

Islamic and Syriac Christian Apocalypses of the 7th and 8th Centuries

Christopher WRIGHT, The Citadel

Those who study the first two centuries of Islamic history must rely upon a limited number of viable contemporary sources. As a result, every minutia of information, conventional and non-conventional alike, must be utilized in order to reconstruct the events of that era. One genre that has received little attention by historians of this era is that of Apocalypses. Apocalypses have been examined and studied at great length by generations of scholars, but rarely by the historian. This is because most of the best known Jewish and Christian apocalypses were written during a period where other documentary and narrative sources are abundant (ALEXANDER, 1978: XIII). Thus there has been little incentive to resort to apocalyptic texts for such historical data. On the contrary, seventh and eighth century Islamic history has not provided us with a rich selection of documentation, and thus an examination of apocalyptic writings may provide missing historical information not available from other, more conventional sources.

The greater scope of my study is an examination of Syriac Christian apocalypses and Arabic Muslim apocalypses written during the Islamic Conquest of the Byzantine east. This work however, will primarily focus on my findings within the Islamic sources. In the late seventh and early eighth centuries many people, Christian and Muslim alike, were convinced that the end of the world was drawing near. Christians were witnessing their world being turned upside down by the Arab conquests, and to make matters worse, these successful conquests were being accomplished in the name of God. There is evidence that some Christians viewed the Arab armies as the armies of the Anti-Christ, leading history towards the end of days.¹ For Muslims, the triumphant conquests were regarded by many as the first step towards expanding the *dar al-Islam* (land of Islam) in preparation for the last days. As a result, both Christians and Muslims looked for answers to their burning questions regarding the tumultuous events of their day, and the writings of the apocalypses helped to fill that lacuna of understanding. Thus the purpose of looking at these texts is to first gain a greater

understanding into the mind-set of the two opposing sides and to help discern the different reactions to the conquests. This includes insights into how they perceived their place in history and the course of their history, as well as their hopes, fears and expectations of the future. The second goal is to find out how useful these texts can be towards helping historians better re-create the events of that critical time in history.

Apocalypses were written during periods of tribulation in order to provide comfort and to strengthen the faithful. They normally provide prophecies and visions of the future that promise a deliverance from the threat at hand. In most instances the true authors of these texts are unknown, but they are attributed to some famous figure of the past in order to build its credibility. Such pseudopigraphal writings are more common among the Christian texts, though some argue that some of the apocalyptic traditions found in the *hadith* literature did not originate with the prophet, and are indeed later additions to the tradition. The most complete *hadith* collection, compiled by Sahih al-Bukhari, was completed in 846 AD, up to two centuries after the era in question. It is likely that during those two-hundred years, spurious *hadith* traditions managed to slip their way into the accepted collections. In these Islamic examples then, traditions are attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, but were in fact written during the period of the conquests.

Recurrent themes are presented in most of the apocalypses. These include primordial events, recollections of the past, prophecy, persecution, other eschatological upheavals, judgment and destruction of the wicked, judgment and destruction of the world, cosmic transformation, resurrection, and sometimes information regarding the afterlife (COLLINS 1984: 6). The impending arrival of the end is preceded by a number of signs (designated as the “portents of the hour” in the Islamic texts), the first of which may have already occurred or are occurring at the time of authorship even though they are presented as future events. This provides credibility for the text and builds confidence that the ensuing prophecies are bona fide (HOYLAND 1997: 258).

The Christian apocalyptic texts I have drawn upon are those of the Eastern Christians written in Syriac. These texts present a conception of history inspired by the Old Testament books of Judges and Daniel. The borrowed themes from Daniel include four successive world empires followed by the arrival of the

Antichrist and the destruction of evil at the second coming of Christ. The book of Judges describes the children of Israel provoking God's wrath due to their iniquity and thus being overrun by barbarians, and then being saved by a deliverer after repenting of their sins (HOYLAND 1997: 259). They viewed the four kingdoms described by Daniel as being the Babylonians, Medes/Persians, the Greeks and Romans, and finally a Christian kingdom that would remain until Christ's return (HOYLAND 1997: 259). The Islamic conquests disrupted this scheme, not only by creating a new empire that had to be worked into the prophecies of Daniel, but also by demonstrating the military superiority of the Muslims, who claimed to be the new chosen people of God.

For the Christians of this era these apocalypses helped to explain why God had brought the "sons of Ishmael" against them, as well as how the Muslims had achieved such swift success.² The primary answer to these questions as described in the apocalyptic writings centered around the neglectful and immoral attitude of the Christians towards their faith and God. They are told that they are being put to the "test," in preparation for a "final peace," after which "the churches will be renewed, the cities rebuilt and the priests set free from tax." (HOYLAND 1997: 27). The apocalypses indicate that this peace will be ushered in by the defeat of the Muslims by a savior figure, a great king of the Greeks, described as another Alexander the Great, Constantine or Jovian. Such prophecy offered a hope for change and redemption in the future which encouraged the faithful to remain steadfast in their faith and conviction (HOYLAND 1997: 27). Muslim apocalypses dealt with a different set of issues, though the intended impact on the reader was very similar. The Islamic conquests had been surprisingly successful, yet the task of holding their newly won territory and the uncertainty of the future became the subject of worry. Such fears on the part of the Muslims became even more apparent during the various civil wars, plagues and military setbacks that occurred in the early to mid-second Islamic century. The Islamic eschatological literature of this period regarded the wars with Byzantium as nascent to the *malahim*, the final wars leading to the end of the world. After some initial setbacks, these wars would culminate in the capture of Constantinople and the appearance of *al-Dajjal*, the Antichrist. Such writings suggested to the Muslims that their struggles would lead to ultimate triumph, thus inspiring them to overcome any adversity (HOYLAND 1997: 28).

