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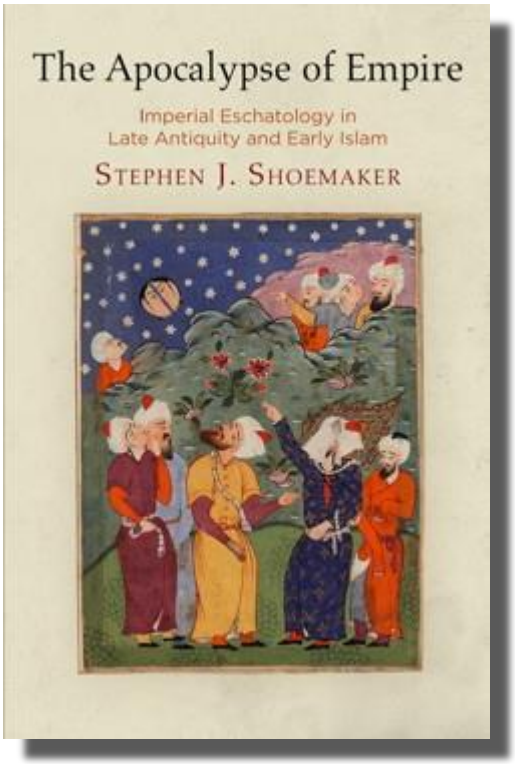

Stephen SHOEMAKER

The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam

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Stephen Shoemaker's *The Apocalypse of Empire* builds upon the methodology, and some of the most provocative conclusions, of the author's earlier monograph *The Death of a Prophet*.[1] In that book, Shoemaker subjects the extant evidence concerning Muḥammad's death to close scrutiny, concluding that the Prophet died after the invasion of Palestine commenced in 634 CE and not before, as most accounts hold. Even more shockingly, Shoemaker asserts that Muḥammad preached a fervently eschatological message and led his followers in a campaign

[1] *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

to conquer Jerusalem as the focal point of an imminent apocalyptic culmination of history.[2] One of the most compelling features of *The Death of a Prophet* is Shoemaker's deployment of a methodology and framework drawn from the study of early Christianity in order to show how the overtly eschatological message of the original movement that followed Muḥammad was radically rewritten in the course of just a few decades, forever altering the meaning and thrust of Islam in its formative period.

In *The Apocalypse of Empire* Shoemaker casts his net wider, and so capitalizes upon his formidable command of the relevant literatures of Late Antiquity (particularly sources from the Byzantine cultural sphere) to locate the Qurʾān and the eschatological mission of Muḥammad in their larger religious and political context. He reaches two major conclusions in this study. First, both the foundation of the original prophetic community in the Hijaz and the subsequent imperial expansion of Islam were thoroughly driven by apocalypticism, aiming specifically at establishing a polity that would usher in the End Times—the eponymous ideology of "imperial eschatology." Second, this ideology was prevalent in the Mediterranean and Near East in the centuries prior to the rise of Islam, especially in the Christian Roman Empire; thus, the conjunction of state-building and eschatology that sometimes appears to be a distinctive trait of Islam is, in fact, commonplace in this period.

Shoemaker's work is accessible and engaging. His prose is lucid and concise, and the argument of the book remains remarkably clear throughout. A particular virtue of the book is its harmonious balance between close examination of the relevant literary evidence, which

[2] As has been widely noted, in this respect Shoemaker's work revisits key aspects of Crone and Cook's notorious, though perhaps unjustly maligned, book *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

necessarily entails attention to more specialized scholarly debates, and robust synthesis of that evidence in pursuit of the overarching thesis. Shoemaker wades into more technical questions when he must, but never loses sight of the main arguments of individual chapters or the book as a whole. In what follows here, I will summarize the major insights of each chapter, and then proceed to some brief observations about the historiographic and methodological implications of the work, especially as it pertains to the contemporary study of Islam's origins in Late Antiquity.

