they will sleep with their wives and with the captive women inside the church. They will make the

abandoned to its grief ... Then he advanced to Euchaita. ... they plundered it, piling up great mounds of booty. They seized the women, the boys and the girls to take them back home as slaves’ (ibid., pp. 165–66); cf. §55 (ibid., p. 149).

31. On the motif of the unprecedented distress and sorrow of the apocalyptic times, see Mark 13:19; Matt. 24:21; Ps.-Hippolytus, *Antichrist*, 25.

32. Harris, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, p. 37.

33. Harris, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, p. 38; and further in the same text: ‘They shall do whatever is hateful in the eyes of the Lord’ (ibid.); cf. The *Copto-Arabic Apocalypse of Pseudo-Shenoute*, ‘they will deny my (Jesus’) suffering on the Cross’ (Émile Amélineau, *Monuments pour servir à l’histoire de l’Égypte chrétienne aux IV^e et V^e siècles: textes et traduction* [Paris, 1888], p. 341).

34. Sophronius, *Sermon on Epiphany*, 151–168 [162], trans. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, pp. 72–73, and further: ‘they set fire on the holy churches, overturn the sacred monasteries ... they increase their blasphemy of Christ and the Church, and utter wicked blasphemies against God ... their leader is the devil’ (ibid.).

sacred garments into clothing for themselves and their sons. They will tether their cattle in the shrines of the martyrs. They are insolent and murderous, shedders of blood and spoilers; they are a furnace of trial for all Christians.³⁵

Moreover, a major sign of the nearing end would be that the divine service and the 'living sacrifice' would cease within the Church at that time.³⁶ The profanisation of society and desacralisation of life are declared as ultimate signs of the end. God's protection over the world will be removed and the world will fall into an apocalyptic disorder of all kinds, including dramatic religious upheavals.

The pre-Islamic 'Ishmaelites' occupied a grey zone between idolatry and Abrahamic legacy. The monotheistic faith now professed by the Muslim Arabs presented the Christians with a new puzzle. Certain historiographical accounts would acknowledge a new religious movement with an emphasis on a monotheistic turn in the beliefs of the Arabs. Early accounts, as evidenced in the writings of Pseudo-Sebeos or John bar Penkaye, indicate their familiarity with a religion, which has 'Abrahamic' features.³⁷

The apocalyptic texts demonstrate little interest in the religious beliefs of their conquerors and hardly any knowledge of it. Although they explicitly refer to the danger of defection, they do not care – probably intentionally – to describe to what the Christians are converting.

Pseudo-Methodius warns that many Christians will deny the true faith: that is, the life-giving Cross and the holy mysteries. Implicitly, thus, *Pseudo-Methodius* summarises for the Christian communities the most important core tenets of Christian faith in contrast to the doctrines of Islam.

35. Ps.-Methodius, *Apocalypse*, ch. XI (trans. Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic*, pp. 144–45); Cf. also the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Shenoute* (Amélineau, *Monuments*, p. 341); cf. Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 11.8: 'The Arabs enslaved the entire population, men and women, boys and girls. They committed a great orgy in this unfortunate city, fornicating wickedly inside the churches' (Palmer, *The Seventh Century*, p. 166, n. 407).

36. The motif of the cessation of the holy sacrifice can already be found in Romanos Melodos' and Ephraem Graecus' descriptions of the rule of the Antichrist, but also in the Edessene Apocalypse (Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic*, p. 236). On Romanos Melodos' poem, *On the Last Judgment*, see José Grosdidier De Matons, *Hymnes, Romane le Mélode*, vol. V. (Paris, 1981), pp. 209–67; Daniel Verhelst, 'Scarpsum de Dictis Sancti Ephraem Prope Fine Mundi', in R. Lievens *et al.* (eds.), *Pascua Medievalia* (Leuven, 1983), pp. 518–28; C.P. Caspari, 'Eine Ephraem Syrus und Isidor von Sevilla beigelegte Predigt über die letzten Zeiten, den Antichrist und das Ende der Welt. Aus zwei Handschriften saec. VIII...', in idem, *Briefe, Abhandlungen und Predigten und aus den zwei letzten Jahrhunderte des kirchlichen Altertums and Anfang des Mittelalters* (Christiana, 1890), pp. 208–20, 429–72.

