CHAPTER THREE

THE APOCALYPSE OF BAḤĪRĀ

Having discussed the Islamic stories about Baḥīrā and their functions, the focus of this chapter will be on the Legend, notably the apocalyptic parts which are to be found in each of the recensions. It has often been observed that apocalyptic texts represent the first literary responses of Christians to Islam.¹ They are exponents of an age-old tradition of Near Eastern culture, to which the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic Bible books also belong. The genre is full of paradoxes. Whereas an apocalypse claims to reflect a unique personal sensual experience that forces itself upon the passive recipient, it is in reality always a literary construct in which ‘the smell of midnight oil pervades’.² Its originality is crammed within the rigid constraints of convention, but these constraints also form one of the securing factors in the apocalypse’s claim to genuineness.³

The force of an apocalypse lies first of all in its ability to give meaning to political and social instability, by revealing how chaotic and adverse events are in reality part of a divine cosmic plan in which all significant changes are purposeful. Proclaiming the imminent end of the world is hardly the principal aim of these writings. Before anything else, apocalyptic texts are to be understood as works of religious and political propaganda that capitalize on a communal worldview and apocalyptic feelings in order to express a view about developments in the present day and the near future, by ‘revealing’ how they are connected to a divine final judgment.⁴

¹ For a survey of the Christian apocalypses in response to the rise of Islam, see Hoyland, Seeing Islam, pp. 257–307 and Martínez, ‘La literatura apocalíptica’.
² A characterization made by Cohn, in: Cosmos, Chaos and the World to come, p. 165.
³ Amongst the many works that have appeared on this subject, two good introductions that define the genre, and its subgenres, and analyze its structural elements are: Collins, ‘Early Christian Apocalyptic Literature’ and Russell, The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic.
⁴ A classic contribution to the field, which recognizes the polemical aspects of apocalypses and shows the need for Jewish, Christian and Muslim apocalypses to be studied as a joint phenomenon, is Steinschneider, ‘Apocalypsen mit polemischer Tendenz’.
Several Eastern Christian apocalyptists in the seventh century have attempted to make sense of the disorientation caused by the presence of a new and unforeseen foreign power. As part of their attempts to explain why much of what used to be the Byzantine and Persian empires had now fallen into the hands of the Arabs, who claimed to have God on their side, they sought recourse to the Bible. On the basis of a typological focus on ancient temporary invasions by foreign peoples in the Holy Land, the new Arab rule was interpreted as having a transient nature. The purpose of this temporary rule was to chastise those who had sinned. To interpret the Arab dominion in this way served both to provide consolation and hope for change, and to reassert the truth of Christianity. If a lack of steadfastness in the faith had caused this colossal punishment, only a return to faith would remove the punishment. The adherence to the notion of transience thus became a way to evade the religious claims of Islam.

In the early eighth century, when Arab rule had already shown itself to be anything but ephemeral, this approach was supplemented with other responses to Islam, notably disputation literature. The focus shifted towards the reasoned defense of the Christian faith and the refutation of the religious doctrines of Islam. We see nevertheless that apocalyptic writings by Christians living in the Islamic world kept on appearing, especially at times of great political change or uncertainty. One such period was the beginning of the ninth century, when a series of internal upheavals upset the stability of the ‘Abbasid caliphate.

The first century of the ‘Abbasids is an era generally associated with the flourishing of culture and science at the courts of the Caliphs. However, it also witnessed many periods of unrest and instability the roots of which lay, among other things, in tribal conflicts and ‘Alid insurrections. The greatest crisis of the time was the fourth civil war, which broke out after the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd in the year 809. His son Muḥammad al-ʾAmīn became Caliph, while another of his sons, ʿAbdallāḥ, the later Caliph al-ʾAmīn, was appointed as governor of Khurasan. Al-ʾAmīn, when taking office, immediately took the decision to appoint his own sons as heirs to the Caliphate. This was

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5 Reinink, ‘The beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature’.
6 Abel, ‘Changements politiques et littérature eschatologique’. See also Cook, ‘Two Christian Arabic Prophecies’, for two examples as late as the eighteenth century.
7 The various rebellions in Syria under the early ‘Abbasids have been analyzed by Cobb in his White Banners. For the ‘Alid rebellions see the chapter on this subject in Kennedy, The Early Abbasid Caliphate, pp. 199–213, and see below.