Ahab, Bar Kokhba, Muḥammad, and the Lying Spirit*

Prophetic Discourse before and after the Rise of Islam

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Since the 1960s and 1970s, a major shift has occurred in the study of Late Antiquity. Once the province of specialists in Classical Studies, Patristics, and – perhaps somewhat more recently – Jewish Studies, a sea-change in the general approach to this period has taken place with the extension of the geographical range covered by the term from the Mediterranean to well beyond the boundaries of the Roman East, and of its chronological limits beyond the decline and fall of Rome itself to the subsequent flourishing of the Byzantine, Persian, and Arab empires. Thus, we have seen the emergence of a significant literature integrating early Islam into the study of Late Antiquity, an area of research once focused almost exclusively upon "late Roman" phenomena.[1] Over just the last few years, subjects as diverse as religious identity, intercommunal relations, scriptural exegesis, and religiously motivated violence have received substantial scholarly treatment in articles and monographs that demonstrate the tremendous benefits yielded by examining aspects of early Islamic tradition alongside comparanda from other confessional communities of the age.

However, it is rather curious that the apparent resurgence of prophecy in Late Antiquity, one of the most dramatic and far-reaching developments of the period, has gone largely unexplored in comparative studies. A number

[1] On these recent trends in scholarship, see Aziz al-Azmeh, *Rom, das neue Rom und Baghdad: Pfade der Spätantike/Rome, New Rome and Baghdad: Pathways of Late Antiquity* (Berlin: Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften/Fritz Thyssen Stiftung/Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, 2008).

of seemingly related phenomena that cut across communal boundaries, spanning the centuries from the Second Temple period to the career of Muḥammad and beyond, should have provoked many scholarly attempts at a comparative approach to prophecy by now. Yet numerous charismatic, mantic, and revelatory aspects of late antique and medieval religiosity in the Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and other traditions continue to be viewed in a disconnected and atomistic way. Why have there been so few attempts to chart the continuity of prophetic claims – or at least the family resemblances between prophetic phenomena – in Late Antiquity, when a host of similar phenomena that recur among communities of the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East over centuries (if not millennia) might be profitably compared?[2]

This essay represents only a preliminary argument for the validity and utility of "comparative prophetology" as a field of research in the study of Late Antiquity. I do not seek to reify prophecy as an objectified type of religious experience that endured unchanged over centuries, or worse, that somehow constitutes a "universal" or "essential" aspect of human religiosity. Rather, I only want to suggest that prophecy is a recognizable form of discourse that occurs in many cultural and historical contexts, but seems especially characteristic of the period under consideration here. We can therefore legitimately use the term "prophecy" as a convenient shorthand for charismatic claims to authority relying upon mantic and revelatory practices that typically materialize in bids for or challenges to communal leadership throughout Late Antiquity.[3] Insofar as the term "prophecy" was often self-consciously invoked throughout this era, by insiders or outsiders, to describe such claims, this approach seems entirely valid. These claims could even be asserted without any reference to oracular activity at all: the mere presence of an individual acclaimed as a prophet could be perceived as a revelatory manifestation of the numinous.[4]

Naturally, the specific ideas and practices associated with these claims evolve over time, and are inevitably inflected by the normative beliefs and language that tend to dominate in a given community. Nevertheless, the core elements that seem to recur in this perennially revitalized discourse are the authentication of communal leadership through putative inspiration and the communication of immutable truths to a given audience, with galvanizing and potentially transformative implications for group identity.[5] Viewed through such a functionalist lens, it becomes easier to grasp the similarities between phenomena attested over a long period of time in varying cultural and social circumstances. We can thus acknowledge the important differences between prophetic traditions attested in various contexts without the term "prophecy" becoming vacuous and devoid of meaning.

The particular relevance of prophetic phenomena in Late Antiquity is especially conspicuous given the almost inevitable "biblical" or "Israelite" inflection of prophecy at this time. Admittedly, significant precursors from the Greco-Roman and Iranian cultures, among others, must be acknowledged as having made important contributions to late antique manifestations of prophecy. Yet it is the persistent and ever-contested legacy of "Abrahamic" monotheism that gradually comes to dominate religious expression in the Mediterranean and Near East beginning in the early centuries of the Common Era. Thus, the spread of prophecy at this time seems to be deeply connected to the wide dissemination of ideas, themes and texts associated with the ancient Israelite heritage in particular, as Torah ceased to be confined to a particular place, linguistic group, ethnicity, cultural formation, or historical community, but rather became a widespread, almost ubiquitous, touchstone of religious identity and communal organization.[6]

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[2] Most of the existing comparative treatments of prophecy do little to challenge the basic impression that prophetic traditions in different communities are only superficially similar. Scott Noegel and Brannon Wheeler's *Historical Dictionary of Prophets in Islam and Judaism* (Lanham, Md. and London: Scarecrow Press, 2002) appears to me to be groundbreaking, inasmuch as the authors treat prophecy in the biblical, Jewish, and Islamic contexts with total equanimity; however, their work is a mere propaedeutic to more substantial comparative work, as they themselves acknowledge.

[3] The concept of discourse I invoke here is conspicuously borrowed from Bruce Lincoln, who sees prophecy as a specific type of authorizing discourse that seeks to ground claims of authority in transcendent, and thus unimpeachable, truths; cf., e.g., his discussion of the Roman sibyls in *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 37–54.

[4] For example, the heads of monastic communities of Egypt, including such famous figures as Shenoute, Athanasius, and Macarius the Great, were considered prophets by their contemporaries on account of the superhuman grace and guidance they manifested to their follow-

ers. As Sizgorich notes, they were "figures whose connection with the divine was sufficient to serve as the basis for a community of the saved and whose personal example was sufficient to lead the members of that community through a world of confusion and peril toward the one truth that would matter on the day of judgment" (Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 123). Our mutual debt to Peter Brown's work on the holy man in Late Antiquity is no doubt obvious here.

[5] Defined thusly, prophecy might seem to overlap both apocalyptic – recently defined quite succinctly as "the supernatural mediation of a definitive knowledge … that permits a properly nuanced evaluation of the larger forces and tensions at work in the contemporary social order" (John C. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postrabbinic Jewish Apocalypse Reader* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 3) – and messianism. Prophecy is admittedly a messy category with frustratingly blurry boundaries; nevertheless, I would argue that it provides us with a flexible heuristic framework for affiliating and comparing distinct traditions that may be seen to have some significant similarities.

[6] Scholars have shown increasing interest in "extra-biblical" prophecy in the ancient world, and it is certainly possible that in various settings – especially Mesopotamia and Arabia – native oracular and revelatory traditions were deliberately synthesized with strains of postbiblical "Israelite" prophecy, or recast in a form more congenial to "Abrahamic" monotheism. How exactly this occurred is an intriguing question that has generally gone

Islamic Origins and Prophetic (Dis)continuities

Despite the obvious linkages between late antique scripturalism and proph-ecy, the close association of the two should not be taken as necessarily im-plying a simple *causal* relationship, as if the spread of Torah guaranteed the appearance of new prophets through sheer imitation of the example set by the Israelite prophets of old. But this is exactly what many scholarly treat-ments of Muḥammad seem to presuppose.

In discussions of Islamic origins, the appearance of a new prophet in seventh-century Arabia is seldom, if ever, seriously considered in the light of more or less proximate prophetic precursors. The most commonly cited precedent for Muḥammad's prophetic experience is the native Arabian tra-dition of *kihāna*, an indigenous "soothsaying" that is itself seldom related to its counterparts among various communities in the wider ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean world. Though the Qur'ān explicitly denies that Muḥammad is a *kāhin* or "soothsayer," modern scholars – echoing remarks supposedly made by some of the Prophet's contemporaries – have some-times related the earlier revelations in the Qur'ān to the distinctive mantic utterances of these inspired poetic oracles.[7] While Muḥammad has *also* traditionally been seen as strongly influenced by Judaism, the idea that his mission might have been a continuation or reflection of prophetic traditions and tendencies that were previously manifest in antiquity and may still have been vital among Jews or other communities in the centuries before the rise of Islam has seldom been entertained.

Instead, the age-old attempt to excavate the Jewish influences on Muḥammad and the Qur'ān has most often focused on the impact of the midrashic tradition in particular on the Prophet's eschatological, theologi-cal, and historical awareness. It is not some living tradition of prophecy in Judaism that is usually taken to have inspired Muḥammad, but rather the tales of prophets preserved in scripture, and in particular the parabiblical elaborations on scripture found in the *aggadah*. Scholars have occasionally preferred some other cultural and religious complex, for example one or another sect of Christianity or some heterodox variety of Judaism or 'Jew-ish-Christianity,' as the putative matrix in which primitive Islam first took shape. However, the presupposition that the Qur'ān is primarily a reposi-tory of *rabbinic* themes and ideas in particular predominated in scholarship throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and endures to this day in various guises.[8]

If one assumes that the main basis for continuity between Judaism and the nascent Islamic tradition would have been the transmission of discrete influences from Arabian Jewish informants to Muḥammad, then the propo-sition that he had some organic connection with any prophetic precursors, whatever (or whoever) they may have been, appears implausible. After all, very few scholars indeed would posit that Muḥammad had somehow been inspired by actual Jewish claimants to prophecy active in the Ḥijāz in Late Antiquity or, for that matter, anywhere else in the vicinity. Inasmuch as rabbinic Judaism is usually assumed to have lacked any notion of continu-ing revelation, the Jewish influence on Muḥammad can only be imagined to have inspired his self-fashioning as a prophet through the communication of wholly *literary* modes and models of prophecy.[9]

Viewed from this perspective, then, Muḥammad appears to have become a prophet primarily because scripture speaks of prophets. Although much of the established scholarship on Muḥammad seems to tacitly assume that exposure to scriptural precedents somehow must have inspired him to be-come a prophet himself, how or why this should have occurred, or whether or not this is even a cogent way to approach the problem, has hardly ever been considered. Admittedly, this approach, pioneered by Abraham Geiger in the mid-nineteenth century, was a considerable improvement over earlier Western scholarship, which emphasized that Muḥammad had been a duplic-itous fraud, an attitude directly derived from medieval Christian polemic. Nevertheless, the contrasting emphasis on Muḥammad's sincere inspiration by textual precedents drawn from biblical and parabiblical tradition, a view that has endured virtually to the present, is similarly problematic on many levels. For one thing, Geiger's approach relies on notions of borrowing and

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unexplored by scholars. On scripturalization or the "textualization of authority" in Late Antiquity among numerous communities, see Reeves, *Trajectories,* 5–6. In Late Antiquity, prophecy is not simply a means of recourse to transcendent authorization that cannot be countermanded by reference to human prerogatives. Rather, in this period, claims of proph-ecy almost inevitably evoke ideas and symbols of established prestige, insofar as they are linked to the legacy of Israel's covenantal history. One of the most characteristic develop-ments of the age is that this history came to be recognizable and meaningful – indeed, to carry *ultimate* meaning and legitimacy – for numerous communities across the Mediterranean and Near East, regardless of whether or not they self-identified as Jews.

[7] Cf., e. g., Q.52:29–33 and 69:38–43. On *kihāna* and its broader significance, see below.

[8] This tendency dates back virtually to the foundation of the modern study of the Qur'ān in the West by Abraham Geiger: see Michael E. Pregill, "The Hebrew Bible and the Quran: The Problem of the Jewish 'Influence' on Islam," *Religion Compass* 1:6 (2007): 643–659.

[9] The only serious attempt in modern scholarship to assert that the rise of Islam had its basis in something resembling an outbreak of prophetic, messianic, or eschatological fervor among contemporary Jews is Patricia Crone and Michael Cook's *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), but the various theses they advance here regarding an alternative model of Islamic origins have now been widely discredited. It is not my intention to resuscitate their arguments here, but rather to attempt to connect the career of Muḥammad with similar revivals or continuations of prophecy in the wider Near Eastern milieu. Doing so hardly requires a major revision of the conventional account of Islamic origins, but rather only a shift in the heuristic framework we bring to the available data.

dependence that are theoretically shallow, misleading, and even at times wholly unsubstantiated.[10]

Another, more fundamental, criticism that may be leveled against this approach is the inherent implausibility of positing purely literary stimuli for the emergence of Muḥammad's prophetic claims. The Muḥammad of Geiger and many other scholars who credit biblical and Jewish tradition as the direct source of his vocation appears much like Don Quixote. In both cases, a man is inflamed by stories of extraordinary individuals of long ago, and strives to be extraordinary himself; both mean for all the world to do good, but their psyches are more than a bit distorted by their obsessions with the past. The gentleman of La Mancha is befuddled into thinking himself like the chivalrous heroes of the romances he loves to read; meanwhile, Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh of the Quraysh somehow deceives himself into believing he has been called to become the apostle to the Arabs, just like the prophets of old who received divine warrant to warn Israel, call their wayward nation to repent, and even, as in the case of Moses, to become the lawgiver to a newly god-fearing people.

It is hardly my intention to call for a more methodologically refined approach to prophetic psychology here; ultimately, we cannot know what Muḥammad "really thought" about anything, or what his prophetic call "felt" like. The quest to uncover his frame of mind, of particular concern to many nineteenth-century scholars, hardly deserves to be revived as a serious preoccupation for contemporary historians. But advocates of the "influence" model of Islam's origins have never really explained how exposure to what is supposedly only a textual reality (as opposed to, say, an established discursive-symbolic idiom, or even a recurrent sociopolitical fact) eventuates in a personally and collectively meaningful experience, and thus compelling claim, of revelation. That is, how it makes sense to posit that an individual native to Arabian society of the time, with its supposedly limited exposure to monotheism, would suddenly embark upon a prophetic career simply on account of his exposure to biblical traditions and texts – especially if prophecy had been *wholly unknown* as a social and cultural phenomenon throughout the region for centuries – is an issue largely unexplored in modern Western scholarship.

