Apocalypse is, historically, a Christian concept whose etymology (Greek ἀποκάλυψις, Latin apocalypse) refers to the disclosing or revelation of hidden realities within an eschatological perspective. Whereas Arabic translations of the term “apocalypse” (both jillān and sifr al-roʿya are common) carry over the fundamental Christian sense of uncovering, the Islamic concept of revelation (wahī) is indissolubly linked to the descent (inzāl) of the Qur’anic message. In order to understand the meaning of apocalypse in Islam, and in particular the notion of the end of times (ākhir al-zamān), a way of overcoming this dogmatic obstacle will need to be found.

Classical biographies of the Prophet Muhammad relate the tale of his encounter, at the age of nine (or perhaps twelve) years, with an Arab Christian hermit named Bahira. This meeting is said to have taken place in Bassora (present-day Basra), in the southern part of Syria, where Muhammad had traveled from Mecca with his family’s caravan. The monk, recognizing in the young Muhammad the sign of prophecy, warned his parents against the malice of the Jews and the violence of the Byzantines (Rūm).¹ The reality of this prediction is no longer disputed in Islamic lands, and the Monastery of Bahira, as it is known, still attracts visitors to Basra. Nor is Bahira’s historical existence a matter of doubt for Christian polemicians, although his Nestorian allegiance leads them to see Bahira as a heretical figure who exerted a decisive (and deleterious) influence on the Qur’anic message. An Apocalypse (or
“Vision”) of Bahira, originally disseminated in both Syriac and Arabic, continues to give rise to contradictory arguments and claims.\(^2\)

**THE SACRED TEXT**

Revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca and Medina between 610 and 632 C.E., the Qur’an is composed of 114 suras, or chapters, which themselves are divided into 6,235 verses. The Arabic word designating these verses, *ayāt*, is also one of the terms used to describe the premonitory “signs” of the Hour (*sā’ā*), the exact moment of which is known to Allah alone. This is the most impenetrable mystery of Islam, fatal to unbelievers and infidels:

> They ignore every single sign that comes to them from their Lord. . . . But all they are waiting for is a single blast [*sayyib*] that will overtake them while they are still arguing with each other. They will have no time to make bequests, nor will they have the chance to return to their own people.

> The Trumpet will be sounded and—lo and behold!—they will rush out to their Lord from their graves. They will say, “Alas for us! Who has resurrected us from our resting places?” [They will be told,] “This is what the Lord of Mercy promised, and the messengers told the truth.” It was just one single blast and then—lo and behold!—they were all brought before Us. “Today, no soul will be wronged in the least: you will only be repaid for your deeds.”\(^3\)

Allah is spoken of in the first sura of the Qur’an not only as “the Lord of Mercy” (*ar-rahmān*) and “the Giver of Mercy” (*ar-rahīm*), but also as “Master of the Day of Judgment” (*al-malik al-yawm al-dīn*, literally “day of religion”). This Day of Judgment—or Day of Resurrection (*al-yawm al-qiyāmā*)—will see the gathering together (*hashr*) of all of humanity, summoned to appear before the Almighty. The dead will come out from their tombs and Muhammad will have delegated to him the full powers of intercession enjoyed by the prophets who have preceded him. Islam recognizes no intermediate category between the paradise promised to the faithful (including martyrs fallen “in the path of Allah”) and the hell of infinite torments:

> There will be no good news for the guilty on the Day they see the angels. The angels will say, “You cannot cross the forbidden barrier,” and We shall turn to the deeds they have done and scatter them like dust. But the companions in the Garden will have a better home on that Day, and a fairer place to rest. On the Day when the sky and its clouds are split apart and the angels sent down in streams, on that Day, true authority belongs to the Lord of Mercy. It will be a grievous Day for the disbelievers.”\(^4\)
Apocalypse in Islam therefore covers the confused period, marked by a succession of violent auguries, that leads up to the Last Hour. Jesus occupies a central place in this preparatory time: the Qur’an calls him “the Messiah, Issa, son of Mariam.” He is the eleventh of the twelve messengers of Allah and takes his place in the mystical line that begins with Adam and ends with Muhammad, seal of the prophets. Yet Jesus’s crucifixion was only a sinister omen: he has yet to complete his mission. For Jesus incarnates the inevitability of the Hour, whose secret he harbors. He has already come to earth with “clear signs” (bayyinät), and he will come back to close the cycle of Creation: “[Jesus] gives knowledge of the Hour: do not doubt it. Follow Me for this is the right path; do not let Satan hinder you, for he is your sworn enemy.” Jesus the prophet, like Muhammad the messenger of God, has been granted the privilege of obtaining access to the divine mystery that believers can apprehend only through their message.

Cosmic signs will announce the nearness of the end, even if infidels persist in denying the obvious: “The Hour draws near; the moon is split in two. Whenever the disbelievers see a sign [ayät], they turn away and say, ‘Same old sorcery!’ They reject the truth and follow their own desires—everything is recorded. . . .” First there will be smoke, mentioned in a sura of the same name, the forty-fourth: “[Prophet,] watch out for the Day when the sky brings forth clouds of smoke for all to see. It will envelop people. They will cry, ‘This is a terrible torment!’” Then from the bowels of the earth will spring forth a creature known as the Beast (dābbā): “When the verdict is given against them, We shall bring a creature out of the earth, which will tell them that people had no faith in Our revelations.” This creature is mentioned only one other time in the sacred text, in the course of an obscure verse concerning the “family of David”: “Then, when We decreed Solomon’s death, nothing showed the jinn he was dead, but a creature of the earth eating at his stick—when he fell down they realized. . . .”

By contrast, the Qur’an abounds in descriptions of the natural catastrophes that will foretell the final state of the world. Thus chapter 84 (“Ripped Apart”) begins: “When the sky is ripped apart, obeying its Lord as it rightly must, when the earth is leveled out, casts out its contents, and becomes empty, obeying its Lord as it rightly must. . . .” In addition to the Call, a trumpet blast will ring out: “When the Trumpet is sounded a single time, when the earth and its mountains are raised high and then crushed with a single blow, on that Day the Great Event will come to pass. The sky will be torn apart on that Day, it will be so frail.”
Other suras announce “a Day when the heavens will be like molten brass and the mountains like tufts of wool. . . .” This will be “the Day when the sky sways back and forth and the mountains float away,” when “the earth will be torn apart,” when “We shall roll up the skies as a writer rolls up [his] scrolls.” On this Last Day, “the sun is shrouded in darkness [and] the stars are dimmed,” and “the seas boil over.”

The Qur’an accords a particular place in these cataclysmic last times to the monstrous peoples known as Gog and Magog (ya’ju m wa ma’ju m). To halt their depredations (“[they] are ruining this land”), the “Two-Horned One” (dhu ‘l-qarnayn, sometimes identified with Alexander the Great) had been assigned the task of raising a rampart of iron and molten metal against them.

“But [said the Two-Horned One] when my Lord’s promise is fulfilled, He will raze this barrier to the ground: my Lord’s promise always comes true.” On that Day, We shall let them surge against each other like waves and then the Trumpet will be blown and We shall gather them all together. We shall show Hell to the disbelievers, those whose eyes were blind to My signs, those who were unable to hear.

Rich though it is in descriptions of the Final Judgment and of hell and heaven, the Qur’an provides few clues regarding the apocalyptic calendar. It was instead the oral “traditions”—the sayings attributed to the Prophet, collectively known as hadith (literally, “news” or “reports” of Muhammad and his companions)—that were to complete the Islamic vision of the end of the world, giving it color and depth. The genuineness of individual hadiths was nonetheless fiercely contested—an indication of the tension between customary behavior (sunna) and orthodoxy that characterized Islam during its formative stages.

