

Essay

The Shi'is and the Qur'an: Between Apocalypse, Civil Wars, and Empire

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Abstract: The study is dedicated to the complex relationship between the Alides (supporters of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and their descendants, later called the Shi'is) and the Qur'an, especially in the early times of Islam. Several points are examined in order to put these relations into perspective. First of all, it is important to remember that the Quranic corpus was elaborated in the atmosphere of the civil wars that marked the birth and the first developments of Islam. These wars seem to have played a major role in the elaboration of the official version of the Quran, which the Alides would have considered a falsified and hardly understandable version of the Revelation. The problem of falsification (*taḥrīf*) as well as the belief in the existence of a hidden meaning of the Quran led to the Shi'i doctrine on the necessity for interpretation (*tafsīr*, *ta'wīl*) in order to make the Sacred Text intelligible. It is also important to question the reasons for the civil wars between the faithful of Muḥammad. According to the Quran and the Hadith, Muḥammad came to announce the end of the world. He therefore also announced the coming of the Messiah, the Saviour of the end times. Now, according to some sources, 'Alī is this Saviour. The problem is that after the death of Muḥammad, according to Shi'is, the opponents of 'Alī took power. With the conquests and the birth of the Arab empire, the rewriting of history and the creation of a new collective memory seem to have become necessary in order to marginalise 'Alī, among other reasons, and consolidate the caliphal power.

Keywords: Shi'ism; falsification; interpretation; 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib; the Messiah; Arab empire



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1. Introduction

The beginnings of Islam are marked by some major historical events: violent conflicts between Muḥammad's followers, rapid conquests, and the birth of the Arab empire. Two particularly important facts are also contemporary with these events: the development of scriptural sources, particularly the Qur'an, and the central position of the figure of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and his followers, both in the civil conflicts and in the history of the constitution of the Qur'an. According to the majority of Shi'i sources up until the middle of the 4th/10th century, the official caliphal Qur'an is a deeply falsified version of the original revelations made to Muḥammad. This alteration, which was due to the violence that followed the death of the Prophet and the delicate problem of his succession, made the Qur'anic text difficult to understand. This historical vision and also the religious doctrine—according to which the Qur'an has an apparent, exoteric (*zāhir*) level and a hidden, esoteric (*bātin*) level—are at the basis of the Shi'i doctrine on the necessity for the interpretation of the Qur'an by an infallible commentator who is the holder of the divine science and of the original, unfalsified version of the Qur'an. This infallible commentator is the Imam, the divine and perfect Guide. One of the functions of the Guide is therefore to make the Qur'an intelligible by restoring it to its original integrity and revealing its spiritual meanings. Ancient Shi'i sources report hundreds of verses of this "original Qur'an" that are not found in the version known to all. The first section of this study is devoted to the development of these issues. The second section attempts to question the historical and doctrinal reasons for the ancient Shi'i positions concerning the Qur'an through the problematization of a

history, ranging from the apocalyptic dimension of Muḥammad's message to the birth of the Arab empire and the attempt to constitute a new collective memory.

2. Civil Conflicts and the Elaboration of the Qur'an

The relationship between Shi'i Muslims and the Quran has always been complex, especially in the first three or four centuries of Islam. They are marked by two problems: firstly, the falsification (*taḥrīf*) of the official Vulgate known to all, and secondly, the absolute necessity for the interpretation of the Quran (*tafsīr* or *ta'wīl*) by a divinely inspired authority.

The falsification thesis is inseparable from the violence that marked the community of Muḥammad's followers in its early days. Indeed, the very first centuries of Islam were marked by two major indissolubly linked facts that have determined the historical and spiritual development of this religion up to the present day: the elaboration of scriptural sources, namely the Quran and the Hadith (but here we are concerned with the Quran alone), and chronic violence manifested mainly in the form of civil wars, not to mention the conquests themselves (Amir-Moezzi 2011, *passim*).

Concerning the Quran: according to Sunni tradition, which has been considered "orthodox", things have been fairly straightforward. The divine revelations, very faithfully and completely collected by the first two Caliphs Abū Bakr and 'Umar, were gathered into a single Quran by a commission of scholars under the reign of the third Caliph Uthmān (r. 23/644 to 35/656); that is, less than thirty years after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 11/632). The parallel Quranic recensions, which were considered untrustworthy, were destroyed and the official version, called the Vulgate of 'Uthmān, was soon accepted by the entire community of the faithful, except for a handful of heretics. Similarly, again according to Sunni tradition, the innumerable prophetic traditions that made up the corpus of Hadith were subjected to severe critical examination by scholars in order to distinguish between the authentic and the false, resulting in the elaboration of a large and reliable corpus of Hadith constituted according to the strict rules of the criteriological science of Hadith.

Yet critical research, subjecting Islamic and non-Islamic sources of all kinds to historical and philological scrutiny for nearly a century and a half, offers a much more complex and problematic picture of the history of the writing of the Holy Scriptures of Islam. A significant body of material dating back to Muḥammad were very gradually distinguished in the Quran and Hadith, i.e., identified respectively as the Word of God and prophetic traditions. The official Quran, subsequently put under the patronage of 'Uthmān, might in fact have been established later, probably under the Caliphate of the Umayyad 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 65/685 to 86/705). Moreover, it shows all the signs of long editorial work, probably carried out by a team of scribes and patent scholars. Only a few decades separate the time of the two caliphs, but these decades count as several centuries since the incalculable consequences of incessant civil wars and immense and dazzling conquests between the two eras shook the history, society, and mentalities of Muḥammad's first followers.

Moreover, even though it had been elaborated and declared official, it took several centuries for the State Vulgate to be accepted by all Muslims. Among the scholars and currents opposed to the Umayyad state, many important figures did not accept the authenticity of the "'Uthmānian Quran" and considered it a falsified version of the revelations made to the Prophet. Among them, the Alides, known progressively as Shi'is, formulated the most systematic and numerous criticisms of the integrity of the official Quran. Other Quranic recensions, sometimes quite different in form and content such as the one attributed to 'Alī, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, fourth Caliph, and first Imam of the Shi'is, or those attributed to the Companions 'Abdallāh b. Mas'ūd (d. 32/653) and Ubayy b. Ka'b (d. 30/649), thus continued to circulate at least until the 4th/10th century. Likewise, endless discussions about the authenticity of hadith-s have set scholars against each other for centuries. Even around the 4th and 5th/10th and 11th centuries, when the Sunnis more or less agreed to accept the corpus of what they called the Books of Authentic Traditions, the Shi'is constituted their own corpus where the very definition of the term "Hadith" diverged from that of the Sunnis. For the Sunnis, Hadith is the set of traditions dating back

to the Prophet (and in a few rare cases, to some of his Companions), whereas for the Shi'is, the term refers to traditions dating back to the Prophet, his daughter Fāṭima, Alī, and the Imams who are descendants of the latter, saints par excellence and guides divinely inspired for the Shi'is.

As for the endemic violence in which Islam was born and developed, we need only recall a few historical facts that seem to be proven by their own broad outlines. According to information provided by various Islamic sources, from the time after the Hegira, the last years of the Prophet's life were marked by many battles. Among these was the battle of Badr in the year 2/624, his first great victory over his Meccan opponents from his own tribe of Quraysh (notably the Umayyad clan of Banū 'Abd Shams), which seems to have left traces that are difficult for them to forget even after their conversion to Islam. After Muḥammad's death—according to some rare traditions, he was poisoned—his succession triggered a wave of violence to which I will return later.

What took place under the first Caliph Abū Bakr was the bloody “Wars of Rebellion” (*ḥurūb al-ridda*), by which he prevented newly converted Arabs to Muḥammad's message from returning to their ancestral religion after the death of the Apostle of Allāh (De Prémare 2002, chps. 1–11; Micheau 2012, chp. 1). According to the majority of accounts, Abū Bakr died by natural death; according to others, he, too, was poisoned. The time of the second Caliph 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb was the time of the wars of the great Arab conquests. He, too, was killed, apparently by a Persian slave. The third Caliph 'Uthmān b. 'Affān was also assassinated, and his death led to what is conventionally called the first great civil war (*fitna*) between Muslims. The short reign of the fourth, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, was an uninterrupted succession of civil wars: the great battle of Ṣiffīn in 37/657 pitted him against Mu'āwiya, leader of the powerful Umayyads, his lifelong enemies; this was preceded by the battle of the Camel (*Jamal*) in 36/656 against 'Ā'isha, the widow of the Prophet who was allied with two of his Companions; the battle of Ṣiffīn was then followed by the battle of Nahrawān in 38/659, where he fought against his former followers who had become his most bitter enemies, the Khārijites. 'Alī was finally murdered by one of them.