The tendency to see Muḥammad's career as primarily the result of exposure to a particular set of textual influences transmitted by Jewish in-

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[10] See *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthum aufgenommen?*, translated into English as *Judaism and Islám: A Prize Essay* (trans. F. M. Young; Vepery, Madras: M.D.C.S.P.C.K. Press, 1898), 3–30, esp. 24–25. There is a copious literature on Geiger's project; see the bibliography in Pregill, *op. cit.*, and also now the suite of essays on Geiger in *"Im vollen Licht der Geschichte": Die Wissenschaft des Judenthums und die Anfänge des kritischen Koranforschung* (ed. D. Hartwig, W. Homolka, M. J. Marx, and A. Neuwirth; Würzberg: Ergon, 2008), 65–109.

formants has been a persistent obstacle to the development of a more sophisticated view of his prophecy in comparative perspective, in proper historical context. We might also attribute the general failure to see that career in continuity with older prophetic phenomena to the prevalence of the idea of the so-called cessation of prophecy in ancient Israel. Although the proposition that prophecy ceased in Second Temple times is extremely problematic, it seems to have been taken for granted by many scholars until fairly recently.[11] On a basic level, the canonical status of the literary remains of ancient Israelite prophecy for both Jews and Christians has undoubtedly contributed to a general cultural predisposition to see that tradition as inherently more legitimate and authentic; later manifestations of prophetic activity, on the other hand, may appear distinctly less so, especially when they occur among more marginal communities. At the very least, a collective uncertainty among scholars about what prophecy was or might have been in the centuries after the canonization of the Bible, as well as how disparate phenomena that appear to be prophetic in nature might be related to one another, seems to have encouraged a predisposition to see Muḥammad as *sui generis*. But arguably, his mission and its vast repercussions might be more constructively understood as an essential part of the long process though which prophecy developed over the course of centuries, alongside the critical evolution of monotheism itself that took place in Late Antiquity.

Notably, a number of scholars have recently argued that the cessation of prophecy was not in fact felt universally by all Jews in the Second Temple period, and that prophecy continued to be a living reality – albeit a transformed one – for various individuals and communities.[12] After all, even the ambiguous rabbinic evidence can be read as suggesting not so much that prophecy ceased as that the rabbis themselves had in some way assumed for themselves the exalted role the prophets of old had played as intermediaries with the divine on Israel's behalf.[13] Still others have emphasized the

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[11] For a widely influential assertion of the supposed rabbinic "doctrine" of the cessation of prophecy, see Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (trans. I. Abrahams; Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 304–307. Urbach's discussion of the topic here compresses much of the material from his earlier discussion of the subject, "When Did Prophecy Cease?" [Heb.], *Tarbiṣ* 17 (1945–46): 1–11. His position seems to be based on a handful of ambiguous dicta preserved in various rabbinic sources that hardly seem to be constitutive of a well-articulated or widespread attitude, let alone representative of historical fact. Urbach's emphasis on the cessation of prophecy echoes that of earlier scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judenthums* school, who in turn may have been inspired by older currents in German scholarship animated by Christian supersessionist claims regarding the spiritual atrophy of post-Exilic Judaism. I owe this observation to Annette Reed.

[12] Cf., e. g., Alex Jassen, *Mediating the Divine: Prophecy and Revelation in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Second Temple Judaism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007).

[13] "All the prophets formerly received their prophecy from Mount Sinai, but each one of the sages from every generation also received his knowledge from Mount Sinai" (*Exodus*

continuation of prophetic claims and ideas in Judaism well *beyond* the Second Temple period. For example, Alexander has convincingly argued that continuing revelation has perennially been an important aspect of rabbinic Judaism, from the time of its origins well into the Middle Ages, citing such diverse medieval phenomena as R. Joseph Karo's *maggîd*, the "heavenly responsa" of R. Jacob of Marvège, the contemplative traditions of the school of Abulafia, and the latent antinomianism of the *Zohar*, the charismatic and messianic impulses within which ultimately culminated in the Sabbatian upheaval.[14]

Thus, Alexander cites an impressive breadth of material to demonstrate the continuing vitality of forms of prophecy (or at least *ideas* about prophecy) in late antique and medieval Jewish tradition. However, what exactly this material represents – and what the ultimate cause of this vitality might be – is open to interpretation. Alexander's approach is symptomatic of the tendency to see later Jewish prophetic phenomena (on the rare occasion that they are acknowledged at all) as manifestations of trends inherent or integral to Judaism, as if unbroken lines of transmission invisibly link ancient Israel, the Second Temple period, and the high Middle Ages.[15] Therefore, according to this perspective, the renewed interest in revelation seemingly reflected in medieval sources is significant mainly as evidence of the chronic failure of perennial efforts by "orthodox" communal authorities to suppress the expression of charismatic energies among Jews, whether in Palestine in the tannaitic period, Babylonia in the amoraic and geonic periods, or in other times and places.

However, if prophetic impulses did in fact continue to be a part of Judaism well beyond Second Temple times, whatever shape they happened to take, it seems entirely reasonable to ask whether our examination of pertinent phenomena should be limited to Judaism at all. What justifies the assumption that recurring claims to prophecy or manifestations of prophetic phenomena in Jewish circles in Late Antiquity or the Middle Ages should be considered to have been solely or primarily the product of direct continuity with older Jewish traditions of the Second Temple period? If prophecy can transcend the artificial *chronological* boundaries supposedly imposed by rabbinic tradition and scholarly tradition alike – and is thus not limited to pre-Exilic Israel, but rather remained a vital force throughout later Jewish history – then why should it not transcend *communal* boundaries as well?

The debates over the question of continuing prophecy in Maimonides demonstrate the problems inherent in many scholarly approaches to these questions. Maimonides devotes considerable attention to describing prophecy and the traits that characterize the true prophet in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Controversy has raged over the possible esoteric interpretation of the *Guide* for centuries, and so his "real" understanding of prophecy, as of so many other matters, is difficult to determine with precision.[16] Thus, some have argued that the passages on prophecy in the *Guide* and Maimonides' other works are primarily intended as a polemic against Islam, while others have seen his privileging of the prophet over the philosopher as possibly signaling his own aspirations to prophetic status.[17]

It is obvious that prophecy is important in Maimonides' work, but it is ambiguous how his treatment of the subject should be read, or what it is actually evidence *for*. The prophetic elements that some have detected in his thought are held in conspicuous tension with his numerous statements that deny outright any possibility of authentic ongoing revelation. For example, his most famous polemic against "false" prophecy (the subjective nature of the phrase is self-evident) appears in the *Iggeret Têmān* or "Epis-

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Rabbah 28.6; *Midrash Tanḥuma, Yitro* 11); "Since the Temple was destroyed, prophecy was taken away from the prophets and given to the sages" (*b. Baba Batra* 12a). Notably, much of the recent scholarship that implicitly or explicitly seeks to refute the claim of the cessation of prophecy appears to do so by showing that not all Jews believed it to be so, rather than questioning the particular representation of the rabbinic evidence that has been used to support arguments like Urbach's.

[14] Philip S. Alexander, "'A Sixtieth Part of Prophecy': The Problem of Continuing Revelation in Judaism," in *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed: Essays in Honour of John F. A. Sawyer* (ed. J. Davies et al.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 414–433. Alexander likewise assumes that the evidence points to some normative conception of the cessation of prophecy that has somehow worked to suppress prophetic tendencies (or "prophetism") in the Jewish community, or at least to some authoritarian force operative in rabbinic communities that strives to marginalize those tendencies whenever they appear. This is also the position of Marti Nissinen, "The Dubious Image of Prophecy," in *Prophets, Prophecy, and Prophetic Texts in Second Temple Judaism* (ed. M. H. Floyd and R. D. Haak; New York and London: T&T Clark, 2006), 26–39.

[15] Peter Schäfer eloquently argues against such a perennialist approach to Jewish tradition; see *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 217 ff.; cf. also Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), esp. Ch. 7.

[16] The classic modern statement concerning the esotericism of the *Guide* is that of Leo Strauss: see *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1952), Chs. 2 and 3. Some of Maimonides' most trenchant remarks in the *Guide* regarding prophets and prophecy are conveniently excerpted in *A Maimonides Reader* (ed. I. Twersky; West Orange, NJ: Behrmann House, 1972), 291–296, 341–349.

[17] Both the continuity of prophetic conceptions in Maimonides with older ideas and his own possible aspirations to prophecy are lines of thought originally developed by Heschel. His two Hebrew articles on the subject, one from 1945 and one from 1950, have been edited together and translated as Abraham J. Heschel, *Prophetic Inspiration After the Prophets: Maimonides and Other Medieval Authorities* (ed. M. M. Faierstein; Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1996). As is typical of much of the established scholarship on Maimonides, there is little to no consideration of Islam here outside of the standard emphasis on his reliance on the philosophical framework of *falsafa*, which is traditionally understood as making a mostly formal, and thus value-free, contribution to medieval Jewish rationalist philosophy.

tle to Yemen" which warns against the disastrous effects of contemporary messianic pretenders on the welfare of the community.[18] Admittedly, this denunciation could simply be politically motivated, or reflect Maimonides' outer or exoteric "face," notoriously distinct from his inner or esoteric "face." Nevertheless, the explicit denial *is* there, and whatever Maimonides' personal aspirations may have been, there is a clear separation between the prophetic echoes that resonate in the *Guide* and the kind of charismatic leadership that the *Iggeret Têmān* seeks to explicitly discredit.

Whatever the case, the significance of the Islamicate context of the outbreak of prophetic and messianic energies in the Yemen in Maimonides' time cannot be denied; nor can we ignore the contribution both Muslim learned discourse and the continuing appeals to charismatic authority in the Judeo-Islamic milieu made to the thought and worldview of Maimonides himself.[19] When we are speaking of prophetic reflections in Maimonides, or kabbalistic echoes of prophetic phenomena for that matter, we simply cannot isolate such trends from the sheer fact of the dominance of Islamic culture in the contemporary Mediterranean and Near Eastern *oikoumene* – a culture that had explicit roots in a prophetic movement in late antique Arabia, an abiding interest in prophecy as a subject of intellectual discourse, and perennially manifested outbreaks of prophetic or quasi-prophetic fervor long after the time at which, according to the "orthodox" view, prophecy had definitively ceased.

A comparative perspective not only enriches investigations into medieval Jewish expressions of what Alexander dubs "prophetism" – or what we might more diffusely label prophetic consciousness – but seems absolutely integral to understanding them properly in their immediate historical context. Such a perspective is likewise crucial for addressing even more fundamental questions, for example how the late antique irruption of prophetic fervor in Arabia, of undeniable significance for world history, might have been related to repeatedly energized (and energizing) strains of "prophetism" among the Jews and other communities, such as that which produced Maimonides' Yemenite messianic pretender. These questions become even

more pressing once we acknowledge the supposed cessation of prophecy in Second Temple times to have been a myth, and recognize that prophetic claims of various sorts were of continuing relevance both in the centuries leading up to and those that followed the career of Muḥammad.

If we level the categorical distinctions separating various forms of mantic, messianic, charismatic, or revelatory activities and claims as "Jewish," "Islamic," and so forth, we can see that the prophetic tradition of Israel, which itself took different forms in its classical phase, was overtly appropriated by numerous later communities, many of whom saw their leaders' religious experience as mirroring and continuing ancient Israelite prophecy. Seen in this light, it begins to become clear that the only real cessation of prophecy in Second Temple times was its ceasing to be the exclusive property or prerogative of "mainstream" Judaism (however this problematic construct might be defined). A broader and more synthetic approach to prophetic or quasi-prophetic phenomena in Late Antiquity can help to enrich our understanding of the period and the continuities that would seem to underlie religious developments in this age. This in turn enables us both to relocate Islam in its wider context and to make its contributions to the evolution of other traditions more perceptible. Overcoming the isolationism that has characterized past scholarship allows us to better appreciate the depth of the interconnections between religious communities in Late Antiquity, both in this case and undoubtedly in many others as well.

Prophecy in Medieval Judeo-Arabic Thought: Abraham Ibn Ezra on Ahab and the Lying Spirit

The importance of the Islamicate cultural and intellectual context for understanding Jewish and Christian perceptions of prophecy in the early Middle Ages is aptly illustrated by the interpretation of a strange biblical story found in the Torah commentary of Abraham Ibn Ezra (d. 1164). Even more than Maimonides, the case of Ibn Ezra demonstrates how numerous presuppositions about prophecy shared between Jews, Christians, and Muslims – perhaps tantamount to a common "theory" of prophecy – came to dominate intellectual discourse in the medieval period. The biblical text in question is found in 1 Kings 22, which portrays the death of Ahab, the notorious ruler of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (r. 870–850 B.C.E.). This odd text inspired considerable speculation among medieval Jews and Christians, for, as we shall see, it addresses complex theodical problems in the framework of a story about prophecy.

In this narrative, Ahab queries the prophets of his kingdom for an oracle concerning the future success of a major campaign against the neighboring

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[18] See "Epistle to Yemen" in *A Maimonides Reader*, 437–462.

[19] Cf. Yehuda Shamir, "Allusions to Muḥammad in Maimonides' Theory of Prophecy in his *Guide of the Perplexed*," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 64 (1974): 212–224, an eloquent argument for the profound importance of both the Islamic milieu and Muslim religious sources (as opposed to "secular" Arab philosophy) for understanding Rambam's thought. Shamir's approach has been relatively anomalous in the world of Maimonidean scholarship in general and in the prodigious literature on prophecy in Maimonides in particular. However, a broader comparative perspective is adopted in the recent monograph of Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), which deliberately seeks to correct the insularity of older scholarship.

Aramaeans in order to reclaim territory they had previously taken from his kingdom. Ahab is particularly bothered by the response of one of these prophets, one Micaiah ben Imlah, regarding the outcome of this venture. In the past, Micaiah's prophecies had boded nothing but ill for Ahab and his kingdom; however, this time, Micaiah foresees that this campaign will be a great success for Ahab, and the king is justifiably suspicious. When Ahab puts some pressure on Micaiah, he learns the truth. At some point just previous, the Lord had addressed his heavenly host on high and said: *Who shall seduce Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead?* (1 Kgs. 22:20) One member of the divine host volunteers, replying, *I will go forth and be the lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets* (vs.22).[20] Despite a number of precautions taken before the battle, Ahab is nevertheless mortally wounded at Ramoth-Gilead, and dies according to the divine plan, despite his futile attempt to escape his destiny.[21]

The function of this story in its immediate context is relatively obvious. Micaiah is recognized as a true prophet of the Lord, yet in this case, he seems to have attempted to deceive Ahab, to trick him into going to his certain death at Ramoth-Gilead. That is, the prophet has lied, albeit for justifiable reasons, since Ahab is a ruthless, idolatrous, undeserving ruler. However, the prophet ostensibly speaks on behalf of the Lord, so his lying to the king, however defensible, is clearly problematic. The solution to the problem of a seemingly deceitful prophet proposed by the biblical story is that it is *not* the prophet Micaiah who has lied by seeking to deceive the king and pretending what he has said is the divine truth. Rather, Micaiah uttered what he sincerely believed were true words; it is in fact God Himself who is ultimately responsible for the lie, in causing the lying spirit (*rûᵃḥ sheqer*) to inspire Micaiah to issue a deceptive oracle of success to Ahab. (In fact, in verse 14 of the account, when Micaiah is summoned to Ahab's court, he swears with perfect sincerity in the name of the living God that "that which the Lord says to me, that will I speak.") This device exonerates the prophet and lets the narrative's audience know that it was all for a good cause; God saw fit to destroy Ahab by sending him to Ramoth-Gilead, and so caused his faithful prophet to deceive him and promise Ahab success.

