



APOCALYPTIC II. IN MUSLIM IRAN

ii. In Muslim Iran

Although the term “apocalypse” has no exact equivalent in Arabic, the material found in Sunni Hadith collections under *Ketāb al-fetan wa ašrāt al-sā‘a* (Book on civil strife and the signs of the Last Hour) deals with the extraordinary events that will precede the Last Judgment and forms the basis of apocalyptic traditions in Islam.

Various factors contributed to the growth of such literature. First, the doctrine of the Last Judgment vividly portrayed in the Koran describes the Day of Judgment as the complete upheaval of the cosmos, dislocating the earth and the heavens. Graphic descriptions of that day (*sūras* 81-82, 84, 88, 98-99, 101), imply that the Koran speaks not only of the destruction of the universe but also of its transformation and rearrangement to create new forms of life (F. Rahman, *Major themes of the Qur‘ān*, Chicago, 1980, pp. 106-20). When the Prophet was asked about the time of the Last Hour, he replied: “The knowledge thereof is with my Lord only” (Koran 7:187, 31:34, 33:63, 43:85), or “The Hour shall come on them suddenly while they are unaware” (6:31, 12:107, 22:55, 43:66, 47:18), or “The matter of the Hour is but as a twinkling of the eye, or it is nearer still” (16:77, 42:17). Soon the coming of the Hour and the eschatological inventory depicted in the Koran received exegetical elaboration, and apocalyptic traditions ascribed to the Prophet emerged.



Boḳārī and Moslem report a tradition that the Prophet told his Companions everything that would happen up to the Last Hour (Boḳārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Cairo, 1378/1958, IV, p. 129; Moslem, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Cairo, n.d., VIII, p. 172).

Second, the doctrine of the Maḥdī evolved in an eschatological sense among the Shi'ites. The application of the term “Maḥdī” to Moḥammad b. Ḥanafīya during Moḳtār's rebellion in 66/685-86 suggests its early development in Islam (D. M. Macdonald, “al-Maḥdī,” *ET* III, pp. 112; S. M. Ḥasan, *al-Maḥdīya fī'l-Eslām*, Cairo, 1953, pp. 95-106). Numerous factors including the socio-political crisis and religious ferment following the assassination of the Caliph 'Oṭmān in 35/656 contributed to messianic hopes. Beliefs concerning a messiah taken over from other religions and cultures must have had some influence as well. The Sunnis believe that there will be a final restorer of Islam, but he is not mentioned by the name Maḥdī in the *Ṣaḥīḥs* of Boḳārī and Moslem, nor is he dealt with in theology. In general the Sunnis hold that at the end of time a man from the family of the Prophet will appear to destroy the forces of evil, restore purity to Islam, fill the earth with justice and equity, and bring true guidance to all mankind (Tabrīzī, *Meškāt al-maṣābīḥ*, ed. M. Albānī, Damascus, 1961-62, III, pp. 24-26; tr. J. Robson, Lahore, 1975, II, pp. 1140-42; Ebn Ḳaldūn, *Moqaddema*, Cairo, n.d., pp. 311-30, tr. F. Rosenthal, Princeton, 1980, II, pp. 156-200).

For the Imamīs the reappearance of the hidden Twelfth Imam, who went into occultation in the year 260/873-74 and is identified with the Maḥdī, is a fundamental tenet of the creed, expressed fervently in an oft repeated prayer: “May God hasten release from suffering through his rise” (Kolaynī, *al-Oṣūl men al-kāfī*, ed. 'A. A. Ḡaffārī, Tehran, 1388/1968, I, pp. 168, 371; Ḥellī, *Ṣarḥ bāb ḥādī'aṣar*, Tehran, 1370/1950, p. 57; tr. W. Miller, London, 1958, p. 81; Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, *al-Reḥla*, Cairo, 1964, I, pp. 138-39; D. Donaldson, *The Shi'ite Religion*, London, 1933, pp. 226-41; Āl Kāṣef-al-ḡeṭā', *Aṣl al-šī'a wa oṣūloha*, Najaf, 1965, p. 104; A. Ṣobḥī, *Nazarīyat al-emāna*, Cairo, 1969, pp. 398-426). A. Sachedina has convincingly argued that the Maḥdī doctrine about the Twelfth Imam grew and developed with eschatological significance following the period of the shorter occultation (*al-ḡaybat al-šoḡrā*), 260-329/873-941 (*Islamic Messianism: The Idea of the Maḥdī in Twelver Shi'ism*, Albany, 1981, pp. 150f.). There arose among the Imamīs a literature dealing with the events that herald the Maḥdī's coming (*alāmāt-e zohūr*, the signs of [the Maḥdī's] appearance). *Al-Kāfī*, the earliest Imami collection of Hadith, by Kolaynī (d. 329/941), does not contain anything on the signs that will precede the Maḥdī's appearance