The reign of the Umayyads was a long series of repressions and massacres of their opponents: first, the Zubayrides, supporters of the short-lived caliphate of 'Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr in Mecca, but above all the Alides, “People of 'Alī”, who would end up being called the Shi'is. A cycle of bloody repression and armed rebellion was thus set in motion and would last for a long time thereafter. The most significant case is the massacre of al-Ḥusayn, beloved grandson of Muḥammad and son of 'Alī, and almost all of his family, by order of the second Umayyad Caliph Yazīd the First in 61/680, only a few decades after the death of the Prophet. The Umayyads were themselves overthrown very violently by a great armed revolution, that of the Abbasids. Under the caliphate of the latter, the bloody repression of the adversaries, especially the Alides/Shi'is of all trends/tendencies once again, would continue intermittently for several centuries. We thus arrive at the end of the 3rd/9th century.

The violent installation of a religion, especially in the complex process of its institutionalization or imposition on peoples who profess other beliefs, is obviously not unique to Islam; the examples of Judaism and Christianity are too well known to be repeated here. What seems to be specific to Islam, however, is primarily the nature of this violence such as the civil wars that have resulted in the death of a considerable number of its most important historical figures, and secondly, the centuries-long duration of the bloody conflicts which very often pitted them against each other.

It is useful to say a little more about what could be considered the matrix and paradigmatic conflict par excellence, both historically and doctrinally, which would have been the root of practically all the others, especially during the first centuries of Islam, but also, in various forms, up to the present day. Sources seem to point to the death and the delicate question of the succession of the Prophet in the year 11/632 as the circumstance that set off the first great explosion of violence among his followers. This seems so predictable because the precarious equilibrium supporting the heterogeneous assembly of groups and

interests that Muḥammad's new followers formed was based on the person of Muḥammad. Moreover, as we shall see below, the apocalyptic dimension of Muḥammad's message no longer suited the new power. In any case, when Muḥammad disappeared, the Meccan emigrants who had accompanied him during his hegira opposed the Medina auxiliaries who had welcomed him. His former Qurayshite enemies who had recently converted—among them the influential Umayyad family and their allies, the Companions of Muḥammad, Abū Bakr and 'Umar—aimed to impose themselves by neutralizing the ardour of the other competitors by all means, in particular the supporters of his other Companion, his cousin and son-in-law 'Alī, considered by some as the new Messiah (we will come back to this later). The confrontations, limited in time and space, at least temporarily, were very violent. After a tense meeting in the “public courtyard” (*saqifa*) of the Banū Sā'ida clan of the Auxiliaries, the conflicts were limited to an opposition between Abū Bakr and 'Alī, where the former quickly gained the upper hand and became the first Caliph of Islam (Amir-Moezzi 2011, chp. 1).

Due to this episode, the Islamic textual tradition has kept roughly two radically different representations. The great majority of religious sources stemming from what would gradually be called Sunnism, the majority current of Islam that supports the legitimacy of Abū Bakr, seems to have sought to attenuate or even conceal the violence of the confrontations and to make it a quasi-consensual figure by trying to limit the scope of the conflicts. Yet historical sources, even Sunni ones, contain sufficient evidence to the contrary, prompting most modern scholars to seriously question the alleged consensus of the “Muslims” (a later term) regarding the election of Abū Bakr and the alleged unity of the “Companions of the Prophet” (another later term). According to most Sunni doctrinal works, the Prophet did not explicitly designate anyone for his succession, either in his own statements or through the Quranic revelations (indeed, the “official” Quran as we know it does not contain any mention in this sense). His “community” would therefore have resorted to ancestral tribal practices that had always marked the succession of a charismatic chief among the Arabs: the appointment, by a council of influential notables, of one of the chief's closest companions, of a respectable age, a sign of wisdom, and belonging to the same tribe as him. Abū Bakr fulfilled all these conditions and was thus elected after the meeting of Saqifa, supported by an almost unanimous approval with the notable exception of 'Alī who, in the end, was also convinced by the wisdom of this choice and by the concern to safeguard the unity and peace of the community.

The supporters of 'Alī, who was very young at the time (which would have been a handicap for him, according to some), who are called the Alides or the proto-Shi'is, the future largest minority in Islam, give a completely different version of events. According to Shi'i sources, Muḥammad had explicitly designated 'Alī as his only legitimate successor on several occasions. Even more decisively, God himself, through his revelations, had announced this succession. According to them, it could not have been otherwise: how could God and his Apostle have left the crucial question of his succession open? Is it conceivable that they were so indifferent to the leadership of the community of the faithful as to leave it in a state of vagueness and confusion? This would be contrary even to the spirit of the Quran, according to which the great prophets of the past had their successors chosen from among the closest members of their families, privileged by blood ties and initiated into the secrets of their religion. It is true that the Quran advises consultation in certain cases, but never with regard to the succession of prophets, which remains a divine election. Alid/Shi'i sources, especially during the first centuries of the Hegira, maintain that the “original Quran”, which contains many explicit references and clear allusions to members of Muḥammad's family and presents 'Alī as his successor, was falsified, heavily censored, and deeply altered by the opponents of 'Alī who usurped power after the death of the Prophet (see also below). Similarly, this original Quran, much larger than the Quran known to all, explicitly contained the names of the opponents of Muḥammad and 'Alī who belatedly and opportunely switched to Islam. In order to remove 'Alī as the appointed successor to the Prophet, these enemies, who eventually took power, were forced to censor

all these passages and at the same time deny the authenticity of the prophetic statements concerning the election of his son-in-law (Kohlberg 1972; Amir-Moezzi 1992, pp. 200–27; Kohlberg and Amir-Moezzi 2009, Introduction).

One of the seminal arguments of those asserting the falsified character of the official Qur'an, which was traditionally elaborated by the first three caliphs (Abū Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthmān), is the following: One of the most important areas of the Quran is the so-called "Stories of the Prophets" (*qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*). In these stories, previous saints and prophets, including those in the Bible such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Solomon, David, Moses, Jesus, etc., as well as important members of their families (parents, wives, children, brothers, and sisters) and their opponents (Satan, Nimrod, Pharaoh, Pontius Pilate, etc.) are mentioned hundreds of times (Tottoli 2002). So how is it that in the official version of the Quran, the Prophet is mentioned by name only four times in total, and none of his enemies are mentioned, nor any member of his family—except for two obscure and enigmatic characters (but are they really historical figures?), namely his hostile uncle Abū Lahab and his provisional adopted son Zayd? How can one imagine that even his son-in-law 'Alī (and perhaps the Messiah announced by Muḥammad, as we shall see) and his daughter Fāṭima, parents of his only male offspring, namely his two grandsons al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, as well as prominent religious figures, are all absent from the Quran? There is a simple reason for this silence of the sacred text—censorship of the original text of the Quran by men of power, the enemies of 'Alī (Amir-Moezzi 2011, chp. 2). The "genuine" Quran, the recension of 'Alī, was hidden for safety and protected by the Imams of his descendants and will not be publicly revealed until eschatological times. However, quite a number of Shi'i books report quotations from this hidden Quran, which are not included in the official version of the Quran known to all. According to this presentation of the Quran, what happened at Saqīfa immediately after the death of the Prophet was a veritable "coup d'état", a long and skilfully fomented conspiracy by the two strongmen of the Quraysh tribe, Abū Bakr and 'Umar, probably with the help of the Umayyad clan, to remove 'Alī in order to seize the new power established by Muḥammad and transform the latter's religion into an instrument of their own ambitions.

However, the respectability of the Companions of the Prophet, and even the quasi-holy status of some of them, notably the first three caliphs, as well as the belief in the absolute integrity of the official version of the Quran, early on became fundamental articles of faith of the official majority current of Islam that was to become Sunni orthodoxy. The uncompromising stances of the Alides and later the Shi'i minority against these two doctrines were therefore considered by various powers, both politically and religiously, to be highly subversive and heretical, leading to the repression and massacres of Alid populations for many centuries.

3. The Need for Interpretation

From the 3rd/9th century onwards, a large number of Shi'i works, with titles such as "Revelation and Falsification" (*al-tanzīl wa l-taḥrīf*), "Revelation and Alteration" (*al-tanzīl wa l-tabdīl/taghyīr*), "The Quran and Falsification" (*al-tanzīl min al-Qur'ān wa l-taḥrīf*), etc., clearly shows that many followers of 'Alī and his descendants considered, until that time, the 'uthmānian version of the Quran to be falsified and censored (Amir-Moezzi 2011, chp. 2, note 173). In their eyes, this state was a direct result of the tragic events that followed Muḥammad's death.