THE GREAT SCHISM

The death of Muhammad, struck down by a sudden illness in 632, plunged the young Muslim community into disarray. He left no political testament, no instructions to his followers regarding the collective management of the faith after his death. The institution of the caliphate (khilāfa, a term of Arabic origin meaning “succession”) fairly quickly came to be established by means of a more or less settled, and on the whole pragmatic, consensus. The caliph was understood to be nothing more than a successor of the Prophet, and no other title augmented his power, supreme though it was.
The first four caliphs, Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthman, and ‘Ali are traditionally referred to as “rightly guided” (rāshidūn), and with the passage of time the three decades of their rule in Medina (632–661) have come to acquire the aura of a golden age. But this reputation survives only by a willful neglect of the severe strains that marked the period of the “Great Dissension” (al-fitna al-kubrā) that set Muslims against one another,15 amounting to a civil war whose legacy of hatred and incomprehension was to bring about a lasting divorce, fraught with consequence, between Sunnis and Shi’a.

Following the brief caliphate of Abu Bakr, who died after only two years, ‘Umar’s decade-long reign witnessed a formidable expansion of Islam outside the Arabian Peninsula, with the defeat of the Byzantine and Sassanid empires as well as the conquest (fath) of Egypt. But tensions grew under ‘Uthman, an eminent figure of the powerful Umayyad clan from Mecca. Unlike the majority of the members of this tribal aristocracy, who rallied to the Prophet’s cause only after having fought against him for many years, ‘Uthman had been one of Muhammad’s first companions. On becoming caliph, ‘Uthman nonetheless favored the strengthening of family privileges over the spreading of the faith by arms. The undisguised nepotism over which he presided gave rise to complaints from the military leaders camped in the garrison cities of Kufa and Bassora, in Iraq, as well as in Fustat, near present-day Cairo. Yet the Umayyad governor of Damascus, Mu‘awiya, unreservedly supported the caliph, to whom he was related by blood.

The crisis erupted in 656 with the siege of Medina by rebel forces. A contingent from Egypt assassinated ‘Uthman, and ‘Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, was elevated to the caliphate with the support of most of the generals of Islam. But Mu‘awiya accused ‘Ali of having encouraged the uprising and demanded that his kinsman’s murderers be punished. Relations between Syria, under Umayyad control, and Iraq, bastion of the partisans of ‘Ali (shī‘at ‘Ali, source of the name Shi’a), quickly deteriorated. The two camps mobilized their forces in anticipation of a clash that took place the following year, in 657, at Siffin in the valley of the middle Euphrates. Just when defeat seemed inevitable, Mu‘awiya’s troops negotiated a cessation of hostilities by raising copies of the Qur’an high in the air, spiked on the tip of their lances. The ensuing arbitration, though on its face favorable to ‘Ali, in fact signaled his political demise, for some of his allies rejected any idea of conciliation and turned against a caliph whom they considered too accommodating. This armed rebellion on the part of the Kharijites (“Seceders”) soon
came to absorb the better part of ‘Ali’s energies: the following year he managed to crush their forces south of Baghdad; three years after that, however, in 661, he was fatally stabbed by a revanchist at Kufa. In the interval Mu’awiyah had been patiently working to consolidate his influence in the various lands of Islam, and succeeded finally in convening at Jerusalem an assembly of Arab leaders who proclaimed him caliph. This title was no longer contested after ‘Ali’s assassination—all the less since Hasan, ‘Ali’s son, publicly renounced any ambition of seeking supreme power for himself.

The two decades of Mu’awiyah’s caliphate saw the marginalization of the Arabian Peninsula and the vassalization of Iraq, both to the profit of Damascus, now effectively the capital of the empire. The Umayyad clan found strong support there among the Banū Kalb, an Arab tribe originally from Yemen that had settled on the Syro-Mesopotamian steppe before the arrival of Islam. But the pace of conquest, dazzling at first, now came to a standstill, Mu’awiyah having proved to be a more skillful politician than military strategist. After protracted negotiations with Arab chieftains, he managed to have his son Yazid designated as his successor, thus substituting a hereditary principle for the earlier custom of reserving the choice of a new caliph to the leaders of the community.

On Mu’awiyah’s death in 680, anger at the Umayyad monopolization of power was growing in Iraq. Husayn, ‘Ali’s younger son and a grandson of Muhammad on his mother’s side, raised the standard of the family of the Prophet. ‘Ali’s followers accused agents of Damascus of poisoning Husayn’s older brother, Hasan. Having taken refuge in Mecca, and refusing to pledge his allegiance to Yazid, Husayn tried instead to make his way to Kufa. But the road was blocked by Umayyad forces, which encircled the rebel heir and seventy of his loyalists in the middle of the desert, and then massacred them in a place called Karbala.

Husayn’s martyrdom at Karbala fatally ruptured relations between the majority Sunnis, who considered that Muslim (in the event, Umayyad) rule continued to enjoy legitimacy, and the Shi’a, downcast in the aftermath of this horrible event and despondent at their powerlessness to prevent it. The ensuing and inexorable dissension (fitna) led on to a dreadful cycle of sacrilege: the Umayyads having mutilated the remains of Husayn and his followers, the Shi’a reacted by heaping ritual abuse on the companions—in their eyes, the felons—of the Prophet (saab al-salaf). Each camp proclaimed itself the Messenger of Allah and produced quotations from the Prophet in support of its claim, often the same ones, only now subject to the most varied interpretations.
These troubled times encouraged a disposition toward apocalyptic prophecy. Two hadiths that enjoyed great popularity in Medina during the Umayyad era were used to justify ambitions on both sides. The first, which says “at the end of My community there will be a caliph who will spend money without counting,” was cited in defense of every kind of official extravagance and favoritism; but it was also pointed to in bringing charges of corruption against the Damascene dynasty. The second says, “The Hour will not come until a man from Qahtan appears and drives the people with his stick.”

Qahtan had given its name to the ancestor of the Arabs who came from the southern part of the peninsula, in particular the Kalb tribe, pillar of the Umayyad throne. This hadith made it possible to represent the Umayyads both as guardians of the order imposed on the descendants of Qahtan and as harbingers of the chaos that these same descendants would one day sow.

The political and religious landscape became still more complicated in 683, when, in addition to the Shi’i challenge in Iraq, Damascus had to confront a rebellion in Medina led by ‘Abd Allah ibn al-Zubayr, grandson of the first caliph, Abu Bakr. Yazid dispatched a powerful army from Syria to suppress the revolt, and the historian al-Tabari relates that Medina was “given over to plunder for three days [and] the blood flowed.” But Ibn al-Zubayr and his followers fell back to Mecca, where they were besieged for two months by the Syrian expeditionary corps. Catapults hurled stones and “pots of flaming naphta” onto the Ka‘ba—a blasphemy so shocking that it was popularly believed to be the act of “an infidel, an Abyssinian,” himself killed by fire blown back from the burning shrine. The Black Stone was broken into three pieces and the Ka‘ba, damaged by the bombardment, resembled “the heaving bosom of a woman in mourning.”

The Umayyad troops retreated ingloriously from Mecca, and Ibn al-Zubayr was proclaimed caliph in the “noble sanctuary” or “sacred enclosure” (al-haram al-shari‘f) within the city. Although his anti-caliphate exerted little influence outside central Arabia, Ibn al-Zubayr retained control of the holy city for almost ten years. It was only in 692 that Umayyad troops, having finally restored order in Iraq, turned their attention back upon Mecca. The holy city endured a merciless siege of seven months, punctuated by bombardment on a scale that was massive for the time. Abandoned by thousands of his supporters, Ibn al-Zubayr himself was slain while fighting in the vicinity of the Ka‘ba. The ferocious combat both around and within Medina, as well as Mecca, inspired many hadiths of a more or less political character;
and the sacrileges committed in the course of this civil war were later to be recast as elements of new apocalyptic episodes.