(*zohūr*); but in a brief section entitled *karāhīyat al-tawqīt* (abhorrence of fixing the time), he refers to the prohibition of fixing its date. As the *Mahdī's rājā* (return) and *zohūr* became an integral part of the doctrine of the occultation, most of the Imami divines who wrote on the occultation, beginning with *Ebn Bābūya* (d. 381/991-92), included a chapter entitled *'Alāmāt zohūr al-Qā'em* (the signs of the *Mahdī's* appearance), or *Men al-'alāmāt al-kā'ena qabl qorūjeh* (some of the signs bound to happen before his coming). These apocalyptic visions of a future restoration through the dramatic intervention of God in history served as source of solace for believers and provided them with an added motive to preserve the faith during the difficult days of the occultation. The messianic expectations relieved them from any need to oppose the established authority actively; accompanying the traditions were reports on the merits of waiting for the *zohūr* in patience (Ṭabresī, *al-Eḥtejāj*, Najaf, 1966, II, p. 50). The absence of any information on the exact time required the believers to be on their guard; they had to be prepared for his coming by a constant reevaluation of contemporary circumstances on the basis of the predicted signs. Familiar with this literature, every generation expected the *zohūr* to take place during its own lifetime.

In its development as an independent genre, *'alāmāt-e zohūr* drew mainly on Islamic eschatological (*'alāmāt al-sā'a*) literature describing the catastrophic events preceding the end of time. The two *Ṣaḥīḥs* incorporate certain traditions stating that the Prophet told his Companions everything that would happen up to the Last Hour (Tabrīzī, *Meškāt* III, p. 3). Sunni collections place a great majority of the apocalyptic traditions directly in the mouth of the Prophet, whereas the Shi'ite collections generally ascribe them to the Imams, the legitimate heirs to prophetic knowledge. Among the books that the imam inherits from his predecessor two should be noted for apocalyptic traditions: *Moṣḥaf Fāṭema* and *Ketāb al-jafr*. The former is described as a scroll thrice the size of the Koran containing information about future events (*'elm mā yakūn*). It is related that after the death of the Prophet God sent an angel to console Fāṭema, who was in much grief and sorrow. So, whatever she heard from the angel she dictated to 'Alī who wrote it down. Another report states that the *moṣḥaf* contains the names of all those who would rule the world until the Day of Judgment. *Ketāb al-jafr* is described as a leather container with the Psalms of David, the Torah of Moses, the Gospel of Jesus, the scrolls of Abraham, the knowledge of the lawful and unlawful and the *Moṣḥaf Fāṭema* (Kolaynī, *al-Kāfi* I, pp. 238-42). Another source for *'alāmāt-e zohūr* was the *malāḥem* literature, dealing with future events that were to happen in the Muslim community;



such prophecies seem to have appeared first among Shi'ites in the doctrine of *jafr* (see T. Fahd, "Djafr," *EI*² II, pp. 375-77; D. Macdonald, "Malāḥim," *EI*¹ III, pp. 188-89). In the *Fehrest* certain books on *malāḥem* are attributed to early Shi'ite authors such as Esmā'il b. Mehrān and 'Alī b. Yaqtīn (*Fehrest*, Tehran, p. 279; tr. Dodge, I, pp. 542, 544 [*malāḥem* is translated incorrectly]). In short, the material found in Sunni Hadith collections (under *Ketāb al-fetan*) dealing with civil strife and sedition, the signs of the Last Hour, *malāḥem*, the account of the Dajjāl or Antichrist, and the descent of Jesus formed the nucleus around which the signs of the Mahdī's advent developed. The *'alāmāt-e zohūr*, therefore, follow the same pattern as the Sunni Hadith, to which they show great resemblance in content.

