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Messianism and Astronomical Events
during the First Four Centuries of Islam¹

Résumé : Il y a une relation entre le messianisme et les événements astronomiques depuis les débuts de l’Islam quoique nous ne sachions pas si la conjonction des comètes et des supernovae influençait le Prophète, à l’époque où il recevait la Révélation, en ce qui concerne sa croyance en une fin du monde proche; en revanche un grand nombre de mouvements apocalyptiques ou messianiques eurent lieu pendant les quatre siècles suivants et même plus, lorsqu’il se produisait des phénomènes astronomiques. Le propos de cet article est de mettre en relief le fait qu’il est possible que les événements astronomiques soient importants pour l’étude de ces mouvements apocalyptiques, et sont souvent utiles pour dater leurs commencements exacts dans la mesure où, souvent, nous manquons d’informations sur la genèse de ces mouvements.

Abstract: Messianism and astronomical events are interconnected from the very earliest period of Islam. Although we do not know whether the appearance of comets and supernovae influenced the Prophet Muhammad to believe that the end of the world was imminent as he was receiving the revelations of the Quran, the fact is that a great many apocalyptic and messianic movements during the following four centuries and afterwards were accompanied by astronomical phenomena. This article is designed to open students of Islam up to the possibility that celestial events are important for the study of these apocalyptic movements and are frequently useful in dating their exact beginnings since in many cases we lack information about the genesis of such movements.

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Messianic Movements and Traditions in Islam

Messianic events of the early Islamic period have been examined recently from a number of different perspectives, including Shi‘i and Sunni variations or other permutations of Islamic orthodoxy. Most studies involve political or social ramifications of these movements, rather than the grassroots causes which led to their occurring in the first place. One should hardly wonder at this for the sources are not overly generous in their descriptions of the reasons that such and such a movement received a popular following. After all, the fate of the vast majority of the perpetrators of these movements was death which was frequently administered in rather unpleasant ways and the movements were usually dissolved in the wake of their founders’ passing. It is comparatively rare that a messianic claimant received more than a line or two in the history books; the major exception to this rule are those claimants connected to the Prophet Muhammad’s family in some way or another who gained political power (e.g., the Abbasids or the Fatimids). Other rebels usually are dismissed as madmen and their movements are simply set up in the accounts to be destroyed by the inevitable government force which came to put them to an end.

However, there is ample reason to believe that a number of these movements were much more popular than one might guess at first glance. The historical sources upon which one relies, for the most part, are those close to the ruling establishment of the day and are frequently « capital-city centered ». It is perfectly obvious to anyone who has ever perused the quartet of the authoritative historical sources in early Sunni Islam, namely al-Tabari, Ibn al-Jawzi, Ibn al-Athir and Ibn Kathir, that all of them are very city-bound, orthodox and somewhat ignorant of the world outside Baghdad or Damascus, or at least that is the impression with which they leave one. This study will concentrate on the social apocalyptic movements outside of these boundaries and seek new methods by which to gauge their appeal to the masses.

Messianic traditions are vibrant pulsing literary creations designed to enflame and excite their audience; they are not to be compared to the cold, dry legal traditions which surround them in the hadith books. These traditions and the apocalyptic mind-set which surrounded them were the pithy statements that encapsulated the deepest yearnings of the Muslim believer, filling a role similar to that of the Jewish and Christian material for their faiths. One of the most ubiquitous hadith statements is that which addresses this yearning: « If there were only one day left in the world, God would lengthen that day to send a member of my [Muhammad’s] family whose name would match my name and whose father’s name would match my father’s name and who would fill the world with justice and righteousness just as it has been filled with injustice and unrighteousness » [2]. This is a revolutionary statement, extremely important in every

2. al-Hindi: XIV, 267 [no. 38676].
one of its components for the believer. It offers hope on this earth: the world will not end without God personally intervening in the corrupt world-system to put things right. It promises a person who is God-sent and ordained, with a personal connection to the Seal of the Prophets, Muhammad, after whom there will be no other prophet, who will correct the world system. And it speaks of justice and righteousness. These are two of the most revolutionary and dangerous slogans possible; it was not for naught that the powers that be feared this call. Justice is the core of the apocalyptic mind-set and there is and will be only one man capable of bringing about the sort of absolute justice required. This figure, after substantial historical development, eventually became called the Mahdi.