It is clear from the *Qur'anic* and *hadith* literature that eschatological ideas appeared very early within the Islamic community. The early dates of this literature and the vast volume of apocalyptic material contained in these two traditions has led some scholars to argue that the strongest single motive for the mission of the Prophet Muhammad was to warn his followers of the imminent end (BASHEAR 1993: 75).

In a widely disseminated tradition regarded as the tradition of the two fingers, a companion of the Prophet, Anas, related that the Prophet said: "I and the last hour have been sent like this" and joined his forefinger with his middle finger as a visual explanation (SAHIH MUSLIM, Book 41: 7049). A variation of this tradition attributed to Gabir b. 'Abdallah includes Muhammad saying that "I was sent with the hour..." and includes a statement that whenever the Prophet spoke of the "hour" that his cheeks used to get red, his voice loud and his anger intensified, as if he was warning of an immediate army attack (BASHEAR 1993: 77).³ These traditions exemplify a sense of urgency, indicating that the coming of Muhammad marked the beginning of the end. These narrations also express a sense of urgency on the part of Muhammad himself, who believed that it was his essential duty to warn his people of the impending end. Such traditions have led some scholars to argue that this profound message may have been one of the driving forces for the armies of Islam and the beginnings of the Islamic conquests.⁴ Muhammad and his earliest followers were perhaps motivated to action based on the belief that the Last Days were shortly to follow.⁵

Regarding the hour, the *hadith* literature also provides us with more detailed information. Some of the earliest *hadith* which deal with the subject of end of the world, center around the traditions of the "signs of the Hour," or "portents of the Hour" (VASILIEV 1942: 472; BASHEAR 1991: 76; BASHEAR 1993: 174.) Before looking at these revealed signs of the end, it is important to note that there are many *hadith*, as well as *Qur'anic surras*, which indicate that the time of the hour and its signs are known only to God. Probably the most interesting *Qur'anic* verse which does provide some information about the signs of the hour is *Surra* 47:18 which reads: "Do they then only wait for the Hour, - that it should come on them all of the sudden? But already have some tokens come." According to this *surra*, which is dated as being revealed about a year after the Hijra, some signs of the end of days had already occurred. Most commentators on the *Qur'an*

agreed that the appearance of Muhammad was one of these signs, an idea which is supported by such traditions as that of the two fingers (BASHEAR 1993: 81). Other *surras* seem to clearly indicate that the hour is near, but knowledge of it's time is for God alone. *Surra* 20:15 states, "Verily the Hour is coming, My design is to keep it hidden." The Islamic texts make clear that the end is imminent and indeed close at hand, but clearly point out the the exact time is known only to God.

Though the exact time is to be hidden by God, the Islamic tradition is full of narratives concerning the specific signs of the hour. These "signs" indicate events, as identified by the Prophet Muhammad, that must occur before the Day of Judgment. Some of the accounts vary as to what these signs are, but many hold relatively common themes. One string of traditions refers to "the six portents of the hour," which include (with minor variations): the death of the Prophet, the conquest of Jerusalem, the spread of carnage and death, (usually as a result of plague, war, or both), the propagation of wealth, a general civil war, and finally a truce with the Byzantines, who would then break the truce bringing about the great and final war, or *malahim* (BASHEAR 1991: 174–175).

Another tradition relates that upon the Prophets return from a conquest, he is congratulated by one of his followers, who expresses his hope that the war has ended. The Prophet replies that the war would not end until six things had happened, and then names the six portents. He states that upon the fifth portent a twelve year old prince would be crowned king in Byzantium, and would then incite them into a war of re-conquest. The Byzantine army would be made up of 300 ships and 12 banners of 12,000 men each.⁶ In the course of the war the Byzantines would drive the Muslims back, and we are told that one third of the Muslims would be killed, one third would flee, while the remaining one third would gain the upper hand and thrust the invaders back to the gates of Constantinople and then conquer it. Almost immediately after the conquest of the Christian capitol, the Muslims would hear that *al-dajjal*, the false messiah, had appeared, marking the sixth portent (BASHEAR 1991: 176).⁷

So what can be gleaned from the numerous examples of eschatological literature? The two main goals of this work, as previously stated, is to search this literature in hopes of discovering the mind-set of the people, and to determine whether any historical value can be obtained from them. The accounts make

clear that from a very early period the Muslims were concerned with eschatological issues. They also point out that Muhammad saw himself as an ensign to his people, whose responsibility it was to warn them of the impending end. These works also suggest that the appearance of the Prophet unto them was an indication that the final hour was close at hand, an idea that was expounded by a sense of urgency in many accounts. So important and widespread were these traditions regarding the last hour that some scholars have come to the conclusion that this belief was a major motivating factor for the Islamic conquests.