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As one would expect, the introduction to *The Apocalypse of Empire* presents its overarching thesis, addresses its multiple scholarly contexts, and rehearses the arguments of its individual chapters. Shoemaker notes that as recently as 2007 John Collins observed the necessity for scholars of Islam to articulate a definition of apocalyptic best suited to the sources and evidence particular to the tradition (16).[3] Whether or not a distinct and coherent paradigm for the study of Islamic apocalyptic has emerged since then is debatable, but what is indisputable is that there has been a significant flourishing of interest in apocalypticism in Islam and Islamic (or Islamicate) contexts over the last couple of decades.[4] Much of this work predates the emergence of ISIS and the wide publication of its views on caliphal dominion and the impending end of the world, though naturally the movement's dramatic military and

[3] John Collins is known for his own germinal contributions to the development of an influential framework for the study of early Jewish apocalyptic, as Shoemaker acknowledges (14–15).
[4] E.g., David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 2002); idem, *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005); Jean-Pierre Filiu, *L'Apocalypse en Islam* (Paris: Fayard, 2008), translated into English as *Apocalypse in Islam*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Jamel A. Velji, *An Apocalyptic History of the Fatimid Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

propaganda successes galvanized the world's attention for a time and stimulated new scholarly reflections on the linkages between apocalyptic and empire in Islamic tradition.[5]

At the very least, the ISIS phenomenon confirmed the evergreen relevance of understanding the conjunction of eschatology and imperial or state-building projects in Islamic history. As already noted, Shoemaker's book makes a critical contribution to our conception of Islamic apocalypticism by arguing that this conjunction was not only an authentic feature of the Prophet's message but increasingly widespread in the late antique milieu and so part of the catalyst behind the emergence of Islam. Admittedly, any attempt to draw a direct line of filiation between "original," and thus putatively "essential," Islam and the ideology of ISIS has problematic implications. At the same time, the whole point of Shoemaker's argument is that while imperial eschatology is an aspect of "original" Islam, it does not originate *with* Islam. Rather, the justification of empire as ushering in the end of history and divine deliverance of the faithful is an ideology shared with, and most probably derived from, older Byzantine precursors in particular. The claim that Muslims are to be held accountable for the roots of ISIS lurking in the ancient history of their tradition is dubious on its own terms, but if one insists on making it, then it seems that one must hold Christians accountable as well.[6]

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[5] E.g., William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015); Graeme Wood, *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State* (New York: Random House, 2016); Michael Pregill, "ISIS, Eschatology, and Exegesis: The Propaganda of *Dabiq* and the Sectarian Rhetoric of Militant Shi'ism," *Mizan: Journal for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations* 1 (2016); David J. Wasserstein, *Black Banners of ISIS: The Roots of the New Caliphate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

[6] It is important to note that this is mainly my interpretation of the implications of Shoemaker's work, though he does hint at this point as well (e.g., *The Apocalypse of Empire*, 117–118). Some Christian polemicists will argue that the message of Muḥammad and the Qurʾān are necessarily definitive for Muslims while distancing themselves from the Christian Roman Empire, though of course most modern American and European Christians are heirs to the Orthodox/Chalcedonian faith that is one of Byzantium's main imperial legacies; Americans in particular are heirs to its characteristic fusion of triumphalist Christianity and imperial authority as well.

The question of how the apocalypticism of the earliest Muslims, or rather Believers, relates to that of other late antique communities is crucial for many reasons. Shoemaker argues that the conspicuous fusion of apocalyptic and empire is apparent not only in formative Islam but in various critical precursors. This compels us to reevaluate a common claim that Jewish and Christian apocalypticism was revived in Late Antiquity mainly in response to the rise of Islam. Sources such as *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* and the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* integrate the Arab empire into their apocalyptic schemes, and so must be acknowledged as reacting to Islam, at least in this basic sense. However, Shoemaker urges us to consider such sources in a new light, as continuing the distinctive imperially-focused eschatological fervor that was in fact a pervasive aspect of pre-Islamic late antique religiosity.[7] Thus, Muḥammad's "apocalyptic polity" was emblematic of its age, but hardly sui generis. This encourages us to rethink not only the conditions under which Islam emerged but the broader development of eschatological thought in late antique Judaism and Christianity.

Detecting the connections between Islamic imperial eschatology and its precursors requires us not only to carefully reconsider the pre-Islamic literary evidence, but also to overcome widely-held assumptions about the nature of apocalyptic as a genre in the pluriform Judaisms and Christianities of the early centuries BCE and CE. In Chapter 1, Shoemaker provides an extremely deft and useful overview of the most ancient exemplars of apocalyptic literature. Here, he seeks to challenge the common thesis, championed in recent years by Richard Horsley and Anathea Portier-Young, that the apocalyptic genre is primarily a form of anti-