According to early Shi'i Quranic commentaries, the main censored elements of the Quran were mostly personal names, especially those of members of the Prophet's Family and their enemies. For the proponents of the falsification thesis, these amputations of the scripture would necessarily have made it unintelligible. What can be understood of a text that is specially revealed about such and such a person if the names of the latter are removed? It was probably in the first two or three centuries of Islam that the doctrinal couple of the Quran and the Imam came about: that the Quran is certainly a guide, but a silent and mute guide; at the same time, the Imam is a Quran, a speaking Book. Because of

falsification, the Book of God became a “Guide”, a “Quran”, or a “Silent Book” (*imām, qur’ān* or *kitāb ṣāmit*). To find his Word, one now needs the teaching of true initiates, the Imams (i.e., ‘Alī and his descendants) whose person and/or teaching is said to be “the Speaking Quran” (*qur’ān nāṭiq*) (Ayoub 1988; Amir-Moezzi 2011, chp. 3). The two expressions, inseparable in Shi’ism, underline the necessity of interpretation, of hermeneutics as a means of understanding. Two traditions dating back to the sixth Imam Ja’far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) seem to make this clear: “If the Quran could be read as it was revealed, even two people would not have disagreed about it” and “If the Quran had been left as it was revealed, we would have found our names in it as those who came before us are named in it (i.e., the holy figures of the earlier religions)” (Sayyārī, *Kitāb al-Qirā’āt*, apud Kohlberg and Amir-Moezzi 2009, Revelation and Falsification, hadith-s no. 8 and 9, Arabic text, p. 8). According to such traditions, it is falsification that has made the Book incomprehensible and thus necessitated its hermeneutics, which is aimed at restoring its lost meaning. In Shi’ism, the Imam is the hermeneutic master par excellence and his teachings, his *ḥadīth*-s, are above all meant to be explanatory (*tafṣīl, ta’bīr*), exegesis (*tafsīr*), hermeneutics, or spiritual interpretation (*ta’wīl*) of the Book (in ancient times, all these terms were more or less equivalent). It is indeed the Imams and their teachings who give their Word to the Quran that has been rendered mute by alteration. Over time, this radical thesis based on the thesis of falsification will gradually give way, but without disappearing completely, to the doctrine that the Quran itself, in its original version, is a coded and multi-layered text which therefore needs the Imam’s hermeneutics in order to be properly understood (Corbin 1971–1972, vol. 4, pp. 346–47).

From its earliest texts, Shi’ism has been defined as a hermeneutic doctrine. The teaching of the Imam/*walī* (Friend or Ally of God) comes essentially to reveal the hidden meaning or meanings of the Revelation. Without the comments and explanations of *walī*, the scripture revealed by the Prophet (*nabī*) remains obscure and its deepest levels remain misunderstood.

The ancientness and centrality of these doctrines undoubtedly explain the antiquity and frequency of the writing of exegetical works in Shi’i circles. Bibliographical and prosopographical sources list more than a hundred works of this kind compiled roughly during the period of the historical Imams, i.e., from the 1st/7th century to the second half of the 3rd/9th century. From works dating before the 3rd/9th century, almost nothing has come down to us except for fragments brought back by later writings. Many of these writings go back to the direct disciples of the Imams such as Abū l-Jārūd (of Zaydi tendency; born around 80/699), Jābir b. Yazīd al-Ju’fī (d. 127/744–745), Abān b. Taghlib (d. 141–758–759), Thābit b. Dīnār, better known as Abū Ḥamza al-Thumālī (d. 150/767) (Modarressi 1993). These ancient collections seem to have been lost, but much of their content was recovered and transmitted by the great compilers of Hadith of the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries, whose works have reached us: al-Sayyārī, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Barqī, Furāt al-Kūfī, ‘Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī, al-‘Ayyāshī, and of course, the great al-Kulaynī (Kohlberg 1983; Bar-Asher 1999). These texts are all compilations of exegetical hadith-s attributed to Imams, theoretically without any additions from the compiler who gave his name to the work.

According to a very ancient conception, exegesis reveals the spirit of the Quran, its hidden meaning, by identifying the characters who are revealed in the Book. According to Shi’ism, the importance of persons and their roles in history constitute the centre of gravity of faith; therefore, these notions could not fail to appear explicitly in the text of the Revelation. In a letter to his intimate disciple al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ju’fī, the sixth Imam Ja’far al-Ṣādiq strongly emphasizes that true faith consists in the knowledge of persons (*inna al-dīn huwa ma’rifat al-rijāl*), that the knowledge of persons is the religion of God (*ma’rifat alrijāl dīn allāh*), and that these persons are, on the one hand, the Friends of God, namely the Prophet, the Imams, and their followers; on the other hand, there are the Enemies of God, namely the opponents of the Imams and their followers. The foundation of faith therefore consists in recognizing God’s Allies and their adversaries, that is, God’s adversaries. This

is why many Shi'is maintained that the original, integral Quran, uncensored by official authorities, contained the names of the main characters of both groups, including members of the Holy Prophetic Family (*ahl al-bayt*), especially 'Alī, and their enemies among the influential figures of Quraysh (Kohlberg 1972; Bar-Asher 1993; Amir-Moezzi 2006, chp. 7). Apart from such assertions, countless Shi'i sources and especially exegetical traditions maintain that the positive words, expressions, or passages of the Quran often symbolically designate the Friends of God, more particularly the *ahl al-bayt* and the Imams, just as the negative expressions designate their opponents (Goldziher 1920, passim; id, p. 263ff.).

I have called this true literary genre "personalized commentaries" (Amir-Moezzi 2011, chp. 3). These are extremely numerous in Shi'ism from the 3rd/9th century to practically the present day.

The thesis of the falsification of the official version of the Quran can therefore be found massively in the sources of the original tradition until the beginning of the 4th/10th century. Things would change with the coming to power of the Buwayhids, shortly before the end of the first half of the 4th/10th century. The reasons are complex and intertwined: the political domination of Shi'ism, which led to this period being called the "Shi'i century" of Islam (in fact, in addition to the Buwayhids at the centre of the Caliphate, the Fatimids, the Qarmates, and the Hamdānides reigned in the most important regions of the Islamic empire). Another reason: the occultation of the last Imam and twelfth of the Imami Shi'is in 329/941, according to tradition. A third main reason: the rationalizing turn of Islamic thought.

The combination of these historical, political, and religious reasons led, among other things, to the advent of a new class of twelve lawyer-theologians gravitating around the Buwayhid princes and seeking to justify their reign. With the Sunni Abbasid Caliph still in place and the population overwhelmingly Sunni, these scholars felt a pressing need for legitimacy and respectability and began to take a critical distance from their predecessors of the original Shi'i tradition. One of the doctrines that would be vigorously but unambiguously rejected is that of falsification (Amir-Moezzi 2014). This was the beginning of the development, within Twelver Shi'ism, of the new "rationalist theological-legal" tradition, which was to become dominant and in the majority, pushing the "primitive esoteric" tradition into isolation (Amir-Moezzi and Jambet 2004, part 3, chps. 1 and 2). With successive self-censures, the Shi'is would henceforth adopt the position of the majority Muslims: the official Quran is a faithful version of the revelations made to Muḥammad. From this period onwards, the advocates of falsification would become increasingly discreet, from the Ismaili Shi'ism (De Smet 2014), and especially in the Twelver Imami Shi'ism, to the present day (Brunner 2001).

4. Examples of the "Shi'i Verses" of the Qur'an

Until the first half of the 4th/10th century, the questioning of the integrity of the official version of the Qur'an has been encountered by many authors and in a number of schools. This is particularly the case with some of the Companions of Muḥammad, some Kharijis, or even some Mu'tazili thinkers (Kohlberg 1972). However, no religious trend has had so many consistent and systematic data on these issues as ancient Shi'ism.

First, there are the indications that one might call indirect. Scattered throughout the imposing mass of Shi'i traditions, reported within chapters that often have nothing to do with the subject, as if to hide data that we know to be highly subversive, some Imams speak unequivocally of the falsified character (*taḥrīf*) of the scripture, of the texts as altered (*tabdīl*, *taghyīr*) and censored (*maḥw*) from the 'Uthmānian Vulgate, to describe what the enemies of the Imams did to the original Quran.

On the other hand, certain classical heresiographers, as important as al-Ash'arī (d. 324/935), Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1054), or al-Isfara'īnī (d. 471/1078-1079), have always counted the belief in the falsified character of the official Quran among the most "heretical" and most scandalous beliefs of the Shi'is.