What are the signs of his coming? It is not enough to know hypothetically that he will arrive before the end of the world. This merely begs the question of when that event is scheduled to take place. Muslim apocalyptists were torn between two equal and opposite impulses in this regard. It is well-known that the text of the Quran denies that God will ever make any man privy to the knowledge of the exact date of the end (Quran 31:34; 33:63). However, this denial comes into conflict with a very basic human necessity: to know about the future as much as possible. One of the Shi`i Imams, Muhammad al-Baqir, stated this dilemma quite concisely:

« Our [messianic] dispensation (amr) did not appear, so we diverted [the people] by hope (amanî). If it were said to us that this [messianic] dispensation would not appear until after 200 or 300 years have passed, then people’s hearts would harden and many of them would apostatize from Islam. So they [the imams] said: Look! How quickly the [messianic] dispensation comes! and dated it close so as to bring people’s hearts together and to bring the [hope of] the messianic release close. »

While this comment does not specifically answer the question of when the end is expected to occur, a number of dated traditions do.4

It is curious that for all of the attempts in the Quran to redirect the necessity of dating the end exactly away from the prophetic office (Quran 79:42), a great many specific prophecies came to be attached to the Prophet Muhammad. Among these are those that deal with the signs of the end of the world, signs known as portents. Each one is a signpost telling the informed where they stand in relation to the Day of Judgment. While this is not the place to review the list of portents, since the number is very great and many of them are mutually contradictory, this material is relevant to the discussion of catalysts for messianic movements by virtue of the fact that the appearance of comets is so central to the list. However, it goes without saying that celestial portents are far from being the only ones available.

3. al-Mûsâwî : II, 75-76.
4. Bashear : 1993.
This leads one to the virtually unanswerable question: what is a portent? For the purposes of this study, the real importance lies not so much in the movement itself, though many of these movements are interesting and worthy of discussion elsewhere, but rather in the factors which sparked it and brought people to believe in it. This is not something to be taken lightly since, in many cases, people must have known that a wrong choice would be a death warrant and, in any case, it often involved giving up all material possessions and social standing for the fulfillment of this dream. For example, a Jewish messianic movement in Baghdad during the year 487/1094 related that

« during this year, during Rabî` al-Âkhir [April-May, probably during Passover], one of the Jews in the West saw a vision in which they were flying. He told the Jews of this and they gave away their possessions and treasures and began to expect to fly. [But] they did not fly and became the laughingstock of the people. »

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Miscalculation or misinterpretation of a portent could be socially disastrous. What, then, constitutes a portent? Here I will hazard a tentative definition. A portent is a normal physical (though sometimes unusual) event which functions as a catalyst in an apocalyptically charged atmosphere. It is usually an event which is tied to the oral (but eventually written) discourse of prophecy and it forms part of a chain of similar events previously witnessed which serve to heighten the expectation. Sometimes, these are very mundane events. However, one must remember that perception is everything in an apocalyptic movement. Therefore, a portent may very well be effective in a given time or place, but entirely ineffective and ignored elsewhere. For this reason, one is greatly handicapped by the « capital city » orientation of Muslim historians; it denies one a view of what other localities deemed to be portentous. A good example of a list of portents occurs in the well-known tradition about what will happen before the end when the Prophet says:

« Count, Oh `Awf, six [events] before the Hour [of Judgment], the first of them is my death… the second of them is the capture of Jerusalem… the third will be death like a plague of sheep… the fourth will be a dissension in my community… the fifth will be wealth so plentiful among you that a man would be offered 100 dinars and would look at it contemptuously… and the sixth is a truce between you and the Banû al-Aṣfar [i.e. the Byzantines]… »

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All of these events are historical and are not dramatic in and of themselves. Two of them are occurrences of death (that of the Prophet and the plague), two are political (the capture of Jerusalem and the truce) and two are social (dissension and wealth). Both the capture of Jerusalem and the appearance of wealth could, under other circumstances, be positive or at least neutral events while the truce

5. Ibn al-Athîr : X, 238.
6. Nu’aym : 25.
is neither good nor bad. Therefore, the portent is not necessarily a catastrophic event.

Occasionally, however, the apocalyptist builds expectation in other ways. Since the above events are mostly localized to the area of Syria, many apocalyptists sought to use events which everyone could see and know about at the same time. This is one of the attractions of the use of the comet as a portent.

It is remarkable that the study of messianic movements has not already brought out the significance of astronomical and cosmic events when the question of portents has been raised. In Christian apocalypses, one reads about

« signs that will be seen in the heavens, great things on earth. The sun will grow dark in their days and the moon will not send forth its light. »

These themes are also familiar from Quran 53:1; 54:1; 81:1-2 and 82:1-2 as well as collections of Tradition. The early Syrian apocalyptic collection of Nu`aym b. Ḥammād frequently mentions comets as signs of the impending end:

« The end of Banū al-`Abbās will be with a star which will rise in the north, with a crash and a breaking asunder. All of this together will be in the month of Ramadaṅ [3 April - 2 May, probably 200/815]. The redness will be between 5-20 Ramadaṅ [8-23 April], the crash between the mid-month and the 20th, the shaking up between the 20-24th [23-27 April], and a star by which you will be able to see lighting up like the moon lights up, then coiling up like a snake coils up until its two heads almost meet, two earthquakes on the night of the two (Christian) holy days [fishayn - probably Good Friday and Easter] and the star which collides with the meteor falling from the sky; with it, a terrible sound until it falls in the East and from it a terrible tribulation will strike the people. »

Shiʿi traditions also evoke the

« rising of a comet from the east, giving light like the light of the moon, then it will incline until its two edges almost meet with a redness appearing in the heavens, spreading out through its horizons. »

It is possible that both of these traditions refer to the same comet.