[7] On Pseudo-Methodius, see the discussion of Chapters 2 and 3 of Shoemaker's book below. The apocalyptic passage on the future deliverance of Israel from Esau and Ishmael (i.e. Rome and the Arabs) in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* is perhaps one of the best-known such prophecies in rabbinic tradition, though Shoemaker omits it from his discussion; see John C. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postrabbinic Jewish Apocalypse Reader* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 67–75.

imperial resistance literature, so much so in Horsley's view that eschatology may be considered at most a secondary consideration in the genre.[8] In contrast, Shoemaker here adopts a more nuanced position: while many classics of the genre are clearly anti-imperial in orientation (the *Apocalypse of John* being the most obvious example), the roots of a shift to a pro-imperial stance (or at least one that acknowledges empire as a necessary instrument used by God to bring about the End Times) may be detected in many of these texts as well. Imperial eschatology is already dimly visible in the messianism of the Qumran library, as well as in early Christian reinterpretations of the widespread motif of the succession of empires.

The theme of the succession of empires is best known from Daniel—an explicitly anti-imperial Jewish text—but Christian authors developed the theme in interesting, and pro-imperial, directions, for example in later Christian additions to the corpus of the *Sibylline Oracles*. The case of the oracles is particularly instructive: Shoemaker demonstrates that the Christian additions to the corpus draw on ancient pagan ideas, for example the restorationist theme of the eschatological king that developed in the Hellenistic era, that then resonate in the motif of the Last Emperor that became widespread in the early Byzantine period. In Chapter 2, Shoemaker explains how an initial aversion to politics in early Christian apocalyptic texts (the book of Revelation being the noteworthy exception) gave way to a politicization of the genre in the fourth and fifth century. This is wholly unsurprising; with the Christianization of Rome (and reciprocal imperialization of the Church), Christian authors adapted older traditions on Rome's salvific role in human history for new ends, not only deeming the empire an

[8] See Richard A. Horsley, *Revolt of the Scribes: Resistance and Apocalyptic Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010); Anathea Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

indispensable instrument of divine providence, but articulating a specific conception of Rome's role in first preventing and then eventually ushering in the final tribulations preceding the Last Judgment.

Thus, various authors of this era cast Rome as preventing the onslaught of Gog and Magog and delaying the advent of the Antichrist. The author of the *Tiburtine Sibyl*, a little-known text that was immensely important for the development of this tradition, actually went so far as to portray the final Roman Emperor restoring the empire, overcoming paganism, and then surrendering his authority and dominion to Christ at Jerusalem, triggering the advent of the Last Judgment. Here Shoemaker gets into the weeds of specialized scholarly debates over the transmission history, witnesses, and dating of the *Tiburtine Sibyl*, but this is necessary for his thesis.[9] Against those who favor a late date for this text and its claims about the Last Emperor's eschatological role, Shoemaker argues that the core of the text, especially its depiction of the Last Emperor's reign as immediately preceding and precipitating the End Times, is a genuinely pre-Islamic expression of imperial eschatology. It is specifically because the authentically pre-Islamic provenance of the tradition has not generally been recognized that the ancient Christian roots of what is mistakenly held to be a quintessentially Islamic ideology have been overlooked. This is a critical point because the Last Emperor tradition is much better known as an aspect of the seventh-century *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, famous as a Christian response to the Arab conquests. Shoemaker avers that the account of the Last Emperor of the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* was dependent upon the older account in the *Tiburtine Sibyl*, which it

[9] Shoemaker's account of the transmission history and compositional-redactive strata of the *Tiburtine Sibyl*, especially its relationship to the much better-known *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, is complex but fascinating, providing a model example of the methodologies by which apocalyptic texts can be dated. See *The Apocalypse of Empire*, 42 ff.

developed and streamlined in various ways, partially through assimilating additional narrative elements from the later, Syriac milieu in which Pseudo-Methodius produced his work.[10]

In Chapters 3 and 4 Shoemaker turns his attention to the circulation and admingling of apocalyptic traditions during the sixth and seventh centuries, especially during the tumultuous decades immediately preceding the rise of Islam. In recent years a number of scholars (particularly Michael Lecker, G. W. Bowersock, and most recently Juan Cole) have emphasized the decades-long struggle between the Romans and the Sasanians as particularly impactful for the emergence of the *ummah* under Muḥammad's leadership; Shoemaker shows that the imperial conflicts of this era were frequently inflected by apocalyptic enthusiasm. In Chapter 3 he examines Greek and Syriac sources produced within the Roman cultural sphere that seem to reflect the heightened eschatological mood of the day; particularly noteworthy here is his discussion of the *Syriac Julian Romance*, a critical text that served as a conceptual and thematic bridge between the depiction of the quasi-messianic Last Emperor of the *Tiburtine Sibyl* and that of the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*. The evidence for this period suggests not only a tendency to interpret political events in an apocalyptic frame, but that actual historical actors could cast their own activities to evoke such a frame, or at the very least to directly invite interpretation of this sort. Thus, Shoemaker suggests that Heraclius's restoration of the True Cross to Jerusalem in 628 deliberately evoked the legend of the Last Emperor. Here,