37. Pseudo-Sebeos, *Armenian History*, 135: 'He (i.e. Muhammad) taught them to recognize the God of Abraham, especially because he was learned and informed in the history of the Jews' (Robert Thomson, *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos* [Translated Texts for Historians 31; Liverpool 1999], p. 95); cf. the account of John bar Penkaye, in Brock, 'Northern Mesopotamia', p. 61.

It is only the *Apocalypse of John the Little*, the latest text to be taken into account here, that betrays some familiarity with the Muslims as a faith community. As its author remarks:

And there shall rise from among them a warrior, and one whom they call a prophet, and they shall be brought into his hands ... those like to whom there has not been any in the world neither do there exist their like; and every one that hears shall shake his head and shall deride him and say ‘Why does he speak thus? And God sees it and does not regard it.’³⁸

This passage reflects the double perspective of the ‘other’ in the consciousness of the Christian population. Even if the Christians would have been aware of Muhammad’s prophetic claims, they could only view him as a warrior.³⁹

In the theological discourse of these writings, the Muslims are primarily the tools of divine wrath caused and provoked by the continuous and extreme sinful behaviour of the Christians. As *Pseudo-Methodius* stresses: ‘It is not because God loves the Sons of Ishmael that He allows them to enter into the kingdom of the Christians, but because of the iniquity and the sin that is being wrought by the Christians, the like of which has never been done in any of the former generations.’⁴⁰

John Lamoreaux suggests that the view that the Christians are punished for their sins seems to be alluded to in the Qur’an. According to Sura 5:18: ‘The Jews and the Christians say: “We are the sons of God and his beloved”. Say: “Why then does he punish you for your sins?”’⁴¹

Especially, *Pseudo-Methodius* underlines the ‘boasting’ of the conquerors on account of their military successes. Furthermore, it alludes to theological anxieties of the Christians or even controversies between early Muslims and Christians on the soteriological or metaphysical meaning of the Muslim victories and the defeat of the Christian arm:

After these calamities and chastisements of the sons of Ismael at the end of that week, mankind will be lying in the peril of the chastisement. There will be no hope of their being saved from that hard servitude. They will be

38. Harris, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, p. 36; cf. Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 11:6, who expresses very similar sentiments with regard to the hostile actions of the early Muslims against contemporary Christians.

39. Cf. The view expressed in the *Doctrina Jacobi Nuper Baptizati* on the ‘prophet who has appeared with the Saracens’: ‘He is false for the prophets do not come armed with the sword ... there was no truth to be found in the so-called prophet, only the shedding of men’s blood’ (trans. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 57).

40. Ps.-Methodius, *Apocalypse*, ch. XI 5; XI 8; cf. the *Apocalypse* of Pseudo-Athanasius (Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic, passim*); John bar Penkayes, in Brock, ‘North Mesopotamia’, *passim*.

41. See John Lamoreaux, ‘Early Eastern Christian Responses to Islam’, p. 3.

persecuted and oppressed, and will suffer indignities, hunger and thirst. They will be troubled with a hard chastisement. All the while, those tyrants will be enjoying food, drink and rest, and they will be boasting of their victories ... They will dress up like bridegrooms and adorn themselves as brides, and blaspheme by saying, 'There is no Saviour for the Christians.'⁴²

Moreover, this description corresponds to a standard cliché attached to the early Muslims that refers to the 'libidinous character' of the Muslim way of life.⁴³ This topos prevails in the Christian literature since the early times of their encounter with Islam and is often accompanied by descriptions of the gluttony of the Muslims, their love for beautiful, costly garments and open demonstrations of relishing a lavish way of life.

