The Qur'an and the Apocalyptic Imagination[1]

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In time We shall make them fully understand Our signs in the cosmos and within themselves, so that it will become clear unto them that this revelation is indeed the truth.
(Qur'an 41:53[2])

The word apocalypse is dangerous because it can be understood in so many different ways, some of them accurate and some of them inaccurate. For example, it is not possible to extract the notions of "disaster" or "catastrophe" or even "end of the world" from this originally Greek word. The word may have acquired these connotations and secondary meanings in the course of its eventful life in scripture, commentary, literature high and low and culture in general, including television news programs and films. But the word apocalypse means "revelation". When thinking about the Qur'an as an apocalypse we are primarily concerned with its literary qualities. Since apocalypse means "revelation" and since it is as revelation that the Qur'an defines itself with regard to both its form and contents it is of particular interest to look at the Qur'an according the standard definition of apocalypse formulated by John Collins.

> 'Apocalypse' is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world. . . . [its purpose is] to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority . . . (*Semeia* 36, pp. 2 & 7).

Revelation is in fact so much a part of what the Qur'an is that one could say that it is the main topic of the book and, for that matter, the main character. It is in the service of the idea and event of revelation, or apocalypse, that the dramatis personae of the Qur'an are presented, are described, act and summon the audience to the highest standards of

human behavior and ethics. This summons or *da'wa* is primarily done through a four-part system of revelation: God>Angel>Prophet>Humanity. As God (Ar. *Allāh*) is utterly unknowable and inaccessible (Ar. *munazzah* = transcendent) direct communication does not occur. Rather the divine message is entrusted to the angel identified eventually as Gabriel (Ar. *Jabrā'īl*) who discloses it to the chosen prophet, in this case Muhammad. Muhammad, in turn, completes the process of revelation by communicating this message to his audience, which according to the Qur'ān, is humanity (Ar. *al-nās*). Thus the requirement of Collins' definition, that the revelation be "mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality" is perfectly met.[3] That this reality has a spatial and temporal dimension is also a Qur'ānic presupposition, especially with regard to the characteristic theme of paradise (Ar. *al-janna* = the Garden) as a feature of the next world (Ar. *al-ākhira*). This otherworldly region is described frequently and in great detail throughout the Qur'an together with the mention of the eschatological *Hour* (see below). The content and structure of the message, when compared with the characteristics of apocalypse as defined by Collins and his colleagues and nuanced by Professor Norelli, would appear to conform so perfectly as to present us with a textbook example.[4] The irony is that none of the exciting work on apocalypse carried out over the last century addresses the interesting examples found in the Qur'ān. As a subject of modern apocalyptic studies, the Qur'ān is virtually unknown.

The suitability of considering the Qur'ān as an apocalypse is immediately apparent when comparing its form and contents with those elements isolated in the literature. Of course, it is important to note that the Qur'ān may fulfill such criteria in its own distinct manner. We have already drawn attention to the first major characteristic, revelation. Here the Qur'ān is quite straightforward. Its own self-image is given repeatedly throughout its verses (Ar. *āyāt* = "signs, portents") where the word for verse assumes a process of miraculous revelation and where other Qur'ānic words are understood as synonyms for this process (Ar. *nazala/tanzīl, kitāb, risāla* to name only a few). In several passages, the Arabic word for revelation (e.g. *kashf*) is also found. The purpose of the

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[3] The definition referred to appears in French paraphrase in this same issue of *Religions et Histoire*, p. 23. For convenience, the original English is provided here in the body of the article above.

[4] This is a reference to his *Histoire de la littérature chrétienne ancienne grecque et latine,* Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2000, p. 116 cited and referred to in this number of *Religions et Histoire,* p. 23 and *passim.*

Qur'ān is to teach mankind what it did not already know (Qur'ān 96:5), to reveal new knowledge. The question of narrative, the next feature of apocalypse according to our working definition, arises when we study the Qur'ān not so much for what is said or taught, but how the message is presented. Narrative emerges as one of the chief means whereby the divine message is communicated to its audience. The Qur'ānic narrative time frame has a beginning, middle and an end, even if the overall structure of the Qur'ān (which may be thought of as endless or perhaps circular) does not reflect this narrative convention. The beginning of the "story" is indicated at Qur'ān 7:172 on what is called the Day of the Covenant. Here, in the supra-logical language of myth God, at some mysterious time before creation, drew forth all the future generations of humanity from the loins of the first prophet Adam. He then addressed them with the supreme existential question: "Am I not your Lord?" The unanimous response was "Yes indeed!" In this same verse, the "narrative" end is also indicated. God explains that this question was posed so that at the time of the Day of Judgment none could say that they had been unaware of the covenant and would thus have no excuse for having been unfaithful to it. Between the Day of the Covenant and the Day of Judgment the apocalyptic narrative develops according to a set pattern whereby God periodically sends prophets and messengers to humanity to remind them of this original covenant and to provide guidance in the form of laws and examples of how to apply these laws and to conduct life. The chief examples are the prophets and messengers themselves, whose holy lives furnish the believers with the best pattern (Ar. *sunna*) on which to model their behavior. This aspect of the narrative has been repeated many times and has been presented, according to the Qur'ān text, to every community on earth (Qur'ān 10:47). Of the 124,000 prophets and messengers postulated thus by Islamic tradition as the number adequate to such a task, 25, including Muhammad, are explicitly named in the Qur'ān.