Additionally, there are the direct indications, also more or less diluted in the enormous corpus of Hadith. These are mostly Quranic quotations possessing great discrepancies from the known version. The seriousness of the subject imposed discretion. This is why in many traditions, Imams ask their followers to apply “secrecy” (*taqiyya*) to the problem of falsification of the Quran, or to recite the Quran in its official version when in the presence of non-Shi’is. According to the direct indications, it must be repeated that at the time of the Prophet’s death, only ‘Alī had a complete recension of the Revelation. This complete original Quran is nearly three times larger than the official Vulgate. The majority of the Companions of the Prophet and the influential men of the tribe of Quraysh, with Abū Bakr and ‘Umar at its head, rejected this original text and developed a falsified text that was cut off from its most important parts, a text established and declared official by the third Caliph ‘Uthmān who ordered the destruction of the other versions.

According to the Twelver Shi’i traditions, this is because the original Revelation contained a large number of verses in which ‘Alī and the descendants of the Prophet—that is, Fāṭima and the Imams—were mentioned by name as models and leaders par excellence of the Community. This Revelation mentioned above all the *walāya* of ‘Alī, his holy power, his belonging to the Divine Covenant, and his theophanic nature, according to the different meanings of this term (Amir-Moezzi 2006, chp. 7).

Other verses, just as numerous, explicitly or allusively denounced the powerful men of Quraysh and their treachery towards Muḥammad, his Book, and his religion. These men, who came to power after the death of the Prophet, naturally censored and altered Quranic passages that were compromising to them. On the other hand, the initial Revelation contained “everything”, the mysteries of heaven and earth, the events of the past, present, and future. All this was censored in the official version. Rejected and threatened with destruction, the “original” Quran was hidden by ‘Alī. It was then secretly transmitted from Imam to Imam until the twelfth and last one, the eschatological Saviour, who took it with him to his occultation. No one except the Imams know its exact contents, which will only be revealed in its entirety when the hidden Imam returns at the end of time. Until then, according to these Shi’i traditions, the Muslims will have to make do with the censored and distorted version of the ‘Uthmanic Vulgate, a version resulting from the betrayal of the Companions who signed, with their ungodly pride, the forfeiture of the community in its majority by removing ‘Alī from the succession to the place of the Prophet and by amputating the Book of its deeper meaning.

Practically all ancient compilations of the Hadith, up to the middle of the 4th/10th century, report a more or less large number of Imam traditions containing quotations from the “original integral Quran”, quotations which therefore do not appear in the known Quran (for sources see Kohlberg 1972; Amir-Moezzi 1992, p. 79sq.; id., Amir-Moezzi 2018, pp. 122sq. et 265sq.; Kohlberg and Amir-Moezzi 2009, Arabic text, passim; Bar-Asher 1993). Here are some significant examples, among many others (the translations are mine; the differences from the Vulgate are marked in italics).

Quran 2: 59: “Then those who were unjust *with regard to the rights of Muḥammad’s descendants* substituted another word for the Word given to them. Thus, We sent down wrath from the heavens on those who were unjust *towards the rights of the descendants of Muḥammad* in response to their perversity.”

Quran 2: 87: “Whenever *Muḥammad* (instead of “a prophet”) came to you, bringing you what you did not want *concerning the Holy Power* (or divine nature, *walāya*) of ‘Alī, you took pride in yourself and, *within the family of Muḥammad*, you called some liars and killed others.”

Quran 2: 90: “How evil is what they have sold their souls against, not believing and rebelling in what God has revealed *about ‘Alī*.”

Quran 2: 255: “To Him belongs all things in heaven and on earth, *and all things between heaven and earth or under the earth, the invisible world and the visible world*. He is Clement and Merciful. Who can intercede with Him without His permission?”

Quran 4: 47: "Oh, you to whom the Scripture was given! Believe in what We have revealed to you about 'Alī as a shining light (instead of: "confirming what you already had")."

Quran 4: 63: "God knows what is in their hearts; depart from them, *for the Word of Woe is intended for them, and the torment* (this part is missing "exhort them", which is found in the Vulgate). Address to them convincing words that apply to their own case."

Quran 4: 65–66: "They will not then find in themselves the possibility of escaping what you have decided about the cause of the Divine Friend (*walī*, i.e., the holder of the *walāya*) and they will submit to Allah to obey in a total way. If We prescribed to them: 'Get yourselves killed and submit to the Imam' or 'Leave your homes for him', they would not do it except for a few. If those who oppose (instead of: "if they") followed the exhortations, it would be better for them and more effective in strengthening them."

Quran 6: 82: "Those who believe in the *walāya* of 'Alī and do not cover their faith with injustice by associating with it the power of Abū Bakr and 'Umar."

Quran 10: 15: "Bring us a different Quran from this one and they said: or change in it (the mentions of) 'Alī (instead of: "or change this one")."

Quran 17: 85: "Most people are stubborn in their disbelief about the *walāya* of 'Alī."

Quran 18: 29: "Let him who will believe and him who will not, remain in disbelief; for those who do wrong to the descendants of Muḥammad, We have prepared a Fire"

Quran 20: 115: "And once We entrusted Adam with Verbs concerning Muḥammad, 'Alī, Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan, al-Ḥusayn, and the Imams of their descendants, but he forgot."

Quran 33: 53 and 33: 69: "You must not offend the Messenger of God with regard to 'Alī and the Imams as those who offended Moses when God cleared him of what they were saying."

Quran 33: 71: "Whoever obeys God and His Prophet with regard to the *walāya* of 'Alī and the Imams after him, enjoys great happiness."

Quran 40: 13: "For it is so: when God the One and the People of the Divine Alliance (*walāya*) are invoked, you remain unbelievers."

Quran 42: 13: "He has established for you, O Family of Muḥammad (i.e., Fāṭima and the Imams), in religion, what He commanded to Noah, and what We revealed to you, O Muḥammad, and what We commanded to Abraham, Moses, and Jesus: 'Establish the religion of the Family of Muḥammad, and do not divide yourselves over it, but be united. How hard it seems to the associationists, those who associate with the holy power of 'Alī other powers, what you call them in fact of the holy power of 'Alī. Certainly, God guides, O Muḥammad, to this religion those who repent, those who accept your call to the holy power of 'Alī (instead of: "God chooses and calls to this religion whoever He wants. He guides to it the one who repents")."

Quran 43: 42: "Hold on to what is revealed to you. You are concerned with the *walāya* of 'Alī and 'Alī is the straight path (instead of: "You are on a straight path")."

Quran 70: 1–2: "A questioner has called for an inevitable punishment for those who do not believe in the *walāya* of 'Alī. No one can reject this punishment."

We will stop here with the examples. But it is important to know that there are hundreds of such verses, with major differences from the official text of the Quran. In his book with the clearest title, *Revelation and Falsification (al-Tanzīl wa l-tahrīf)*, the 3rd/9th century compiler, al-Sayyārī, reports nearly three hundred of them (Kohlberg and Amir-Moezzi 2009). Meir Bar-Asher, in his monograph on the variant readings and the Shi'i additions to the text of the Vulgate, reproduces dozens of them (Bar-Asher 1993). That is to say, that several centuries after the advent of Islam, and even afterwards but in a less massive way, the Shi'is, especially the Twelver Imams, had a different definition of the Quranic text than the Sunnis, as was also the case for the Hadith.

5. Between Apocalypse and Empire

5.1. The Qur'an: A Problematic Text

The Shi'i doctrine of the falsification of the Quran can be seen as part of a broader problem: the text of the Muslim holy book is problematic. Orientalists, and long before them the Muslim scholars themselves, have been asking this question. The latter, of course,

never use the term “problematic” when referring to the Quran, but a number of factors seem to show that they objectively had to face a number of questions that remained without convincing answers. Let us content ourselves with a few significant examples.

First of all, the disjointed, unstructured, and fragmentary “style” of the Quran. Why does this book, unlike the other books of the textual tradition to which it belongs, namely the Torah and the New Testament, present such an unusual, disconcerting style? The question was raised in the polemics between Muslims themselves on the one hand, and between Muslims and the followers of other “People of the Scriptures” on the other hand, where the latter reproached the scripture of the former for its lack of narrative logic, inconsistency of composition, obscurity and contradiction in the exposition, and various stylistic defects. In the face of these attacks, Muslim scholars developed a whole literary genre called *naẓm al-Qur’ān* (“composition of the Quran”) in order to provide plausible justifications for these problems actually posed by the Quranic text. However, each author provides different answers to these problems, and what characterizes the works of this literary genre is rather their great diversity in the justifications proposed. The logical conclusion that can be drawn from this is that Muslim scholars do not know the reasons for the unstructured style of the Quran (Audebert 1982; Urvoy 2007).