All this is fine and good, but it is not difficult to notice that this "solution" is really not much of a solution at all. This narrative exonerates prophets

who lie by explaining that in fact, it is not *they* who lie; rather, it is the lying spirit who lies, through divine commission. But now we are left with an even more unsettling proposition: that in certain cases the word of the Lord might not be true – that is, that *God* lies. Predictably, this story has presented a virtually insurmountable theological quandary to modern exegetes; some have seen it as simply irreconcilable with the Jewish and Christian vision of the Deity as He or it is commonly understood today, and it is noteworthy that contemporary exegesis tends either to dismiss the story as a pastiche of different sources, or else to interpret the lying spirit as simply metaphorical, a homiletic device employed to underscore the deception and corruption that generally prevailed at Ahab's court.[22]

Ibn Ezra's exegesis of the story seems to reflect a similar discomfort about the story's theodical implications. In proposing a solution to the problem, he invokes a distinction that recurs a number of times throughout his biblical commentary. There are, he says, *two kinds of prophets*. The first sort just speaks on behalf of God: the ordinary, run-of-the-mill prophet who will claim to have seen the future and takes it upon himself to warn sinners of their imminent punishment. The second sort is the prophet to whom is entrusted an actual revelation. Micaiah ben Imlah belongs to the first category; these prophets can lie. The second sort of prophet *cannot* lie, because if they could, this would jeopardize the integrity of the scripture that they bear.[23] The crux of Ibn Ezra's argument is that, while scripture undoubtedly testifies that at least *some* prophets *do* lie, under divine mandate or not, many other prophets clearly do *not*; the latter are essentially prevented from this to safeguard the integrity of the revelation which has been entrusted to them.[24]

Ibn Ezra's discussion of Micaiah ben Imlah is fascinating for a number of reasons. It is immediately obvious that the distinction that he proposes here

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[20] The portrayal of the heavenly host here is clearly reminiscent of the divine council depicted in the prologue to Job, a theme that also has conspicuous precursors in Canaanite culture.

[21] On the problematic historicity of this account and of Omrid historiography in general, see Edward F. Campbell Jr., "A Land Divided: Judah and Israel from the Death of Solomon to the Fall of Samaria," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (ed. M. D. Coogan; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 273–319), 288–299.

[22] Cf., e. g., R. W. L. Moberly, "Does God Lie to His Prophets? The Story of Micaiah ben Imlah As a Test Case," *Harvard Theological Review* 96:1 (2003): 1–23.

[23] Ibn Ezra's discussion of the 1 Kings story actually appears in his comments on a well-known episode from Exodus, where he uses it to explain Aaron's lame excuse to Moses regarding the origins of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32:24: *I cast the gold into the fire, and out came this calf!* (vs.24) This lie (or half-truth) is tolerable, as far as Ibn Ezra is concerned, because Aaron is just a regular prophet, and not a prophet to whom scripture has been entrusted, like his brother Moses, so his lie is of no real consequence.

[24] Ibn Ezra's reference to the story of Micaiah and Ahab appears in his long prologue to his comments on Exodus 32: Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Perushei ha-Torah le-Avraham Ibn Ezra* (ed. A. Weiser; 3 vols.; Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1976), 2.204–206; for German translation with substantial annotation, see *Abraham Ibn Esras Langer Kommentar zum Buch Exodus* (ed. and trans. D. U. Rottzoll; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000), 962–975. Again, the prophet-messenger distinction recurs throughout his biblical commentary; as John Reeves points out to me, the first place he seems to mention it is in his comments upon Gen 27:19, Jacob's theft of Esau's birthright by deceiving his father Isaac (cf. *Perushei ha-Torah*, 1.82–83).

and elsewhere replicates one of the classic explanations of the difference between the terms *nabī* and *rasūl* in the Qur'ān. There, both terms signify "prophet," and they sometimes appear to be interchangeable; that is, some individuals seem to qualify as both. One of the classic explanations of the different connotations of these terms, however, is that one kind, the *rasūl*, is a "scriptuary" prophet, one who bears revelation; the other is a mere warner.[25] Both the distinction between two types of prophet and the specific interest in the question of whether prophets can commit sins or errors or perpetrate falsehoods are quite familiar from Muslim literature dating back as early as the eighth century; for example, the creed *Fiqh Akbar II,* attributed to the jurist Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 767), directly addresses this question as part of the discussion of the principle of *ʿiṣma,* prophetic infallibility.[26]

That it is Ibn Ezra who provides evidence of Jewish familiarity with such ideas is totally unsurprising. Perhaps even more than better-known figures such as Saʿadya Gaon or Maimonides, Abraham Ibn Ezra truly epitomizes the medieval Judeo-Arabic cultural synthesis, particularly the common discourse of Arabic philosophy and science; a native of Tudela, he spent most of his life in Andalus and was fully versed in many aspects of classical Islamic culture. Like Maimonides, he wrote his religious works (as well as his poetry) in Hebrew but his scientific and philosophical works in Arabic.[27] It is also worth noting that an analogous distinction is found in the work of Maimonides, who recognizes two modes of true prophecy, a higher form associated with revelation and a lower associated with exhortation and moral instruction.[28] Of course, Ibn Ezra's discomfort with the theodical implications of the story of Ahab and Micaiah is not unique to him, nor is it restricted to authors of the "Islamicate" milieu. But it is extremely significant that he takes a problematic story that appears to challenge the integrity and sanctity of the prophetic office and makes a *positive* point with it: some prophets, the ones who really count, are protected from falsehood, and the integrity of scripture is guaranteed thereby. The Islamic doctrine of *ʿiṣma*

and the conventional distinction between "higher" and "lower" prophetic types is quite clearly in the background here.

On Prophecy and the Origins of *kalām* in the Sectarian Milieu

Ibn Ezra's approach to the story of Ahab and the lying spirit conforms to a larger pattern. For some time now, scholars have recognized that discursive treatments of prophecy – in the form of carefully articulated theories of prophecy, sustained exegesis of biblical passages particularly significant for understanding prophecy, or explicit debate over the distinction of true prophecy from false – began to proliferate in Jewish and Christian sources after the repercussions of Muḥammad's career had been widely felt in Near Eastern and Mediterranean centers of civilization. A now-classic argument holds that active and energetic reflection on the nature of prophecy among Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike in the Middle Ages commenced in response not only to the career of Muḥammad, but also to his increasing importance in Muslim devotion, practice, and scholarly discourse.[29] This is in sharp contrast, so this argument holds, to the general silence of Jewish and Christian spokesmen on the subject of prophecy in pre-Islamic Late Antiquity.[30]

It seems almost obvious that the mission and claims of Muḥammad were fundamental to Muslim self-imagining. Likewise, it is unsurprising that the Prophet would thus have been readily identified as a crucial target for Jewish and Christian polemic against Islam, and that attacks on the integrity of his prophetic claims would have precipitated the elaboration of a sophisticated Muslim apology for prophecy (or at least *Muḥammad's* prophecy). However, it is worth reflecting on these developments, however momentarily, because this subject has wider significance for contemporary debates over the origins of *kalām,* Islamic theological discourse. The central question that has occupied scholars for some time now is whether *kalām* was specifically a product of Muslim interaction with Christians in particular, or

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[25] The classic discussion of this terminology can be found in W. A. Bijlefeld, "A Prophet and More Than a Prophet?: Some Observations on the Qur'ānic Use of the Terms 'Prophet' and 'Apostle,'" *Muslim World* 59 (1969): 1–28; cf. the more recent treatment of Uri Rubin, *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān,* s. v. "Prophets and Prophethood."

[26] See A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 192. Wensinck sees *Fiqh Akbar II* as late, possibly datable to sometime after al-Ashʿarī (d. 925).

[27] On Ibn Ezra's life, milieu, and hermeneutics, see Irene Lancaster, *Deconstructing the Bible: Abraham ibn Ezra's Introduction to the Torah* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003) and bibliography therein.

[28] Naturally, Maimonides invokes this principle in order to safeguard the uniqueness of the Mosaic revelation; cf. *Maimonides Reader,* 291–294. The Islamic underpinnings of his approach here are perhaps somewhat less obvious than in the case of Ibn Ezra's.

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[29] A number of scholars have emphasized that identification with the career and revelations of the historical prophet Muḥammad came to be central to Muslim identity only gradually; cf., e. g., Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 15; Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 1998), esp. 147 ff.

[30] Note, for example, the example of Isaiah 21:6–7: Reeves has recently shown that it was Muslim exegesis of this passage as a prefiguration of Muḥammad that appears to have stimulated Jewish and Christian counter-interpretations of these verses' predictive force, whereas formerly neither Jews nor Christians had exhibited much interest in the passage at all (*Trajectories,* 7–12).

rather emerged as an indigenous feature of Muslim intellectual life without any direct stimulus from other communities.[31]

In their discussions of this topic, Griffith and Stroumsa have emphasized the evolution of *kalām* through dialogue and dynamic exchange between communities, in contrast to earlier scholars who asserted Muslims' simple dependence on outside influences in this area. For both Griffith and Stroumsa, the emergence of explicit and systematic discussions of prophecy in *kalām*, a common discourse on prophecy based upon language, concepts, and presuppositions shared between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, is central to their arguments.

Thus, Griffith has addressed the theme of the so-called "unworthy incentives to belief," a distinctive aspect of the polemical writings of early Christian Arabic authors such as Theodore Abū Qurrah (fl. late eighth-early ninth century) and ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī (fl. mid-ninth century). These Christian polemicists argued that the true religion would not motivate people to follow it through obvious inducements such as the promise of worldly success or a permissive morality, nor through coercion. Their transparent goal was the establishment of a negative criterion for evaluating religions that would inevitably discount all possible claimants to truth *except* Christianity.[32] The question of prophecy was often central in these discussions of what constituted legitimate or necessary inducements to belief. Consequently, Muslims appear to have become rather self-conscious about Muḥammad's lack of evidentiary miracles, which seems to have led directly to the claim that the Prophet's revelation of the Qurʾān was itself a miracle, alongside the concept of the Qurʾān's miraculous inimitability (*iʿjāz*).[33] In contrast, Christian spokesmen had ready recourse to the Gospels' ample testimony about Jesus' impressive public miracles, and could easily assert that Muḥammad's poor performance in this respect implicitly demonstrated Christianity's superior status.

However, at least one Christian spokesman of the early Islamic period appears to have been uncomfortable with a totally unconditional assertion of the necessity of miraculous testimony to the truth: ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī's *Kitāb al-burhān* contains the unique claim that while miraculous signs are absolutely necessary at the time of a religion's *foundation* in order to establish its truthfulness, it is also necessary that these miracles should cease after a certain time, since their continuation would constitute a species of coercion (*ijbār*).[34] Griffith emphasizes quite rightly that ʿAmmār's concern about *ijbār* is plainly derived from Muslim dialectics. This is a concrete example of the way in which *kalām* developed through reciprocal influences between communities, rather than through a one-sided "borrowing" of Christian concepts and language by Muslims.

Similarly, Stroumsa has investigated the conspicuous interest of Jewish *mutakallimūn* such as Dāwūd al-Muqammiṣ (a contemporary of ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī) in the theme of the evidentiary miracles of Moses, which, like the "unworthy incentives to belief" in the works of Griffith's Arab Christian apologists, appears to be a uniquely post-Islamic concern. Stroumsa notes that pre-Islamic Christian philosophy seldom reflected upon prophetology in a formal or deliberate way; this is most likely because Jesus was from an early date not really considered to be a prophet per se. Similarly, Jews were most interested in safeguarding the authenticity of Mosaic prophecy, but since Christians upheld this as well, there had been no compelling reason for them to articulate a specific argument in its defense before the rise of Islam.[35] According to Stroumsa, the exegesis of scriptural passages such as Deuteronomy 18, which discusses the distinction between true and false prophets, or Exodus 7–12, portraying the plagues Moses brings upon Egypt, amply demonstrates this lack of interest. When we examine the interpretation of these passages among both Jewish and Christian exegetes in pre-Islamic Late Antiquity, they seldom seem to occasion detailed prophetological discussions.[36] However, this is in sharp contrast to the special interest the subject of prophecy holds for al-Muqammiṣ and other Jewish *mutakallimūn* of the early centuries of the Islamic era.[37]

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[31] For classic expositions of the Christian origins of *kalām*, see W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 180–186, and M. A. Cook, "The Origins of *Kalām*," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43 (1980): 32–43. Intriguingly, there is almost no attention paid to the question of the possible "foreign" origins of *kalām* in the recent *Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (ed. T. Winter; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Tellingly, the first essay in the volume treats the Qurʾān and ḥadīth literature – that is, "internal" sources – as the solid foundation of the dogmatic edifice of early Islam.

[32] Sidney H. Griffith, "Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians," in *Proceedings of the PMR Conference: Annual Publication of the Patristic, Mediaeval and Renaissance Conference* 4 (1979): 63–87; repr. in Sidney H. Griffith, *The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic: Muslim-Christian Encounters in the Early Islamic Period* (Aldershot and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Variorum, 2003).

[33] There is some controversy over the issue of whether the doctrine of *iʿjāz* necessarily emerged in response to Christian polemic. Following Frank, Griffith holds that it is wholly independent, seeing it as thoroughly based in early Muslim speculations on the nature of the Qurʾān; cf. "Comparative Religion," 79–80.

[34] "Comparative Religion," 69–70.

[35] Sarah Stroumsa, "The Signs of Prophecy: The Emergence and Early Development of a Theme in Arabic Theological Literature," *Harvard Theological Review* 78:1–2 (1985): 101–114, esp. 104–106.

[36] Ibid., 103–104.