It is clear from the vast amount of Sunni and Shi'ite apocalyptic literature that most of the later traditions were elaborations or expositions of earlier, authenticated traditions; often details of later political and social turmoil were appended as prophecies, and major political events, such as the disintegration of the caliphate, were interpreted as the fulfillment of predictions. Numerous traditions predict the final Muslim victory over the Byzantines and the conquest of Constantinople. The constant reference in the texts to conflict among enemies reflected the political tumult of the time and provided the Shi'ites with assurance that the great event of the Mahdī's coming would take place. The great majority of the traditions are ascribed to Ja'far al-Šādeq and Moḥammad al-Bāqer, the rest to 'Alī al-Rezā, Mūsā al-Kāzem, 'Alī Zayn-al-'ābedīn, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb, and various Companions of the Prophet. (In addition to the six canonical Sunni Hadith collections the main sources employed are Ebn Bābūya, *Kamāl al-dīn wa tamām al-ne'ma*, ed. with Persian tr. M. B. Kamara'i, Tehran, 1378/1958, II, pp. 362-70; Shaikh Mofid, *al-Eršād*, Najaf, 1962, pp. 356-66; Shaikh Ṭūsī, *Ketāb al-ḡayba*, Najaf, 1385/1965, pp. 265-80; Maḡlesī, *Behār al-anwār*, Tehran, 1384/1964, VI, pp. 295-316, LII, pp. 181-308; Mīrzā Ḥosayn Ṭabresī, *al-Naḡm al-tāqeb yā Mahdī-e maw'ūd*, Tehran, n.d., pp. 462-80). Leaving aside a great wealth of detailed descriptions and specific references, this amorphous material can be classified into a number of major themes:

Celestial signs. The Mahdī's advent will be preceded by events against the natural order, such as the rise of the sun from the west, a solar and a lunar eclipse at the middle and the end of the month of Ramaḡān respectively, a lunar eclipse in the east and the west, and the sun's remaining stationary in the middle of the day. Some traditions describing the halting of the sun state that the face of Sofyānī (see below) will be visible at its center portending his



destruction. A shining star like the moon will rise in the east; redness will appear in the sky and spread on the horizon; fire will appear on the eastern horizon and remain from three to seven days. Time will contract, a year being like a month, a month like a week, a week like a day, a day like an hour, an hour like the kindling of a fire. Gabriel will proclaim from the heaven in the early morning, “Verily, the truth is with ‘Alī and his followers,” and his words will be heard by all the earth’s inhabitants in their respective languages. Satan will declare from the earth in the evening, “Verily, the truth is with ‘Oṭmān (or Sofyānī) and his followers,” and the liars will waver in doubt. The Mahdī’s name will be proclaimed on Friday night, the 23rd of Ramaḏān. These celestial signs are conspicuous in the Imami sources.

Terrestrial phenomena. Extraordinary and calamitous events, such as earthquakes, famines, tremendous rains, and epidemics will take place on the earth; the yield of crops will decline and dates will rot on the branches.

Social anarchy. The Mahdī’s coming will be preceded by a period of terrible suffering, great commotion, and civil strife, and mankind will sink into a state of moral turpitude. Pretenders to prophethood and the imamate will arise and “a pure soul” from the progeny of Banū Hāšem will be killed at the Ka‘ba. Many traditions state that Sofyānī, Ḳorāsānī, and Yamānī will rise simultaneously on the same day. During this period of violent convulsion two-thirds of mankind will perish.

Sofyānī. The Mahdī’s advent will be heralded by the coming of Sofyānī—a figure whom the Omayyads were accused of devising as a counterpart of the Shi‘ite Mahdī (*Aḡānī* XVI, p. 88; Ebn Taḡrībīrdī, *al-Noḡūm al-zāhera*, Cairo, 1929, I, p. 221; Ḥasan, *al-Mahdīya*, pp. 177-81; R. Hartman, “Der Sufyānī,” in *Studia Orientalia Ioanni Pedersen*, Copenhagen, 1953, pp. 141-51); he is not mentioned in the six canonical Sunni Hadīth collections, although other Sunni collections mention him in detail. His name is ‘Oṭmān b. ‘Anbasa and he will rise from among the descendents of Abū Sofyān. Of medium height with large head and marks of smallpox making him appear one-eyed, he will come from the desert in the month of Raḡab and march into Syria after defeating the Byzantines. After occupying Syria eight or nine months, he will be killed by the Mahdī.