The "Portents of the Hour" provides the believers with signs to expect in preparation for the end. Yet, the *Qur'an* itself indicates that only God knows the time of the end, and He chooses not to share that information openly with man. In this there appears to be a contradiction. How can the narrations of the Prophet speak of specific details regarding the end of times, including a list of events that one should expect, when the *Qur'an* reveals that such information was never to be given? It is possible that the accounts within the *Qur'an*, as well as those *hadith* which speak of the end in general terms, represent the earliest form of Islamic eschatology. That is to say there is no contradiction between the *Qur'an* stating that the Hour is imminent, that it will come swiftly and it is God's design to keep its time hidden - and the teachings of Muhammad which state that the end is near, or even that he and the final hour are as close as two fingers held together. Both merely teach that the end draws near, but provide no real detail as to what signs will signal its arrival. This first phase would indicate the beliefs and feelings of the Prophet himself, his companions and the first community of believers. The narratives of this phase emphasize that the final Day of Judgment is near at hand as well as the Prophet's own sense of urgency in regard to it. Muhammad wished to warn his followers and establish a community of true believers who could be spared the wrath of God in the Last Day. Fred Donner points out that Muhammad did not teach passive piety or righteousness, "rather, he preached a militant piety, one that felt an urgent need not only to adopt righteous behavior in one's own life, but also to stamp out *kufr* (ingratitude toward God, hence unbelief in the form of impious behavior) wherever it appeared." (1991: 47-48). This urgent need to "stamp out *kufr*" may point to the fact that the early Muslims felt it their role to cleanse the world of the unrighteous in preparation for the Last Day. Even the *Qur'an* teaches that "Those who actively strive and fight (for his cause) hath He distinguished." (*Qur'an* 4:95).

This may explain a key motivation for Muhammad and his immediate predecessors to subjugate the other tribes of Arabia in the *Ridda* wars and acted as a catalyst for what became known as the Islamic conquests. That is, a need to gather the *umma* together in a single community of God's elect, and actively engage themselves in a struggle against evil and a world of unbelief. Donner takes this idea a step further by arguing that the Prophet and the early Muslims may have seen themselves as part of the eschatological event itself, acting the part of an avenging force sent to punish the unbelievers. With such a mind set, he argues, they would consider themselves waging war in God's name, and acting as "instruments of God's will in the final act of history." (DONNER 1991: 48).

Those traditions which speak of the Portents of the Hour, however, diverge a great deal from these general warnings. This suggests that these traditions may represent a second phase of Islamic eschatological literature. In addition, the signs provided in these traditions exemplify the fears and hopes of a later generation of Muslims. These accounts of the last days focus on a terrible series of wars with the Byzantines, defeats and victories, treaties and treachery, culminating with the eventual triumph of the Muslims with the conquest of Constantinople. These fears and hopes exemplify those held by the Muslims during the years of conquests. Indeed these people had been touched by the events of the conquests in one way or another. They had heard, witnessed or taken part in the series of victories the Muslims achieved against the Byzantines, the chaos caused by Byzantine raids during those conflicts, and the disastrous campaigns against Constantinople. It was only natural that the greatest fears of these peoples would include a strong Byzantine offensive, and their greatest aspiration to be the utter defeat of the Byzantines followed by the conquest of Constantinople. The general attitude and fear reflected in the eschatological literature regarding these wars with the Byzantines can be inferred by the company such events keep in the apocalyptic traditions, including famines, plagues and the advent of the Antichrist.

The fact that the Hour did not arrive during the lifetime of the Prophet or his companions as many expected, may explain why these different phases occurred (as well as later phases as time went on). A different view of the Last Days emerged as new generations of Muslims continued to embrace this idea of an impending end. The modification of these apocalyptic narratives to fit the course

of historical events is demonstrated by the evolution of a widely circulated tradition. It reports that the Prophet said: "The wheel of Islam will turn in the years 35, 36, and 37. If you perish you will be like other nations, but if you survive, that will be for seventy years." (BASHEAR 1991: 88). It is believed that this narrative was an indirect reference to the first and second *fitnas*, but as the year 70 and the second *fitna* passed without the arrival of the final Hour, new traditions arose to ease the anxieties of the faithful. One such tradition, attributed to 'Abdullah b. 'Amr, states that he denies saying that Hour would come in the 70th year, or at 90 or 100 years. He goes on to say that the community was given a delay of 130 years (BASHEAR 1991: 88–89). Yet another attempt to alter or rationalize the initial meaning of the Prophet's statements occurs regarding his comment that "... at the end of one hundred years no one would be left alive on earth." A response to this tradition is attributed to Ibn 'Umar, transmitted by his son Salim (d. 105–7 H.) and Abu Bakr b. Sulayman on the authority of Zuhri (d. 124 H.). It is explained that the Prophet was making this statement near the end of his life, and what he "actually" said was that "no one will remain from those who are on earth today," that is, within 100 years none from that generation would remain (BASHEAR 1991: 90). These examples illustrate that the apocalyptic narratives were filtered and analyzed in order to fit into a new context of events. In the same way the earliest traditions gave rise to the expansion of Islam through the conquests, a new series of traditions emerged in order to express the hopes and fears of a new generation of the *umma* with a new set of circumstances.