THE FORERUNNERS OF THE ANTICHRIST

The capture of Jerusalem and the conquest of the Holy Land by the Muslims was most probably one of the main events that triggered apocalyptic anxieties among the local Christian population.⁴⁴ A crucial event was the construction of the Dome of the Rock by 'Abd al-Malik, which was seemingly considered by the contemporaries as the re-building of the Temple of Jerusalem;⁴⁵ an action that in the classical Christian apocalyptic discourse is commonly ascribed to the Antichrist.⁴⁶

42. Ps.-Methodius, *Apocalypse*, ch. XIII (trans. Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic*, pp. 148–49).

43. See *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, AG 932 (Palmer, *The Seventh Century*, p. 56). This accusation was also later often reinforced by ridiculed descriptions of the 'carnal' paradise of the Muslims, which, nevertheless, reveal certain knowledge of Islamic lore and awareness of Muslim religious beliefs, see Theophanes, *Chronicle*, AM 6122 [629/30].

44. On the apocalyptic understanding of the building of the Dome of the Rock, see also the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Shenoute*, 'After that shall arise the sons of Ishmael and the sons of Esau, who hound the Christians, and the rest of them will be concerned to prevail and rule all over the world and to [re-]build the Temple that is in Jerusalem. When this happens, know that the end of times approaches and is near' (Amélineau, *Monuments*, p. 341; trans. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 280); on similar apocalyptic interpretations of the building of the Dome of the Rock by Jews and in a certain way later also by Muslims themselves, see Andreas Kaplony, *The Haram of Jerusalem (324-1099)* (Freiburg Islamstudien 22; Stuttgart, 2002), *passim*; Guy Stroumsa, 'Christian Memories and Visions of Jerusalem in Jewish and Islamic Context', in Oleg Grabar and Benjamin Zeev Kedar (eds.), *Where Heaven and Earth Meet: Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade*, (Jerusalem–Austin TX, 2009), pp. 321–33, 404–405.

45. See Reinink, *Die syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius*, p. XXI. On the building of the Dome of the Rock, see Oleg Grabar, *The Dome of the Rock* (Cambridge MA, 2006); idem, *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* (Princeton NJ, 1996); Chase F. Robinson, *'Abd al-Malik* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 71–75.

46. See Wilhelm Bousset, *Der Antichrist in der Überlieferung des Judentums und des Neuen Testaments und der alten Kirche* (Göttingen, 1895), p. 105. This motif is associated

More specifically, in pre-Islamic Christian apocalyptic literature the biblical prophecy of the ‘presence of the abomination in the Holy Place’ is associated with the appearance of the Antichrist. Accordingly, whereas the Muslim rule is commonly understood as a precursor of the eschatological reign of the Antichrist, the description of the Muslim rule itself in the post-Islamic Christian apocalyptic literature follows traditional apocalyptic motifs attributed to the times of the Antichrist. The times of the Antichrist are typically depicted as a demonic, ungodly rule that will bring harsh persecutions on the faithful.

Theophanes in his *Chronicle* recounts how, the caliph, ‘Umar (Oumaros), entered the Holy City dressed in filthy garments of camel-hair in order to meet the local patriarch, Sophronios’. Accordingly, ‘Umar stood as the prototype of the uncivilised desert-dweller in front of the venerable patriarch. As the story goes, ‘the patriarch asked him to accept a linen garment to wear until his own cloak was washed’. The encounter between the patriarch and the caliph is thus introduced in terms of a profound cultural contrast. The seeming lack of respect on the side of the caliph introduces the main part of the story, which is the intention of ‘Umar to build ‘a place of worship for his own blasphemous religion’ on the site of the ‘Temple of the Jews’. Seeing this, Sophronios said, in a much quoted phrase: ‘Verily, this is the abomination of desolation standing in a holy place, as has been spoken through the prophet Daniel.’⁴⁷

Theophanes the Confessor shares this theological understanding of the presence of the Muslims in the Holy Land and describes, further, the building of the Dome of the Rock in a typical apocalyptic frame.

