APOCALYPTIC EXPRESSIONS IN THE EARLY ISLAMIC WORLD

MICHAEL G. MORONY

In the usual circular way apocalyptic literature tends to be defined in terms of recurring elements in works that are considered to be apocalypses.1 Modern scholarship has been largely concerned with the origin(s) of the genre, the possibility of cross cultural “influences,” and the use of historical references in such texts in order to date them. By the early centuries of the common era the original meaning of apocalypsis as an experience of revelatory spiritual ascension had begun to be overlaid and largely replaced by the eschatological content of the message, which is generally the way “apocalypse” is understood and used today.2 The passage of the soul through the spheres and an expectation that the Roman Empire would last until the last days were added during Late Antiquity. In many ways the renewed spate of apocalyptic literature dating from early Islamic times appears to be more “historical” in nature relating to and perhaps occasioned by contemporary events and circumstances beginning with the great war between the Byzantines and Sasanians in the early seventh century3 and continuing with the events and aftermath of the early Islamic conquests. It is surely significant that such expressions surfaced in multiple religious traditions: Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, Mandaean, and Muslim. Some comparative analysis of this material is thus possible, useful, and desirable. The four articles presented here are an attempt in this direction by examining and juxtaposing apocalyptic themes in Syriac and Coptic Christian, Zoroastrian, and Muslim literature.

---

Unfortunately a companion article on Jewish apocalyptic expressions in this period was not available for inclusion.  

The first article, by Villagomez, provides a general overview of recent apocalyptic studies and of scholarship on Syriac apocalyptic literature in particular, and notes that, whereas cataclysmic events were interpreted as God's punishment for the sins of Christians during Late Antiquity, in early Islamic times they were also seen as signs of the approach of the apocalyptic age. The second article, by Iskander, examines the Copto-Arabic "Apocalypse of Samuel." His argument for redating this work probably to the eleventh century C.E. relates to the historical significance of the socio-religious changes and pressures attested to in the text. The third article, by Daryaee, uses Zoroastrian apocalyptic expressions to gauge that community's reaction to the Muslim conquest in the seventh century, to the 'Abbāsī "revolution," and to the sectarian revolt of the Khorrāmiyya. In the final article, Campbell surveys themes in apocalyptic Muslim *ahadīth*, particularly those aimed at discouraging participation in civil strife and rebellion against even an unjust ruler. It is important to include this material along with the first three cases here by way of demonstrating that apocalyptic fears/hopes existed in the same period among the politically dominant religious group as well as among the subject communities. That is, in this period apocalyptic expressions were not confined to the adherents of downtrodden, conquered religious populations. Apocalyptic expectations appear to have been encouraged both among Syriac using Christians and among Muslims by the events associated with the second Muslim *fitna* during and after the 680s. At the same time Campbell notes the sense of bewilderment, despair, and alienation among an apparently large sector of the Muslim population (at least these *ahadīth* were preserved in the majoritarian collections). The quietist position of avoiding civil strife at almost any cost also seems to have a Murji‘ī tone, while the advice not to rebel against even unjust rulers surely contributed to the stability of authoritarian forms of government, and such *ahadīth* may, in fact, have been encouraged by Muslim rulers. However, with one notable exception, the common literary definition of apocalyptic works does not fit most of the Islamic material; its membership in the apocalyptic category is more a matter of content than of form.

The similarities among these apocalyptic traditions are at least as important as their differences. The theme of sinning believers runs through all of

---