[10] Some have argued that the Last Emperor motif in the *Tiburtine Sibyl* was interpolated into that text from the widely disseminated *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, a claim predicated on the absence of the motif from the major Greek witness to the sibyl. However, Shoemaker demonstrates quite convincingly that the extant Latin witness preserves the original version of the tradition, despite the presence of late interpolations in the text.

eschatological anticipation transcends ideology, propaganda, or theodicy, and ascends to the level of statecraft and political theater.

It should be noted that already in Chapter 3 Shoemaker probes questions of direct interest to scholars of the Qurʾān. First, he draws our attention to certain early seventh-century prophecies of Roman victory over the Persians as ushering in the End Times. Some of these texts are genuine "prophecies" that sought to predict future events, for example the Persian martyr act *The Passion of Golinduch*; others are more obviously *vaticinium ex eventu* notices produced after Heraclius's successful counterattack against the Sasanian occupation of the Roman provinces of the Near East, as in Theophylact of Simocatta. Whatever the case, one cannot fail to observe the striking parallel these traditions furnish to the much-discussed opening verses of Sūrat al-Rūm, which likewise appear to endow Roman political and military victory with religious, if not eschatological, significance.[11]

Second, towards the end of the chapter, Shoemaker wades into the complex and contentious debates surrounding the *Syriac Alexander Legend* and its putative impact on the qurʾānic depiction of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn. Shoemaker does hold out the possibility that—as first argued by Kevin Van Bladel—the date of composition of the former implies a rather late origin for the latter, possibly even one posterior to the putative date of the death of Muḥammad in 632 CE.[12]

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[11] *The Apocalypse of Empire*, 78–79, 150–154. The opening passage of Q 30 appears to have spawned a veritable cottage industry of interpretation over the last several years, and is well on its way to becoming one of the most remarked- and commented-upon passages in the Qurʾān among Western commentators. To the sources cited by Shoemaker (especially Beck, El-Cheikh, and Tesei), one should add Mehdi Azaiez et al. (eds.), *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 288–292; Juan Cole, *Muhammad: Prophet of Peace amid the Clash of Empires* (Nation Books, 2018), 65–68; and—reading entirely against the grain of previous discussions–Adam J. Silverstein, "Q 30:2–5 in Near Eastern Context," *Der Islam* 97 (2020): 11–42.

[12] Kevin Van Bladel, "The *Alexander Legends* in the Qurʾān 18:83–102," in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 175–203. Shoemaker is not hostile to the idea

However, Shoemaker also suggests that the Alexander narratives of both the *Syriac Alexander Legend* and Sūrat al-Kahf could possibly be dependent upon an earlier version of the Syriac text that dates to the early sixth century, which alleviates the problem of either holding to an implausibly tight "production schedule" for the qurʾānic *sūrah* or pushing its date of completion past the threshold of the traditional death date of the Prophet.[13]

Chapter 4 establishes a wider frame for understanding the currency of imperial eschatology in Late Antiquity, presenting evidence for ideas similar to those promoted by pro-Roman Christian authors writing in Greek, Latin, and Syriac in sources farther afield. One corpus of material stems from Jewish communities in the region that were likely familiar, at least in broad terms, with Roman Christian claims about the restoration of the empire preceding the advent of the apocalypse. In Jewish sources we see this idea appropriated and subverted in particularly compelling ways, most notably in the complex and ever-shifting messianic mythologies of works such as *Sefer Zerubavel* and *Sefer Eliyahu*. Despite their differences, the overarching significance of these texts is clear: the decline (or possibly resurgence) of Rome (or possibly Persia) would inevitably lead to the End Times, but this idea is subsumed within a larger scheme of messianic advent and Jewish redemption and vindication. Not only do these Jewish sources share their Christian counterparts' conception of the eschatological necessity

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of a late closure for the qurʾānic canon; in a well-known earlier publication, he argued for exactly this ("Christmas in the Qur'ān: The Qurʾānic Account of Jesus' Nativity and Palestinian Local Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 33 [2003]: 11–39). Compare his comments in *The Apocalypse of Empire*, 125–126 and (rather more stridently) 152.