[37] Cf. Sarah Stroumsa, ed. and trans., *Dāwūd Ibn Marwān al-Muqammiṣ's* Twenty Chapters (ʿIshrūn Maqāla) (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), 254–270. Cf. also the *Kitāb al-amānāt waʾl-iʿtiqādāt* of Saʿadya Gaon, which touches on many of the same aspects of prophecy as the

The key issue for our interests here is the degree to which both Griffith and Stroumsa emphasize that before the rise of Islam, such questions as the reliable signs or exact nature of prophecy were simply not much of a concern for Jewish or Christian spokesmen. Another well-known authority on the dynamics of intercommunal relations in the early Islamic milieu puts it even more bluntly: "The question of how to recognize a true prophet ... was scarcely considered by pre-Islamic Christian and Jewish authorities and was clearly provoked by Muslim claims about Muḥammad's prophetic credentials."[38] We might thus conclude that the emergence of the theological discourse of *kalām* in early Islam was *not* primarily due to interaction with outsiders per se. Insofar as basic tenets of early Jewish and Christian *kalām* address issues that were important only after (and in response to) the mission of Muḥammad and the development of Muslim supersessionist claims after the establishment of Arab dominion over most of the Middle East, it was actually Islam that provided the driving force behind the emergence of the common discourse of *kalām*. Seen from this perspective, then, one might even say that it was Jews and Christians who were primarily dependent upon – or at least responding to – Muslims in this regard, and not the other way around.[39]

Bar Penkāyē on the Lying Spirit and Pre-Islamic Reflections on Prophecy

Ibn Ezra's exegesis of the story of Ahab and the lying spirit seems to provide another, albeit later, example of the process Griffith and Stroumsa describe. Like Theodore Abū Qurrah and Dāwūd al-Muqammiṣ, his ninth-century philosophical predecessors, Ibn Ezra's conception of prophecy is clearly inflected by ideas and categories originally deployed by Muslims in arguments on behalf of Muḥammad. However, when we turn to another example of commentary on the story of Ahab and the lying spirit, this time from a

much earlier source from Late Antiquity, we can see that ideas about prophecy *did* have a certain importance in earlier Jewish and Christian discourse, though they may have been expressed in less obvious ways than in the more systematic presentations on the subject studied by Griffith and Stroumsa.

The commentary in question is found in the *Rēš Mellē* of John of Fenek, an Assyrian Christian ("Nestorian") author of the seventh century who is better known as Bar Penkāyē. Bar Penkāyē is primarily known to scholars of Islam because his *Rēš Mellē* is a critical source for political affairs in late seventh-century Iraq: the author seems to have witnessed events of the great civil war of 680–692 (the so-called "Second Fitna") first-hand, directly observing the counter-caliphate of Ibn al-Zubayr and the rebellion against him that broke out in the city of Kūfa in 686–687.[40] Upon the death of Muʿāwiya b. Abī Sufyān, the first caliph of the Umayyad dynasty (r. 661–680), and the accession of his son Yazīd (r. 680–683), the Arab empire began to fracture. At that time, ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Zubayr, the scion of a prominent Meccan family with numerous kinship ties to the Prophet and his closest associates, established a rival caliphate based in the Ḥijāz; Ibn al-Zubayr would prove to be the most serious threat to the hegemony of the Umayyad state faced by the regime until its final collapse in the mid-eighth century. For about a dozen years, Ibn al-Zubayr's power and influence extended over a considerable amount of the Islamic empire, including Iraq, and for some time the Umayyads were hard pressed to maintain their control over their own domains in Syria, let alone present a credible claim to the caliphate.[41]

Ibn al-Zubayr would find his own claims challenged by Abū Isḥāq al-Mukhtār b. Abī ʿUbayd al-Thaqafī, who seized power in the city of Kūfa in the year 687 in the name of Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib. The latter, known as Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya, was apparently perceived by many of the partisans of the ʿAlīd family as the legitimate leader of the community. Though al-Mukhtār's revolt was short-lived, his movement is of great historical in-

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work of al-Muqammiṣ: *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (trans. S. Rosenblatt; Yale Judaica Series 1; New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1948), 145–150.

[38] Robert G. Hoyland, Introduction to *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society* (The Formation of the Classical Islamic World 18; Aldershot and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Variorum, 2004), xx.

[39] That said, I should reiterate that the goal of both Griffith and Stroumsa is to stress the *reciprocity* of the process through which *kalām* evolved. Jews and Christians first challenged Muḥammad's claim to be a true prophet; Muslims then proceeded to mount an articulate defense of Muḥammad's prophecy; Christians then responded by establishing the negative criteria for evaluating the true religion; and finally, Muslims altered their defense of Muḥammad in reaction to that response, while Jews such as al-Muqammiṣ adapted classic elements of both the Muslim and the Christian arguments to formally vindicate the continuing integrity of the Mosaic revelation.

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[40] Sebastian Brock discusses this text in its intellectual and religious context in "Syriac Views of Emergent Islam," in *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society* (ed. G. H. A. Juynboll; Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 9–21, 199–203, and translates the entire section of the work dealing with the Second Fitna in "North Mesopotamia in the Late Seventh Century: Book XV of John Bar Penkāyē's *Rīš Mellē*", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1989): 51–74. Hoyland expands upon his analysis considerably, but reaches much the same conclusions: see 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: Darwin Press, 1997), 194–200.

[41] For a convenient overview of the Second Fitna, see G. R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661–750* (2nd ed.; London: Routledge, 2000), 46–57; for a somewhat more revisionist perspective, cf. Chase Robinson, *ʿAbd al-Malik* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), 31–48.

terest, not least of all because Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya seems to have been the first individual in Islamic history to be proclaimed the Mahdī.[42]

Bar Penkāyē's *Rēš Mellē* is the only surviving non-Islamic source on these events. He can hardly be deemed an objective observer by modern standards; however, considering the highly contentious nature of al-Mukhtār's rebellion and his proclamation of the imamate of Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya (considered illegitimate by all later branches of the Shīʿa, though a movement traced to him is thought to have contributed in some way to the Abbasid Revolution), his account is a useful counterbalance to the Muslim sources on the revolt and its consequences.

The tumultuous background to Bar Penkāyē's composition of the *Rēš Mellē* is directly relevant to his commentary on the story of Ahab and the lying spirit. In discussing the beginnings of apostolic history in the years following the death and resurrection of Jesus, Bar Penkāyē gives us a concise survey of Jewish history in the Second Temple period mixed with commentary on the events depicted in the book of Acts. In this survey, he briefly discusses Bar Kokhba, the Jewish rebel and messianic pretender who precipitated the disastrous second Jewish war against Rome in the 130s, which led in the end to the near-complete devastation of Jerusalem.[43] Bar Penkāyē asks how Bar Kokhba could have been so successful in persuading the Jews to follow him, when they had not been persuaded by the message of Jesus (a fact he does not fail to mention repeatedly). Somewhat strangely, Bar Penkāyē explains that, like the death of Ahab described in 1 Kings 22, this too was the work of the lying spirit (*rūḥā dĕ-šūqrā*). Bar Penkāyē first provides a terse summary of the story of Micaiah and Ahab. He then explains that "this one" (he does not mention Bar Kokhba by name) prophesied to the Jews and promised them that the time for their deliverance had come. This, he says, is what caused them to engage in their hopeless rebellion against Rome; from then on, they would no longer be subservient to the Romans, but rather only to their own destruction.[44]

Bar Penkāyē's emphasis on the role played by a false prophet in precipitating the revolt seems to draw upon a number of precedents in both Jewish and Christian historiography. Most Jewish and Christian authors see Bar Kokhba as a pretender; for example, according to the account of Eusebius, Bar Kokhba "claimed to be a luminary who had come down from heaven and was magically enlightening those who were in misery."[45] But Bar Penkāyē's specific invocation of the story of the lying spirit here in his discussion of Bar Kokhba is extremely unusual, if not wholly unique.[46] In Bar Penkāyē's scheme of post-Exilic Jewish history, the failure of the Bar Kokhba rebellion is but one of a series of events that signals the Jews' punishment by God for rejecting the Savior. The implication of this appropriation of the central device from the story from 1 Kings is clear: although Bar Kokhba, like Micaiah, might have been sincere in his message, that messianic message was ultimately a lie, because God wished to deceive the Jews and hasten their destruction. In short, the fate that had befallen the wicked Ahab was now ironically visited upon the Jews as a whole. Notably, Bar Penkāyē has no trouble at all invoking the story of the lying spirit, and finds no need to apologize for it: he is totally unconcerned with its broader implications for the nature of prophecy, and rather than find the story threatening to theodicy in any way, he seems quite comfortable with its apparent establishment of the lying spirit as an instrument of divine wrath.

Though Bar Penkāyē's use of the story of Ahab and Micaiah hardly qualifies as a theoretical treatment of prophecy, the creative way in which he applies the biblical account to explain the Bar Kokhba rebellion is noteworthy. Inasmuch as he is a Christian writer who lived in the early Islamic period who demonstrates what appears to be a novel interest in the subject of prophecy, Bar Penkāyē might be considered to be an early forerunner of

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[42] The authoritative treatment of al-Mukhtār's movement is still Wadad al-Qāḍī, *Al-Kaysāniyya fī'l-tārīkh* (Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāfa, 1974); cf. also her "The Development of the Term *Ghulāt* in Muslim Literature with Special Reference to the Kaysāniyya," in *Akten des VII. Kongresses für Arabistik und Islamwissenschaft* (ed. A. Dieterich; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 295–319. The recent treatment in William F. Tucker, *Mahdis and Millenarians: Shī'ite Extremists in Early Muslim Iraq* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 19–33, is useful but suffers from taking highly problematic sources largely at face value. For al-Ṭabarī's material on al-Mukhtār's revolt, see *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Vol. XXI: The Victory of the Marwānids* (trans. M. Fishbein; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 1–121.

[43] For a brief survey of the period and the complex historical problems surrounding Bar Kokhba and his revolt, see Peter Schäfer, *The History of the Jews in the Greco-Roman World* (rev. ed.; London: Routledge, 2003), 145–161.

[44] *Sources Syriaques, Vol. I* (ed. A. Mingana, Leipzig: Harrassowitz, [1908]), 82*, lines

[11–14]: *wĕ-lā mekkēl lĕ-rhomāyē tešta'bdūn henōn gēr meṭṭul da-bĕkulzĕbhan lĕ-rūḥā dĕ-šūqrā ettalmad(w) yattir men da-l-rūḥēh dĕ-alāhā; ešta'bad(w) āph hāšā lĕ-abdānhōn.* The discussion of the Roman oppression of the Jews and the destruction of Jerusalem appears in Book 12, pages 80* ff.

[45] *Hist. eccl.* IV.6.2, Lake; cf. Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 31.6. The rabbinic sources on Bar Kokhba are discussed in Richard G. Marks, *The Image of Bar Kokhba in Traditional Jewish Literature: False Messiah and National Hero* (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 13–56.

[46] Bar Penkāyē's narrative is particularly reminiscent of Josephus' account of the causes of the *first* Jewish War, which he blames on *pseudoprophētai* and especially upon the mistaken interpretation of an oracle of triumph that actually referred not to the Jews but to Vespasian (*B.J.* 6.312), on which see Anthony J. Tomasino, "Oracles of Insurrection: The Prophetic Catalyst of the Great Revolt," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 59:1 (2008): 86–111. Notably, in his world chronicle, George Synkellos, who lived about a century after Bar Penkāyē, bases his short account of Bar Kokhba directly on Eusebius, but seems to omit any reference to his messianic pretensions; see *The Chronography of George Synkellos: A Byzantine Chronicle of Universal History from the Creation* (trans. W. Adler and P. Tuffin; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 427–428.

the trend described by Griffith and Stroumsa. However, we should recall that Griffith and Stroumsa base their arguments upon extant theological treatises of the eighth and ninth centuries that were supposedly written by Jews and Christians in *direct response* to Muslim apologetic on behalf of Muḥammad. Though he lived through the Second Fitna, Bar Penkāyē is much too early to have been substantially influenced by such apologetic, since the Islamic tradition was relatively young at this time and was still in the process of articulating all but its most fundamental doctrines.

Moreover, we should also note that Griffith and Stroumsa's argument specifically pertains to the appearance of particular themes relating to prophecy in the works of *kalām* that they discuss – themes such as evidentiary miracles and prophetic impeccability that would later form the core elements of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim discussions of the subject. The themes of greatest concern to Bar Penkāyē are obviously quite different: rather than addressing these subjects, his use of the story of the lying spirit seems to reflect an interest in the possible providential function of *false* prophecy. While this specific theme is not one of the classic constituent elements of treatments of prophecy in *kalām* works, it does happen to be one of the classic constituent elements of another genre, namely apocalyptic.

Apocalyptic had originally flourished in Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity, and was revitalized not only among Jews and Christians, but also among Zoroastrians and eventually Muslims as well, in the decades before and after the rise of Islam in reaction to the political upheavals of the sixth and seventh centuries.[47] For example, in the 630s, Maximus the Confessor interpreted the apparent inversion of the world order in his time (barbarians from Arabia having overrun the settled lands of the great empires of Rome and Persia) as clearly signaling the advent of Antichrist. Some fifty years later, in the time of the Second Fitna in the 680s, contemporaries of Bar Penkāyē were still carefully adducing scriptural prooftexts as evidence of the correspondence between biblical prophecies of the eschaton and the vicissitudes of recent political history.[48] It goes almost without saying that for Christians at least, the emergence of Antichrist was widely believed to be attended by the appearance of false claimants to prophecy. The scriptural foundations of such anxieties are obvious, inasmuch as the Gospel of Matthew portrays Jesus himself warning his followers to beware the false Christs and false prophets (*pseudochristoi* and *pseudoprophētai*) that would

come after him (24:24). Notably, Christians often cited this verse to demonstrate Muḥammad's falsity; sometimes they did so in order to deliberately provoke Muslims.[49]

Thus, in trying to locate Bar Penkāyē in his proper context in the evolution of late antique discourse on prophecy, we might speculate that the *Rēš Mellē* and other contemporary works of an apocalyptic bent occupy a particularly important place in that evolution, though their role has been largely overlooked. With the resurgence of apocalyptic in the seventh century, we might expect that the trope of the false prophet, long a mainstay of the genre, was ripe to be renovated and employed in new contexts, especially given the presumably overt prophetic associations of the Arab conquests (even given that Muḥammad may have occupied a relatively rudimentary place in primitive Muslim self-conception and expression). Griffith and Stroumsa posit that Jews and Christians internalized what became the major themes associated with medieval prophetology specifically in response to Muslim apologetic, but both explicitly acknowledge that Muslim apologetic must have *initially* been prompted by a first round of Jewish and Christian polemic against Muḥammad, though the evidence for this stage is generally lacking.