The same observation applies to the chronology of the Revelation. We know that very early on, Muslims distinguished between Meccan and Medinan suras. However, we do not know the precise reason why the Meccan chapters of the Quran contain Medinan verses and the Medinan chapters contain Meccan verses. One then wonders what this distinction really corresponds to. The current order of the suras does not correspond in any way to the chronological order of their “revelation”, as the faithful themselves agree. The chapters have been ordered more or less according to their respective sizes, from the longest to the shortest (according to a certain ancient scribal culture?). What is the logic of this distribution? The answers are very divergent. Similarly, different Muslim scholars trying to reconstruct the chronological order of the “descent” of the Quran’s chapters propose different lists. Thus, from al-Ya’qūbī and Ibn al-Nadīm in the 3rd and 4th centuries of the Hegira/9th and 10th of the Common Era, to al-Zarkashī in the 8th/14th and al-Suyūṭī, who died at the beginning of the 10th/16th century, we have chronological lists of suras that are completely divergent from each other (Reynolds 2011). The logical conclusion for the historian is that Muslim scholars, even the great and recognized experts in Quranic sciences, did not know the chronological order of the suras or had lost knowledge of it very early on.

The same is true for another important aspect of knowledge of the Quran: “the circumstances of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). For experts, the aim was to know and present the context, time, and place; in short, the circumstances surrounding the revelation of this or that verse, set of pericopes, or sura. Once again, a whole literary genre was born in the first centuries of Islam, and it must be noted once more that the circumstances proposed for the same Quranic text vary greatly from one author to another, especially in ancient times. In this regard, it would be useful to examine the monumental Quranic commentary of the famous al-Ṭabarī (m.310/923), which presents the different reports on the circumstances of the revelation of the same text; one can thus see the extent of the divergences of scholars on the subject (Yahia 2007). Here, one can only conclude that the latter are ignorant of the true historical and geographical contexts of the Quranic texts.

We are facing the same kind of problems concerning another Quranic science, that of Abrogation. This science has been developed to solve some of the contradictions of the Quranic text. It argues that some recent verses abrogate some older ones in contradiction with them. The literary genre of *nāsikh wa mansūkh* is devoted to this issue. However, in addition to the theological problems posed by the doctrine of divine versatility, which has divided certain currents, the study of works of this “literary genre” shows, for example, that the number of “abrogated” verses varies, depending on the author, between 3 and 400. This considerable gap clearly shows how much the question remained debated among

Muslim scholars (Burton 1977, p. 17sq., Part 1, chps. 3 and 4; index sub “Abrogation”; Burton 1990; Chaumont 2007; Rippin 2000).

The bitter debates about the authenticity of the official Quran during the first four centuries of the Hegira also fall within the framework of the questions raised about the problematic nature of the Quranic text.

All these questions, and many others that we cannot discuss here, have been studied at varying lengths by orientalists, Islamic and Quranic scholars from the 19th century to the present day. They clearly show that many aspects of the Quranic text remain as enigmatic as they were for Muslims from the earliest times of their history. Why? What are the reasons for these grey areas, these irregularities, these question marks that are still unresolved? Many different avenues of research have already been proposed by scientific researchers. I present here those opened in particular by the study of ancient Shi’i sources in the hope that they will complement the others. They are based on three distinct but interdependent historical phenomena: the absolute centrality of the figure of ‘Alī in Shi’ism, the civil wars of early Islam, and the apocalyptic dimension of Muḥammad’s early messages. We have already seen the case of the civil wars and the importance of ‘Alī and the role of both in the turbulent history of the writing of the Quran according to the Shi’i perception of events. Let us now push the questions further: Why ‘Alī? Why these civil wars? Where did these differences arise from, opening up to so much violence that seems to have profoundly marked the Quranic text? Perhaps it is the will of the Caliphal power just after the death of the Prophet, especially after the great Arab conquests, to make people forget the strong apocalyptic and messianic dimension of the Prophet’s message.

The following statement can be summed up in a kind of syllogism: Muḥammad came to announce the end of time; he belongs to a biblical culture; he therefore announces the coming of the Messiah. Now, for a certain number of his followers, ‘Alī would have been this Messiah (Amir-Moezzi 2016).

5.2. *The End of Days in the Message of Muḥammad*

The apocalyptic dimension is heavily present in the Quranic corpus. Indeed, the Quran insists on numerous occasions on the imminent end of the world. It is not the case of one or two verses, one or two suras, but dozens of suras and verses. This entails not only a large number of scattered verses, this is a case of more than thirty of the very last suras of the Quran, reputed to be the oldest and rightly called the “Quranic apocalyptic” suras (Cuypers 2014). These passages herald the dramatic cosmic upheavals announcing the imminent end of time, invite unbelieving men to repent and purify themselves in order not to suffer God’s wrath, to follow the right path to become part of the pious and good people to whom salvation is promised. Let us look at some examples (Arberry’s translations):

Quran 99 (the Earthquake), 8 verses: “In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate/When earth is shaken with a mighty shaking/and earth brings forth her burdens/and Man says ‘What ails her?/upon the day she shall tell her tidings/ . . . Upon that day men shall issue in scatterings to see their works/and whoso has done an atom’s weight of good shall see it/and whoso has done an atom’s weight of evil shall see it.”

Quran 102 (Rivalry), 8 verses: “In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate/Gross rivalry diverts you/even till you visit the tombs/No indeed; but very soon you shall know /Again, no indeed; but soon you shall know/No indeed; did you know with the knowledge of certainty/you shall surely see Hell/Again, you shall surely see it with the eye of certainty/then you shall be questioned that day concerning true bliss.”

The imminence of the end of the world is still evoked in many passages. It is notably underlined by the use of the term *al-sā‘a*, the Hour, but also “moment, instant”, to designate the very imminent advent of this end. The use of the term *āzifa* for the Judgement is also noteworthy, evoking the idea of an event that is about to happen or is approaching at full speed, something that happens suddenly: “ . . . Which of the blessings of your Lord do you wish to dispute?/Here is a warning similar to the ancient warnings/The coming of the

Imminent is imminent (*azifati l-āzifa*)/No one but God can conjure it . . . ". (Quran 53:57; translation is mine).

These Qur'anic examples can go on for several pages. These passages, as well as many similar data in the corpus of Hadith, have led some scholars from the 19th century to the present day to consider the Quran, the environment in which it was born, and the early days of Islam as phenomena belonging to a time and space, or to a history and a geography, strongly imbued with apocalyptic beliefs: from Snouck Hurgronje (1886, 1894) and Paul Casanova (1911–1924) to Stephen Shoemaker (2014), Tor Andrae (1955), Patricia Crone-Michael Cook (Crone and Cook 1977), Suliman Bashear (1991, 2004), and David Cook (2002), among many others.

Some examples are also found in the corpus of Hadith. First of all, there is the "two fingers tradition". According to the *Musnad* of Ibn Ḥanbal (m. 241/855), Muḥammad is believed to have said: "The Hour is coming. My coming and the Hour are separated from each other like these two", and he pointed to his forefinger and middle finger. Ibn Sa'd (m. 230/845) reports in his *Ṭabaqāt* that Muḥammad was sent at the same time as the Hour to warn his people of the coming of a painful punishment. Casanova quotes another prophetic Hadith from the *Khiṭaṭ* of al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442): "My coming and the coming of the Hour are concurrent; even this one almost came before me". Again, according to the *Musnad* of Ibn Ḥanbal, Muḥammad is said to have been sent at the time of the coming of the Hour. The same scholar and his contemporary, the famous traditionist Ibn Abī Shayba (d. 235/849), report a prophetic tradition in which Muḥammad declares: "Those who see me or hear my words will see al-Dajjāl (the Muslim antichrist) in their lifetime" (for sources see Amir-Moezzi 2016, pp. 25–26). Finally, in a large number of texts and passages in the "biographies" of the Prophet, or in more or less ancient historiographical works, Muḥammad is called "the prophet of the end of time" (*nabī ākhir al-zamān*) or "the prophet/apostle of the calamities of the end of the world" (*nabī/rasūl al-malḥama* or *nabī almalāḥim*).