This analysis helps elucidate the mind set of the Muslims during the conquest period. But what do these apocalyptic texts reveal in terms of their historical value? Though limited, the apocalyptic material bears a remarkable semblance to the historical sources. Although the similarities are circumstantial in many instances, the same could be said of this period of Islamic history in general. Using apocalypses as an historical source may seem to some an enterprise in futility, but all intertwine historical fact with eschatological prophecy. In addition, the emergence of apocalyptic material during particular periods of history act as a barometer of sorts for measuring the eschatological pressures on a people at that given time (ALEXANDER 1978: 102).

One of the recurrent themes throughout the Portents of the Hour is one of truce and treachery. The Muslims and Byzantines would come to peace only to have that peace broken through some act of betrayal. The historical sources reveal that a series of peace treaties did occur between the two powers. The first truce came when the Emperor Constans sued for peace with Mu'awiya in the year 650 C.E.. Theophanes explains that this truce was set for the duration of two years and Mu'awiya was given Gregory, the son of Theodore as a hostage in Damascus (1997: 479). In this instance it was Mu'awiya who broke the peace by attacking Rhodes in 652/53 CE - 30-31 H. and casting down the Colossus (THEOPHANES 1997: 479). Yet, Baladhuri speaks of this event occurring in the year 52 H. / 672 CE (1996: 375). Theophanes tells us that in 657/58 CE, Mu'awiya sent an embassy to Constans to offer peace due to the civil war with 'Ali. He states that the terms of the truce were to be for three years and that the Arabs agreed to pay the Romans a daily tribute of one thousand *solidi*, one horse, and one slave (1997: 484). Baladhuri provides an undated account of the Byzantines making peace with Mu'awiya under the stipulation that he pay them an undisclosed amount of money. Mu'awiya in return took hostages which he held in Ba'albakk. In this account, Baladhuri states that the Byzantines broke the truce, but Mu'awiyah spared the lives of the Hostages and set them free, saying "Loyalty against perfidy is better than perfidy against perfidy." (1996: 245).

An important variation along of the treachery/truce traditions, comes from Abu Qabil. It follows the general theme, but begins with a prophecy that "An enemy will attack from behind and both Muslims and Byzantines will fight him together." (BASHEAR 1991: 177). It is possible that this is in reference to the peace treaties connected to events surrounding the Marionites and Mardaites of Lebanon. Baladhuri relates that the Mardaites, known as the al-Jarajimah, were inhabitants of a town called al-Jurjumah, which lay between Baiyas and Buka on mount al-Lukam near Ma'din az-Zaj in Lebanon. He also indicates that when Abu 'Ubaidah conquered the region that the Muslims took no note of them. He goes on to say that the Mardaites acted properly to the Muslim governors on some occasions, but many times "deviated from the right path" and held friendly communications with the Byzantines (1996: 247). The first recorded Mardaite incursion against the Muslims, according to Theophanes, occurs in the year 676 CE/57 H. He writes that:

“In this year the Mardaites invaded Lebanon and conquered it from Mt. Mauros as far as the Holy City and captured the peaks of Lebanon. Many slaves, prisoners, and natives fled to them, so that soon there were many thousands of them.” (THEOPHANES 1982: 53).

As a result, Mu’awiya sought peace with the emperor Constantine, and agreed to pay the Byzantines a yearly tribute of 3,000 *nomismata*, fifty prisoners, and fifty high-bred horses (THEOPHANES 1997: 54).

By the year 685 CE/66 H. the Mardaites were attacking regions of the Lebanon again. These attacks, coupled with a severe famine and plague in Syria at the same time, convinced the new caliph Abd al-Malik to petition for peace. Theophanes reports that he agreed to pay the Byzantines 365,000 *nomismata*, 365 slaves and 65 high-bred horses (THEOPHANES 1997: 59). Similarly, Baladhuri tells us that ‘Abd al-Malik had to make peace with the Mardaites in order to stop them because he was too busy with other matters to deal with the assault and agreed to pay them one thousand *dinars* a week. ‘Abd al-Malik also came to terms with the Byzantines at this time, fearing that they might overpower him in Syria. He agreed to pay them a certain amount of money along with an exchange of hostages (1966: 246–247). Baladhuri also reports, according to Abu al-Khattab al-Azdi, that during the days of Abd al-Malik the Mardaites would pray upon the summer expeditions, striking at the rear to cut off any who lagged behind. Apparently it became such a problem that Abd al-Malik ordered that garrisons be placed at the rear of the armies in order to repel Mardaite attacks (1966: 250).