That is, though the contents of most of the early Islamic sources advancing defenses of Muḥammad's prophecy can only be ascertained through quotations preserved in later texts, we possess enough such evidence that the broad outlines of the original Muslim apologetic – the second round in the exchange – can be readily conjectured. The polemical treatises upon which Griffith and Stroumsa focus seem to constitute the Christian and Jewish ripostes to that apologetic – the third round. Though such speculation could only be borne out through a considerable expenditure of time and effort, one wonders if more evidence concerning the *first* round, the initial Jewish and Christian assaults on Muslim claims on behalf of Muḥammad, might possibly be salvaged by broadening the scope of inquiry to other sorts of texts besides formal theological or polemical treatises.

It is possible that works such as Bar Penkāyē's do in fact preserve traces of these initial polemical volleys, if the passage on Bar Kokhba and the lying spirit really might be thought to have anti-Muslim implications. After all, there is nothing to suggest that this first wave of polemic must have taken the discursive forms or employed the exact same themes as those found in later discussions of prophecy. Notably, the timing here seems especially right: Bar Penkāyē may have predated the emergence of articulate Muslim apologetic, as we have noted, but he *did* live long enough to witness what

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[47] For a concise description of the revival of apocalyptic in this period, see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 26–31, and Reeves' Introduction in *Trajectories*, 1–24.

[48] On Maximus, see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 76–78; on Pseudo-Methodius' integration of recent events into the historical scheme of the "weeks" mentioned in Daniel 9, see 263–267. Brock compares the perception of the Second Fitna in Bar Penkāyē and Syriac Pseudo-Methodius in "Syriac Views," 15–19.

[49] As in the well-known case of the Cordoban martyrs in the ninth century; cf. John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 87 ff.

some have seen as the initial manifestations of public Islam, closely associated with the crisis of legitimacy reflected in the conflict of the Second Fitna.[50]

However, all that said, we should acknowledge that Bar Penkāyē's comments on Ahab and the lying spirit may not have been aimed directly at Muḥammad; rather, he may have a more proximate target in mind. For one thing, when we examine his explicit comments about Islam and recent history in the *Rēš Mellē*, although Bar Penkāyē does interpret that history through the lens of apocalyptic, surprisingly, he seems to have an overall positive view of Muḥammad and the Arab dominion. Moreover, like other contemporary Christian commentators, he typically seems to understand Muḥammad not as a prophet, but rather as an Arab king. As Brock notes, this perception is primarily motivated by the desire to interpret the caliphate as one of the four kingdoms (or "horns") of Daniel 7; thus, we can see Bar Penkāyē making use of an eschatological framework borrowed from the book of Daniel to assist him in construing the providential purpose behind the Arab conquests.[51]

Bar Penkāyē therefore sees the Arabs as originally having been sent as instruments of divine wrath to sweep away both Byzantine and Persian power in the Near East, particularly because of the abuses and excesses of the Chalcedonians after the establishment of Christianity in the Roman Empire. But the complacency of the Arabs themselves caused God to divide their community in turn, leading to the First Fitna, the struggles that commenced upon the murder of the third caliph, ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān, in 656. However, according to Bar Penkāyē, God then established peace and tranquility once again with the ascendance of Muʿāwiya, whose reign Bar Penkāyē seems to romanticize.[52]

Subsequently, Bar Penkāyē sees the Second Fitna as primarily resulting from the sins and corruption of his own community, the Assyrian church. During the time of Muʿāwiya, Bar Penkāyē's community supposedly became so complacent that they allowed the "heresy" of the Monophysites to spread in dioceses abandoned by the Chalcedonians after the Arab conquest of Iraq; God sent them many warnings, but the church failed to heed them.[53] Thus, the chastisement that followed, manifest first in a new civil war between the Arabs of the west (the Umayyads) and those of the east (the Zubayrids), and then by extremely severe plague and famine in northern Iraq, signaled the beginning of the end times.[54]

This being the case, one wonders if it is actually al-Mukhtār, whose revolt he portrays as exceptionally disastrous for the church, that Bar Penkāyē wishes to cast aspersions upon as a false prophet. Bar Penkāyē knows many of the circumstances of al-Mukhtār's rebellion: for example, he observes that the Kūfan notables failed to support al-Mukhtār in his bid for power, and so he took the extraordinary step of manumitting their slaves and enlisting them in his army. This seems to confirm later Muslim historians' association of his movement with the *mawālī*, essentially subaltern converts and dependents of the Arab Muslim elite.[55] Further, Bar Penkāyē specifically notes the importance of the battle of al-Mukhtār's forces against the "Western" general Bar Zāyāṭ, i.e. ʿUbayd Allāh b. Ziyād, commander of the Umayyad army. He describes this engagement as a slaughter on both sides, though as recounted by al-Ṭabarī, for example, the battle of the Khāzir appears more like a one-sided Iraqi massacre of the Syrians. But frustratingly, Bar Penkāyē omits any reference to al-Mukhtār's prophetic

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[50] Recently, Robinson has argued quite compellingly for the importance of the Second Fitna in precipitating what he views as the Islamification of the Umayyad state during the reign of ʿAbd al-Malik, a process reflected in such diverse phenomena as the reform of the state bureaucracy, the implementation of aniconic symbolism in the imperial coinage, the building of the Dome of the Rock, and possibly the promulgation of the "official" recension of the Qurʾān. See *Abd al-Malik*, esp. 59–80.

[51] As in the *Doctrina Jacobi*; see Brock, "Syriac Views," 9, and for an overview of this text, see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 55–61. Note, however, that in one passage Bar Penkāyē refers to Muḥammad as the "guide" (*mĕhāddyānā*) of the Arabs, a term that occasionally appears in other Syriac sources as well. See Mingana, *Sources Syriaques, Vol. I*, 146*–147*; cf. Brock, "Syriac Views," 14–15, and translation of the passage in "North Mesopotamia," 60–61.

As Reeves notes, certain works of the period exhibit some resistance to fully incorporating the Arab dominion into the eschatological scheme presented by Daniel; for example, Pseudo-Methodius does not acknowledge the Arabs as the fourth "horn" or kingdom, but rather insists that a full restoration of *Roman* authority must precede the coming of the Messiah. See Reeves, *Trajectories*, 12–13, and cf. 15–17 on the shift to the interpretation of the Ishmaelites as the fourth "horn" in the unexpurgated versions of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*.

[52] Mingana, *Sources Syriaques, Vol. I*, 146*–147*; Brock, "North Mesopotamia," 61–62. Compare the positive view of the Arab dominion found in the apocalyptic *Secrets of R.*

Shimʿon bar Yoḥai: the Ishmaelites are seen as hastening Israel's redemption, and the second king of Ishmael is described as a "friend of Israel" (cf. Reeves, *Trajectories*, 80–82; the "second king of Ishmael" is apparently a conflation of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān on the basis of the association of both with renovations of the Temple Mount).

[53] Mingana, *Sources Syriaques*, 154*–155*; Brock, "North Mesopotamia," 63.

[54] Mingana, *Sources Syriaques*, 154*–165*; Brock, "North Mesopotamia," 63–74. Hoyland trenchantly observes that apocalyptic anxieties were most often triggered not by mere political turbulence, but by events that exceeded the explanatory capacities of existing theological frameworks: "it was not the degree of destruction or number of fatalities caused by a catastrophe that counted, but the challenge that it posed to the established understanding of history" (*Seeing Islam*, 31). Thus, it was not the severity of the second civil war and the consequent plague in northern Mesopotamia that had to be explained in themselves; rather, it was the apparent collapse of Arab dominion after twenty years of stable rule under Muʿāwiya, of seemingly providential benefit to Bar Penkāyē's community, that had to be addressed.

[55] The notorious "Episode of the Chair," in which partisans of al-Mukhtār are said to have paraded about a chair in which ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib had habitually sat as a war standard, is often treated as decisive proof of the heterogeneous religious background of al-Mukhtār's supporters. For al-Ṭabarī's account of this strange incident, see *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Vol. XXI: The Victory of the Marwānids*, 67–73.

claims whatsoever, although, as Brock notes, *later* Syriac authors seem to have been quite aware of these claims.[56]

It is extremely tempting to view Bar Penkāyē's interpretation of Bar Kokhba as a false messiah inspired by the lying spirit, and thus able to compel his followers to hasten towards their own destruction, as a veiled reference to al-Mukhtār. According to later Muslim sources, his revolt is supposed to have had chiliastic overtones: he is said to have made messianic claims on behalf of Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya, as well as having prophetic pretensions of his own.[57] Further, Bar Penkāyē has a strong predilection for reading the Second Fitna in eschatological terms. Towards the end of his historical account, he concludes with reflections upon the implications of the "chastisements" brought upon his community in recent years: "Here are famines, earthquakes and plagues; only one thing is missing for us: the advent of the Deceiver."[58] He thus interpreted the severe disruptions in the life of his community caused by the civil war as signs of the impending apocalypse, and in particular, he saw the revolt of al-Mukhtār as the beginning of the end of the Arab dominion. One could thus surmise that explicit reference to a false prophet – or someone who could be implicitly cast in such a role – among one party of the warring Ishmaelites would certainly have enhanced Bar Penkāyē's claims about the eschatological nature of the civil strife that consumed Iraq at that time.[59]

But as much as it might make sense to us for him to target al-Mukhtār for criticism in this way, Bar Penkāyē's account of the civil war lacks any allegation of prophetic and messianic claims on al-Mukhtār's part; again, direct reference to such claims is not found here, only in later Muslim and Christian works. There is no way of telling for sure how familiar Bar Penkāyē was with the specific religious claims advanced by al-Mukhtār on behalf of Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya; there is actually no mention of the latter here in Bar Penkāyē's work, and again, the author does not even really acknowledge *Muḥammad's* claim to prophecy! Despite the numerous links between his accounts of the Bar Kokhba revolt and the Second Fitna – most of all their common interpretation as manifestations of divine wrath – the possible connection between Bar Kokhba and al-Mukhtār as false prophets in the *Rēš Mellē* must remain only a tantalizing possibility.

The Late Antique Prophetic Milieu?

Bar Penkāyē's exegesis of the Ahab story, linking it to Bar Kokhba and the Jewish revolt, challenges common assumptions about the lack of interest in the subject of prophecy among Christians in Late Antiquity. The casual way in which he invokes the theme of false prophecy here is surely significant, whether or not he does so as a subtle condemnation of al-Mukhtār and his movement, or even as a polemic against Muḥammad himself. If we dig a little deeper, we might very well find that some of Bar Penkāyē's contemporaries and predecessors may have had similar things to say about Micaiah and Ahab, and thus about the nature of prophecy as well. It seems quite improbable that Bar Penkāyē's use of the Ahab narrative as an illustration of the destructive potential of false prophecy is completely unique, or that none of his contemporaries and predecessors in the Syriac Christian tradition shared his significant interest in the subject.[60]

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[56] See Brock, "North Mesopotamia," 64, note b: in practically identical wording, both Michael the Syrian (d. 1199) and the anonymous *Chronicle of 1234* relate that al-Mukhtār "was a false deceiver who hypocritically said of himself that he was a prophet." The compendious chronicle of Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286) contains many details about the Second Fitna (some garbled); notably, though he identifies al-Mukhtār as causing widespread dissension and strife, he does not mention his prophetic claims at all.

[57] Strikingly, it seems that some of al-Mukhtār's supporters might have claimed charismatic abilities as well: al-Ṭabarī preserves an odd report in which one ʿAbd Allāh b. Nawf prophesies (incorrectly!) in *sajʿ* before a battle (see *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Vol. XXI: The Victory of the Marwānids*, 99). According to al-Ṭabarī's source here (the Iraqi traditionist Abū Mikhnaf), this individual was associated with a small circle among al-Mukhtār's followers who were considered "extremists" (*ghulāt*) at that time. Al-Qāḍī takes this report as genuine evidence that *ghuluww* already had specific, though possibly non-pejorative, connotations at this very early stage (cf. "Development of the Term *Ghulāt*," 295–301). However, it seems just as likely that the report deploys the term anachronistically. Abū Mikhnaf, al-Ṭabarī's source, was himself removed from the events of the Second Fitna by more than a hundred years, and there is no compelling reason to accept the unique appearance of the terminology of *ghuluww* or doctrinal excess in this report, at such an early stage of Islamic history, as necessarily authentic.

[58] Mingana, *Sources Syriaques, Vol. I*, 165*; Brock, "North Mesopotamia," 72.

[59] See Brock, "North Mesopotamia," 52–53 for a brief explanation of the circumstances surrounding the composition of the work; Brock conjectures that it was actually completed sometime after the death of al-Mukhtār in 692 and thus at a point at which the Marwānid restoration of imperial order was well underway.

[60] Stroumsa surmises that pre-Islamic Jews and Christians appear to have been generally uninterested in prophecy because of the lack of any substantial discussion of biblical passages dealing with the subject in pre-Islamic sources. However, I would suggest that the problem might be that she is looking in the wrong place. It would certainly be worthwhile to scour her sources to see if there is any significant interest in *false* prophecy to be found there, whether manifested in exegesis of the Ahab and Micaiah narrative in 1 Kings 22, for example, or else in some other fitting scriptural context. Inasmuch as our extant texts have a strong tendency to reflect the normativizing perspectives of the church and the rabbinate, Jewish and Christian spokesmen in the pre-Islamic period had little motivation to defend the validity of prophecy, which they could take for granted, as Stroumsa herself notes. However, they may have had ample cause to denounce what they would have assumed was *false* prophecy, especially given an appropriate textual opportunity such as that presented by 1 Kings 22.

Pace Griffith and Stroumsa, it may not have been the rise of Islam that first precipitated substantial discussions of prophecy among Jews and Christians in the Near East. Rather, it seems just as likely that this discourse has authentically pre-Islamic roots, although the concepts and categories Jews and Christians drew upon in discussing prophecy no doubt changed in particular ways after the rise of Islam. Living in a time of severe political strife, during a conflict that was exacerbated by intense chiliastic and messianic ferment, at least for a short while, Bar Penkāyē looks back at Bar Kokhba and sees the hand of God working through the lying spirit to guide the Jews to their destruction; meanwhile, contemplating more proximate events, he comprehends the tumultuous history of his own time through an apocalyptic framework, seeing current events as heralding the advent of Antichrist. Works such as Bar Penkāyē's, confronting the Arab conquests and their aftermath – including what might have seemed like the imminent collapse of the caliphate scarcely fifty years after its foundation – drew on familiar tropes and categories to explain contemporary developments; and though a direct link between the appearance of false prophets and the End Times is lacking in Bar Penkāyē's work, the theme of false prophecy generally held an important place in the established eschatological schemes that informed Christian and Jewish reflection on the present.