The Shi‘a, for their part, refused to endorse either the caliph in Damascus or the anti-caliph in Mecca, instead proclaiming the supremacy of the Imam (the Leader—literally, “the one who stands [or walks] in front”). This person could only be the “rightly guided” one, the Mahdi, charged by Allah with the task of reestablishing justice on earth and of punishing both infidels and impious Muslims, which is to say members of the opposing Sunni camp. In order to make up for the absence of a pretender to the caliphate, the Shi‘i conception of the Imam had to be fortified by the theme of concealment: shut away in an inaccessible mountain stronghold protected by wild beasts, the Mahdi was preparing the day of his return, when he would march from the east beneath black banners and supervise the destruction of the enemies of Islam.20

The compensatory value of such assurances only increased with the crushing of the anti-caliph and the suppression of various Shi‘i insurrections. By the time of Hisham’s caliphate (724–743), Umayyad power seemed to have been durably established. The regime’s many opponents had been driven underground, but they had not been rooted out, and after Hisham’s death they resumed their subversive activities with renewed vigor, relying on quotations that were conveniently ascribed to the Prophet. One hadith then popular in Kufa claimed: “Members of my family will suffer reverses, banishments, and persecutions until people come from the east with black banners. They will ask for charity, but they will be given nothing. Then they will fight and they will be victorious.” At Bassora, another highly political hadith enjoyed great favor: “Three men, one of them the son of a caliph, will fight in front of your treasure house. None of them will gain control over it. Black banners will then be raised from the east. . . . When you see him, pledge him allegiance, even if you must wait in the snow, for it is him, the Mahdi.”21

Still lacking an uncontested leader, Shi‘i propaganda continued to promote the idea of an anonymous imam—the “chosen one of the family of Muhammad” (al-ridā min āl Muhammad). This indecision well suited the designs of a revolutionary of genius, Abu Muslim, who in 747 launched an anti-Umayyad uprising in Khurasan, formerly a satrap of the Sassanid Empire, on the borders of Persia and Afghanistan. Skillfully manipulating apocalyptic symbolism, Abu Muslim marshaled his troops under the dark standards associated with the return of the Mahdi. In less than two years he had seized control of Persia, going on to cross the Tigris and then the Euphrates. His entry into Kufa was celebrated by the
Shi’a as a posthumous victory for Husayn, whose great-grandson Ja’far was nominated for the caliphate. At this moment Abu Muslim showed his true intentions by revealing a prior commitment to the cause, not of the descendants of ‘Ali, but of another clan originally from Mecca, the ‘Abbasids, kinsmen of the Prophet’s uncle.

In 749 Abu'l-'Abbas al-Safah became the first caliph of the new line. The Umayyad family was liquidated; only one of its dignitaries escaped the massacre, taking refuge first in North Africa and then in Spain. But this amounted only to replacing one dynastic principle by another, for Abu'l-'Abbas’s half-brother, Abu Ja’far, succeeded him in 754 under the name of al-Mansur (“the Victorious”). During the twenty years of his reign the second ‘Abbasid caliph provided a firm and lasting basis for the dynasty’s claim to power. He ordered the murder of the overly cunning Abu Muslim and entrusted to his own son, Abu Abdallah, command of the army of Khurasan. Voices of Shi‘i dissent were stifled, one after another. To put an end to the endemic unrest in Kufa once and for all, al-Mansur in 762 founded a new capital at Baghdad, where he died twelve years later. Scarcely had Abu Abdallah inherited the throne than he moved to exploit the symbolic value of his campaigns in Khurasan, under the black banners of the dynasty, by assuming the name of al-Mahdi. It is significant that the new caliph felt sufficiently sure of his power to adopt a conciliatory policy toward Shi‘i notables, with the paradoxical consequence that messianic accounts now came to recognize the legitimacy of ‘Abbasid rule.

Complicating this situation further was the apocalyptic dimension associated with Byzantium. A hadith announcing the fall of Constantinople to a caliph bearing the name of a prophet justified three determined expeditions against the Byzantine capital within a half-century. Umayyad forces laid siege to it by both land and sea between 666 and 673, without managing to break the Christian will to resist. In 716, Caliph Sulayman (the Arabic version of Solomon, recognized as a prophet of Islam), having first instructed his eulogists to present him as the saving Mahdi, dispatched his own brother to direct an assault on the city. But Sulayman was forced to order a retreat at the end of a year of unfruitful hostilities. The ‘Abbassids had better luck. On seeing enemy troops beneath the walls of Constantinople in 782, Empress Irene quickly agreed to pay tribute to the caliphate in Baghdad. A truce was signed, and the Muslim troops promptly departed.

These military adventures were subsequently placed in an eschatological perspective by means of a hadith listing six harbingers or signs of
the Last Hour, five of which had already come to pass: the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the conquest of Jerusalem, a frightful epidemic (identified with the so-called plague of Amwas under ‘Umar’s caliphate), an abundance of superfluous goods (associated with the corruption and nepotism that were rampant under ‘Uthman), and a devastating fitna (corresponding to the Great Dissension brought about by ‘Uthman’s murder). The final sign was to be the violation by the Byzantines of the truce they had concluded with the Muslims, who would find themselves the target of a massive offensive. The hadith relating these things reflected a fear that the balance of forces, for the moment favorable to Baghdad, would one day tilt to the advantage of Constantinople, potentially the most serious threat to ‘Abbasid power, at the northern boundaries of the empire.

Finally, the prophetic sayings inspired by the revolt of the anti-caliph at Mecca between 683 and 692 were belatedly to have great influence. Owing to a complex interplay of positive and negative identifications, the rebel of the holy city, Ibn al-Zubayr, was transformed into an ambiguous mahdi, whereas his adversary, sent from Syria, took on the traits of a mythical figure known as the Sufyani (after the name of a ruling branch of the Umayyads in Damascus). Defamed by both Shi‘i and ‘Abbasid propagandists as a satanic incarnation, the Sufyani assumed by contrast the aspect of a national hero in Syria, where his legend intermittently galvanized Umayyad resistance to the caliphate of Baghdad. An enigmatic figure of apocalypse, the Sufyani emerged only by extrapolation from hadiths that were themselves bitterly disputed.

All parties during these years of conflict looked to prophetic tradition for inspiration, arguments, and rallying cries. The messianic impulse was prominent in the various uprisings of the seventh and eighth centuries, each side claiming to carry out the purposes of the Mahdi in order to cast its adversaries back into the camp of the devil. The result of these furious polemics, marked by the unrestrained production of quotations from the Prophet and a corresponding stream of suitably biased commentaries, was great doctrinal confusion. The time had come for orthodoxy to provide itself with a set of scriptures less open to challenge.

THE TWO AUTHENTIC COLLECTIONS

Almost two centuries were to pass after the death of Muhammad before a definitive selection was finally made from the immense corpus of traditions attributed to the Prophet. The controlling criterion was the validity
of the chain of transmission (\textit{isnād}) of a given saying, which in order to be considered wholly reliable had to reach back, from one chronicler to another, as far as the companions of the Prophet himself. Tens of thousands of hadiths of doubtful provenance were therefore set aside, when they were not actually stigmatized as pure and simple fabrications.

A dozen monumental anthologies were compiled during the second half of the ninth century, while the ‘Abbasid caliphate still shone in all its glory in Baghdad. The end of times was generally treated under the rubric of dissension (\textit{fitan}, plural of \textit{fitna}), for quarrels among Muslims, it was believed, must inevitably accompany and precipitate an apocalyptic course of events. The singular form \textit{fitna}, which signifies both discord and unrest or insurrection, refers not only to the great schism in Islam between Sunnis and Shi‘a, but also to any of the episodes of armed combat that unfolded from the time of the Patriarchal Caliphate until the consolidation of ‘Abbasid rule. To the custodians of the prophetic heritage, dissension in all these related senses stood out as the direst threat facing Islam.