[13] Shoemaker makes an important observation regarding the possible impact of the *Alexander Legend* on the Qurʾān. While that impact is most conspicuous in Sūrat al-Kahf's portrayal of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn's role in building the wall that prevents the onslaught of Gog and Magog against the civilized world (vv. 92–102), he notes that it is likely that the Prophet's community knew the whole text, which would have conveyed important ideas about the ultimate eschatological role of the Last Emperor to them (*The Apocalypse of Empire*, 150). In other words, this specific precursor is significant not only as a putative source of specific motifs, but as a conduit for the ideology of imperial eschatology as a whole.

of a final imperial dominion on earth, they also frequently indulge in analogous glorification of the inevitable messianic triumph, including the extirpation of the enemies of the faithful and the restoration of Jerusalem and the Temple. The image of an earthly sovereign surrendering the signs of his authority at Jerusalem appears to be an especially important motif linking Christian and Jewish visions of the eschaton, one that would be particularly influential on early Islam as well.

As is often discussed by historians of Late Antiquity, the recovery of genuinely pre-Islamic Zoroastrian religious conceptions from the Sasanian era is a difficult issue. Shoemaker surveys the eschatology of Zoroastrian cosmological and messianic schemes, and conjectures not only that these schemes were current in the decades leading up to the emergence of Islam, but that just as in the time of Heraclius, these ideas were capitalized upon and exploited by political actors. Once again the literary evidence is exceedingly complicated to navigate and synthesize, but the notion of an eschatological ruler coming to power and ushering in a new age was apparently so prevalent in late Sasanian Iran that it provided the legitimating ideology behind the momentarily successful coup of the general Bahram Chobin against the dynasty in 590, an ideology with repercussions in the Zoroastrian literary tradition long after the Sasanians' short-lived restoration.

Shoemaker discusses Muḥammad, the Qurʾān, and Islam in Chapters 5 and 6. In Chapter 5, Shoemaker's disciplinary background in the study of ancient Christianity comes to the foreground; here he demonstrates how the shaping of the New Testament canon and the reinterpretation of the eschatological urgency of the message of Jesus provides a model for understanding similar social and religious processes at work in the development of the

qurʾānic corpus. Shoemaker devotes considerable space to a much-needed critique of the various imperatives that led scholars to downplay or overlook Muḥammad's fervently eschatological message, preserved both in the Qurʾān and a significant body of surviving (and putatively authentic) *ḥadīth* reports, for decades. In contrast to this dominant strain in Western scholarship, Shoemaker argues that the earliest message of the Prophet was one that was intensely focused on both the imminent culmination of history and the necessity of expanding political control over the biblical Holy Land as a precondition for the coming of the final judgement.[14] While the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth* corpus present an immediate and authentic picture of Muḥammad's teachings about the imminence of the Hour, the subsequent development of Islam necessitated a substantial reconfiguration of what the Prophet's mission had really been about.

Perhaps Shoemaker's most contentious point in this chapter is his conjecture about the possible impact of later editing and interpolation on the qurʾānic corpus. One can readily observe a contrast between the most urgent expressions of imminent eschatology in the Qurʾān and other passages that express uncertainty about the arrival of the Hour or acknowledge its postponement. Addressing this discrepancy, Shoemaker proposes, at least as a possibility, that the Prophet's original message was altered "to soften the blow of the Hour's delay," adjusting the emergent canon's message to conform to a malleable and gradually receding eschatological timetable (130). Shoemaker is exceedingly careful to characterize this process—well attested in the development of the New Testament corpus in the light of the

[14] In this connection, I should acknowledge that Shoemaker asserts that the Qurʾān—and so the ethos of both the Prophet and his community—should be characterized as eschatological but *not* apocalyptic per se, since it emphasizes the eschaton as an unfolding reality (of which the foundation of the *ummah* itself is a part) rather than an anticipated future event (*The Apocalypse of Empire*, 148–149).

delayed *parousia*—not as 'forgery' but rather as a reflection of the early Believers' deep conviction that the scripture's message should, indeed must, reflect their contemporary reality.