What is important for our purpose is that the Quranic suras and verses as well as the Hadith-s and narratives we have just examined are likely to be traced back to Muḥammad himself, to his immediate entourage, or very soon afterwards. Given that the advent of the Hour was not finally realised and that the world did not come to an end, what interest would later scholars or Muslim currents have in fabricating such texts and attributing them to Muḥammad who, in this way, would have lost all credibility and thus all prophetic legitimacy? This is the central argument of Casanova, and more recently of Shoemaker, in support of the thesis that the announcement of the end of time was the main message of the Muḥammadian mission, a message that the later Muslim authorities had every interest in concealing. I will come back to this point. Another crucial historical element corroborating this thesis is that the period and part of the world that saw the birth of Muḥammad and his message (i.e., the century that runs from the first half of the 6th to the first half of the 7th century in the immense regions that we now call the Near and Middle East) are strongly marked by intense apocalyptic expectations illustrated in all religious traditions (Shoemaker 2018). The incessant and bloody great wars between the Byzantine and Sassanian empires, and to a lesser degree, the bloody violent conflicts from Ethiopia to Yemen, with their share of massacres, destruction, displacement of populations, and disease, all created a world of uncertainty and anguish, particularly conducive to the darkest premonitions and the most grandiose hopes.

Messianic uprisings are common, especially among the Jews, seeking to liberate Jerusalem from Byzantine rule and rebuild the Temple. Jewish apocalyptic writings such as *the Apocalypse of Zerubbabel* or *the Secrets of Rabbi Shim'ōn ben Yoḥai* had great religious influence among some Jews who eagerly awaited the deliverance of Jerusalem and who, after the advent of Muḥammad, would have considered him as the providential instrument of this liberation (Crone and Cook 1977, p. 4sq; Reeves 2006, pp. 76–89). Apocalyptic beliefs also prevailed in Sassanian Zoroastrian circles at the time, as can be seen in texts

such as *Zand-ī Wahman Yasn* and the *Jāmāsp Nāmag* (whose exact dates are problematic) or the Armenian History attributed to Sebeos (Cereti 1995; Greenwood 2003; Grenet 2019).

But the most numerous sources of this kind were composed by Christian authors, especially of the Syriac language, some of them a few years after the Arab conquests and thus aroused by them: *the Testament of the Twelve Apostles*, *the Apocalypse of the Pseudo-Method*, *the Apocalypse of Bahīra*, *the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Esdras*, *the Sermon on the End of Days of Pseudo-Ephrem*, *the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Athanasia*, etc. (Debié 2019). The emergence of a new prophet among the Arabs, their lightning conquests within the two largest empires of the region, and the civil wars between Muḥammad's followers constitute a significant part of the Apocalypses written or developed after the advent of Muḥammad.

5.3. Muḥammad and the “biblical milieu”

The Quranic apocalyptic text belongs, in its own way, to this rich literature that was widespread in its time. This is for good reason; precisely at that time, Arabia was largely imbued with a biblical monotheistic culture (Robin 2019). This must also have been the case in the region of Ḥijāz, despite the almost total absence of material evidence, an absence no doubt caused by the policy of the systematic destruction of pre-Islamic remains in this region by the Saudi authorities. Contrary to what Muslim apologetics would later argue, pre-Islamic Arabia was not the “era of ignorance” (*al-jāhiliyya*), chaos, and idolatry, nor was Islam the beginning of Arab monotheism. Polytheism had probably practically ceased to exist there many centuries before, except perhaps among a few non-sedentary Bedouins.

Apart from a lot of epigraphic, archaeological, and historical evidence, especially outside Ḥijāz—as shown by the numerous studies of scholars such as Frederic Imbert, Christian Robin, or Jan Retsö—the most obvious textual attestations are to be found in the Quran itself (unless one considers hypothetically that a part of the Quran is not ḥijāzienne): the massive presence of figures from the Old and New Testament; the allusive character of the biblical accounts which attests that the audience knew them well (otherwise these allusions would have remained completely unintelligible); the onomastic of the biblical characters stemming from that of Eastern Christianity of the Syro-Palestinian culture; the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac roots of such important technical terms as *qurʾān* (Quran), *sūra* (chapter of the Quran), *āya* (Quranic verse), or *zakāt* (almsgiving), *ṣalāt* (canonical prayer), *ḥajj* (great pilgrimage to Mecca), or *ʿumra* (small pilgrimage to Mecca); the role of Ethiopian Christianity, etc. The phenomenon has been widely studied by dozens of specialists from various disciplines through hundreds of works that have yet to be synthesized (Kropp 2007; Reynolds 2008; Reynolds 2010; Dye and Nobilio 2011).

And what about Muḥammad? What was the religious milieu of his birth and education? From which tradition(s) did he draw his spirituality? What are the origins of the numerous biblical or parabiblical characters and pericopes of the Quran, of which there are hundreds of occurrences? For nearly a century and a half, various questions, theories, and theses have been developed on this subject, again through innumerable works, and still without to the possibility of drawing any definite conclusions. Was there one or more forms of Judaism? Different non-Nicean and non-Chalcedonian Christian currents, that is to say, mainly non-Trinitarian trends (Nestorianism, Arianism, Monarchianism, Monism, etc.)? Heterodox tendencies of Manichaeism (Amir-Moezzi 2016, pp. 30–31, notes 30 to 32). We can also assume a syncretism between several of these religious traditions. Obviously, entering into a detailed discussion of this particularly complex subject is out of the question as this would take us away from our topic of interest. However, the most probable hypothesis seems to be that which was formulated by Alfred-Louis de Prémare as “a more or less defined membership (of Muḥammad) in one or another sectarian grouping qualified as Judeo-Christian . . . The hypothesis that existed at the beginning of the 7th century, if not Arabic translations of entire biblical books, at least a collection in Arabic of quotations from the Bible or other parallel texts from Jewish or Christian apocalyptic writings” (De Prémare 2002, p. 267sqq.).

5.4. The Announcement of the Coming of the Messiah

Indeed, if Muḥammad and his message stemmed from a monotheism of “Judeo-Christian sensibility” (Dye 2018, p. 126) and were addressed to listeners belonging to the same kind of milieu, and if they were announcing the imminence of the end of the world—all this being largely attested to by the Quran and the Hadith, as we have just seen—then Muḥammad could not have failed to speak of the central figure of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic and messianism, namely the Messiah (*al-masīḥ*, from the Hebrew *mashiaḥ* “anointed”). Yet curiously, and unlike the Hadith, the Quran says nothing about Muḥammad’s announcement of the imminent advent of the Messiah¹.

Moreover, the non-Islamic works contemporary with the Arab prophet mention the fact. For example, in *Doctrina Jacobi*, also known as Jacob’s Didascalia—a Christian text in Greek probably written shortly before 640—a certain Abraham, a Jew from Caesarea, addresses his brother Justus (the source of Jacob, the author of the work), as follows: “. . . A prophet appeared with the Saracenes (i.e., the Arabs), proclaiming the coming of the expected Anointed One, the Messiah. When I arrived in Sykamin, I was with an old man who was well-versed in the Scriptures and asked him: ‘What can you tell me about the prophet who appeared among the Saracenes?’ He answered me with a sigh: ‘He is false! Prophets do not come with sword and chariot’ . . . ” (Dagron and Déroche 1991, p. 209). Similarly, in the Jewish work already mentioned above, *the Secrets of Rabbi Shim’ōn ben Yoḥai*, reference is made to an apocalypse from the beginning of the 7th century in which it is said that for some Jews, Muḥammad was regarded as the liberator of Jerusalem and the herald of the Messiah (Reeves 2006, p. 78).

Indeed, numerous textual attestations show that, for the first followers of Muḥammad and most probably for himself, the Messiah of the end times was none other than Jesus Christ (Hayek 1959; Parrinder 1965; Dye and Nobilio 2011, Introduction, esp. p. 28, note 52). First of all, the Quranic corpus indicates this very clearly on numerous occasions (Q 3:45; 4:157, 171 and 172; 5:17, 72; 43:57–61 and 75; 9:30–31). Four of these occurrences use the expression “the Messiah Jesus” (*al-masīḥ ‘Īsā*). In his letter to John the Stylite, James of Edessa (d. 708) writes: “The Mahgraye (most likely an Aramaic transliteration of *muhājirūn*, the name, along with the *mu’minūn*, of Muḥammad’s early followers) all firmly confess that he (Jesus) is the true Messiah who was to come and who was foretold by the prophets; on this point there is no dispute with us (Christians)” (Nau 1901, pp. 518–19—Syriac text- et p. 524—French translation). A large number of studies are devoted to the identification of the Messiah with Jesus Christ, as the Saviour of the end times, by Muḥammad’s followers during the early days of Islam. The fact is attested to in the ancient layers of the Hadith that are likely to be authentic because later Muslims had no interest in making up such traditions (Zwemer 1912; Reynolds 2001). However, according to a large number of textual attestations, for a number of Muḥammad’s followers, ‘Alī was the place of manifestation of the “new Jesus” and thus the Second Christ/Messiah.

Let us take a closer look.