The two most respected collections of hadiths, each titled \textit{Al-Sahīh} (“Authentic” or “Genuine”), are the work of a pair of Persians who had been Arabized by long stays in ‘Abbasid Iraq, Arabia, and Egypt: Muhammad ibn Isma‘il al-Bukhari, born in Bukhara in 809 and buried near Samarkand in 870; and Abu al-Husayn Muslim, born in 816 at Nishapur, where he passed away some sixty years later, having completed an equally heroic labor of recension. Bukhari claimed to have seen himself in a dream fanning the Prophet and driving away the flies that disturbed his peace of mind. From this Bukhari concluded that henceforth his duty was tirelessly to chase away the lies that disfigured prophetic tradition. Of the hundreds of thousands of hadiths he had collected, only one in every hundred met the tests of authenticity. Muslim was no less rigorous in his selection.26

Bukhari reports the solemn warnings of Muhammad to his followers: “When I will no longer be here, do not go back to idolatry, and do not kill each other.”27 The direction from which the final catastrophe shall come is known, for “the Messenger of Allah has said, his face turned toward the east: ‘Is the insurrection not here, from the side where the horn of the devil appears?’” Contemplating Medina, the Prophet uttered this premonition: “I see dissension falling among your dwellings as does the rain.”28

According to Bukhari, again, the Prophet preached neutrality—indeed, passivity—as the antidote to the enmity among Muslims: “There
will be troubles. Whoever remains seated will be more worthy than he who stands up. Whoever stands up will be more worthy than he who marches [into battle], whoever marches will be more worthy than he who incites others [to violence]. Whoever lays himself open to [these temptations] will perish. May whoever is able to find asylum or shelter take refuge in it. . . . Every time two armed Muslims come to blows, both will go to hell.” But everything will go from bad to worse until the advent of the Hour: “They will be the worst of men who are alive when the Last Hour comes. . . . You will have no time that will not be followed by another that is worse until you meet your Lord.”29

A famous hadith intimately links the worsening of unrest with the end of the world:

The Last Hour will not arrive before two figures come to blows and a great struggle takes place between them; both will preach the same thing. It will not arrive until some thirty false messiahs appear, all of them pretending to be the messenger of Allah. It will not arrive until [religious] knowledge has disappeared, until unrest has spread, until the length of a day is near unto the length of a night, until the unrest is manifest and until murder [herj] has become frequent. It will not arrive until wealth, which has become so great among you, grows greater still, so that no one can any longer be found who will accept alms. Whomever is offered alms will say to the one who has offered them: I do not need any. It will not arrive until people build buildings that are too high and until whoever passes by a tomb says: I wish to Allah that I were in the place of the one buried here.30

This hadith predicts the sudden appearance of false messiahs—literally, “charlatans” or “imposters” (dajjāl; pl. dajjālāin). But the harm they will cause is as nothing compared to that which will be done by one of them, the Antichrist (ad-Dajjāl), who contends with Jesus for the title of Messiah (al-Masih): “The Antichrist will make his camp at a place near Medina. The city will tremble three times, and after that the infidels and hypocrites will go out [of Medina] to the Antichrist.” Fortunately, “Medina will not have to dread the terror inspired by the Antichrist messiah, for that day it will have seven gates, each one guarded by two angels.” Carrying with him “a mountain of bread and a river of water,” the Antichrist “will be blind in the right eye, like a grape protruding from the socket,” and between this blind eye and his good eye will be “written the word: infidel [kāfir].”31

Bukhari ratifies the prediction of other apocalyptic signs, for they too come from the mouth of the Prophet: “The Last Hour will not arrive until a fire shoots up from the land of Hijaz. The glow from this fire will
throw light on the necks of camels as far as Bassora,” in the south of Syria; that is, a supernatural fire rising from the shores of the Red Sea and illuminating a good part of the Middle East. The moment is also near “when the Euphrates will [part to] reveal heaps of gold. Whoever will be present [at that moment] should take only a small amount.” But the greatest catastrophe, in Bukhari’s account, will be the rupture of the barrier that holds back Gog and Magog. These accursed peoples will rush forth and break like a wave over the “wretched Arabs,” who face annihilation despite the virtue of the faithful in their midst, for “the iniquities will have become too many.”

The fifty-second book (“Book of Dissension and Portents of the Hour”) of Muslim’s *Sabih* devotes 143 hadiths to the last days of the world. For the most part Muslim concurs in the apocalyptic traditions approved by Bukhari. But he expands the chronology of the major signs (*ayât*) and portents of the Hour, organizing them in a sequence of ten events. First there will be three entombments (*khasf*), which is to say three places—in the east, in the west, and in the Arabian Peninsula—where the earth will open up and people will be buried alive. These events will be followed by the appearance of smoke, and then of the Antichrist. The Beast will then crawl out of the earth, followed by Gog and Magog, who will break through the wall that isolates them from the civilized world and run wild. The three last signs will be the rising of the sun in the west, the supernatural fire originating in Yemen, and finally the gathering together of humanity, driven by the fire to the place of the Final Judgment.

The figure of the Antichrist, the subject of only a handful of hadiths in Bukhari’s *Sabih*, acquires considerably greater stature in Muslim’s compilation. There the Dajjal is intent on making the confusion of the faithful more acute by transposing the usual properties of water and fire: “When the Antichrist will appear, he will have alongside him water and fire. What people take to be water will in truth be blazing fire, and what they take to be fire will in truth be cool and pure water.” The Antichrist will be “followed by seventy thousand Jews from Isfahan,” whose heads will be covered by a veil (taylassan) made from a kind of satin found in Persia. Throughout the whole of human history, from Adam until the resurrection, no thing or person will have caused greater turmoil than the Antichrist. Muslim also confirms a detailed hadith concerning the Dajjal’s repudiation by a follower of Muhammad:

On seeing him the believer hastened to alert those around him: “O people, this is none other than the Antichrist against whom the Prophet has warned
us.” The Antichrist will then order [the people] to throw him down on the ground and strike him with blows on his back, after which he will say [to the believer]: “Do you not therefore believe in me?” [The believer] will reply to him: “You are only a blind imposter.” The Antichrist will then order [the believer] to be cut in two with a saw and he will walk between the two parts, and then he will say: “Stand.” The believer will then stand upright. The Antichrist will say to him: “Do you not therefore believe in me?” The believer will say: “I am only more sure of your deceitfulness,” and then tell those around him: “After this he shall no longer be able to perform such a trick with others.” The Antichrist will then take hold of [the believer] and try to strangle him, but his neck will be protected by [a] lead [collar] and [the Antichrist] will not be able to achieve his purpose. He will then take hold of [the believer] by the hands and feet and throw him [into the air]. The people will believe that he has been cast into Hell, whereas in truth he will have been hurled up into Paradise.36

According to Muslim, the Antichrist will dominate for “forty days, forty months, and forty years” before he meets up with Jesus. In these troubled times, “the Byzantines [Rūm] will be the most numerous of men,” whereas the Arabs, caught unawares first by the Christian menace, and then by the Antichrist, will be “very few.”37 Their apocalyptic combat occurs as part of an involved sequence of events in which the Byzantines will threaten the Muslims at one of two places in the north of Syria before finally losing Constantinople:

The Last Hour will not come until the Byzantines attack A’amaq or Dabiq. A Muslim army consisting of some of the best men on earth at this time will be sent from Medina to thwart them. Once the two armies come face to face with each other, the Byzantines will cry out: “Let us fight our brethren who have converted to Islam.” The Muslims will respond: “By Allah, we will never let our brothers fall.” Then the battle will be joined. A third part of the [Muslim] army will admit defeat; Allah will never forgive them. A third will die; they will be excellent martyrs in the eyes of Allah. And a third will conquer: they will never have been tested and they will [go on to] conquer Constantinople. Then, when they will have hung their swords on the olive trees and divided up the spoils, the devil will falsely spread this word among them: “The Antichrist has taken your place in your homes.” They will then hasten to leave and, once arrived in Syria [Shām], the Antichrist will come out. The Muslim soldiers will then prepare themselves to do battle against him and draw up their ranks.38

The Muslims will be able to ward off the spells of the Antichrist by reciting chapter 18 of the Qur’an (“The Cave”).39 The scene will have been set for the apocalyptic clash:
Then Allah will send the Messiah, son of Mary, who will descend [from heaven] to the white minaret on the east side of Damascus, wearing two saffron-colored garments and placing his hands on the wings of two angels. When he lowers his head, beads of perspiration will fall from it, and when he raises it, beads like pearls will flow from it. Death will strike every infidel who breathes the odor of the Messiah, and [Jesus's] breath will extend as far as he can see. Jesus will search for the Antichrist until [he reaches] the gate of Ludd, where he will kill [the Antichrist].

Ludd is the Arabic name for Lod, in Palestine, where Saint George, one of the principal figures of Eastern Christianity, was laid to rest, having been martyred in 303. A veritable cult grew up around his remains, and his victory over the dragon came to be regularly celebrated. In addition to this popular veneration, ancient Jewish traditions of the False Messiah persisted as well. During the Islamic conquest of Lod in 636, a Jew of that city is said to have predicted to Caliph ‘Umar the murder of the Antichrist “a bit more than ten cubits from the gate of Lod.” Since then, scholars have emphasized the role played by Jewish and Christian influences in the emergence of Lod in Islamic eschatology as the place where the Antichrist meets his death at the hands of Jesus.

The execution of the Antichrist is accompanied by the extermination of all those Jews who have persevered in impiety rather than convert to Islam: “The Last Hour will not come until the Muslims fight against the Jews and kill them. And when a Jew will hide behind a [stone] wall or a tree, the wall or tree will cry out: “O Muslim! O servant of Allah! There is a Jew behind me.” And [the Muslim] will come to kill him. Only the gharqad [will remain silent], for it is the tree of the Jews.”

This supernatural intervention of minerals and plants to eliminate any Jewish presence made a considerable impression in the Islamic world. The “tree” mentioned in the hadith is a thorny bush native to the region of Jerusalem, inseparably linked in the popular mind with the notion of Jewish resilience.

Having achieved total victory over the Antichrist and his allies, Jesus will comfort the surviving and sorely tested Muslims. He will lead them into the calm haven of Tur [al-Tur]. The word Tûr’s general meaning—“mountain”—has given rise to scholarly disagreement over the location of the refuge chosen by Jesus for the Muslims. The most widely shared view today places it atop the Mount of Olives (Tûr Zayta), on the east side of Jerusalem, though Mount Thabor (Jabal al-Tûr), near the Sea of Galilee, and Mount Gerizim (al-Tûr), to the south of Nablus, are
also considered. Other commentators lean toward Mount Sinai, which indeed is twice associated with “al-Tūr” in the Qur’an itself. However this may be, it is clear that such a sanctuary was supposed to be essential in preserving the Muslims from the new apocalyptic catastrophe. For “Allah will then send Gog and Magog, who will swarm down from every slope” and drain Lake Tiberias to slake their monstrous thirst. Gog and Magog will next lay siege to the Messiah and his followers, who have taken refuge atop Tur:

Jesus and his companions will beseech Allah and He will send insects to bite the peoples of Gog and Magog in the neck, so that in the morning they will all be dead. Jesus and his companions will come down [from the mountain] and will find every corner and recess of the earth filled with the stench of their putrefaction. They will pray again to Allah, who will send birds that resemble the necks of camels. [These birds] will snatch up the bodies of Gog and Magog and throw them where Allah wishes. Allah will send rains that no house or tent can keep out and in this way the earth will be washed so thoroughly it will look like a mirror.

Syria is classically spoken of as the “land of Shām,” a phrase that refers both to Syria in the broad historical sense (including Palestine and Lebanon) and to its capital, Damascus. Muslim’s Sahih assigns great importance to the region as a whole. Target of the Byzantine offensive, base for the counterattack on Constantinople, theater of the struggle between Jesus and the Antichrist, and the scene of devastation by Gog and Magog, ancient Syria is central to this apocalyptic account. The Antichrist, in particular, “will appear somewhere between Syria [Shām] and Iraq, before spreading terror on all sides,” and Jesus “will come down to the white minaret on the east side of Damascus [Dimashq].”

Finally, Muslim accepts a structurally complex hadith in which the Prophet endorses the account given by a convert to Islam named Tamim al-Dari, from Hebron, of an extraordinary encounter with the Antichrist. Tamim relates that, while still a Christian, he had set out to sea with thirty other merchants. A violent storm stranded their ship on an island. There Tamim and his companions found an astonishingly hairy creature, who introduced himself to them as “the Spy” (al-jassāsa) and bade them to go to see a huge man, whom they found in chains. This was the Antichrist, who questioned them about Muhammad’s victory over the people of Mecca and foretold that Lake Tiberias would soon dry up. The Antichrist added that he himself would travel throughout their land for forty nights, but that he could not enter either Mecca or Medina. According to Muslim, the Prophet cited this account as proof
of the inviolability of the two holy cities in the face of the Antichrist—all the more since the evaporation of Lake Tiberias confirmed other forecasts regarding Gog and Magog. The great popularity enjoyed by this hadith for its colorful descriptions of the Spy and the Antichrist made it a founding myth for the Tamimi, one of the leading families of Hebron.

As not only the Islamic archetype of the converted Christian, but also as a vehicle for transmitting eschatological traditions, Tamim al-Dari is a fascinating figure. A native of Palestine, he was one of the great travelers of the period, on both land and sea, and sold wine (among other things) before embracing Islam. Tamim became a companion of the Prophet (even though the other members of his family remained Christians and paid the capitation tax that fell upon dhimmi), and, having had regular commercial contacts with Mecca following his conversion, transferred the base of his activities to Medina after Muhammad’s migration there, known as the Hegira (hijra). Muhammad’s unqualified approval of the “hadith of the Spy” is exceptional for revealing the profound influence of a defector who was reputed also to have introduced two incontestably Christian innovations—oil lamps and, still more notably, the pulpit (minbar)—in the Prophet’s own mosque in Medina, where they were Islamized.

Alongside certain elements already found in the Qur’an (the Smoke, the Beast, Gog and Magog), both Bukhari’s and Muslim’s collections incorporated new supernatural phenomena, such as tremors that open up the earth and bring widespread destruction, the rising of the sun in the west, and a fire covering the entire Arabian Peninsula. But most striking of all is the figure of the Antichrist, absent from the Qur’an, who emerged only in the two centuries that followed the death of the Prophet—and this on the authority of the most respected Islamic sources. The similarity with Christian tradition is especially intriguing, considering the absence of the Antichrist from the Book of Revelation, on the one hand, and his mention in the two epistles attributed to John and his popularization in the second and third centuries by Tertullian, Irenaeus, and Origen.

TRADITIONS AND VALIDATIONS

A relatively detailed examination of the apocalyptic tradition literature can hardly be avoided if we are to understand the debates within Islam, past and present, over the end of the world. The two anthologies of authentic hadiths compiled by Muslim and Bukhari have been continuously cited in the interval, from medieval commentaries to modern-day
pamphlets. Despite the lack of any mention of the Dajjāl in the Qur’ān, the uncontested authority of these two arbiters guaranteed the Anti-
christ and his death at the hands of Jesus, Allah’s messenger, a pivotal
place in apocalyptic narratives, further emphasized by contemporary
commentators on prophetic tradition.