In the second half of Chapter 5 and continuing in Chapter 6, Shoemaker discusses the complex question of the impetus behind the Arab conquests, building in critical ways on his insights in *The Death of a Prophet*. *Pace* those who see the specifically religious justification for the conquests as a later development, he argues that already in the time of the Prophet himself the early Believers movement was strongly focused on expanding political control to the biblical Holy Land, specifically as a precursor to the coming of the Hour. In other words, like Heraclius and Bahram Chobin before them, Muḥammad and his followers saw themselves as directly undertaking the events that would usher in the eschaton—imperial eschatology adopted as a real-world political-military ideology. While acknowledging that the goal and legitimacy of *jihād* against unbelievers is a complex and ambiguous question in the Qurʾān itself, Shoemaker notes that the emergence of a more strident attitude towards unbelievers and the open embrace of warfare to build a divinely sanctioned caliphal empire after the death of the Prophet reflects more a difference of degree than of kind. That is, the "pious militarism" that impelled and legitimated the Umayyad *jihād* state was motivated, at least initially, by the same eschatological urgency that infused the original prophetic community; the imperative driving the community towards "waging the apocalypse" was in some way reflective of earlier pious imperialism, most notably that of Heraclius, but it was authentically rooted in Muḥammad's message as well.[15]

[15] Shoemaker derives this phrase from the study of Jay Rubenstein, *Armies of Heaven: The First Crusade and the Quest for Apocalypse* (New York: Basic, 2011); see 149–150.

Much of Chapter 6 is devoted to the role of the biblical Promised Land, particularly Jerusalem, in early Islam. Reviving some aspects of Crone and Cook's controversial hypothesis in *Hagarism*, Shoemaker deems the account of Pseudo-Sebeos, a cornerstone of revisionist speculation on the rise of Islam, to be credible: the initial conquest of Syria-Palestine under the leadership of Muḥammad and his immediate successors was impelled by a mission to overthrow the Romans and establish just rule over the Holy Land, particularly by restoring some form of sovereignty to the Jews there. The mission to reclaim the land closely associated with the shared 'Abrahamic patrimony' to which Muḥammad's followers laid claim was initially seen as a prerequisite for the advent of the Hour. Shoemaker reads this idea as at least latent in the Qurʾān and persisting in the early *ummah* for decades, though this understanding of the purpose of Islamic dominion over the Holy Land was later recalibrated, and eventually wholly erased, as imperial eschatology faded from view as the legitimating ideology of the caliphate.

Shoemaker detects traces of this early conception of the Believers' (later Muslims') dominion over Syria-Palestine in both Islamic and Jewish sources. The most enduring artifact of early Islamic imperial eschatology is, of course, the Dome of the Rock. Shoemaker argues, as others have, for the persistence of apocalyptic ideas associated with the Temple Mount in the late seventh century, reading the structure's original meaning in Marwānid times as a marker of the site's cosmic sacrality in anticipation of its central role in the eschaton. In its earliest conception, the rock is understood as the gateway to Paradise, destined to serve as the location where God will descend to earth at the commencement of the Last Judgment.[16] Shoemaker's

[16] Shoemaker's synthesis of the evidence is convincing, but overlooks some of the arguments previously made in Oleg Grabar's final presentations of his ideas concerning the structure's original meaning in

distinctive contribution to older studies on this theme is his contextualization of this conception in older late antique traditions, both more commonly cited Jewish traditions on the cosmological and eschatological significance of the Temple Mount and older literary traditions on the final sovereign's reign at Jerusalem. The answer to the age-old question of why ʿAbd al-Mālik built the Dome of the Rock is that he believed that he, or one of his successors, would surrender his authority and dominion to God there at the advent of the Hour, just as late antique Christians had claimed the Last Emperor would do.

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Shoemaker's thesis about the continuities between the imperial eschatology of the Qurʾān and the early Believers movement and their older precursors provokes an interesting question of method: how does formative Islam relate to the wider late antique environment? *The Apocalypse of Empire* is a worthy addition to the ever-growing literature on the connections between early Islam and Late Antiquity. It may also be located in the context of a recent revival of scholarly interest in a more positivist approach to the rise of Islam and the biography of Muḥammad specifically. As it stands at the nexus of these two discourses, we may justifiably ask of Shoemaker's book: what about Muḥammad makes him a distinctively late antique prophet?

