Apocalypse, empire, and universal mission at the end of antiquity: world religions at the crossroads

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Introduction: World Empire and the Consequences of Monotheism

This essay sets it upon itself to address an issue that has rarely been explored before: ideologies of universal rule and how they work, whether world empires go with supersessionist ideologies, and its consequences. Now universal or world empire is not the most unambiguous of terms, more often thrown carelessly than defined clearly. For our present purposes, I use world empire as shorthand for an empire with aspirations of extending its control over the known world. Since I am interested in the ideology of rule rather than in empire itself, I will not focus on one individual's ambition to conquer the whole earth, but will be concerned with actual programmes believed and strove for by a whole group of people. In other terms, by my definition an imperial polity is only a universal empire when a considerable number of its elites deem global domination to be their manifest destiny. Universalist projects contingent upon the ambitions of one man almost invariably fail to work out an ideology that would outlast them, and hence are of no concern to the present enquiry.

But what spawns these global ambitions, and what form they usually take? Here I agree with Garth Fowden that monotheism has a role to play:[1] it is with the marriage of Roman imperialism and Christian monotheism under Constantine that the kind of ideological universalism that this essay is concerned with was first born, and it was under Islam that it reached its zenith in the ancient world. The ancient Near Eastern sacral model of kingship propounded a divine right for kings to rule over their subjects, but multiple kings could just as easily coexist as a multitude of deities could. But if one was the instrument, indeed representative, of the One True God on earth, how could one contemplate sharing one's power with anyone else? As will be seen in Chapter 3, the early caliphs claimed to be God's vicegerents on earth and as such had ambitions to take over the entire globe—as did Christian Roman emperors before them. But if one is to take political control of the whole world and one's ideology is to reign supreme, where is the place of other ideologies in this world imperium? The answer is that there is virtually no place for any ideological alternatives, which is why ideologies of universal rule need to be supersessionist. Early Islam is, then, an apt case-study, for as I will argue in Chapter 1 it started out as a non-supersessionist, albeit universalist, enterprise, and only became supersessionist at its imperial moment. By supersessionist here I mean an ideology, of whatever brand, that claims to have obviated all its antecedents, and in the case of formative

[1] Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton 1993).

Islam I use the term non-supersessionist in the minimalist sense of it not having claimed to have superseded Judaism and Christianity as a way of life.[2] Here I find my thoughts to some extent anticipated by Samuel Huntington, who found the root cause of the conflict between the Islamic world and the west not in 'transitory phenomena such as twelfth-century Christian passion or twentieth-century Muslim fundamentalism' but in 'the nature of the two religions and the civilizations based on them', inasmuch as 'both are monotheistic religions, which, unlike polytheistic ones, cannot easily assimilate additional deities, and... are universalistic, claiming to be the one true faith to which all humans can adhere'.[3]

What facilitated the transition to supersessionism in the first Islamic century, I contend, was the acquisition of an empire with universal aspirations. However, whether it is supersessionism that brings about universalism or the other way round is uncertain—and perhaps something of a chicken and egg question—but what is clear is that the two go together. In order to further prove this contention, I turn to traditions that are typically considered 'ethno-religions', namely Judaism and Zoroastrianism, in the final chapter. I show that ethno-religion has a perennial tendency to defy our conception of it, but it only becomes supersessionist in Late Antiquity, in clear response to the monotheistic, supersessionist world empires of Christian Rome and the Islamic Caliphate. In particular, the universal Judaism of earlier periods, where the boundaries were porous and converts may have been allowed in, is not supersessionist, but the apocalyptic Judaism of Late Antiquity, where it aspires to found a universal kingdom of Israel at the expense of Roman global ambitions, is supersessionist in every sense of the term, and seeks either the conversion or destruction of the ethno-religious other.