“Speaking to ‘Alī, the Prophet said: ‘Something in you is like Jesus son of Mary and if I did not fear that certain groups in my Fellowship would say about you what the Christians said about Jesus, I would reveal something about you that would cause the people to gather the dust of your footsteps for their blessing’” (Amir-Moezzi, ‘Alī. *Le secret bien gardé*, p. 90). This tradition, emphasizing a theological similarity between Jesus and ‘Alī, is reported by Muḥammad b. Ya’qūb al-Kulaynī (m. 328 or 329/939–40 or 940–41), one of the greatest authorities of the so-called “moderate” Twelver Shi’i Hadith. However, the association between the two characters reaches its apogee in certain sources belonging to esoteric Shi’i circles, taxed a posteriori and by opponents of “extremism” (*ghuluww*). These circles trace their roots back to the early days of Islam, in the entourage of the Imams Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. c. 119/737) and Ja’far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), on the borders of the first and second centuries of the Hegira (Halm 1982, passim; Van Ess 2011, index), and perhaps even further up, in the entourage of ‘Alī himself and thus possibly in the time of Muḥammad (Kohlberg 1984, pp. 145–46; Amir-Moezzi 2006, chp. 1). This is why the relatively late texts

that transmit the traditions that interest us have often taken them from some very early reports, corroborated moreover by the information provided by heresiographic works on the first Shi'i milieu of the esoteric and gnostic type, and the great Alid "heresiarchs".

"People! I am the Christ, would have said 'Alī, I who heal the blind and the lepers, who create birds and cast out clouds (allusion to Quran 5:110) ... I am the Christ and he is me ... Jesus the son of Mary is part of me and I am part of him. He is the greatest Word of God" (on these sermons of 'Alī, see Amir-Moezzi 2006, chp. 3; and Amir-Moezzi 2016, pp. 42sq). Alī is not a reincarnation of Jesus. His identification with the son of Mary is explained in ancient Shi'ism by the doctrine of the transmission of the Sacred Legacy (*al-waṣīyya*), the Light of the Alliance, or the Divine Friendship (*nūr al-walāya*) (Amir-Moezzi 2006, chps. 3 and 4). It is a question of the passing on, or the inherence, of a luminous divine force in the members of a long chain of initiated saints, making them inspired persons capable of communicating with God in order to transmit to men the messages from On High and even, in some cases, transforming them into a place of manifestation of God; a doctrine which, in many respects, recalls that of the Paraclete or of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the divine Man in Christianity (Van Reeth 2012).

The messianic nature of 'Alī as Saviour, resurrector, and judge of the end times is clearly illustrated in many sentences from some of the sermons (*khuṭba*) attributed to him, where an Eternal Guide, speaking through the mouth of the historical 'Alī, declares loud and clear his theophanic reality. These sermons attributed to 'Alī precisely recall the "I am" words of Jesus in the Gospels (e.g., John 10:30 and 14:11), which are most representative of the way Jesus describes himself (Stauffer 1957, pp. 130–45):

"'Alī: ' ... I am the Avenger on the Day of Judgment. I am the Judge of Garden and Fire ... I am the Hour for Deniers. I am the Call that awakens the inhabitants of the graves. I am the Lord of the Day of Resurrection ... I am the One who will fill the earth with justice and righteousness, just as before it was overflowing with oppression and injustice (or darkness). I am the Hidden One, the One Who is awaited for the Great Matter ... I am the Attendant of the Resurrection. I am the Attendant of the Hour. I am the Creator. I am the Created ... I am the Resurrector of the dead ... I am the One who spoke through the mouth of Jesus ... I am the Saviour (*mahdī*, literally "the Guided One") of this time. I am the Christ. I am the Second Christ. I am the Jesus of this age (*anā l-masīḥ/anā l-masīḥ al-thānī/anā 'Īsā al-zamān*). I am the Lord of the Balance ... I am the Highest, the Most Highest (*al-'alī al-a'lā*)".

Thus, if we consider that the ancient expression *walāyat 'Alī*, "the divine Alliance (practically in the biblical sense of the term), the theophanic nature or the holy power of 'Alī", an expression so often present in the "Shi'i verses" of the Quran, as we have seen above, if this expression could have had the meaning of "the messianic nature and mission of 'Alī", so a whole new light would shed on those verses.

Quran 13: 7 refers to two important religious figures (the translation is mine): "... You are but a Warner (*mundhir*) while every people has a Guide (*hādīn*)". The Shi'i exegetes unanimously maintain that the first refers to Muḥammad and the second to 'Alī. In other words, Muḥammad, according to what has just been stated, is the prophet warner of the end of the world and is merely calling his people to the guidance of 'Alī, his Messiah. One can conclude that 'Alī, for some of Muḥammad's followers, had a religious and spiritual rank infinitely higher than the Prophet.

5.5. The Empire and the Development of a New Collective Memory

As in other religions with apocalyptic proclamations, here, too, the problems begin when the end of the world does not come; when the prophet "warner" and the expected Messiah die without the times reaching their end. Moreover, as far as the new Arab religion is concerned, other facts have made things even more complex: incessant civil wars, dazzling conquests, the rapid constitution of an immense empire, and the establishment of a strong and more or less centralized state, in this case that of the Umayyads (Borrut 2019). Moreover, a well-established state has never been a good match for messianism and

apocalyptic aspirations, for the simple reason that a stable power and the powerful men who occupy it do not want the world to end too quickly. All of these factors have had some inevitable consequences: the rewriting of history, the reinterpretation of tradition, and the reorientation of texts to establish a new collective memory.

According to Paul Casanova (1911–1924, *Mohammed et la fin du monde*), and more recently to Fred Donner (1998, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*) and Mahmoud Ayoub (2003, *The Crisis of Muslim History*), Muḥammad died believing that the coming of the Hour was imminent. The disadvantage of such a hypothesis is that if one accepts it, one must consider that almost the entire Quranic corpus and Hadith are fabrications after Muḥammad's death. A certain amount of data, however, allows us nuancing this hypothesis and at the same time avoid such a radical hypercritical attitude.

According to traditional chronology, Muḥammad's prophetic career lasted more than twenty years, between 610 and 632 CE. Even if these dates, just as many others concerning the events of the *sīra* (traditional biography of the Prophet), are not reliable (precisely because of the rewriting of the history we are talking about), we can still admit that this career covered many long years. For a spirit that refers to the end of the world as *al-sā'a* (the Hour, the Instant, the Immediate Delay), which heralds the imminent advent of the Day of Judgment, as well as for those who believe in it, this duration is extremely long.

Muḥammad may well have evolved during this period: still believing in the coming of the Hour but in a less immediate future. The Quran itself seems to reflect such an evolution. In addition to statements about the inescapable immediacy of the Hour, other passages emphasize, at the insistence of unbelievers, that only God has the knowledge of the Hour (*'ilm al-sā'a*, see Q 7:187; 31:34; 41:47; 43:85), that a "day of God" is equivalent to a thousand human years (Q 22:47 and 32:5); it may even last for 50,000 years (Q 70:4). The same development seems to be discernible in the Hadith when Muḥammad declares that the coming of the Hour may take a century. Other data, extremely recurrent and reported by all sorts of sources belonging to divergent and even rival factions, would not be explained if Muḥammad had considered the end of the world to be imminent throughout his life; for instance, his longing for a male offspring; his insistence on the marriage of 'Alī and Fāṭima; the rich oasis of Fadak, left as an inheritance to his daughter Fāṭima and his family, especially his only two male descendants, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn (Madelung 2013, 2014). Thus, he might well have been thinking about his succession, too. The choice of 'Alī as the father of his only male offspring (not to mention the other privileged relations that would have linked the two men) seems obvious, especially if Muḥammad considered him to be the Saviour of the end times.