Shoemaker's answer—as this review has hopefully made clear—is that many religious communities of the late antique Near East believed the eschaton was imminent, and their ideas

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Chapter 2 of *The Dome of the Rock* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), which should be added to Shoemaker's bibliography. Shoemaker cites only Grabar's 1959 study and so neglects some of his most important and nuanced observations on the building's significance, which anticipate his own to some degree.

about the apocalyptic culmination of history they anticipated were thoroughly fused with imperial ideology. This discourse, a kind of eschatological koine, clearly impacted the rise of Islam, resonating throughout the Qurʾān and the early Islamic tradition. Importantly, in Shoemaker's presentation, imperial eschatology explains both Muḥammad's foundation of his community and that community's subsequent understanding of the implications of their rapid establishment of a world empire. One of the great virtues of Shoemaker's book is that he traces imperial eschatology as the through line that links early Byzantium (and some even older precursors) with early Islam with great clarity, economy, and efficiency, so that the trajectory of continuity he follows across the chapters of his book seems undeniable.

But there are other trajectories one might trace as well. As a completely contrasting perspective, we might consider the image of Muḥammad presented in Juan Cole's recent biography of the Prophet, *Muhammad: Prophet of Peace amid the Clash of Empires*, as the similarities and differences between the two books are instructive. For quite some time, many scholars of the Qurʾān have not only eschewed reliance on the *sīrah* and other traditional sources that purport to explain the context in which the scripture was revealed, but have adopted a wholly agnostic position regarding the authorship of the Qurʾān.[17] Only relatively recently have we begun to see a return of interest in the historical Muḥammad—or more positivistic approaches to Islamic origins in general. The studies of Shoemaker and Cole are both emblematic of this trend.[18]

[17] In extreme cases, Muḥammad seems to be evacuated from the Qurʾān entirely; see the trenchant recent critique of Walid A. Saleh, "The Preacher of the Meccan Qur'an: Deuteronomistic History and Confessionalism in Muḥammad's Early Preaching," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 20 (2018): 74–111.
[18] On these issues, see Michael E. Pregill, "Positivism, Revisionism, and Agnosticism in the Study of Late Antiquity and the Qurʾān," *JIQSA* 2 (2017): 169–199. For another important contribution to the revival of the historical Muḥammad, see Tilman Nagel's forthcoming *Muhammad's Mission: Religion, Politics, and*

Moreover, both Cole and Shoemaker place significant emphasis on Muḥammad's imperial context, though in rather different ways. Whereas Shoemaker links the Qurʾān with older traditions of imperial eschatology, particularly with early Christian and Byzantine precursors, Cole sees Muḥammad's ministry as responding directly to the wider historical crisis of his time—the Roman-Persian conflict of the late sixth and early seventh century, particularly the aftermath of the collapse of the Roman east and the Sasanian occupation of territory formerly under Christian rule.[19]

Most strikingly, like Shoemaker, Cole also emphasizes the Prophet's deep imbrication in late antique cultural and religious traditions, although—to put it quite bluntly—the Late Antiquity to which Muḥammad is heir in Cole's conception is completely different from that of Shoemaker. It is not simply an issue of the particular cultural and religious traditions at hand, though this certainly *is* a significant issue. As we have seen, Shoemaker's Late Antiquity—insofar as it is the matrix of formative Islam, at any rate—is a largely Christian one, and he emphasizes Greek, Latin, and Syriac precursors as furnishing the most germane comparanda for understanding the Qurʾān. Cole, on the other hand, contextualizes Muḥammad's message in a much more eclectic cultural landscape, and places a surprising amount of emphasis on late Greek pagan traditions he sees as still vibrant in the Roman East of pre-Islamic times.

Power at the Birth of Islam (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), and on the critical issues surrounding such efforts, see Sean W. Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith: The Making of the Prophet of Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020). For a concise survey of the historical precursors to this contemporary project, see Kecia Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), Chapter 1.

[19] Another point of convergence between Cole and Shoemaker's studies is their fruitful development of the influential ideas of Fred Donner, most famously articulated in his *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2010). In particular, both elaborate in significant ways upon Donner's idea of the primitive *ummah* as largely ecumenical in character, though that ecumenism has rather different implications for each.