The jurist Nu‘aym ibn Hammad (771–843) was one of the first to spe-
cialize in the critical analysis of the hadith literature. Born in Khurasan,
at Merv, Ibn Hammad became Arabized over the course of a long and
itinerant apprenticeship that finally took him to Egypt. Toward the end
of his life, under the caliphate of al-Mu’tasim (833–842), his support
for the doctrine of the uncreated Qur’an (according to which the Word
of Allah has always existed) brought him into conflict with the reigning
orthodoxy. Transferred to Iraq, he was forced to submit to interrogation
and finally imprisoned in Samarra, where he died while still in custody.
His *Kitāb al-fitan* (Book of Dissension), written during the period of
al-Mu’tasim’s rule, is nonetheless characterized by a profoundly quietist
messianism, notable above all for the importance it attaches to trad-
itions concerning the Sufyani and for its unalterable animosity toward
this figure, reviled as an agent of Umayyad subversion. At a time when an
independent base of Umayyad power was being consolidated in Andalu-
sia, Ibn Hammad sought to heighten popular anxieties over the prospect
of a Berber insurrection originating in the west and advancing eastward
behind a line of yellow standards. His work can therefore be seen as a
distinctive form of apocalyptic legitimism, though this did not spare him
an ignominious death in the shadow of the ‘Abbassid caliphate.

Ibn Hammad was not alone in advocating the doctrine of the uncre-
ated Qur’an. Despite threats of official sanction, the most conservative
of the four canonical schools of Sunni Islam, founded by Ahmad ibn
Hanbal (780–855), relentlessly defended it as well. The steadfastness of
the Hanbali school in the face of state repression and its ultimate tri-
umph over more liberal factions made Ibn Hanbal a major figure of fun-
damentalist Islam; indeed the rise of Saudi Wahhabism in recent times
has owed much to Hanbali dogma. But Ibn Hanbal was also the com-
piler of a collection (*musnad*) of traditions that remains among the most
respected anthologies. It lays stress, in particular, on the religious and
moral decadence that will announce the arrival of the Hour, marked by
the reign of ignorance, fornication, and drunkenness.

Ibn Hanbal also assigned an important place to the Antichrist, who
would be mounted on an ass in his journeys. Despite all the blasphem-
ers and hypocrites who follow him, the Antichrist will succumb in the end
to Jesus. Ibn Hanbal located the place of his death not at Lod, however, but at Aqabat Afiq, a mountain pass near Lake Tiberias, in the Golan Heights, through which the Antichrist will travel in going from Damascus to Jerusalem: “The Antichrist will roam the earth as far as Medina, but he will not be permitted to enter [that city]. . . . From there he will roam until he reaches the country of Shâm. Jesus will then descend and by his hand Allah will kill the Antichrist near Aqabat Afiq.”

Abu Dawud (817–889), one of the most zealous disciples of Ibn Hanbal, to whom he dedicated his own collection of oral traditions, the *Kitağb al-Sunan*, claimed to have selected its 4,800 hadiths from an initial corpus of a half-million. This was not enough, however, to silence recurrent complaints that his method was unrigorous. Thus, for example, Abu Dawud validated a controversial account that bore unmistakable evidence of the conflicts of the Umayyad era:

A disagreement will occur with the death of a caliph. An inhabitant of Medina will flee his city toward Mecca. People from Mecca will go out to find him and make him rebel against his will. They will put him under oath between the corner [rukn] of the Ka'ba and the Station [maqâm] of Abra-ham. An expedition will be dispatched against him from Syria, but it will be buried in the desert, between Mecca and Medina. When people see that, the righteous of Syria will come to him, as well as groups of Iraqis, to pledge their allegiance to him. Next there will appear a man from the Quraysh [tribe], whose maternal uncles belong to the Kalb [tribe]. He will send an expedition against them, but it will be vanquished. This will be the expedi-tion of the Kalb, and disappointment will overcome those who do not share in their spoils. Next he will distribute money and treat the people in conformity with customary behavior [sunna]. He will firmly establish Islam on earth. He will stay for seven years, then he will die, and the Muslims will pray at his grave.

This hadith became widely known in Iraq in the aftermath of the anti-Caliph revolt in Mecca of 683–692. Its first part recycles certain typical features of such accounts: a quarrel over the very legitimacy of the caliphate, flight of the rebel from Medina to Mecca, a futile expedition ordered by the Umayyads (a branch of the Quraysh tribe linked by marriage to the Kalb tribe), and so on. But the same hadith at the end conflates the rebel and the reformer, without the name of the Mahdi ever being mentioned. Perhaps owing to its confusion of rebellion with restoration, this tradition became one of the most popular of the messianic style, and its validation by Abu Dawud severed the link to memo-ries of the tragic uprising of Mecca. The same process is at work in Abu Dawud’s *Kitâb al-mahdî* (Book of the Mahdi), which upholds another
hadith having its origins in the Umayyad wars. According to this prophecy, the Mahdi would be named Muhammad ibn Abdallah (Muhammad, son of Abdallah), like the Prophet himself.\textsuperscript{59}

Apocalyptic exegesis owes a very particular debt to the great historian Abu Ja‘far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, who was born in the Persian town of Amol in 839 and died in Baghdad in 923. By the age of seven Tabari had learned the whole of the Qur’an by heart. In addition to the unrivaled influence exerted by his monumental \textit{Kitāb ta‘rīkh al-rusul wa-al-mulūk} (History of Prophets and Kings), the dogmatic and normative deductions contained in his commentary (tafṣīr) on the Qur’an, thousands of pages long, continue to stimulate contemporary scholarship. Tabari also sought to renew the study of oral traditions in a work titled \textit{Tahdhib al-athār} (Classification of Transmitted Reports). Unfortunately left unfinished at his death, it not only classified prophetic utterances according to their chain of transmission, but also scrutinized their philological and juridical implications—a striking departure from the restrained and deferential method observed by the two \textit{Sahīh} compilations and the \textit{Musnad}.\textsuperscript{60}

In his analysis of apocalyptic accounts, Tabari lays particular emphasis on the Beast, mentioned only in passing in the Qur’an, and finds grounds for authenticating the hadith in which it is foretold that the Beast will emerge from Safa, one of the two hills of Mecca, notwithstanding that Jesus and the Muslims will have already made the ritual seven turns (\textit{tawāf}) around the Ka‘ba. The ears of the Beast, Tabari says, will be no less hirsute than the crown of its head. Nor will anyone be able to escape the Beast (who, he adds, will speak Arabic). It will divide people into two groups, causing the visages of believers to shine like stars while stigmatizing the foreheads of the ungodly with the black mark of infamy. Not content to “make men ashamed of their impiety and their hypocrisy,” the Beast will itself bear the sign of universal death, which the imam of the mosque of Mecca will eventually recognize. Traditionists who came after Tabari embellished his picture of the Beast by adding to it the rod of Moses (used to pick out believers) as well as the seal of Solomon (for branding infidels).\textsuperscript{61}

Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Hibban (884–965) was raised in an Arab family in the southern part of Afghanistan. Although his reputation as a scholar hardly matched that of Tabari, he nonetheless traveled as far as Egypt to collect and validate prophetic reports. From these Ibn Hibban drew his own \textit{Sahīh}, the eighth book of which treats the last days of the world and reverses the chronology of the ten major signs: the rising of
the sun in the west now opens the cycle, followed by the arrival of the Antichrist (against the backdrop of fighting between Muslims and Byzantines), the Smoke, the return of Jesus, the appearance of the Beast, the sudden resurgence of Gog and Magog, the earth’s three swallowings of humanity, and, ultimately, the Fire. The Antichrist, Ibn Hibban adds, will emerge from an island (not from Khurasan) and only Mecca and Medina will escape ruin, thanks to the intervention of angels who will defend the two holy cities.