A case can be made that this finding does not solely apply to Christianity and Islam, or, for that matter, late antique apocalyptic Judaism, and that such supersessionist trends may be found in other forms of universalism, too. For instance, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which sets out the philosophical foundations of the French constitution and the form of representative government it advocates, calls for the abolition of aristocratic rights and privileges. In other terms, it construes the democratic model of government as incompatible

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[2] As I will argue in Chapter 1, the Quran does consider the Old Covenant with the Jews to have been abrogated.

[3] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York 1996), 210-11. I must however emphasise that I do not see anything inevitable about the clash of civilisations in general, or Islam and Christianity in particular.

with absolute monarchy and its accoutrements, and, consequently, seeks to disestablish it. The Declaration, it will be noted, is a document that, as its title implies, claims universal validity, and as such there is no escaping the fact that it should also be supersessionist. One may also point to liberal democracy and socialism, modes of government that deem themselves irreconcilable with other forms of rule and cannot coexist in concord with them. It goes without saying that these are not monotheistic religions, but it can be argued that the imperial monotheism of Late Antiquity, with its universal ideologies and supersessionist approach to the other, has left an indelible imprint on the west Eurasian imaginaire.

Although I will briefly return to modern ideology in the conclusion, the aim of this essay is more modest and is focused on two case-studies: Islam and ethno-religion. Chapter 1 deals with the non-supersessionist origins of Islam, where, focusing on the Quran, I attempt to demonstrate that the quranic movement arose as an ethno-religion before transitioning to universalism, but that it remained non-supersessionist throughout. In Chapter 2 I turn to a most remarkable document, the Fiscal Rescript attributed to Umayyad caliph ʿUmar II ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz. After a detailed reconstruction of the nature of the fiscal regime in the Umayyad period and its transformation in the immediate wake of the Abbasid revolution, and comparing the Fiscal Rescript to a newly found document attributed to ʿUmar II called *Risāla fī al-fayʾ*, I conclude that if not actually emanating from ʿUmar's pen, the Rescript is at the very least a document issued by a mid-Umayyad-era high official, and note that it is the oldest extant unequivocally supersessionist document issued by the early Islamic state. Although this allows me to point out the economic and other factors that impacted upon Islam's transition to supersessionism, the perceptive reader will cognise that this chapter is something of a long excursus. Chapter 3, as stated, brings together evidence of a universalist tendency in early Islam. This evidence comes in a variety of forms and in a host of places, amongst other caliphal titulature and claims, Umayyad royal art, juridical literature, and, most importantly, apocalyptic and eschatological compositions. Thus the first three chapters conclude my first case-study, that of Islam, and also draw attention to the importance of apocalyptic material for the study of imperial ideology, and in particular one's conception of the other vis-à-vis the self, for it is difficult to talk about the end of the world and the fate of humanity without commenting on the fate of the other.[4] In

[4] Thus this is something of a rejoinder to the claim that there is not much material of interest to the historian in the eschatological compilations such as Nuʿaym ibn Ḥammād's *Kitāb al-fitan*; Suliman Bashear, 'Apocalyptic and Other Materials on Early Muslim-Byzantine Wars: A Review of Arabic Sources', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1 (1991): 173-207, 173, n. 3.

Chapter 4, I turn to my second case study, where the bulk of the discussion is devoted to the dating of the texts that constitute my evidence, in particular the *Judaeo-Persian Apocalypse of Daniel* and the newly published *Saint Petersburg Vision of Daniel*, as well as the *Signs of the Messiah* and the *Signs of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai*. But I also note the Islamic and Roman and Christian context of these texts' composition, how they respond in kind to Islamic and Christian universalist aspirations, and how this turn to universalism makes them supersessionist, too, before going on to reaffirm my conviction that apocalypticism is a most forthcoming venue for the interrogation of such phenomena. In conclusion, I passingly note the continued relevance of my findings in today's world, where universal ideologies of a secular nature insist on superseding their rivals and promise to bring about earthly utopias where humankind can live in peace and harmony—in a manner that is somewhat reminiscent of the apocalypses discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