Thus, in making use of such tropes and themes, Jews and Christians writing in the apocalyptic mode in the early years after the Arab conquests undoubtedly contributed to their communities' perception of Islam, however distorted that perception may have been. This in turn helped to lay the foundations for the subsequent flourishing of formal polemic against Muḥammad's prophecy in subsequent decades and centuries. That is, insofar as earlier generations of Christian spokesmen living after the Arab conquests interpreted events of their own time through the lens of apocalyptic, anticipating Deceivers and *pseudochristoi* and *pseudoprophētai*, this must in some way have helped to condition ecclesiastical discourse for the characteristically polemical function it adopted in later generations, especially inasmuch as systematic refutations of Muḥammad's authenticity became one of its cornerstones.[61]

Thus, it is reasonable to conjecture that some of the associations prophecy held for Jews and Christians in the pre-Islamic era carried over into the early Islamic period, even if for much of that time their attention might have been devoted to rejecting what was interpreted as *false* prophecy. For this reason, Jewish and Christian interest in prophecy should not be considered an exclusively post-Islamic phenomenon. Rather, we should recognize the shifting and fluid nature of the discourse on prophecy, as it evolved from an established, though relatively marginal, component of eschatological schemes to a central topic of theological and philosophical speculation.

Moreover, anticipation of false prophets as signs of the impending eschaton was just one of several ways in which prophecy continued to be significant for Jews, Christians, and other communities in Late Antiquity. When Islam emerged on the world stage in the early seventh century, Muslims encountered preexisting discourses on the nature of prophecy, assimilated them, adapted them, and in the end significantly redirected them. For example, it is ironic that while Jewish and Christian eschatological speculations intensified in the late sixth and early seventh centuries in response to the political turbulence of the day (of which the Arab conquests were a major part), Muslims themselves rapidly appropriated apocalyptic for their own ends and made significant contributions to the genre, though they had themselves been the cause of much of that turbulence.[62]

Thus, when we look at a later era significantly removed from the late antique milieu in which the most critical exchanges affecting the evolution of prophetic discourse probably occurred, what we see in a figure like Ibn Ezra in the twelfth century is not simply a Jewish adaptation of originally or intrinsically Muslim concepts, categories, and arguments, even though, as with Maimonides, the *formal* characteristics of Ibn Ezra's thought might be recognizably Islamic. Rather, this seems to represent a Jewish *reincorporation* of a discourse that had previously been assimilated and adapted by Muslims, who were themselves reacting to the polemical attacks of Jews and Christians. Jews and Christians did not start talking about prophecy again in the seventh century just because of Muslims, as if they had forgotten all about it since Second Temple times. Rather, it is entirely probable that they had never really stopped talking about it.[63]

It may be true that in the *specific* realm of *kalām*, of formal disputation and philosophical-theological reflection, it was Muslim claims about Muḥammad's authentic prophethood and unique experience of revelation that provoked the elaboration of sophisticated arguments on the nature of

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[61] Tolan emphasizes the way in which Christian ecclesiastical spokesmen commonly attempted to come to terms with Islam by forcing Muslim beliefs, doctrines, and practices into established schemata strongly influenced by scriptural models of false religion, no matter how outlandish or contrary to obvious truths; thus the religion of the "Saracens" was commonly decried as heresy, idolatry, a variety of Judaism, etc. See Tolan, *Saracens, passim*, but cf., e.g., the discussion of Isidore of Seville, 5–20.

[62] Early Muslim apocalyptic is only beginning to receive the attention it deserves; cf., e.g., David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 2002).

[63] Obviously Bar Penkāyē's exegetical and ideological position cannot be fully appreciated without being placed in the full context of his predecessors in both the Greek and Syriac Christian traditions of historiography and chronography. A careful examination of the relevant parallels and precursors is necessary before we can conclusively establish what his goals and motivations might have been, and to what degree he may have been innovating here.

prophecy by Jews and Christians, largely to enable them to counter those claims. But to draw the relationships between these elements too schematically, positing the career of Muḥammad as the *sole* impetus for such discussions and Jewish and Christian engagements with the subject as entirely reactive, ignores the important prehistory of what became a major component of the common culture of the high medieval Islamicate civilization in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims were equal participants.

Moreover, revisiting the larger historiographic concerns with which we began here, it is not just that there were preexisting debates that foreshadowed some of the intellectual issues that became central for learned Muslims and their interlocutors after the rise of Islam. Rather, both the full-blown discourse of *kalām* and those prior debates might actually have been energized by ongoing prophetic activity, and this activity could itself have contributed in some way to the emergence of Islam. That is, we should be open to the possibility that prophecy was widely current not only as a discursive object in the late antique milieu, but also as a living tradition. To put it plainly, it is not that Muḥammad's mission provided the absolute stimulus that gave rise to a new discourse on prophecy on account of his single-handed reinvigoration or reintroduction of the institution *de novo*. Rather, if we look closer, drawing together phenomena that scholars seem to have been hesitant to connect in the past, we find that the continuing vitality of prophecy in Late Antiquity may in some sense have given rise to Muḥammad, inasmuch as he was not the only prophet to emerge in this era. Indeed, he was not even the only *Arabian* prophet to do so.

We have already made brief mention of the *kāhin*, the Arabian soothsayer or oracle; while there may be some phenomenological similarity between the mantic experience supposedly undergone by these figures and Muḥammad's revelation of the Qur'ān, an objective evaluation is practically impossible due to the highly tendentious and suspect nature of virtually all of the accounts of *kihāna* preserved by Muslim sources.[64] Perhaps because they implicitly recognize that claims of oracular revelation would naturally convey authority in Jāhilī Arabian culture, particularly as expressed in oracles pronounced in *saj'* (and thus uncomfortably similar to the Qur'ān itself), those sources portray and denigrate a group of rival prophets who emerged in Muḥammad's time as *kāhin*s. When exactly these prophet-*kāhin*s emerged

relative to Muḥammad's ministry is unclear, but what *is* clear is that by the time of the accession of Abū Bakr as first caliph in 632, they were perceived as a distinct threat to the authority of the Muslim umma, necessitating the prosecution of the *ridda* wars (or "wars of apostasy") against them: Ṭulayḥa b. Khuwaylid of the Banū Ṭayyi' and Banū Asad; al-Aswad al-ʿAnsī, called Dhū'l-Khimār (the Veiled One), of the Yemen; the prophetess Sajāḥ bt. al-Ḥārith of the Banū Tamīm; and finally, her ally (and alleged paramour), the most notorious of all the *ridda* prophets, Musaylima b. Ḥabīb of the Banū Ḥanīfa, commonly called *al-kadhdhāb* (the Liar) by later Muslim sources.[65]

Scholars have often seen all of these figures as emerging in direct response to the career and death of Muḥammad, in particular as a means through which the various tribal communities of Arabia could maintain their autonomy and resist subordination to the Quraysh-dominated Muslim community, which was at this time rapidly developing into the jihād state that directed and profited richly from massive campaigns of conquest. For example, although he does not explain it in exactly this way, the impression Kister's masterful survey of the primary source material on Musaylima gives is that his mission might have been a failed attempt at organizing an indigenous resistance to the expansionist policy the umma aggressively pursued after the Prophet's death. This seems particularly plausible given that the Muslim community in the Ḥijāz had already begun to extend its influence into al-Yamāma, the territory of the Banū Ḥanīfa, during Muḥammad's lifetime.[66] Seen as a deliberate program of religious and political colonization, the assertion of total Qurashī or Ḥijāzī hegemony throughout Arabia can quite reasonably be interpreted as the most obvious rationale behind the *ridda* campaigns, rather than viewing them as an unplanned response to the "apostasy" of various tribes outside of the umma's direct control after the Prophet's death. One might even speculate that the wars against "apostasy" were *primarily* a reaction to the attempts of the prophet-*kāhin*s to galvanize resistance against Muslim incursions in parts of Arabia outside of the Ḥijāz.[67]

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[64] The classic discussion of the *kāhin/kāhina* phenomenon is Toufic Fahd, *La divination arabe: études religieuses, sociologiques et folkloriques sur le milieu natif de l'Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 92–104, with many points summarized in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, second ed., s.v. "Kāhin." Fahd's magisterial study is indispensable, yet perhaps overly positivistic, insofar as everything we know of the *kāhin* phenomenon comes from sources far removed from the original Jāhilī milieu. It is entirely possible that the strong resemblances between the surviving accounts of these obscure figures and their cryptic utterances and Muḥammad and the Qur'ān are due to the former being directly modeled upon the latter.

[65] For a concise overview of the *ridda* wars, see Fred M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 82–90. Al-Ṭabarī's accounts of the *ridda* prophets are conveniently found in English translation in *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume X: The Conquest of Arabia* (trans. F. M. Donner; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985); for al-Aswad, see 18–54; Ṭulayḥa, 60–74; Sajāḥ, 84–98 (including the lurid and probably wholly unreliable account of her assignation with Musaylima); and Musaylima, 105–134.

[66] See M. J. Kister, "The Struggle Against Musaylima and the Conquest of Yamāma," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 27 (2002): 1–56; cf. Dale Eickelman, "Musaylima: An Approach to the Social Anthropology of Seventh Century Arabia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 10 (1967): 17–52 and Abdullah al-Askar, *Al-Yamama in the Early Islamic Era* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2002), 79–100.

[67] Scholars of early Islam often operate under the assumption, encouraged by Muslim sources, that the imposition of fealty to the umma upon other tribes was a natural conse-

All that said, it is perhaps too deterministic to see the umma's eventual domination of all of Arabia as inevitable, and thus the emergence of the prophet-kāhins as primarily or solely a reaction to Muḥammad's success and the triumph of the Muslim umma in the Ḥijāz after the capitulation of the Quraysh and the "conquest" of Mecca in 630. Especially given the clear association between religious development and political consolidation in Late Antiquity, it is equally plausible that the appearance of some or all of the prophet-kāhins may represent an autonomous development coinciding with the rise of Islam, and not just responses to (and thus, presumably, mere imitations of) Muḥammad.[68] In his anthropological analysis of Musaylima's mission among the Ḥanīfa in al-Yamāma, Eickelman emphasizes that the positive conditions for cultural transformation and religious revitalization do seem to have prevailed in central and eastern Arabia just as much as in the western region of the Ḥijāz.

For example, al-Ḥajr, the main urban settlement in the territory of the Banū Ḥanīfa, was situated at a natural confluence of agricultural land and the desert areas populated by the Bedouin, thus providing a meeting-place for both the settled and the nomadic elements of the Ḥanīfa tribe. Like Mecca, al-Ḥajr was an important regional trading center, and as such, the settlement had a significant amount of contact with the imperial states at the northern fringes of Arabia, especially through the Christian Arab client state of the Banū Lakhm directly to the north. On this basis, Christianity seems to have become particularly influential among the Ḥanīfa as well as among the neighboring tribe of Tamīm in Musaylima's time.[69]

Thus, although a conclusive answer is probably beyond our reach, it is reasonable to assume that, when we seek to evaluate Muḥammad's "competitors" among the prophet-kāhins, there is in fact no compelling reason to privilege the mission of Muḥammad himself as the primary stimulus explaining their emergence. Rather, both they and Muḥammad should be located in the context of a much broader movement towards political consolidation on a monotheistic basis in late antique Arabia, a movement that

Fowden and others have commented upon extensively. Fowden notes what appears to be the ineluctable progression towards monotheization throughout the peninsula during the centuries before Muḥammad, citing the examples of Ḥimyarite Yemen, the Ghassānid and Lakhmid imperial foederati in the northern borderlands, and the major Christian settlement of Najrān in particular. Admittedly, as far as we know (and we know very little about all of these cases) prophets were not prominently associated with any of these communities' adoption of monotheism.[70] However, a prophet is not the sole means of achieving monotheization or greater religious organization in general, though charismatic or prophetic leadership is presumably one of the most compelling and efficient means of doing so. The rapid proliferation of Arabian prophets in the late sixth and early seventh centuries may very well serve as an illustration of this phenomenon.[71]

The commonalities linking Muḥammad and his rivals may also help to bring even larger trends of the period into focus. Muḥammad's prophecy might best be understood not as the result of a mere aping of scriptural influences "borrowed" from Jews – and thus reflecting either his solitary religious genius or his slavish dependence on his sources, depending on how one looks at it – but as one manifestation of a larger prophetic ferment in Late Antiquity. Charismatic leadership frequently provides the foundation for community building (Gemeindebildung) in this milieu, both in the narrower Arabian context and in the wider Near Eastern and Mediterranean context.[72] This being the case, it is possible that prophecy provides a frame in which the puzzle pieces constituted by an extremely diverse body of phenomena in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages may fit, and within which they might yet be assembled into a coherent whole.

The most obvious parallel to Muḥammad outside the Arabian milieu – one that has not gone wholly unnoticed – is Mani. Admittedly, the connections between Manichaeism and Islam may not be as direct as was once thought. Stroumsa has convincingly demonstrated that Islamic sources on Mani filter his purported claims about his prophetic status through

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quence of the conception of Islam as the natural (if not "original") religion of the Arabs. Rethinking that assumption, we might just as readily conclude that the ridda wars were simply driven by the umma's recognition that the concession of authority or legitimacy to prophetic leaders from other tribes was too much of a challenge to Muḥammad's uniqueness, and thus to their own community's political hegemony. While the literature on early Islam sometimes treats the Muslim umma as wholly antithetical to tribalism, in recent years many scholars have emphasized more the community's nature as a "super-tribe" that could organize large sectors of the Bedouin population and redirect their military energies from intertribal warfare to large-scale campaigns of conquest. But perhaps this is too teleological a view of developments in this early, and no doubt chaotic, era.

[68] On Muslim sources' approach to the problem of the apparent similarity of Musaylima's revelations to Muḥammad's, see Kister, "The Struggle Against Musaylima," 37–42.

[69] Cf. Eickelman, "Musaylima," 28–32.

[70] Garth Fowden, From Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 109–116, 119–121. Oddly, prophets and prophecy are nowhere to be found in Fowden's wide-ranging discussion.