THE SOURCES OF SHI‘I MESSIANISM

Whereas Sunni orthodoxy established a scriptural canon concerned with the habits and religious practice (sunna) of the Prophet during the third century of Islam, the terms of Shi‘i dissidence were thrashed out in quarrels over legitimacy among the various descendants of ‘Ali. The acceptance of the ‘Abbassid caliphate by the sixth imam, Ja‘far al-Sadiq, notwithstanding that he was Husayn’s great-grandson, intensified the confusion surrounding an already mystical genealogy, with a schismatic minority holding that only Ja‘far’s son, Isma‘il, could be revered as the next imam. For many years to come the Isma‘ili challenge to Shi‘i orthodoxy was able to further its cause only by clandestine means.

Legitimist Shi‘ism, for its part, continued to issue pronouncements in the matter of imamate lineage. To ‘Ali, the first imam, it attributed a “Sermon of the Great Declaration” (khutba al-bayan) having prophetic overtones: “I am the sign of the Almighty. I am the gnosis of the mysteries. I am the threshold of thresholds. I am the companion of the radiance of the divine majesty. I am the first and the last, the manifest and the hidden. I am the face of Allah and I am his mirror.” The succession of Shi‘i imams, inaugurated by ‘Ali, was carried on by his sons Hasan and Husayn. Husayn’s younger son, ‘Ali, was venerated as the fourth imam under the title of Zayn al-‘Abidin (“Adornment of the Worshipers” [of Allah]), and his own son, Muhammad, bore as fifth imam the title of Baqir al-Ilm (“Source of Knowledge”). Ja‘far was revered as the sixth imam, and his refusal to claim the caliphate for himself was elevated into a model of integrity—whence his epithet al-Sadiq (“The Truthful”).

The last three imams lived and died in Medina, but the ‘Abbassids preferred to have greater control over their descendants. Indeed the seventh imam, Musa al-Kazim (“The One Who Swallows His Anger”), earned a reputation for forbearance by uncomplainingly submitting to the will of Caliph Harun al-Rashid. Musa’s son and successor
‘Ali, styled al-Rida (“The Chosen One”), was buried next to Harun al-Rashid in northeastern Iran, where a city of pilgrimage, Mashhad, sprang up around their tombs.

‘Ali al-Rida’s son, Muhammad, became the ninth imam under the epithets al-Jawad (“The Generous”) and al-Taqi (“The Respectful” [of Allah]). He was laid to rest next to his grandfather in Baghdad. The two imams who came after him lived on the margins of the ‘Abbassid court, installed in the caliphate’s new capital, Samarra, north of Baghdad: ‘Ali, the tenth, called al-Hadi (“The Guide”), and his son Hasan, the eleventh, known as al-Askari since his life was confined to the military camp (‘askar) of the Commander of the Faithful. Hasan al-Askari died without issue in 873, or so it appeared. According to his followers, however, he had left behind in a closely guarded hiding place a four-year-old son, Muhammad.65

Although the boy Muhammad was thereafter venerated as the twelfth imam, only a handful of initiates were allowed to have contact with him. Charged in the first instance with protecting a vulnerable minor, over time they became the exclusive interpreters of the doctrine of the Hidden Imam (al-madhī al-ghā’ībh) for the rest of the faithful. This was the period of the Lesser Occultation (al-ghayba al-sughra), during which Muhammad received the attributes of the Mahdi and communicated with his followers through a series of four “ambassadors” (sufara). In 941 the last of these agents (or “mediators”) declared that the Hidden Imam, now reckoned to be seventy-two years of age, had resolved to sever his remaining ties with the world and to disappear from it completely: “Henceforth this is the business of Allah alone.”66 Thus began the Great Occultation (al-ghayba al-kubra), in whose shadow Shi‘ism has lived until the present day.

The Hidden Imam had now become the Awaited Mahdi (al-mahdī al-muntazar), yet his continuing physical absence prevented neither his radiant beauty nor his long black hair and dark beard from being described. One day, it was believed, the Mahdi would manifest himself as the Master of the Age (al-sāhib al-zamān), and his return would mark the end of the cycle of creation. But the Mahdi is also the Master of the Sword (al-sāhib al-sey), for he will mercilessly punish the enemies of Islam. This dual conception integrated the residual elements of three centuries of millenarian anxiety, dramatized by means of the theme of occultation, which emerged during the darkest times of Umayyad oppression. But it was only in the course of the tenth century that this view achieved precedence over other interpretations of the imamate and
that the expression “Twelver Shi’ism” (referring to the belief in a sacred line of twelve imams) came into common use.67

Shi‘i theologians themselves insisted on the connection between this sacralization and the mystical aura of the number twelve in the Judeo-Christian tradition (the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve apostles of Jesus, and, in the Book of Revelation, the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem). The refulgent brilliance of Creation, they held, was divided into twelve lights corresponding to the twelve imams as well as to the twelve houses of the zodiac, the twelve months of the year, and the twelve hours of the day and night.68 Additionally, as the French scholar of Islam Henry Corbin has pointed out, this enumeration also agrees with the twelve millennia of Zoroastrian cosmogony.69

In order to saturate the suspended time of this Great Occultation, Shi‘i theologians endorsed a saying of the Prophet previously validated by Sunni tradition: “If the world had only one day of existence left to it, Allah would prolong this day until there appears a man descended from me, whose name will be my name, and whose surname my surname. He will fill the world with harmony and justice, just as it will have been filled until then with violence and oppression.”70 In Shi‘i dogma the Great Occultation corresponds to this day, which will not come to an end until the Mahdi returns.

An attempt was therefore made to draw up an encyclopedic inventory of the sayings attributed not only to the Prophet, but also to each of the twelve imams. Like the Sunni interpreters of oral tradition of the previous century, Shi‘i exegetes performed a colossal labor of selection and commentary. In Baghdad, Shaykh Muhammad ibn al-Nu‘man earned the epithet al-Mufid (“The One Who Instructs”) for a collection of validated quotations called Kitāb al-irshād (Book of Guidance). Moreover, his receipt of a personal letter from the Hidden Imam, proof of the trust placed in him by the Mahdi at the height of his occultation, conferred exceptional authority on the shaykh’s compilation.71 From 1017 until his death in 1022 Shaykh Mufid trained Muhammad ibn al-Hasan at-Tusi, later known as Shaykh at-Tusi and perhaps the most important author of Twelver Shi‘ism, who published in his turn Tahdhib al-ahkām (The Rectification of Judgments), one of the four canonical Imami hadith collections.

In the meantime the city of Kufa, cradle of Arab Shi‘ism, had gained in prestige from its proximity to Najaf and the tomb of the first of the imams, the incomparable ‘Ali. Husayn, the martyred imam, had been laid to rest in Karbala, the other holy city of Iraq. Shi‘ism also put down
deep roots in the Iranian city of Qum through the work of emigrés from Kufa who became Persianized in the course of their stay there, and subsequently enjoyed great popularity throughout the Iranian high plateau, where jurists composed treatises in Arabic with the purpose of refuting extreme deviations from orthodoxy (ghulāt) associated with the influence of anti-Islamic, Zoroastrian, and gnostic doctrines.