In this year Umar began to build a temple in Jerusalem; the building would not stand but fell down. When he asked why, the Jews told him the reason: ‘If you do not tear down the cross on top of the church on the Mount of Olives, your building will not stay up.’ Therefore the cross was torn down, and thus their building arose. For this reason the Christ-haters tore down many crosses (*Chronicle*, A.M. 6135).⁴⁸

with the motif of the antichrist’s session in the temple of Jerusalem, as Bousset remarks: ‘Soll the Antichrist sich im Temple zu Jerusalem niederlassen, so muß dieser vorhanden sein, - aber nach der Zerstörung Jerusalem wieder aufgebaut werden’ (ibid.); cf. Gregory J. Jenks, *The Origins and Early Developments of the Antichrist Myth* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche 59; Berlin–New York, 1991), pp. 69–72.

47. Sophronios, *Sermon on Epiphany*, 168; cf. Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11; Matt. 24:15.

48. Cf. Ps.-Sebeos, *Armenian History*, 142: ‘I shall also speak about the plots of the rebellious Jews, who after gaining help from the Hagarenes for a brief while, decided to rebuild the temple of Solomon. Finding the spot called Holy of Holies, they rebuilt it with base and construction, as a place for their prayers. But the Ismaelites, being

Similarly, Anastasius of Sinai in his work, *Diegemata psychophele and sterekтика* ('Edifying and Supporting Tales'), maintains that the site of the Temple was cleared and prepared for the new construction with the help of demons. 'Anastasius recounts that the demons call themselves the companions of the Saracens but are worse than demons, since demons often shrink from the Christian sacrament, the cross and the relics etc., whereas these physical demons (the Arabs) mock Christian holy things and destroy them.'⁴⁹

SIGNS OF THE END

Typical signs of the Muslim rule include serious draught, the dissolution of family bonds, the disturbance of the social order, *et al.* As in a number of other apocalyptic texts, the post-Islamic apocalypses stress that many people will wish their own death.⁵⁰ Equally, barbarian invasions would

envious of them, expelled them from that place and called the same of prayer their own' (trans. Thomson, *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, pp. 102–103). A version of the same story is included in the Chronicle, attributed to Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, in which it is added that powerful gales kept damaging the building (The *Secular History* of Dionysius of Tel Mahre §86, in Palmer, *The Seventh Century*, p. 167). There is a corresponding story with regard to the attempts of the emperor Julian to rebuild the temple. Ephraem the Syrian and other sources (such as, Gregory of Nazianzus) relate about earthquakes and other natural disasters that prevented Julian from carrying out his building plans, on this see: Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum* (CSCO 174–175, Scr. Syri 78–79; Louvain 1956), see especially pp. 18–23; cf. Sebastian P. Brock, 'A Letter Attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem on the Rebuilding of the Temple', *BSOAS* 40 (1977), pp. 267–86; cf. David Levenson, 'Julian's Attempt to rebuild the Temple: An inventory of ancient and medieval sources', in Harold W. Attridge *et al.* (eds.), *On Scribes and Scrolls* (Lanham Maryland, 1990), pp. 261–79. See also Sidney H. Griffith, 'Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian'. Meditation on History and Imperial Power', *VC* 41 (1987), pp. 238–66.

49. G.J. Reinink, 'Following the Doctrine of the Demons. Early Christian Fear of Conversion to Islam', in Jan N. Bremmer *et al.* (eds.), *Cultures of Conversion* (Groningen Studies in Cultural Change 18; Peeters, 2000), pp. 127–38: p. 133; cf. on the same motif Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, pp. 100–101, who translates this passage by Anastasius; cf. Bernard Flusin, 'Demons et sarrasins. L'auteur et de propos de Diegemata Steriktika d'Anastase le Sinaïte', *T&MByz* 11 (1991), pp. 381–409; Sidney H. Griffith, 'Anastasius of Sinai, the *Hodegos* and the Muslims', *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 32 (1987), pp. 341–58; cf. the Jewish account of the new construction in a similar apocalyptic context: 'A second king will arise from Ishmael who will be a friend of Israel. 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 upon the site of the "foundation stone"' (*Secrets of Rabbi Shim'on b. Yohai*, in A. Jellinek [ed.], *Bet ha-Midrash*, III [Lipsia 1855], p. 79; trans. John Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postbiblical Jewish Apocalypse Reader* [Society of Biblical Literature, Resources for Biblical Study 45; Atlanta, 2005], pp. 81–82).