Theophanes writes that by the year 686 CE, the peace between the Byzantines and Muslims had already been broken by the new Byzantine emperor. In this same year the Mardaites again began attacking Muslim targets in Lebanon causing a great deal of devastation. Abd al-Malik was facing the Byzantines, the Mardaites, as well as al-Mukhtar’s rebellion in the East and a revolt in Damascus. After striking back at the Byzantines in a somewhat successful fashion, Abd al-Malik again sent envoys to the Byzantines requesting a peace. Justinian II agreed, and the Muslims offered to pay the Romans 1,000 *nomismata*, a horse, and a slave each day. The two sides also agreed to equally share the tribute from the recently contested regions of Cyprus, Armenia and Iberia. The most interesting aspect of this treaty, and the portion that hearkens to the previously discussed apocalypses, is that Justinian agreed to keep the Maronite and Mardaite’s troops

out of Lebanon and stop their attacks. As a result, in 687 he had 12,000 Mardaites and Maronites seized, and Abd al-Malik was now free to suppress his ongoing troubles in the East, as well as consolidate and strengthen his position in Syria (1997: 61–62).

The fact that both, the Muslims and Byzantines, as part of a truce, agreed to collaborate against a common “enemy” is in no way even hinted at in the Islamic historical writings of Baladhuri or al-Tabari. Yet, Islamic apocalypses of this era report just such an event in a variety of accounts. Theophanes is the only historian to have recorded such activity in relation to the Mardaites, providing us with the only possible historical match as far as the available histories can verify.

In these accounts concerning the Mardaites some other interesting parallels with the apocalypses are revealed. One such example taken from Nu’aym relates that the Byzantines would rule Syria for forty days from the coast to the Jordan River and Baysan, followed by a Muslim re-conquest and a peace treaty between the two sides. This brings to mind Theophanes’ account that: “the Mardaites invaded Lebanon and conquered it from Mt. Mauros as far as the Holy City and captured the peaks of Lebanon,” after which Mu’awiya sought for peace. Historically, as well as within the apocalyptic literature, we read that a Byzantine force conquered a large section of Syria, but later lost it again to the Muslims, and had to sue for peace.

The Emperor Justinian II may also be the key figure in one of the portents as related by Muhammad in the *hadith*. Muhammad spoke of the fifth portent being the rise of a twelve-year old emperor who would resume attacks against the Muslims, but who would eventually be driven back, ultimately leading to the conquest of Constantinople. Indeed Justinian did become emperor at the age of twelve. His father, Constantine IV had successfully defended multiple attempts by the Muslims to take Constantinople, and in the final seige, he also defeated their land forces at Lycia in Anatolia. This forced a general Arab withdrawal, and forced the caliphate to make peace and pay tribute. Soon after his ascension to the throne, Justinian successfully moved against the Muslims in Armenia and Cyprus, leading to an increase in the annual tribute payed by the caliphate. Also, as the *hadith* records, Justinian managed to rebuild the depleted Byzantine navy, successfully using it against the Muslims at Cyprus. Yet, by 694, after again

launching attacks against the Arabs in Armenia, his luck began to change. The Muslims went on the offensive, winning victories in Armenia, and then moving into Anatolia. By 711 they had taken Cilicia and Cappadocia, and appeared poised to move again towards their prize, Constantinople. Though Arab historians such as Baladhuri and al-Tabari do touch on some of these incidents during the reign of Justinian, it is Theophanes that provides most of the detail. Though mixed with typical eschatological rhetoric, these events fit well with the fifth portent. Even the idea that a successful conquest of Constantinople would follow seems reasonable considering these events signaled a real turn of events for the Muslims who had seen their share of setbacks internally and against the Byzantines in previous years.

The conquest of Constantinople figures as the key objective in the Islamic apocalyptic literature, as well as one of the specific Portents of the Hour in some variations. There is of course no doubt to the existence of historical references to Muslim attempts to conquer Constantinople. The first recorded attempt was attributed to Mu'awiya in the year 654 CE/34 H., who amassed a great naval force in Phoenician Tripolis to send against the Byzantine capital.

The next major expedition against the city came in 669–70 CE/49–50 H., led by Mu'awiya's son Yazid. Al-Tabari merely tells us that: "The raid of Yazid b. Mu'awiya against the Byzantines occurred during this year. He reached Qustantiniyya (Constantinople) accompanied by Ibn 'Abbas, Ibn 'Umar, Ibn al-Zubayr, and Abu Ayyub al-Ansari." (AL-TABARI 1987: 86). Theophanes, though dating the beginning of the attack in 673 CE, states that both sides were thrusting and counter thrusting from April through September, after which the Muslim armies retreated to Kyzikos to rest for the winter. The following spring the Muslims embarked upon their offensive once more, a pattern which according to Theophanes lasted "for seven years, but with the aid of God and His Mother they were disgraced, expending a host of warlike men. They retreated in great distress, with severe wounds inflicted upon themselves" (THEOPHANES 1982: 52–53).⁸ To make matters worse for the Muslim army, their retreat was overtaken by a terrible winter storm near Syllaion in which it was completely destroyed (THEOPHANES 1982: 53). Though this military expedition against Constantinople ended with a devastating Muslim failure, initially the Muslims did manage many successes. This may very well have led some to believe that a

successful conquest of Constantinople was within reach, and given inspiration to following attempts.