[71] The Sīra of Ibn Isḥāq features a fascinating story about the ministry of a wandering holy man named Faymiyūn and the origin of Christianity in Najrān, the most important center of Arabian Christianity in the Prophet's day; see The Life of Muhammad, A Translation of Isḥāq's [sic] Sīrat Rasūl Allāh (trans. A. Guillaume; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 14–16, and for discussion, David Cook, "The aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd: History and ḥadīth in a Martyrological Sequence," Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 34 (2008): 125–148.

[72] I deliberately invoke Wansbrough here by using the term Gemeindebildung, since his emphasis on the formative influence of common patterns of prophetic authority shared among Jews and Christians on the fledgling Muslim community seems quite germane to the larger point I wish to make here.

Qur'ānic terms and concepts; thus, the notion that the Qur'ānic reference to Muḥammad as "Seal of the Prophets" (khātam al-nabiyyīn, 33:40) may derive directly from Mani's own adoption of that title, as scholars once held, proves to be untenable.[73] Nevertheless, the *overall* continuities between Manichaeism and Islam are striking, in particular the idea of an historical prophetic succession that culminated in the apostolic mission of the community's founder and the positing of a complex, creative tension between apostles and prophets in both traditions.

While it is surely inaccurate to think of Qur'ānic prophetology as "borrowed" from Manichaeism, the impact of this widely influential prophetic movement, which so successfully synthesized diverse Christian, Iranian, and gnostic elements that had percolated in the late antique Near East for centuries, on the emergence of Islam has yet to be fully appreciated and explored.[74] Intriguingly, this brings us right back to the *kāhin*s and the religious ferment that seems to have precipitated the rise of the *ridda* prophets. Gil has argued for the close relationship between strands of Manichaean thought channeled from the Syrian-Mesopotamian milieu through the Lakhmid center at Ḥīra to tribal confederations like Kinda and Ḥanīfa in central and eastern Arabia.[75] If such continuities did in fact exist between Iraq

and Arabia, we might justifiably wonder if it is not Musaylima who might have imitated Muḥammad, but rather, perhaps, vice versa.

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What the community who followed Muḥammad made of him after his death – how they conceived of his prophecy, how they presented it to others, and how some might have self-consciously sought to replicate his prophecy while others categorically denied this as a possibility – reflects the larger cultural, social, and religious dynamics at work in the late antique environment as well. The flourishing of the genre of *dalā'il al-nubuwwa* or the "proofs of prophecy" not only stimulated a new phase in intercommunal dialogue among learned spokesmen of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam alike. It also placed any continuing expression of prophetic energies as beyond the bounds of orthodoxy, a process symbolized by the establishment of *khatm al-nubuwwa* or the finality of Muḥammad's prophethood as Sunnī dogma.[76]

As long-lived as the genre of *dalā'il al-nubuwwa* was, it not only testifies to the perennial rejuvenation of the discourse through polemical encounters between theologians of various communities well into the Middle Ages (indeed virtually to modern times). It also reflects the continuing need to constrain charismatic energies and channel them into other cultural and religious enterprises. For Sunnīs, this helped to ensure the unique authority of the established bases of normative thought and behavior, the Qur'ān and Sunna, and bolstered the leadership claims of their authorized interpreters, the *'ulamā'*, while preventing potentially destabilizing recapitulations of Muḥammad's charismatic leadership whenever possible.

As such, the "proofs of prophecy" literature and the doctrine of *khatm al-nubuwwa* are direct analogues to the rabbinic "doctrine" of the cessation of prophecy, at least as it has been traditionally conceived by scholars.[77]

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[73] Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, "'Seal of the Prophets': The Nature of a Manichaean Metaphor," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 7 (1986): 61–74. Stroumsa emphasizes the fact that, although *literal* parallels to the Qur'ānic and Islamic phrase are occasionally found in authentic Manichaean texts, in all of these cases, it cannot mean "the *final* prophet," as the Islamic usage holds, but rather "he who *verifies* the [previous and subsequent] prophets." However, Friedmann notes that alternative understandings of the meaning of the Qur'ānic phrase *khātam al-nabiyyīn* are attested in early Islamic sources – including a direct parallel to the Manichaean usage, namely "he who *verifies* the [previous and subsequent] prophets." This implies that the observed parallel between the Manichaean and Qur'ānic conceptions might be more legitimate than Stroumsa would allow. See Yohanan Friedmann, "Finality of Prophethood in Sunnī Islam," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 7 (1986): 177–215, esp. 180–193. Horovitz was the first to observe that *khātam al-nabiyyīn* might mean "verifier of prophets" rather than "the final prophet"; see Josef Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Berlin and Leipzig: De Gruyter, 1926), 53.

[74] The most compelling treatment of the complex problem of the relationship between Manichaeism and Islam is Róbert Simon, "Mānī and Muḥammad," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 21 (1997): 118–141; cf. also François de Blois, "Elchasai—Manes—Muḥammad: Manichäismus und Islam in religionshistorischem Vergelich," *Der Islam* 81 (2004): 31–48. The importance of late antique Syrian-Mesopotamian precursors to Muḥammad's prophecy – Ebionites, Elchasites, Manichaeans, and the *Pseudo-Clementine* literature – was first suggested, as far as I am aware, by Tor Andræ in his 1932 biography of Muḥammad (cf. *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith* (trans. T. Menzel; New York: Scribner's, 1936), 99–113), but the trajectories of religious development Andræ describes here have not received the attention they deserve, though his work is almost a century old.

[75] Moshe Gil, "The Creed of Abū 'Amīr," *Israel Oriental Studies* 12 (1992): 9–57; cf. Simon, "Mānī and Muḥammad," 130–132. Although Manichaeism spread quite widely and

survived well into the Middle Ages, it never gained a durable foothold anywhere in the world; Fowden speculates that this is due to the fact that no Manichaean community ever successfully associated itself with a politically expansionist or centralizing state (cf. *From Empire to Commonwealth*, 72–76). Similarly, Eickelman and others have noted that Musaylima's mission failed because his message was too insular; he aimed solely at creating an autonomous Ḥanafī polity in al-Yamāma, in sharp contrast to Muḥammad's global vision ("Musaylima," 48–50); cf. Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 237–250.

[76] Dozens, if not hundreds, of Muslim authors wrote in this genre, including al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868), Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 891), 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025), Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ (d. 1149), and al-Bayhaqī (d. 1066); the work of the last author is perhaps the most widely recognized classic of the genre.

[77] A point made by Friedmann, particularly on the basis of a widely attested tradition that the *'ulamā'* are the heirs of the prophets ("Finality of Prophethood in Sunnī Islam,"

Both represent the attempt to prevent or marginalize further manifestations of "prophetism" while shoring up the claims of those who deliberately presented themselves as the spokesmen for the orthodox and the mainstream. The dialectical tension here between the construction of authority and the denial of the possibility of a charismatic basis for an alternative authority brings to mind another obvious parallel, that of the Montanists. Emerging in Phrygia in Asia Minor in the mid-second century, proponents of the so-called "New Prophecy" organized a charismatic community that successfully resisted control by officials at Rome and Constantinople for some time; despite ongoing persecution from the time of Constantine onwards, the community spread throughout the Mediterranean world, its fervor quelled only by the draconian measures taken to suppress the movement by Justinian in the sixth century. As many observers have noted, the long survival of the "New Prophecy" may in part have been due to the Montanists' apparent lack of any substantial theological deviation from nascent Orthodoxy, the movement's most salient distinguishing features being an emphasis on ascetic rigor, an exaggerated anticipation of the eschaton, regular expression of charismatic gifts (including oracular revelation) and, perhaps most conspicuously, women's assumption of leadership roles.

For our present concerns, what is most notable is the strategy anti-Montanist spokesmen adopted in their attacks on the movement. As Nasrallah has shown, the third-century source used by the fourth-century heresiographer Epiphanius to condemn the "New Prophecy" distinguishes between "rational" prophecy, which seems to have ended in the apostolic period, and the irrational claims of the Montanists, whose oracular pronouncements demonstrate their unsoundness of mind. Thus, as with the (putative) rabbinic claim of the cessation of prophecy and Muslim claims about the finality of Muḥammad's prophethood, we find once again that the boundaries between past and present, the historical and the contemporary, are sharply delineated by those who seek to undermine or prevent claims to authority based on continuing revelation.[78]

The analogies between these normativizing discourses and the nonconformist impulses they sought to delimit, control, or suppress should serve to remind us that the possible continuities between prophetic phenomena of the late sixth and early seventh century in Arabia and their late antique counterparts surely did not stop there. If we think of "prophetism" as a current that runs forward from at least as far back as the Second Temple period through Late Antiquity up to the time of Muḥammad, there is no real reason why that current should cease flowing once it emerges there.[79] That is, the torrent of prophetic enthusiasm that courses through several interconnected traditions and communities, like riverside towns linked by a common waterway, doesn't just crest with Muḥammad and then subside into the earth; in significant ways, the floodwaters rush over him and around him and through him as well. Thus, we might think of Musaylima and Muḥammad's other Arabian rivals as tributaries of the mainstream, affluents of a larger and deeper current – although if Musaylima and his confederates among the Banū Ḥanīfa had fared better in their political struggle against Muḥammad and his successors, we would undoubtedly have a different perspective on the question of who exactly had been the mere tributary and who the mainstream.

Sometimes tributaries thin out into what is little more than a picturesque babbling brook: this seems like a fitting figure for the notorious Ibn Ṣayyād, an Arabian Jewish boy whom Muḥammad is reported to have encountered a number of times. According to the ḥadīth literature, he was reportedly a visionary who experienced some sort of trance state while he lay under a blanket (reminiscent of the depiction of Muḥammad himself as al-muzzammil, "one wrapped in a cloak"; cf. Sūra 73). The challenge to Muḥammad implied by his oracular activity may have been the major contributing factor leading to his eventual identification as the Dajjāl, the Islamic version

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197–199), strongly reminiscent of the aforementioned rabbinic tradition about the *sages* being the heirs of the prophets.

[78] On the periodization of history as polemical strategy in Epiphanius' "anti-Phrygian" source, see Laura Salah Nasrallah, *"An Ecstasy of Folly": Prophecy and Authority in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press for Harvard Theological Studies, 2004), 187–193, and cf. 11–19; on the problematic construction of "Montanism" as a heresiological category, see 156–162. In this connection, we might recall the ninth-century Arab Christian theologian ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī's characteristic insistence that latter-day miracles constitute a species of coercion, inasmuch as it also contains an implicit argument against continuing revelation. Wonderworking and charismatic leadership may have been as much of a concern for him in his milieu as they were for Epiphanius and his source, as they may have been for rabbinic authorities in the Second Temple period and after.

[79] Recently, Hämeen-Anttila has made a similar argument, emphasizing the continuities between Muḥammad's prophecy and phenomena both preceding and following him. While fully recognizing the unreliable nature of much of our information about both pre-Islamic *kihāna* and the rival prophets to Muḥammad, Hämeen-Anttila makes a compelling case for a coherent tradition of Arabian prophecy and even suggests a daring, but quite plausible, revision of the received account of Muḥammad's Meccan origins that locates him more firmly in a milieu in which itinerant prophecy was common. Note, however, that Hämeen-Anttila sees the "biblical" (i. e. Jewish and Christian) associations of Muḥammad's message as a later development, providing his career and message with a secondary layer of associations and significations on top of, and eventually supplanting and effacing, the primary Arabian ones. This seems to me to isolate Muḥammad from the wider religious context far too strongly, and in fact, Hämeen-Anttila does not seem to detect any relationship between this Arabian tradition and prior or contemporary developments in the broader Near Eastern environment. See Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, "Arabian Prophecy," in *Prophecy in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context: Mesopotamian, Biblical, and Arabian Perspectives* (ed. M. Nissinen; Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 115–146.

of the Antichrist. Though some commentators on the ḥadīth interpret his activities as mere *kihāna*, such speculation tends to be drowned out by the chorus of voices condemning him as absolute evil. In one famous report, he is even depicted as the beast of the apocalypse, chained in a dungeon on a desert island, awaiting Armageddon. Without assuming too much about his historical authenticity, we can see quite clearly here that the linkage between pseudoprophecy and eschatological threat, so central in Christian apocalyptic, remains vital in this early Muslim tradition; and in fact, this tradition has an explicit Christian pedigree.[80]

Further, to continue with our riverine metaphor for just a moment longer, we might think of those branches of the current that flowed *through* Muḥammad as future manifestations of "prophetism" within the Muslim community that were colored and inflected by those normative discourses that grew up after him – despite the fact that those normative discourses often held that prophecy had actually reached its absolute and final culmination with Muḥammad. That is, though it was seldom *called* prophecy, mantic and charismatic phenomena in Islam often assumed a distinctly "Muḥammadan" appearance, for it was inevitably shaped by concepts and categories developed to describe and explain Muḥammad and his mission.

The most obvious example of this is the concept of the imamate as it became authoritative for various communities among the Shīʿa. The numerous groups that have favored the *wilāyat ʿAlī* as the sole legitimate path for the succession to Muḥammad have almost all been predisposed to conceive of some sort of special prophetic ability being associated with the members of his family whom they support as the true imams. Even the Twelver Shīʿa, who have historically been perhaps the most closely assimilated to the normative concepts and doctrines of the Sunnī majority, impute a distinctly supernatural and charismatic aura to their imams, though here, as in various forms of Second Temple Judaism, prophecy often manifests itself as inspired interpretation of the normative sources of law and religious guidance. Similarly, though the Twelvers have tended to avoid explicitly revelatory terminology such as *tanzīl* or *waḥy* when referring to the teachings of their imams, they do use terms such as *ilhām* to refer to their leaders' experience, and the distinction between these words may ultimately be a moot one.