50. Cf. Rev. 9:6; *Apocalypse of Elijah* II.5; Ephraem Graecus, *De Fine Mundi*, III.140; 2 Baruch 10.6; *et al.*

have been understood as a historical sign of apocalyptic significance. The authors of these writings compose new apocalypses using long established patterns and motifs, in order to include the Muslims in an end-of-the-days scenario and to make sense of the Arabic conquests. That is, they intentionally make use of a specific literary genre, in order to explain and to come terms with a real, distressing historical situation.

In typical apocalyptic fashion, these texts juggle with the multivalent apocalyptic symbols, which potentially describe real historical events, albeit in an exaggerated manner. Motifs, which may be considered as typical apocalyptic, such as natural disasters, pest and famine⁵¹ are recorded in the historiographical accounts as well.⁵² Similarly, the eschatological narrative of *Pseudo-Ephraem* is introduced with a vision of famine and quakes, the earth drenched in blood and the plague prevailing in many places.⁵³

Pest epidemics are reported to have repeatedly devastated Syria between the sixth and eighth centuries. Lawrence Conrad writes that in the early Middle Ages Syria was affected by the pest at least every seven years and there are even hints for even more frequent epidemics between the sixth and the eighth century CE.⁵⁴ Furthermore, as Michael Morony observes:

Michael the Syrian estimated that one-third of the people in the world perished in the great pestilence (mawtāna rabbā) (in 704–705)⁵⁵ ... during the plague of 686–687 in upper Iraq, John bar Penkaye tells of human corpses strewn in the roads and streets like ‘dung on the earth’ (Jer. 16:4) so that springs and river became contaminated.⁵⁶

51. Cf. Mark 13:7–8; 4 Ezra 5:9; 6:24; 9:3–4; 1 Enoch 100:1; On draughts, springs drying up, cf. 4 Ezra 6:24; ‘a reversal of the preennial founts of nature’s blessings in 1 Enoch 68:17 and Sib. Or. 4:13’ (Michael Stone, *Fourth Ezra: A Commentary* [Minneapolis, 1990], p. 171); On social corruption as a sign of the end of times, see 4 Ezra 11:10–43; 1 Enoch 91:67; 2 Baruch 48:30–43.

52. Cf. Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 11:16.

53. Beck, *Sermones*, p. 80.

54. See Lawrence I. Conrad, ‘The Plague in Bilād al-Shām in Pre-Islamic Times’, in Muhammad ‘Adnan al-Bakhit and Muhammad ‘Asfur (eds.), *Proceedings of the Symposium on Bilād al-Shām During the Byzantine Period* (Amman 1986), vol. II, pp. 143–63; idem, ‘Epidemic Diseases in Central Syria in the Late Sixth Century. Some New Insights from the Verse of Hassan ibn Thābit’, *BMGS* 18 (1994), pp. 12–58; idem, ‘The Plague in the Early Medieval Near East’ (Ph.D. Diss. Princeton University, 1981); M.W. Dolls, ‘Plague in Early Islamic History’, *JAOS* 94 (1974), pp. 371–83; cf. Michael Morony, “‘For Whom Does the Writer Write?’: The First Bubonic Plague Pandemic According to Syriac Sources”, in Lester K. Little (ed.), *Plague and the End of Antiquity, The Pandemic of 541–730* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 59–86, for an overview of sources.

55. Morony, “‘For Whom Does the Writer Write?’”, p. 73.

56. Morony, “‘For Whom Does the Writer Write?’”, p. 76; and further: ‘In those regions where the plague recurred from the mid-sixth to at least the mid-eighth century there should have been a major, long-term demographic crisis. This was due not only to the plague; for more than two hundred years the population of the Levant was repeatedly decimated by epidemic, disease, famine, earthquakes, massacre, and deportation’ (ibid., p. 79).