The next Muslim leader to take serious aim at Constantinople was Sulayman b. 'Abd al-Malik in 715 CE/97 H., almost fifty years after Yazid's failure (Theophanes 1982: 53–54). According to a unique Syrian tradition we learn that Sulayman's motivation for the new expedition came from news regarding a Byzantine invasion of the coast around Hims. The source also relates that Sulayman headquartered himself in Dabiq, near Aleppo, in order to be close to the campaign. Sulayman, however, died in 99 H. and his successor 'Umar II decided to forego the operation due to an array of difficulties faced by the besiegers (BASHEAR 1991: 202).

There is no doubt, based on the historical events of the era, that the Muslim apocalyptic literature accurately depicts the importance of taking Constantinople to the Islamic psyche. Such a conquest would symbolize the true power of Islam, and pave the way for the inclusion of the Christian world into the "Dar al-Islam" and the eventual end of days.

The apocalyptic writings provide many examples of Byzantines raids into Muslim territory, especially within Syria and the coastal regions. One such tradition relates that the Byzantines would besiege Hims, attack Antarsus and make a landing between Jaffa and al-Aqra'. This would force the Muslims to retaliate, pushing the attackers back and advancing to lay siege upon Constantinople, after which the Byzantines would sue for peace (BASHEAR 1991: 178).

Another prophecy from Nu'aym's manuscript recounts that in the last days the Byzantines would rule Syria for forty days from the coast to the river Jordan and Baysan. The account concludes with the eventual prevail of the Muslims and a peace treaty between the two sides (BASHEAR 1991: 179).

One last account preserved in Nu'aym regarding events of the hour speaks of a Byzantine naval attack around Tyre and Acre which would mark the beginning of the *malahim* (BASHEAR 1991: 180).

Finally, a similar tradition is preserved by Sahih Muslim and attributed to Abu Huraira, who quotes the Prophet as saying: "The last hour would not come until the Romans would land at al-Amq or in Dabiq. An army consisting This number

of seven years takes into account the preparation period of the of the best soldiers of the people of the earth at that time will come from Medina to counteract them.” (SAHIH MUSLIM, book 41: 6924). Examples of these raids within the historical sources are found sporadically within the Arab literature. Baladhuri preserves an account of a Byzantine campaign during the war between ‘Abd al-Malik and Ibn al-Zubayr (the second *fitna*), in which ‘Asqalan is destroyed and its inhabitants expelled. The same fate was apparently shared by the cities of Caesarea, Tyre and “outer Acre.” (1966: 219–220).

The Lebanese coast was contested from a very early point. According to Baladhuri, Yazid ibn abi Sufyan and Mu’awiya conquered Sidon, ‘Arqa, Jubayl and Beirut, but by the close of ‘Umar’s Caliphate, the Byzantines had retaken many of these coastal towns. Mu’awiya was forced to return and march against these towns in order to conquer them again. Sensing their vulnerability, Mu’awiya then stationed garrisons in each one for their protection (1966: 194).

The coastal areas around Antioch, the ‘ *Amq of Mar’ash* and other areas in the frontier of Syria were faced with some of the same levels of adversity. In the year 42 H., for example, Baladhuri reveals that the Byzantines attacked the coast near Antioch and laid siege to the city (1966: 228). Similar attacks are recorded in various other sources in the years 45 H., 47 H., and 48 H. (BASHEAR 1991: 203–204). During the accounts concerning the Muslim campaigns against Constantinople, it was mentioned that Suleyman moved against the Byzantines only after hearing of their raids against the coast near Hims. To the south of Antioch we find this coast-line under similar attack as late as the year 718 CE/ 100 H.. Baladhuri reports that in that year the Byzantines attacked the coast of Latakia, destroyed the city and took its inhabitants as prisoners. The city was rebuilt and garrisoned by order of Yazid ibn ‘Abd al-Malik, who also paid the “Greek Tyrant” a ransom for the return of the Muslim prisoners (1966: 204).

Again, the Muslim apocalyptic literature is right on target regarding the location of Byzantine raids and the main regions of contention. Tyre and Acre were indeed subject to conquest, re-conquest, and raids. Dabiq represents the northern frontier region of Syria, which remained under threat throughout most of the era of this study. History provides the context for what the apocalypses indicate are the areas of concern for Muslims of the period. It is clear that the apocalyptic

writers felt these regions must be secured before Constantinople could be taken, and their eschatological ideas manifest.

Although it may go without saying, just as there is mention of plagues and famines within almost all apocalyptic literature, there is also historical evidence of these events within the Muslim world of the seventh and Eighth centuries. Baladhuri and al-Tabari informs us of the plague of 'Amawas which occurred

in the year 639 CE/18 H. in which "a great many Muslims fell victim."⁹ Theophanes mentions a plague of locusts in Syria in 675 CE/25 H., a great plague in Syria in 683 CE/64 H., a famine in Syria in 686 CE/67 H., another Syrian plague in 699 CE/80 H., again in 725 CE / 107 H., and finally in 733 CE/ 115 H.¹⁰ It is clear that the appearance of plagues and famines were feared by the people of Syria and the surrounding region perhaps as much as war, hence the appearance of both as typical apocalyptic symbols.