It is obvious that during the earliest period of Muhammad's preaching this end was thought to be very near. It is in fact not completely obvious that this feeling about the nearness of the Day of Judgment grew any less in the latter part of his message when he had become the leader of a powerful community. The various markers of the expectation of the Day of Judgment are found throughout the Qur'ān in both its earliest and its later pronouncements. This feature was first thoroughly studied by Paul Casanova in his

groundbreaking *Mohammed et la fin du monde: étude critique sur l'Islam primitif* (Paris 1911). Unfortunately, Casanova's views were harshly criticized by leading contemporary Islamicists and this book with its highly suggestive thesis was more or less ignored for over half a century. The Qur'ānic words for a great eschatological and noetic denouement, whether this be understood to pertain to the broad historical plane or restricted to the arena of individual experience (as it eventually came to feature in the writings and lives of those we like to refer to as "mystics") are many and varied. The most common is "the Hour" (Ar. *al-saʿa*) occurring some 48 times. This may be related to the many mentions of "the Day", 346 times, many of which refer explicitly to the Day of Judgment, or the Day in which all good will be distinguished from all evil. Similarly, the idea of God's "command" or "cause" (Ar. *al-amr*) frequently synonymous with the *Hour*, occurs some 150 times in various combinations and contexts. But the earlier revelations are distinguished by their powerful description of such apocalyptic events as the cleaving of the moon (Qur'ān 54:1), the crumbling of mountains into "tufts of wool" (Qur'ān 101:5), or the day on which none shall find any helper but God (Qur'ān 86:10). There is no space here to explore these standard apocalyptic motives further. Suffice it to say that they occur throughout the Qur'ān with characteristic and defining regularity.

Another feature that has recently come to the attention of the scholarly world is the role that duality, opposition and symmetry play in expressing the apocalyptic élan of the Qur'ān. This has been shown to be an integral part of the "text grammar" of the Qur'ān providing continuity in what is otherwise susceptible of becoming a disjointed and disconnected reading experience. The proliferation and concatenation of oppositions and dualities, far from communicating any kind of dualism – a concept foreign to the Qur'ānic conception of God, powerfully expresses and reinforces the transcendent oneness so essential to Islam's version of ethical monotheism.[5]

The Qur'ān, whether it is speaking of a future time or not, is profoundly concerned with the judgment of humanity and so may be said to be primarily occupied with the transformation of human behavior. In the early days of the revelation, Muhammad and his followers were severely persecuted and harassed because of the threat they posed to

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[5] Todd Lawson, "Opposition and Duality in the Qur'ān: The Apocalyptic Substrate," *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies*. 10.2 (2008): 23-49.

the status quo. Thus it may be that much of the Qur'ān is meant to console the believers as they suffer for having accepted the revolutionary message of the prophet Muhammad. That message was: there is only one God. Such a theological emphasis had grave implications for the existing society, headed by an oligarchy of tribal aristocracy whose fortune and existence would appear to have depended and flourished precisely on the traditional polytheism of the Arabs. Thus the monotheism preached by Muhammad was not mere theology, but a "modernity" that challenged the entrenched social and cultural mores of his time and place. He and his followers suffered accordingly.

Among other apocalyptic themes and motives isolated by research in Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian and other cultural spheres, a few are worth mentioning due to their irresistible application to the form and contents of the Qur'ān and the history and development of the Muslim community, from its beginning as a harassed remnant to its status as a world power. Thus the grid of features first isolated in the landmark issue of *Semeia*, offers a schematic guide for reading the Qur'ān as an apocalypse, or at the very least a text eminently susceptible of the interpretive readings of an apocalyptic imagination: visions, otherworldly journeys, otherworldly mediator, reaction of recipient, primordial events, salvation, resurrection, forms of afterlife, otherworldly regions and beings, paraenesis by revealers (in this case God through the angel and Muhammad), instructions to recipient (Muhammad & his audience), narrative conclusion.[6]

Islam sees itself as having arisen in the midst of a transformative crisis in a society that had strayed much too far from a monotheistic ideal and which, as a result, was beset by numerous social and spiritual ills: economic injustice, rampant crimes of betrayal, absence of compassion, violence and savagery. The *Hour* that the Qur'ān preaches is simultaneously a time of self-awareness and of social responsibility. The message is cast in a venerable language of images and symbols well known to its immediate audience. That Muhammad was the last prophet is a doctrine that perfectly conforms to the apocalyptic vision of his revelation as this has been preserved by the faithful. The question remained for generations of followers, who thus form a true apocalyptic community: when and how does this divinely ordained *Hour* occur? In a sense, the riches and achievements of Islamic civilization that are now the heritage of a global humanity,

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[6] *Semeia* 14, p. 28, cf. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 2nd edition, 1998, p. 7.

are also perhaps also the result of the various answers to this question offered by its most talented and most creative citizens over the last 14 centuries.