Dajḡāl (literally “deceiver”). The appearance of the Antichrist is a sign of the Last Hour. Endowed with miraculous powers, he will come before the end of time and do mischief right and left to lead people astray. He will rule the world with impurity and tyranny for forty days, one like a year, one like a



month, one like a week, and the rest like other days. He is described as a corpulent, red-faced youth blind in the right eye, his eye looking like a floating grape, and the letters *k, f, r* (infidel) written on his forehead. He rides the ass and is attended by the sinners and hypocrites. Legends make his advent from the remote regions of the east, especially Khorasan. Despite his conquests he will be incapable of entering the mountain passes of both Mecca and Medina because the angels guard its gates. According to the Sunni traditions he will be killed by Jesus (A. Abel, “al-Dadjdjal,” *ET*² II, pp. 76-77). He does not appear in early Shi’ite works, though he is discussed in detail in Sunni Hadith. In later Imami works he is mentioned in a few traditions where he is said to be killed by the Mahdī, not Christ. Some traditions trying to reconcile the figures of Sofyānī and Dajjāl interpret Dajjāl’s emergence as a test for sifting true believers from false.

The Decent of Jesus. In Islamic apocalyptic traditions Jesus is assigned a significant role, and the description of his return, regarded as one of the signs of the approaching Last Hour, does not vary substantially in the sources. He will descend on a hill in the Holy Land, or on the white arcade of the eastern gate of Damascus with a spear in his hand to kill the Antichrist. He will then arrive in Jerusalem when the dawn prayer is being said. The Imam will try to give up his place to Jesus, but Jesus will refuse to lead and will pray behind the Mahdī. Thereafter he will break the cross, kill all the swine, destroy the synagogues and the churches, and will kill all the Christians except those who believe in him. The People of the Book will believe in him and will form one single community, that of Islam. He will establish the rule of justice and insure it for forty years; then he will die. His funeral will take place in Medina where he will be buried beside the Prophet (Ṭa’labī, *Qeṣaṣ al-anbiā’*, Bombay, 1306/1888, pp. 461-62; Bayzāwī, *Tafsīr*, Cairo, n.d., IV, p. 132 [commentary of verse 43:61]; G. Anawati, “Īsā,” *ET*² IV, pp. 81-86). The Imami doctrine about the Mahdī’s coming at one point merges with the return of Jesus. Imami traditions emphasize that Jesus will descend during the Mahdī’s reign and that he will offer his prayer behind him. The function of killing the Dajjāl is also reserved for the Mahdī.

Al-Mahdī. The prohibition regarding the fixing of a particular time about the Mahdī’s advent seems to relate to the year, since many traditions mention the day on which he will appear. The most often cited date is ‘*Āšūrā*’, the tenth day of Moḥarram, on a Saturday in one of the odd-numbered years of the *hejra*. Though the traditions differ about the place where the Mahdī will rise, his



zohūr will take place in Mecca at the Ka'ba, between the *rokn* and the *maqām*, where his followers will swear allegiance to him. Then he will move to Medina and march triumphantly into Kūfa, which will become his capital (detailed description in Maĵlesī, *Beḥār al-anwār*, LIII , pp. 1-38; its summary in Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism*, pp. 161-66). In some early traditions ascribed to Imam Moḥammad al-Bāqer the number of years which had to elapse before the Mahdī's coming was specified. The fact that the period passed without the prophecy being fulfilled was interpreted as *badā'*, a change in circumstances causing God to alter His ruling in the peoples' own interest (see Ṭūsī, *Ketāb al-ġayba*, p. 265; Goldziher and Tritton, "Badā," *EF*² I, pp. 850-51).

The Mahdī will be old in age but young in looks. Those who look at him think that he is forty or less. The proof that he is the Mahdī, is that he will not age with the passage of time until his death. He is described as of white complexion leaning to redness; he has a beautiful face with pretty black hair hanging down to his shoulders and two birth marks on his back: one like the color of his skin and the other resembling the birth mark of the Prophet. There is no agreement in the Imami sources about the duration of his rule. One report states that it will be 309 years (the number of years the Aṣḥāb al-Kahf slept in the cave), while another report states 7 years (Sunni sources), each year equal to 70 years; thereafter he will die. The purpose of *zohūr* is to secure justice and liberate the world from suffering, oppression, and war and to inaugurate an era of spiritual and worldly felicity. He will rule with the sword (hence the appellation *ṣāḥeb al-sayf*), fight the enemies, and restore the purity of the faith. His rule, therefore, personifies the millennial dream, the accomplishment of an ideal Islamic society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

See also M. Jabr, *Aṣrāṭ al-sā'a wa asrārohā*, Kuwait, n.d.; M. Hodgson, "A note on the millennium in Islam," in *Millennial Dreams in Action*, ed. S. Thrupp, New York, 1970, pp. 218-19.