The inner chronology of the Quran and the time and place of its composition

The diachronic reading of the Quran that I propose in Chapter 1 has implications for its internal chronology that are diametrically opposed to the internal chronology advocated by the exponents of the modified traditional-Nöldekean approach. This chronology is usually sustained on the grounds that it comports with a stylistic analysis of the text of the Quran, but this argument is problematic for two reasons. The first is the seeming inability of modern European scholars to entertain the possibility that their mediaeval Muslim counterparts could have been just as dexterous at employing stylistic reconstructions; in other words, I believe the chronology advanced by traditional Muslim sources is itself based on a stylistic ordering of the text and thus does not constitute independent evidence.[5] Second, the traditional chronology does not take into account issues of form and function, and stylistic differences are construed as evidence of 'chronological development' rather than as texts that serve different purposes. Even the argument that the continuous growth of the mean verse length, based on an extremely arbitrary division of the quranic text into several passages, is indicative of a chronological development misses the point that in a corpus as large as the Quran, which likely constitutes the aggregate of the variegated proclamations and enunciations of its messenger, one is likely to get a continuum

[5] For evidence of mediaeval commentators using stylistic arguments to date certain quranic passages, see Devin J. Stewart, 'Vocatives in the Qur'an and the Framing of Prophetic Proclamations', in Nicolai Sinai (ed.), *Unlocking the Medinan Qur'an* (Leiden 2022), 199-248.

from any kind of stylistic marker.[6] But this is not the place to linger on how a diachronic reading of the Quran sometimes obscures the fact that the oral Quran is, unlike the closed *muṣḥaf* that scholars are in the habit of subjecting to critical examination, a living text, as pointed out by Angelika Neuwirth:[7] for instance, while it may very well be the case that the eschatologically rich suras belong to the earliest stratum of the text, it does not necessarily follow that Muhammad was initially a doomsday preacher who after attaining political power became a social reformer[8]—these suras and their eschatologically charged message, it bears reminding, were recited again and again on a daily basis.[9]

My arguments in Chapters 1 and 2 are also based on the understanding that the quranic text underwent unappreciable change, if any at all, outside Arabia and/or after the death of its messenger, an assumption that is in need of some justification.[10] The earliest possible date for the codification of the text is the reign of the caliph ʿUthmān (24-35/644-56), which is the date reported by the tradition and the earliest date which mainstream scholars have been ready to

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[6] Here I am specifically addressing the most imaginative of these arguments, that by Behnam Sadeghi, 'The Chronology of the Qurʾān: A Stylometric Research Program', *Arabica* 58 (2011): 210-99. Sadeghi maintains that 'doing so is consistent with the pre-modern and modern scholarly insight that *sūra*s may contain materials from different periods' (ibid., 231), which is a legitimate observation, but ignores the fact that any such arbitrary arrangement of individual passages will, inevitably, result in a continuum.

[7] Angelika Neuwirth, 'Two Faces of the Qur'an: *Qur'an* and *muṣḥaf*', *Oral Tradition* 25 (2010): 141-56.

[8] See the influential formulation by Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment* (London 1926), 103-8.

[9] The short, rhyming suras of the Quran which are placed towards the end of the Uthmanic *muṣḥaf* are very likely remnants of the liturgical hymns used by the congregation from which the Quran's messenger and his earliest followers broke away and thus constitute an even earlier stratum, but I do not wish to deal with that issue here. On the problems attendant upon traditionally-inspired chronologies of the Quran, consult Gabriel Said Reynolds, 'Le problème de la chronologie du Coran', *Arabica* 58 (2011): 477-502.