Under the direction of Shaykh Mufid, in particular, the Shi‘i apocalyptic account acquired greater detail and assurance. The return of the Mahdi is to be preceded by a series of cataclysms, including eclipses in the midst of Ramadan and ravaging swarms of locusts. The Euphrates will then overflow its banks and rise in the streets of Kufa, where the wall of the great mosque will crumble. A rain of reddish fire will fall on Baghdad and Kufa. Syria will be laid waste by fighting between Arab rebels from Egypt, cavalrymen stationed in Al-Hira, and the troops who will suddenly have come out of Khurasan beneath black banners. The Turks will occupy the middle valley of the Euphrates (the Jazira), while the Byzantines will attack the Palestinian city of Ramla (not far from Lod). As in the Sunni traditions, the sun will rise in the west, the infidels will seem to triumph, and the chaos will be aggravated by the appearance of dozens of false messiahs (dajjalūn). Shaykh Mufid adds that a wave of “twenty-four successive storms” will rid Muslims of the miasmas emanating from the epidemics (“the red death and the white death”) that are to come in the wake of so much bloody strife.

It is therefore at this moment that the Mahdi will appear in the sacred grounds of Mecca, between the Ka‘ba itself and the place (maqām) where Abraham stood to contemplate it: “The Shi‘a will come to him from the ends of the earth, crowding together in great numbers to pledge him their allegiance.” No Shi‘i student of prophetic tradition ventured to predict exactly when the occultation would draw to a close, but a consensus grew up around the idea that this moment would fall during an even year of the Islamic calendar, on the anniversary of the massacre of Husayn and his followers (Ashura, the tenth day of the Muslim month of Muharram). On that day the Mahdi will leave Mecca in the company of five thousand angels, with Gabriel on his right and Michael on his left, and go first to Medina, and then to Kufa, where he will massacre “all the hypocrites” and destroy their palaces and mosques. The mausoleums of ‘Ali in Najaf and of Husayn in Karbala will then miraculously be linked together by a canal. Finally, after conquering “Constantinople, China, and the mountains of Daylam [south of the Caspian Sea],” the Mahdi will institute a period of the most perfect justice lasting seven or
nineteen years, depending on the account, and in this way prepare the world for the Resurrection and the Final Judgment.\textsuperscript{75}

In compiling their anthologies, Shi‘i traditionists enumerated the “five signs” (al-alamāt al-khams),\textsuperscript{76} or apocalyptic heralds, of the Mahdi’s appearance: the return of the Sufyani, the Mahdi’s sworn enemy, identified with Umayyad tyranny; the rising up against him of the Yemeni, who, as the Mahdi’s ally, is implacably opposed to the Sufyani; the Call—not the Qur’anic summons to the Final Judgment, but the heavenly rallying cry of the partisans of the Mahdi\textsuperscript{77}—which will be answered by the demoniacal roar of his enemies issuing from the bowels of the earth (this battle of rival exhortations will last for the entire month of Ramadan); the assassination of the Mahdi’s messenger, known by the name of the Pure Soul,\textsuperscript{78} and the swallowing up (khasf) by the earth, probably between Mecca and Medina, of an army sent out against the Mahdi.\textsuperscript{79} This premonitory sequence of five signs proceeds by a terrible dialectic between Satanic successes (the revolt of the Sufyani and the murder of the Pure Soul) and Mahdist victories (the Yemeni’s counterattack and the entombment of enemy forces) and against the echoing clamor of the celestial and infernal calls. The apocalyptic scenario of Shi‘i tradition therefore rests on a balance of terror that only the sudden appearance of the Mahdi himself can resolve.

The consolidation of Twelver Shi‘ism was accompanied by a transfiguration of the return of the Mahdi. In coming back to earth to avenge Husayn and the martyrs of Karbala, the Mahdi will put an end to a cycle of violence inaugurated in 624 by the Prophet Muhammad’s first victory, at Badr. Just as Muhammad was joined there by three hundred and thirteen warriors and assisted by a cohort of angels, so the Mahdi will lead an army of three hundred and thirteen faithful, escorted by the same angels that had helped Islam to triumph at Badr.\textsuperscript{80} This Mahdi Army (jaysh al-mahdi) will also be an army of wrath (jaysh al-ghadab), for between the Hidden Imam and the Arabs “there will only be the sword.”\textsuperscript{81} The intensity of anti-Arab feeling in the hadiths that tell of the Mahdi Army’s progress is striking.\textsuperscript{82} Once again apocalyptic narrative was used to settle very immediate quarrels, against the background of a growing identification of Persian nationalism with Twelver Shi‘ism (which was nevertheless to remain a minority faith in Iran until the sixteenth century).

Having embarked upon the conquest of Hijaz, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, the Mahdi Army will then turn against the Byzantines with the object of taking Constantinople.\textsuperscript{83} At this point, with the sudden appearance
of the Antichrist and the intervention of Jesus, Shi‘i traditions come into alignment once more with the Sunni apocalyptic calendar. But just the same it is the Mahdi who will set Islam back on the straight and true path from which it had strayed: each of his fighters will carry a sword engraved with “a thousand words, each one of which gives access to a thousand others,”84 and the Mahdi himself will disclose the twenty-five letters of knowledge that remain secret to this day, only two letters yet being known to humanity.85 The apocalypse, quite literally, is an act of revelation, an unveiling.

We are now in a position to briefly characterize the apocalyptic sensibility that took shape in the three centuries following Muhammad’s death. The following features are conspicuous:

• The Qur’an has rather little to say about the end of the world, and still less about the omens of the Last Hour, whose prediction and description later came to be based on prophetic reports.
• The apocalyptic narrative was decisively influenced by the conflicts that filled Islam’s early years, campaigns of jihad against the Byzantine Empire and recurrent civil wars among Muslims.
• The emergence of this narrative at a time of tumult and violence sharpened the tensions that grew up between Syria (al-Shām), Iraq, and the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina.
• The acts of sacrilege provoked by the uprising of the anti-caliph in Mecca were too numerous and too painful to be accommodated even by a schismatic heritage, and therefore had to be recast as a series of apocalyptic episodes.
• The figure of the Antichrist (Dajjāl), absent from the Qur’an, was authorized by Sunni tradition, and his death at the hands of Jesus located in Palestine.
• Shi‘i tradition, for its part, granted a central place to the Mahdi, an eleventh-generation descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, who triumphs over the combined forces of evil; like the Antichrist, he is nowhere mentioned in the Qur’an.
• The black banners, insignia of the Mahdi on his westward march from Khurasan, were initially associated with the messianic perspective of Shi‘ism; later, owing to their reappropriation by
‘Abbasid agitators and subsequently by the caliphate in Baghdad, they came to be incorporated in Sunni symbolism as well.

- The final state of the world is a matter on which Sunnism and Shi‘ism profoundly disagree, not as it is described in their respective apocalyptic accounts, but for what it implies about the scope and mechanics of human salvation.

- There is an abiding tendency within Islam as a whole to consider widespread impiety as a sign of the end of the world, and to hold that it must precede the ultimate revenge of faith. In much the same way, Shi‘i quietism maintains that no temporal power is legitimate so long as the Mahdi remains hidden, and that the human usurpation of divine political authority carries within it the seeds of tyranny. Paradoxically, then, apocalyptic beliefs encourage Muslims to endure the unendurable.

The desire to rehabilitate the fundamental tenets of Islam, shared by both Sunnis and Shi‘a, must be examined more closely if we are to make sense of the production of apocalyptic prophecies on the massive scale seen today. More than a simple rereading of ancient texts, it amounts to a reinvention of Islamic tradition by means of a process of selection whose very arbitrariness is claimed to be an incontrovertible proof of authenticity. The fierceness of the faith’s original disputes over doctrine was deepened, as we have seen, by the harshness of the world in which an apocalyptic corpus was first assembled. In many respects the modern discovery of the end of the world sees itself as a return to sources, and therefore as requiring the development of two kinds of argument, one concerned with textual justification, the other in support of armed combat. But this discourse has been shaped in its turn by two decisive things: on the one hand, the canons of the great medieval exegetes, and, on the other, the actual experience of messianic insurrection.