Similarly, the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* (AG 1016= 713/714) reports that ‘there was a great and virulent pestilence in the land, so devastating that the people were not equal to the task of burying their fellow human beings’.⁵⁷

John bar Penkaye thought that famines, earthquakes and plagues were signs of the end of the world.⁵⁸ As Sebastian Brock has noted, John bar Penkaye also refers to a severe famine in Syria for the year 687. According to this account: ‘People did not even bury the dead but left them and fled like pagans (that is, Zoroastrians). Dogs began to eat many people while they were still alive’.⁵⁹

The above quoted passages actually reflect a very common apocalyptic motif, namely that the catastrophe and the despair will be so overwhelming that the dead will lie unburied. This motif is closely paralleled in the post-Islamic apocalyptic texts. For example, in *Pseudo-Methodius*, we read: ‘there will be a great hunger; many men will die and their corpses will be thrown out in the streets for lack of anyone to bury them’.⁶⁰

The psychological effects of actual natural disasters and epidemics as well as historical catastrophes would find a tool of literary expression in apocalyptic writing. In other words, the existing apocalyptic tradition would provide the people with an effective language to express their feelings of despair. Moreover, it would also provide them with a symbolic interpretative structure which would enable them to make sense of their current situation. Actual events were understood as part of a divine plan that would give hope and an optimistic perspective, since it promised ultimate salvation under the care of God’s providence. Furthermore, the dreadful events were not seen simply as random strikes of destiny but rather as fulfilment of established prophecies, that is, they formed part of a meaningful and logical pattern of history.

THE END OF TIMES

One of the main functions of apocalyptic literature of the time was the prediction and calculation of the length of Muslim rule and of its

57. Trans. Palmer, *The Seventh Century*, p. 61; cf. John bar Penkaye, on pest and famine in Syria in ca. 686 (Brock, ‘North Mesopotamia’, pp. 68–70); Theophanes, *Chronicle*, AM 6176 (684/685).

58. Brock, ‘North Mesopotamia’, p. 72; cf. Morony, “‘For Whom Does the Writer Write?’”, p. 81.

59. Brock, ‘North Mesopotamia’, pp. 68, 70; cf. Morony, “‘For Whom Does the Writer Write?’”, p. 76, n. 123.

60. Ps.-Methodius, *Apocalypse*, ch. XIII (trans. Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic*, p. 147).

ultimate downfall. The calculation of the duration of the Islamic rule is obscured by real expectations based on actual historical facts mixed with popular apocalyptic symbols. The apocalyptic writings include various suggestions on the length of the Muslim rule combining classical cryptic apocalyptic numeral symbols⁶¹ with actual expectations on the downfall of the Muslims. Significantly, the second civil war in Islam raised hopes among the Christian communities that the Muslim rule was near.⁶²

Pseudo-Ephraem maintains that the Muslim conquests are a precursor for the final invasions of the apocalyptic nations that will be sent by God so that the earth will be cleansed from the impurity. In a way, the Arabs are the forerunner of the unclean nations and they are implicitly associated with them as an apocalyptic nation that has already invaded the earth announcing its final destruction.

Finally, the post-Islamic apocalypses hope for the emergence of a messianic figure, who will overthrow the Islamic rule and will restore Christian dominion in an end-of-days scenario.

According to the apocalyptic scenario developed by the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, the liberation from the Muslim oppression will be ushered through the emergence of the messianic figure of the Last Emperor, the ‘King of the Greeks’.⁶³

Pseudo-Methodius depicts the last Emperor, as someone who was asleep and will go out with great anger to destroy the Ishmaelites and to

61. According to the *Apocalypse of John the Little*, they shall rule for one great week and the half of a great week (Harris, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, p. 37). The Edessene apocalypse calculates that the sons of Hagar will remain a week and a half (that is ten years and a half) (see Brock, ‘The Edessene Apocalyptic Fragment’, in Palmer, *The Seventh Century*, pp. 225, 245); Pseudo-Methodius expects their downfall in the tenth year-week (see Reinink, *Die syrische Apocalypse*, pp. 39, 57).

62. See the *Apocalypse of John the Little*, where there is a quite clear allusion to the Second Civil War (Harris, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, p. 38).