[10] The thesis that Muhammad may have died after 11/632 and outside Arabia, most recently argued for by Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (Philadelphia 2012), has been debunked in Mehdy Shaddel, 'Periodisation and the *futūḥ*: Making Sense of Muḥammad's Leadership of the Conquests in non-Muslim Sources', Arabica 69 (2022): 96-145.

entertain. In his *Collection of the Qurʾān*, however, John Burton controversially posited that Muhammad 'must have' undertaken the codification of the Quran himself on the grounds that the application of the concept of abrogation (*naskh*) of quranic proclamations in Islamic law, where the absence of scriptural testimonia for a certain ruling is explicated as the result of the abrogation (and, presumably, removal?) of the wording of the relevant part of the Quran but not the ruling itself, induced Muslim scholars to sequester the codification of the Quran from their prophet.[11] This would no doubt provide them with a motive to suppress the presumed fact of the text's codification by Muhammad, but only if that had actually been the case—which Burton seems to have taken for granted. The only attempt to make a real case for Muhammad's codification of the Quran is passingly made in two short sentences on the book's penultimate page,[12] where he cites the absence of any extant non-Uthmanic codices, which, however, have now come to light.[13]

It would also be very difficult to argue for a later date for the codification of the Quran, as issues of paramount significance had emerged already by the start of the Second Muslim Civil War (60-73/680-92) that necessitated legal and political decisions which were at odds with what would have been the earlier modus operandi that the Quran attests to. For instance, the fiscal regime put into place in the immediate wake of the conquests was vastly different to the fiscal regime, insofar as such a regime could be said to have existed, operative in Arabia under Muhammad. But this is not only about a fiscal system not being based on quranic injunctions, but rather about the conflict that ensued, in which the opposing factions attempted to vindicate their claims by resorting to the Quran, as is clear from the Fiscal Rescript issued by ʿUmar II. Yet the conflict does not start in the reign of ʿUmar II and goes back to the reign of Muʿāwiya, and one would have expected it to have left its mark on the pertinent quranic passages if the text was still open to additions and alterations. This would have been easy as these passages are few in number and short, and yet ʿUmar II and others had to resort to exegesis to offer interpretations of these passages that accord with their view of things. What is more, one may disagree with my contention in Chapter 1 that the Quran is a non-supersessionist text, but it is more difficult to disagree with the statement that explicitly supersessionist statements in the Quran are few and far between, and even then they need to be taken out of their context to sound

[11] John Burton, *The Collection of the Qurʾān* (Cambridge 1977).

[12] Ibid., 239.

[13] Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi, 'Ṣanʿāʾ 1 and the Origins of the Qurʾān', *Der Islam* 87 (2012): 1-129.

really supersessionist, a most prominent example of which being a verse that recurs no less than three times in the Quran: 9:33, 48:28, and 61:9. This quranic statement supplied later generations of Muslims with a pithy slogan to trumpet their supersessionist and universalist claims, but, as will be discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, most modern commentators neglect the fact that these later invocations of the verses are not verbatim quotations from the Quran but an adaptation therefrom that changes the wording of the text in order to remove the ambiguities of it—in addition, of course, to decontextualising it. This adaptation makes its first appearance on ʿAbd al-Malik's wholly epigraphic coinage introduced in 77/697, which leaves one wondering why the same minor rewording should not have made it to the Quran too if the text was not yet codified at this time and was still open to alterations. The only explanation for the existence of the version attested to in the Quran would, then, be that it pre-existed the version that first appears in 77/697 and dates to a time when a need for an explicitly supersessionist claim of this sort was not felt. The survival of this early version in the Quran thus indicates that the quranic text had fully solidified by this point. Arguments such as these can be made for many issues that loomed large within the ranks of the community in the first Islamic century, but of which we hear nothing in the Quran.[14]

[14] Arguments along this line have already been made by Nicolai Sinai, 'When Did the Consonantal Skeleton of the Quran Reach Closure?' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77 (2014): 273-92, 509-21; and Nicolai Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung: Studien zur frühen Koraninterpretation* (Wiesbaden 2009). See also his recent remarks on the problems that arise from postulating a late codification date for the Quran: Nicolai Sinai, 'The Christian Elephant in the Meccan Room: Dye, Tesei, and Shoemaker on the Date of the Qurʾān', forthcoming in *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association*.