Most of the apocalyptic traditions concerning the *malahim* refer to the struggles against the Byzantines, yet from a very early period the Turks also received a fair amount of attention. Those narratives which speak of the Byzantines, though acknowledging initial defeats, indicate that the Muslims will eventually triumph. To the contrary, the accounts concerning the Turks describe the exact opposite. The apparent apprehension of the early Muslims regarding the Turks is exemplified in the Prophets warning to the early community of believers to "let the Turks alone as long as they leave you alone." (SUNAN ABU DUWAD, book 37: 4288). Dawud also relates, on the authority of Abu Bakrah, an apocalyptic vision of the Prophet regarding the future trouble with the Turks:

"The Apostle of Allah (peace_be_upon_him) said: Some of my people will alight on low-lying ground, which they will call al-Basrah, beside a river called Dajjal (the Tigris) over which there is a bridge. Its people will be numerous and it will be one of the capital cities of immigrants (or one of the capital cities of Muslims, according to the version of Ibn Yahya who reported from Abu Ma'mar). At the end of time the descendants of Qantura' will come with broad faces and small eyes and alight on the bank of the river. The town's inhabitants will then separate into three sections, one of which will follow cattle and (live in) the desert and perish, another of which will seek security for themselves and perish, but a third will put their children behind their backs and fight the invaders, and they will be the martyrs." (SUNAN ABU DAWUD, book 37: 4292).

The truthfulness of these warnings became quickly apparent during the early conquests when the first Muslim defeat came at the hands of the Turks (COOK 1996: 97). In a similar incident, the Caliph 'Uthman wrote to one of his commanders, 'Abd al-Rahman b. Rabi'ah, saying: "Verily greed and arrogance have made many of the subjects reckless. Curtail [your campaign] and do not plunge ahead with the Muslims so boldly, for I fear they may face severe trials." (AL-TABARI 1990: 95). 'Abd al-Rahman did not heed the warning of his Caliph and proceeded with his expedition until he reached Balanjar and besieged it. The inhabitants of the city and the Turks of the region agreed to form a combined attack in order to drive back the Muslim army. The battle that followed was a disaster for the Muslim invaders, who found themselves scattered and in retreat, while their commander, 'Abd al-Rahman, lay dead in the field." (AL-TABARI 1990: 95). This last account harkens to the apocalypse recorded by Dawud, which indicated that townspeople would ally with the Turks to defeat the Muslims.

During Caliphate of Yazid II (720 CE/101 H. - 724 CE/105 H.) the Turks continued to exude an element of fear. Baladhuri records the words of al- Hasan, the newly appointed *'amil* over Samarkand, regarding the relentless Turkish attacks upon the outskirts of the city:

"The Turks used to attack the outskirts of Samarkand and raid, and al- Hasan would retreat whenever they made a raid, and would not meet them. One day he was preaching, and cried out against the Turks in his sermon saying 'O God, cut off the last remnant of them, and speedily destroy their power, and send down calamity upon them.' And the people of Samarkand reviled him and said, 'Nay, let God rather send down ice, and make their feet to slip." (BALADHURI 1996: 200).

Theophanes provides similar examples during the reign of the Caliph Hisham. In 728 CE/110 H. he mentions that the son of the Khagan attacked Media and Armenia, destroyed an Arab army, ravaged the land and terrorized the Arab inhabitants (1982: 98). In 729 CE Theophanes describes an attack by Maslama upon the land of the Turks, stating: "When they met one another in battle men fell on both sides. Maslama became fearful and withdrew in flight through the mountains of Khazaria." (1982: 98). Maslama again attacked the land of the Turks in 731 CE, but "grew fearful and withdrew after he had reached the Caspian Gates." (THEOPHANES 1982: 101). The historical narratives provide clear evidence that the Turks were problematic and feared by the Muslim state. Vari-

ous narratives ascribed to the Prophet, as well as caliphs and commanders of the conquest period furnish ample evidence to support this fact. It is not surprising then to find the Turks playing a distinct role in their apocalyptic literature. The Islamic apocalypics focus on the hopes and fears of the Muslim world during this era, and the Turks were undeniably a group that caused them great trepidation.

Some of the Islamic apocalyptic literature mentioned, describe alliances between the Byzantines and Turks. Theophanes provides a number of examples of such alliances actually taking place. One such alliance took place between the Byzantines and the Khazar Khagan in the year 704 CE/85 H., at which time Justinian II married the Khagan's sister Theodora. Later that same year Justinian entered into a military alliance with Tervel of the Turkic Bulgars in an attempt to re-conquer "the Empire of his forefathers." (1982: 70–71). Interestingly enough, Islamic historical sources are scant on this topic, yet the apocalypses make specific note of it, indicating that Muslims of the day were aware of such alliances, but somehow the details did not make it into the histories that were written centuries later.

The apocalyptic narratives of the seventh and eighth centuries, though sparse, demonstrate a remarkable congruence and parallelism with their historiographical counterparts. They trace the major events of conquest and defeat, truce and treachery, the important role of Constantinople to the Muslims and even their exhaustive efforts in attempting to capture it. They also reveal military co-operations between the Muslims and Byzantines, as well as specific alliances among their enemies. Indeed these texts also provide an understanding as to the mind-set of the Muslims of the seventh and eighth centuries. Their hopes, ie., a Muslim victory over the "treacherous Greeks," and the conquest of Constantinople, as well as their fears, ie., famines, plagues, Byzantine raids, military defeats, the inability to hold on to their new empire, and complications with the Turks. In some cases the information provided in the apocalyptic texts is very specific, while others offer only vague references. Yet even the texts do not provide specifics, they do indicate to scholars what issues and events were seen as most important in the eyes of the people and the authors of the period.