But the most fundamental divergence between the accounts of Cole and Shoemaker pertains to the meaning of Muḥammad's mission as a whole and which late antique trends and tendencies manifest most prominently within it. In Shoemaker's account, late antique imperial eschatology dominates the Prophet's ministry to an extreme degree; the entire point of his preaching and building his community is to fulfill the precondition of establishing a final *ummah* that would conquer the Holy Land in anticipation of the imminent coming of the Hour. Here, the main legacy Late Antiquity bequeaths to formative Islam is that of justified warfare, active *jihād fī sabīl Allāh* as a campaign to restore God's rule and a Jewish presence in Palestine. Cole's Muḥammad could not be more different. In Cole's account, Muḥammad's *jihād* is not only defensive warfare—as is frequently alleged in contemporary scholarship—but represents an ethos of active peacemaking that permeates the Prophet's entire ministry and resonates throughout the Qurʾān. Notably, Cole argues that Muḥammad is in this respect the heir to a legacy of peacemaking with both native Arabian and late antique Christian roots.[20]

The contrast between Cole's Muḥammad and Shoemaker's Muḥammad is startling, and compels us to consider not only *if* an image of the historical Muḥammad is plausible, but also *which one*. What passages of the Qurʾān are most distinctive and germane for understanding the core of the Prophet's message, and with which late antique precursors should they be aligned? Which of the many strands of late antique tradition does Muḥammad really inherit? This is not only an historiographic problem, but also a hermeneutic one, insofar as Shoemaker and Cole both adduce the necessary textual evidence to support their argument; anyone seeking to

[20] Cole argues throughout his work for an ancient tradition of peacemaking associated with the Meccan *ḥaram* and the Quraysh as its custodians, even going so far as to describe them as being recognized as a quasi-priestly class by the larger Arab tribal population. This is complemented by an equally prominent argument for the continuity of Muḥammad's message with Christian traditions of positive peacemaking and justified warfare.

object to their hypotheses must reckon with the numerous qurʾānic passages they adduce to support their claims. Here we see the methodological problem before us most sharply, since both the actual meaning and putative context of qurʾānic verses may, of course, be contested. The "proper" reading of a verse that one favors depends in large part upon one's preference in terms of the conjectured revelatory context, as well as one's perception of the most germane intertexts.[21]

It is unclear to me if this problem can ever be resolved; in the absence of some hermeneutical master key that all scholars in the field could potentially accept, not only the meaning of specific verses and pericopes in the Qurʾān but the connection between text and context is inevitably highly variable, subject to the specific position and preferences of the interpreter. Perhaps a more modest question is whether scholars are necessarily obligated to quest after a unitary and unifying theory of the historical Muḥammad at all, or if we might rather simply pursue a reasonably cogent hypothesis about the meaning and cultural location of a particular subcorpus of passages within the qurʾānic canon. It does not seem particularly cynical to observe that we all find the Muḥammad we read for in the Qurʾān, and that historiography and hermeneutics are not only intertwined but in some sense predetermined. I cannot be the first scholar of Islam to think that the same situation pertains for us that pertained for scholars in

[21] For Shoemaker's main discussion of the eschatological verses of the Qurʾān (where he countenances the possibility that some of these verses were emended after the Prophet's death), see *The Apocalypse of Empire*, 124–131. Cole's biography ranges through an impressive number of qurʾānic citations. Unfortunately, he does not provide an index of those citations, but he does helpfully arrange those passages most pertinent to his interpretation of Muḥammad as peacemaker into an appendix; see *Muhammad*, 211–223.

pursuit of the historical Jesus in the past: we peer down into a dark well and see our own reflection peering back.[22]

As the contemporary flourishing of scholarship on the Qurʾān continues—at least, one hopes it will continue—perhaps the optimal goal should not be to come to some definitive, all-embracing conclusion about who the Prophet was and which of the larger discourses of his time were most determinative for him. Rather, might we not embrace multiple late antique Muḥammads of varying, but still respectable, plausibility? Shoemaker has offered us one possible image of the historical Muḥammad that I personally find convincing. But others with different perspectives, favoring different trajectories of Late Antiquity as the royal road into the Qurʾān, will no doubt favor other options.

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[22] This famous image is sometimes misattributed to Albert Schweitzer, probably due to the fame of his *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. William Montgomery (London: Black, 1911). However, it was actually coined by George Tyrrell in his critique of Adolf von Harnack's 1900 study *Das Wesen des Christentums*, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* (London: Longmans, 1909, 44). Shoemaker discusses the parallels between the quest for the historical Jesus and similar attempts to discern the kernel of authentic information in the *sīrah* and *ḥadīth*s (including his own) in *Death of a Prophet*, 188–196. The parallels between these two projects were already invoked in Ibn Warraq (ed.), *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2000), where, however, the representation of scholarly perspectives is conspicuously biased in the direction of skepticism, if not overt polemic.