The rewriting of history and the fabrication of a new collective memory seem to have been initiated from the beginning of the Umayyad caliphate (perhaps even earlier), historical enemies of Muḥammad's clan and family in general and the Alides in particular, at least since the battle of Badr. In this process, 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, conqueror of Jerusalem who was granted the messianic title of *Fārūq*, was the supreme symbol (Crone and Hinds 1986, *passim*). In his letter to Caliph 'Abd al-Malik (r. 65-86/685-705), the famous Umayyad governor of Iraq, al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf (m. 95/714) states that the Caliph is superior to the Prophet-Messenger because in the eyes of God, he fulfils a more important role in carrying out the divine will. Some strongmen around 'Abd al-Malik believed that doing ritual circumambulations around his palace would be better rewarded by God than doing the same around Muḥammad's tomb. The public curse of 'Alī, from the pulpit of the mosques but also in the propaganda of the state apparatus, became systematic from the reign of Mu'āwīya I, the first Umayyad ruler. Hatred of 'Alī, his family—which is obviously that of the Prophet—and his followers reaches its peak at Karbalā and the massacre of al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī, grandson of the Prophet, and almost all of his relatives by order of the Caliph Yazīd I in 61/680. An official version of the Quran, compiled according to the requirements of the Caliphal power, was elaborated and distributed in the major cities of the empire; at the same time, the other Quranic recensions were researched and destroyed. Similarly, the initiative for the constitution of an official corpus of Hadith of the same nature was

taken, mainly in the entourage of ‘Abd al-Malik and the court scholar Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhri (d. 124/742) (Bashear 1989; Lecker 1996; Motzki 2001, especially pp. 22–29). Mu‘āwiya, a fine politician installed in Syria—a largely Christian country—had adopted a strongly pro-Christian attitude and policy (however, without any reference to the Quran, neither to Muḥammad nor Jesus, nor to any other prophet), recovering at the same time “the Judeo-Christian sensitivity” of the message of Muḥammad and his first followers while trying to hide its messianic dimension, widely supported in the Alid circles (Crone and Cook 1977, pp. 11sq; Bashear 1991; Borrut 2011). This is most probably the reason why he is undoubtedly the highly praised hero of most Syriac chroniclers of the time who, probably in line with Umayyad propaganda, removed ‘Alī from the list of Arab “kings” after Muḥammad.

Gradually, even those who believed in ‘Alī as the Messiah of the end times changed their minds, probably a few years after his death, when hopes for his “return to earth” were dashed. The Alides, and later the Shi‘is, continued to challenge whole swathes of rewritten history and collective memory that the califate was forging. However, they were part of the same empire, the same community, the same religion, and to maintain all of their original doctrines was akin to cutting off the branch on which they were sitting. Inflections would thus be introduced into beliefs. From its messianic status, ‘Alī lost the apocalyptic dimension but retained its main spiritual functions: the theophanic nature and inspired guidance. He thus became the Imam par excellence, the first and the father of all the other Imams, countless descendants of his sons, recognized as such by countless Shi‘i currents of the first centuries of the Hegira.

Let us go back to ‘Abd al-Malik and the official Quran. With this Caliph, of major importance to the genesis of Islam as an imperial religion, the process of “demessianization” becomes decisive. The figure of Muḥammad as the holiest and last of the prophets is rehabilitated and at the same time, his message, originally rather “universalist”, bringing together the other monotheists called the Believers (*mu‘minūn*), is now strongly “Arabized”. The differences of this message, and soon, its superiority over Judaism and Christianity, are valued and its faithful are called the Muslims (*muslimūn*) (Donner 2010). The supreme symbols of the establishment of the new Arab religion are, on the one hand, the construction or completion of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the officialization of a certified Quran called the Vulgate of ‘Uthmān (the first Umayyad calife), henceforth declared independent of Jewish and Christian Scriptures and as the Book of Muslims; on the other hand, there is the sacralization of the Arab cities of Mecca and Medina. (Robinson 2005, p. 77sq; 102sq; Shoemaker 2012, chp. 4). Jesus becomes a prophet almost identical to the others in this Quran which, in the words of Alfred-Louis de Prémare: “was controlled from point to point by the Umayyad family, from ‘Uthmān to ‘Abd al-Malik, via Mu‘āwiya and Marwān” (De Prémare 2002, pp. 290–91). Two other Umayyad personalities would also have played a major role in the establishment of this Quran—the two famous governors of Umayyad Iraq: ‘Ubaydallāb b. Ziyād alias Ibn Ziyād (governor from 56 to 67/675 to 686) and the aforementioned al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf. The common denominator of all these prominent historical figures is their relentless hatred of ‘Alī and his followers; Ibn Ziyād was even directly involved in the massacre of al-Ḥusayn, the son of ‘Alī, at Karbalā. Thus, the opposition to ‘Alī and the desire to erase the messianic dimension of Muḥammad’s message, the bloody conflicts that followed, and the birth of the empire would have had, among other consequences, the elaboration of an official Quran with a problematic text because it would then bear the vestiges of these dramatic events. As a result, the thesis of *taḥrīf*, the “falsified Quran”, which is widely supported in Shi‘i circles until the 4th/10th century and states that the power hostile to ‘Alī and to the Family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*) removed all mentions of the latter from the “original Quran”, thus making the Book unstructured and often difficult to understand, gains more plausibility. Of course, this is not to say that Shi‘i sources relate historical reality; they are as oriented as Sunni sources and historical “reality” seems completely lost in the contradictions of the texts and the multiplicity of “representations” of reality that they seek to give. However, the

notions underlying the Shi'i assertions concerning the official text of the Quran—and the Hadith—can be approved by the historian of religion in general and the historian of the Quran in particular: the historical character of the Scriptures, the role of the political and social context in their writing, the articulation between the holy texts and power, the weight of the scribes' editorial work, and their connivance with the circles of power.

6. Epilogue

One of the main scientific aims of this study is to show the need to integrate Shi'i sources and their historical and philological analysis into the study of the origins of Islam and the Qur'an. This is rarely performed in the vast majority of Islamological research, which is based exclusively on Sunni sources, or even on Sunni sources canonised by later tradition. It is as if there were an "orthodox" Islamology as there is an "orthodox" Islam.

Of course, this is not to say that Shi'i sources relate historical reality; they are as oriented as Sunni sources and historical "reality" in its entirety seems completely lost in the contradictions of the texts and the multiplicity of "representations" of reality that they seek to give. However, the notions underlying some Shi'i assertions concerning the official text of the Qur'an—and the Hadith—can be approved by the historian of religion in general and the historian of the Qur'an in particular: the historical character of the written version of Scriptures, the role of the political and social contexts in their writing, the articulation between the holy texts and power, the weight of the scribes' editorial work, and their connivance with the circles of power.

The consideration of Shi'is, the "vanquished of history", offers a fascinating counterpoint to the history of early Islam and the elaboration of the Qur'an. In fact, it poses a fundamental problem: the existence of several narratives around the collection of the Qur'an from the early centuries of Islam, before one of them prevailed over the other and recognised as canonical.

The turbulent history of the genesis of the Qur'an can no longer be dissociated from the civil wars between the first followers of Muḥammad—in which the figure of 'Alī would have been central—the Arab conquests, and the birth of the empire that followed. The problematic character of the Qur'an would undoubtedly find some explanations in these articulations. What deserves to be emphasised is that it is precisely this problematic character, which has made difficult the understanding of the Qur'an, that pushed Muslim intellectuals and scholars to look everywhere to find the "keys to understanding" their holy book: In the ancient Arab traditions, of course, but also among the Jews, Christians, Manicheans, and a little later among the Greeks, Hindus, and Persians. Weakness transmuted into strength thus marked the birth of a civilising element: the hermeneutics, the search for meaning under the cover of the letter. In this search for the hidden meaning or meanings, Shi'ism, with its fundamental doctrine of *ta'wīl*, seems to have played a precursory role. Hermeneutics is the discipline that professes that the Qur'an is not limited to its literalness, to its surface, that it contains layers of hidden meanings that should be discovered with the help of everything that the cultures of conquered or neighbouring peoples make available to believers. This hermeneutic openness gives rise to the extraordinary richness and great diversity of the intellectual and spiritual currents of classical Islam with its theological, mystical, legal, philosophical, or scientific schools. Hermeneutics, the source and result of openness to the Other, has often been opposed to literalism, which reduces holy texts to their letter, often amputating their spirit, their hidden potential meanings, and which has advocated closing on oneself. An important part of the doctrinal tensions in Islam, throughout its history and up to the present day, can be explained by the conflicts between the supporters of hermeneutics and advocates of literalism.

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Note

- ¹ According to Paul Casanova (1911–1924, *Mohammed et la fin du monde*, chapter VI, pp. 54–67 and chapter VII, pp. 68–69), it is impossible that the Quran, an apocalyptic book in its earliest layers and an extension of the holy books of the Judeo-Christian tradition, did not say anything about the figure of the Messiah. The astonishing absence of the figure of the Messiah in the Quran is due to the subsequent deletion of many passages by the Caliphal authorities, since the messianic dimension of the Quran would have made it look too Shi'i. David Cook believes that the problem goes beyond Shi'ism and concerns all the early followers of Muḥammad. Once the empire and the Islamic state was established, the Caliphal authorities would have done everything possible to erase the messianic origins of their religion and would have removed from the Quran everything that too obviously reflected those origins, including the mention of the imminent advent of the Messiah (Cook 2002, p. 302sq.).

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