Notes

1 One of the great first hand accounts of the Islamic conquests comes from John, the Coptic Bishop of Nikiu in Egypt. He specifically refers to the Arab armies as the “army of the Beast.” John of Nikiu, *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu*, tr. R.H. Charles Merchantville, NJ: Evolution Publishing, 2007.

2 In many of the Christian apocalypses, the Arabs are referred to as the “sons of Ishmael.” This was meant to be an insult to their lineage. That is, they are the sons of the illegitimate son of Abraham through his handmaiden, not the accepted line of Abraham through his wife Sarah.

3 In a similar tradition regarding the hour and its sense of urgency, Qisama b. Zuhayr (d. circa 80 H.), records the Prophet stating: “the hour almost surpassed me.” In addition, the Prophet compared himself as a watchman for his people who is seeing a sudden attack already on the move, and worrying that he might be surpassed by it before he can signal a clear warning (BASHEAR 1993, p. 79).

4 The motivation behind the Islamic conquests is a topic still subject to scholarly debate. Do the conquests represent the expansion of a new Arab state, hoping to unify all Arabs and expand their land and economy at the expense of neighboring empires? Or, as the early eschatological literature might suggest, was this expansion due to an impending end that was expected in the near future? The truth is probably a mixture of the two. For some of the best analysis on the motivations that prompted the conquests see: DONNER, Fred 1981. *Early Islamic Conquests*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. and KENNEDY, Hugh 2007. *The Great Arab Conquests*. Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press.

5 See COOK 2002. *Cook’s Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* is the best single volume available on the topic of Islamic apocalypses and the driving forces behind their creation. Though some of his conclusions are weighted heavily with conjecture, no other scholar has tied history, Hadith, and Qur’anic literature along with the apocalyptic tradition together better than he.

6 The 12 banners of 12,000 men each may be connected to Revelations chapter 7. 144,000 servants of God would be given the seal of the living God upon their head. The 144,000 are to be made up of 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel. In addition, the rest of the account that focuses on the fraction 1/3 is reminiscent of Revelations chapter 8, where desolation is poured upon the earth and 1/3 of life, nature, and the stars are destroyed.

7 BUKHARI, vol. 4, book 53, number 401). *Sahih Bukhari* preserves a number of similar traditions that only vary slightly. See SAHIH *Medieval Perspectives* 27 (2012)

8 672–673. The siege upon the city of Constantinople lasted from 674–678 CE.

9

BALADHURI 1966, p. 215.; AL-TABARI 1989, pp. 96–97.

WORKS CITED

ALEXANDER, Paul. 1978. *Religious and Political History and Thought in the Byzantine Empire*. London: Variorum Reprints.

ALI, A. Yusuf. 1997. *The Holy Qur'an*. Muslim Students Association. AL-TABARI. 1987. *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk*. XVIII. Michael G. MORONY tr.

Albany: State University of New York Press.

_____. 1989. *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk*. XIII. Gautier H. A. JUYNBOLL tr. Albany: State University of New York Press.

_____. 1991. *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l muluk*. XV. R. Stephen HUMPHREYS tr. Albany N.Y.: State University of New York Press.

BALADHURI. 1966. *Kitab Futuh al-Buldan*. Philip HITTI tr. Beirut: Gorgias Press.

BASHEAR, Suliman. 1991. "Apocalyptic and Other Materials on Early Muslim-

Byzantine Wars: A Review of Arabic Sources." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* ser. iii-1: 173–207

Medieval Perspectives 27 (2012)

Islamic and Syriac Christian Apocalypses - 209

_____. 1993. "Muslim Apocalypses and the Hour: A Case-Study in Traditional Interpretation." *Israel Oriental Studies*. 13: 75–99.

BUKHARI, Sahih. 1980. *Hadith*. vol. 4, Book 53. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Arabia.

COLLINS, John. 1984. *The Apocalyptic Imagination*. New York: Crossroads Publishing.

COOK, David. 1996. "Muslim Apocalyptic and Jihad." *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic*

and Islam 20: 66–104.

_____. 2002. *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*. Princeton, New Jersey: Darwin Press
DAWUD, Sunan Abu. *Hadith*. Book 37.

DONNER, Fred, M. 1991. "The Sources of Islamic Conceptions of War." *Just War and Jihad*. Ed. John Kelsay and James Turner Johnson. New York: Greenwood Press.

HOYLAND, Robert. 1997. *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It*. Princeton, New Jersey: Darwin Press.

MUSLIM, Sahih. 2003. *Hadith*. vol. 8, Book 41. New Delhi: Adam Publishers.
THEOPHANES. 1997. *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*. Cyril Mango and Roger

Scott tr. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

THEOPHANES. 1982. *The Chronicle of Theophanes*. Harry Turtledove tr. Philadelphia:

University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.

VASILIEV, A.A. 1942. "Medieval Ideas of the End of the World: East and West." *Byzantion*. 16: 1942–1943.