This is to say nothing of the concepts associated with the Ismāʿīlīs, who have historically been far less reticent in describing the inspired activity of their own imams.[81]

While some aspects of prophecy were legitimated and incorporated into what became the classic sectarian formations of the Islamic community, for Sunnīs, explicit prophetic claims decisively placed individuals and groups beyond the bounds of orthodoxy. Friedmann speculates that the doctrine that Muḥammad was the final prophet – the orthodox understanding of the Qurʾānic phrase *khātam al-nabiyyīn* – emerged only gradually over centuries, and that it may have initially been stimulated by the necessity of repudiating the prophet-*kāhin*s and rejecting any possibility of accommodating prophetic claims after Muḥammad's death. But well after the *ridda* campaigns and the subordination of Arabia to the umma's control, prophetic pretenders continued to appear throughout early caliphal times: one al-Ḥārith b. Saʿīd was put to death for claiming prophecy during the time of ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 685–705), while another, Maḥmūd b. al-Faraj, was executed in the time of al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–861).[82]

Notably, both of these figures appeared in the caliphal heartlands, demonstrating that such claims did not simply thrive on the margins of Islamic society, as one might expect. This too occurred, however, as in the case of al-Muqannaʿ, the "Veiled Prophet" who arose in remote Khurāsān, at the easternmost geographical fringe of the early Islamic empire, or otherwise in the aforementioned case of al-Mukhtār, whose revolt was supposedly strongly influenced by its location in the milieu of the *mawālī* in Iraq, which may have constituted a kind of *social* fringe or frontier in early Islamic society.[83] In any event, as the Sunnī tradition coalesced, Muslims came to anticipate a succession of false prophets as an inevitable sign of the eschaton, just as Christians did. Notably, some linked the *ridda* prophet-*kāhin*s with the prophetic claimants of more recent times, as is seen, for example, in one

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[80] This ḥadīth report is the only one in the canonical corpus that is purportedly related by Muḥammad from another source, rather than being related on the authority of Muḥammad himself or one of his Companions. Notably, that source is Tamīm al-Dārī, a Christian monk. For a recent discussion of the Ibn Ṣayyād traditions, see Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 109–120. The Christian provenance of this tradition is wholly unsurprising: even the very word *dajjāl* itself hearkens back to the Gospels, insofar as it seems to be directly derived from Christ's prophecy regarding the advent of false Christs alongside false prophets (*pseudochristoi*, or, as rendered into Syriac, *mĕšīḥē daggālē*) in Matthew 24:24, which we have already mentioned here.

[81] The classic discussion of the Twelver doctrine of the imamate and the relationship between *imāma* and *nubuwwa* is that of Henry Corbin: see *En Islam iranien: aspects spirituels et philosophiques* (4 vols.; Paris: Gallimard, 1971–1972), 1.219–284; cf. also Uri Rubin, "Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shīʿa Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 1 (1979): 41–65.

[82] See Friedmann, "Finality of Prophethood," 194–196; on al-Ḥārith b. Saʿīd in particular, see the study of D. M. Dunlop, "Al-Ḥārith b. Saʿīd al-Kadhdhāb, a Claimant to Prophecy in the Caliphate of ʿAbd al-Malik," *Studies in Islam* 1 (1964): 12–18.

[83] On al-Muqannaʿ, see *Encyclopedia of Islam*, second ed., s.v. "Al-Muḳannaʿ" and B.S. Amoretti, "Sects and Heresies," in *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol. 4: The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs* (ed. R.N. Frye; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 481–519, 498–503. On the milieu of the converts in Iraq and Iran as a kind of social frontier or 'edge' in early Islamic society, cf. Richard Bulliet, *Islam: The View from the Edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

ḥadīth report that asserts that three false prophets must appear before Judgment Day: Musaylima, al-Aswad, and al-Mukhtār.[84]

It may have been the coalescence of the Sunnī doctrine of the finality of Muḥammad's prophethood that necessitated Shīʿī circumspection about the prophetic capacities of the imāms. However, it is also possible that the association between inspired knowledge and the imamate so characteristic of classical Shīʿism was actually a side effect of the emergence of the concept of strict designation (*naṣṣ*) that led to the construction of specific lines of imāms, thus producing Fiver, Sevener, or Twelver Shīʿism *qua* Shīʿism as it came to be known in the Middle Ages, replacing the diffuse ʿAlīd loyalism that characterized the "proto-Shīʿism" of earlier centuries. In other words, the imāms may have started out as a chain, or several chains, of inspired successors to the Prophet himself, but it is just as likely that the claim of their specific inspired knowledge was a way of justifying the very notion of loyalty to one lineage or another instead of to a whole host of genealogically qualified claimants.[85] Whatever the case may be, in the mature conception of the Shīʿa, the supernatural knowledge of the imāms did in fact make them tantamount to prophets, though the specific terminology of prophecy (*nabī/rasūl*) was strictly avoided, and an *implicit* doctrine of ongoing revelation became a hallmark of the Shīʿī conception of authority instead.

But even this had its limits: as the classical theory of the imamate began to be articulated among Twelver spokesmen, the most "excessive" doctrines associated with claims of inspiration were projected upon earlier ʿAlīd movements and leaders who had subsequently been marginalized. Thus, with the invention of the category of *ghulāt* ("extremists" or "exaggerators"), the legitimacy of the leaders sanctified by "orthodox" Shīʿism delicately perched upon a tacitly charismatic idea of authority, even as sharp limits were placed on the claims that could be made about the holders of that authority through the development of heresiology.[86] That is, mature

Shīʿism – at least its quietist and accommodationist forms – managed to be quasi-prophetic *and* anti-prophetic at the same time.[87] Nevertheless, it is unquestionably true that charismatic leadership stands as one of the decisive criteria separating Shīʿism and Sunnism, insofar as the latter repudiates both any form of continuing revelation and a charismatic basis for legitimate authority, at least in its most rigorously normativizing expressions. This is because for Sunnīs, *ʿilm*, authentic religious knowledge, is produced through the legitimate mediation of knowledge via verified chains of reliable transmitters, and not through inspiration or mediation through designated succession as for the Shīʿa.[88] The sharp distinction between Sunnī and Shīʿī attitudes in this regard is vividly demonstrated by the fact that among some *ghulāt* circles, not only inspiration but actual revelation continued, judging by the extraordinary testimony offered by not one but two surviving scriptures emanating from radical Shīʿī circles during the early centuries of the Muslim era, *The Mother of the Book* and the *Book of Shadows*.[89]

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[84] The same ḥadīth states that the worst of people are Banū Ḥanīfa (Musaylima's tribe), Banū Umayya, and Banū Thaqīf (al-Mukhtār's tribe). From the *Mustadrak* of al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī, cited in Kister, "The Struggle Against Musaylima," 13.

[85] See Hodgson's argument in favor of this premise: "How Did the Early Shīʿa Become Sectarian?," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 75 (1955): 1–13, esp. 10–11. At the same time, Hodgson does not deny that mantic and charismatic phenomena were rife among the early figures who were *later* designated (or defamed) as *ghulāt* or Shīʿī extremists; if anything, this seems to have been one of their most persistent traits. His point is that in the classical formulation, inspiration is mainly connected with the imamate as a *byproduct* of the designation of specific imāms as legitimate, especially as a means of bolstering their authority when political sovereignty was unattainable. The quasi-inspired knowledge that distinguishes the genuine imāms in orthodox Shīʿī theory epitomizes the phenomenon of prophecy as authorizing discourse that I have touched on repeatedly here.

[86] The emergence and application of *ghuluww* as a polemical term used by both Shīʿa and Sunnīs is an extremely complex question that is still not well understood. In her seminal

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article on the subject, al-Qāḍī shows that the category first began to be deployed by Shīʿī spokesmen around 800 to distance more moderate Shīʿism from its earlier and supposedly more deviant forerunners. However, it is clear that most if not at all of the substantive claims classical Shīʿī heresiographers make about early movements such as the Mukhtāriyya may be totally anachronistic and tendentious. See Wadad al-Qāḍī, "The Development of the Term *Ghulāt*"; cf. also Tamima Bayhom-Daou, "The Second-Century Šīʿite *Ġulāt*: Were They Really Gnostic?," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 5 (2003–4): 13–61.

[87] It should be noted that the Twelvers primarily indict the so-called *ghulāt* of excessive claims regarding the imāms, but this most often takes the form of divinizing them on some level; the accusation is also sometimes made that they claimed prophetic status for their leaders, but this is less frequent. For complicated reasons, the Kaysāniyya, the fully sectarian offshoot of al-Mukhtār's movement, are not usually considered *ghulāt* by Twelver Shīʿī authors *despite* their heterodoxy, including their idiosyncratic claims regarding al-Mukhtār's claim to prophecy. See al-Qāḍī, "Development of the Term *Ghulāt*," 313.

[88] Note, however, that the concept of knowledge in Sunnism changes dramatically with the advent of organized theoretical Sufism; on this point, see Yohanan Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahmadī Religious Thought and its Medieval Background* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 71–75.

[89] Both of these works are apocalypses attributed to early imāms, *The Mother of the Book* to Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Bāqir and *The Book of Shadows* to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq. The former may be as early as the late eighth century, while the latter has been dated to the early ninth. For discussion and German translations, see Heinz Halm, *Die Islamische Gnosis* (Zurich and Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1982), 113–198, 240–274. Excerpts from *The Mother of the Book* appear in English in *The Gnostic Bible: Gnostic Texts of Mystical Wisdom from the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (ed. W. Barnstone and M. Meyer; Boston: Shambhala, 2003), 665–725.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although there is a significant literature on the importance of prophecy in philosophy and disputation in the early and medieval Islamic periods, there has been surprisingly little comparative work done on the wider social, religious, and historical significance of prophecy as a continuing phenomenon in pre- and post-Islamic Late Antiquity. Nor has much of an effort been made to bridge the gap between philosophical and theological discourse and what one might call the "facts on the ground," at least as represented (however dimly or tendentiously) in sectarian, heresiographical, and historiographical literature. Once again, *pace* Griffith and Stroumsa, there does seem to have been significant interest in prophecy in learned discourse before the rise of Islam, but this is only one symptom of the more basic fact of the general continuation or resurgence of prophecy in myriad forms in Late Antiquity. The career of Muḥammad and his tremendous success in establishing a new religious community is only the most conspicuous consequence of this phenomenon.

In some halting and tenuous way, we have attempted to draw connections between historical problems and diverse phenomena here, moving from Second Temple Judaism to late antique and medieval communities that lay well outside the Jewish and Christian folds. To the extent that a prophetic resurgence may have radiated outward from Palestine to Asia Minor, Iraq, and Arabia in Late Antiquity, it mirrored the trajectory taken by other elements of the Israelite religious legacy such as the diffusion of Torah. How our understanding of a Mani, an Elchasai, or a Muḥammad is enriched by looking back to ancient Judaism is still uncertain; and unfortunately, the centuries just before the rise of Islam are dark ones, even more obscure than the first century AH. This is exactly what makes the testimony of Syriac literature of that period, of which Bar Penkāyē's work is essentially a continuation, so important.

But just as we may be sure that Elchasites, Manichaeans, or Muslims were distinctly aware of themselves as inheritors of the *scriptural* legacy of Israel, so too should the continuities between the divine emissaries these movements revered and the *prophetic* legacy of the Jews be meaningful as well. Nor were the Jews of a later period isolated from these developments, and the broader perspective we are suggesting here would undoubtedly cast numerous events and phenomena in Jewish history in a new light. For example, marginalized groups like the Ebionites, the ʿĪsāwiyya, or other messianic movements would gain a new autonomy and phenomenological significance precisely through being compared with similar, roughly contemporary phenomena in other communities and histories, instead of being perceived primarily as deviant anomalies or obscure dress rehearsals for the disastrous Sabbatian heresy of the 17th century.[90]

A fully integrated, synoptic account of prophecy in Late Antiquity would seek to evaluate the diverse oracular, prophetic, messianic, and sectarian phenomena of the period, before and after the rise of Islam, alongside the normative statements found in contemporary theological and philosophical sources from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities, which should themselves be viewed more holistically. That is, developments on the theme of prophecy as a purely intellectual datum may be profitably considered in tandem with aspects of the social and religious situation in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic milieux. Thus, questions such as how and why the ʿĪsāwiyya developed as an accommodationist form of Judaism that accepted Muḥammad as a legitimate divine messenger, or why the Twelver Shīʿa accepted a barely attenuated prophetic role for their imāms while eschewing explicit prophetic language, should be considered alongside the normative concerns of mainstream rabbinic or Sunnī authorities. The cases of the ʿĪsāwiyya and the Twelvers indicate that prophecy continued to be a socio-religious, cultural *fact*, that prophetic claims, or at least perceived prophetic status, were real and significant. Our scattered observations here represent only a prolegomenon to such work, suggesting the terrain that such an inquiry might propose to explore more fully.

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[90] The ʿĪsāwiyya have been reintroduced to contemporary scholarship primarily due to the efforts of Steven Wasserstrom: see his "The ʿIsawiyya Revisited," *Studia Islamica* 75 (1992): 57–80, and *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 71–89; cf. also Yoram Erder, "The Doctrine of Abū ʿĪsā al-Iṣfahānī and its Sources," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 20 (1996): 162–199.

Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity

Edited by

Philippa Townsend and Moulie Vidas

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Introduction

Revelation, Literature, Community, and Late Antiquity

PHILIPPA TOWNSEND and MOULIE VIDAS

The subject of this collection of essays reflects not only the prominence of the theme of revelation in late ancient texts, but also the centrality of discourses of revelation to both ancient and modern discussions of literature, community, and historical change in late antiquity. Authors from this period appealed to ideas, images, and experiences of revelation to understand and define the period in which they lived, the texts which they read and produced, and the social interactions and structures in which they participated. In modern historiography too the discussion of revelation is used to distinguish late antiquity from the period preceding it, to reconstruct its literary history, and to map and analyze its society.

One of the oldest and most pervasive ideas about revelation in late antiquity is that by this period it had declined or ceased. This notion appears in Plutarch's famous dialogue *On the Failure of the Oracles* as well as in several Jewish and Christian texts. As we shall see, variations on this idea have dominated modern scholarship too, even though expressed in new idioms; and while more recent scholarship has been critical of this narrative, the notion that revelation was essentially transformed in late antiquity persists. In both ancient and modern discussions, the cessation or transformation of revelation has been used to indicate or even define the essence of the period: it is a sign of the decline of Graeco-Roman cult, it is what ushers in the Christian era, it is what distinguishes the "Biblical" from the "Rabbinic," it is what makes late antiquity "late."

While a contrast between late antiquity and the age of revelation has structured much of the discussion, so too has the distinction between literary art and revelatory experience. According to this contrast, the less artfully designed, produced, or composed a text appears to be (and sometimes, the less intelligible it is), the more credible is the claim that it carries the message of God. This contrast exists already as early as the distinction Plato develops between divine inspiration and literary skill in his *Ion*, or in the Biblical tropes that prophecy is involuntary, comes from unexpected places, and can be misunderstood by its bearers. It is of particular importance, however, for the study of late antiquity because of the role it can play in the