63. On this apocalyptic figure, see: Paul J. Alexander, ‘Byzantium and the Migration of Literary Works and Motifs: The Legend of the Last Roman Emperor’, *Medievalia et Humanistica* 2 (1971), pp. 47–68; idem, ‘The Medieval Legend of the Last Emperor and its Messianic Origin’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 41 (1978), pp. 1–15; idem, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*; Gerrit J. Reinink, ‘Die syrischen Wurzeln der mittelalterlichen Legende vom römischen Endkaiser’, in Martin Gosman and Jaap van Ost (eds.), *Non nova, sed nove. Mélanges de civilisation médiévale dédiés à Willem Noomen* (Mediaevalia Groningana 5; Groningen 1984), pp. 195–209; idem, ‘Pseudo-Methodius und die Legende vom römischen Endkaiser’, in Werner Verbeke, Daniel Verhelst, and Andries Welkenhuysen (eds.), *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages: Proceedings of the International Colloquium Organized by the Instituut voor Middeleeuwse Studies of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, May 14–16, 1984* (Leuven, 1988), pp. 82–111; Harald Suermann, ‘Der byzantinische Endkaiser bei pseudo-Methodius’, *OC* 71 (1987), pp. 140–55; András Kraft, ‘The Last Roman Emperor Topos in the Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition’, *Byz.* 82 (2012), pp. 213–57.

send them back to Yathrib, their homeland. The text stresses in particular their expulsion from the Promised Land, which is considered to be (temporarily) occupied by the Muslims.

The king of the Greeks will come out with great anger and pour desolation and destruction in the desert of Yathrib. ... The sons of the king of the Greeks will seize the regions of the desert and will finish by the sword any survivor left among them in the Promised Land. Fear will fall upon them from all sides. ... They will be given over to the sword, to destruction, captivity and slaughter.⁶⁴

The apocalyptic texts envision perfect peace and tranquillity during the last kingdom of the king of the Greeks. The vision of perfect peace paints a radically contrasting image to the previous sufferings and tribulations imposed by the Muslims.

CONCLUSION

Our survey of apocalyptic writings in combination with a brief survey of more 'traditional' historical writings of that time period reveals their inter-relationship. The non-apocalyptic sources in many cases corroborate the evidence that is revealed or alluded to in the apocalyptic texts. In other words, the historical writings provide the hard facts, dates and places, names of rulers and decrees for historical events that in the apocalypses often appear hidden in symbols and allegories. However, historical writings of the time were also influenced by apocalyptic thinking in its theological interpretation of actual disasters. Accordingly, the distinction between apocalyptic writing and historiography becomes at times blurry.

Apocalyptic writings would have even perhaps functioned as history for the common people. Notably, these writings recounted familiar events and gave to them a convincing and above all a comforting interpretation. The people of Syria knew, of course, of the fall of Jerusalem, they knew about the Muslim rule from their everyday experience and have probably also personally experienced the hardships of taxation, slavery, etc. but thanks to popular writings, such as the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, they would also learn that a Last Christian Emperor would arrive one day (perhaps not before long) and would ultimately vindicate the suppressed Christians and usher the final triumph of the

64. Ps.-Methodius, *Apocalypse*, ch. XIII (trans. Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic*, p. 149).

Christian faith. Moreover, contemporary apocalyptic literature contributed to the procedure of re-constructing a communal identity in particular from the new position of the Christian communities as subjects to non-Christian rulers.

In many ways, historical apocalyptic writings filter specific crucial moments of the collective memory. Along these lines, we could also argue that they challenge the traditional genre of historiography. The apocalyptic texts remain the earliest and most immediate witnesses of that early time of Islam and they deal with real-life problems posed by taxation, conversion, a dramatic change of masters that brought with them a number of practical, ideological, social and personal challenges. These writings are to be treated with caution as alternative and certainly unconventional sources of historical knowledge. However, they undeniably form part of the contemporary cultural, literary and religious landscape and as such, they need to be studied as valuable sources for a better understanding of turbulent times and their *Zeitgeist*.