A final question about portents will be asked here: are the portents ready-made or do the events themselves create the portents? This is a very difficult question just as, for generations, people have been asking whether the chicken or the egg comes first. Does the appearance of a certain event trigger the apocalyptic imagination or are events portrayed in such a fashion as to necessitate an

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7. Gottheil : 225.
8. This redness is very likely that of the comet’s passing, something which is noted in other sources about comets.
9. Nuʿaym : 133.
10. al-Majlisī : LII, 220.
apocalyptic interpretation? This question is especially relevant in the matter of comets, since they, like other events used as portents (plagues and earthquakes, for example), were entirely random and outside the explicable universe to the general population living in Middle Eastern Muslim territories (see below). Other events are, of course, unexpected, as the future is to all of us, but there is a difference between an unexpected explicable event and one which is entirely a bolt from the blue such as a comet. The most rational explanation of such events, therefore, demands that they are signs from God to His creatures, both believers and unbelievers. For the apocalyptist, there is also the sometimes ignored issue of effective communication to his audience since a comet can be seen instantly by everyone and cannot be hidden or explained away, at least not easily. Since the earliest recorded historical notices about comets, they have inspired a sense of anticipation, of a search for a hidden meaning. This is effectively used by the apocalyptist to convey his agenda.

**Astronomical and Cosmic Phenomena**

The Muslim conception of the universe, following the Ptolemaic tradition, was that of a stable place.\(^{11}\) The Middle Eastern Muslim world possessed a vast astronomical literature which has been surveyed and examined over the past century. This shows that the Arab Muslims were more than adequately familiar with the heavens and could, in a rough and ready fashion, predict such events as lunar and sometimes solar eclipses. They also tracked the relative movements of what were known as the seven « traveling stars » (al-kawâkib al-jâriya: the planets) and were sensitive to celestial events such as conjunctions of the known planets which had astrological significance. These moving objects were in addition, of course, to the vast numbers of « fixed stars » (al-kawâkib al-thâbita) which, for the most part, had been assembled into the twelve Zodiac signs and which constituted the mainstay of the ordered universe. Conjunctions between the traveling and the fixed stars, or between the traveling stars themselves, were frequent cause for panic among the populace but were generally predicted by the astrologers with a fair degree of exactitude. They were, however, unable to predict the effects of such a conjunction upon humanity and sometimes even encouraged extreme reactions.

However, a number of celestial phenomena did not fit well into the medieval Islamic calculations. In ascending order of inexplicability, these included the periodic appearance of meteors, comets and the occasional supernova. With the exception of supernovae, the Arab Muslims had words for all of these phenomena but did not comprehend where they fit into the ordered universe described above. Usually, both meteors and comets were ascribed to activity in the upper atmosphere, a fact which led to frequent confusion between the two in the

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11. Fahd, 1993; Kunitzsch, 1986.
history books. Their appearance was frequent cause for panic, especially when 
the phenomenon was brilliant and long-lasting; occasionally, this panic was put 
to secondary use by apocalyptic movements taking advantage of the terror 
among the people. Of these phenomena, the effects of the appearance of comets 
will be focused upon in this study since meteors are very punctual: terrifying for 
an hour or two (and, occasionally, for the duration of a nightly meteor shower) 
but since the event of their falling tended to pass over so quickly, one usually cannot 
speak about them as having apocalyptic significance. Indeed, they do not 
appear in the hadith traditions or in any of the associated apocalyptic literature 
with any portential significance. Supernovae, too, were not even accurately 
identified until long after the period with which we are dealing and their 
identification within the sources remains somewhat tentative.

Therefore, comets are the portents of choice for medieval Arab apocalyptic 
movements. They are both visible and inexplicable – they do not seem to hold 
to the laws of the universe as they were understood at that time. In addition to 
these key ingredients, they also tend to last for a long enough period of time during 
which apocalyptic excitement about them can and did grow (this, of course, refers 
to those comets visible over a period of time to the naked eye like Halley’s 
Comet). They are regularly reported in the historical literature, usually with the 
tense comment that they must have some meaning. The very fact that this is 
continually brought up by the historians shows what the effect must have been 
on the populace. The meaning is usually one of doom. For example, the Egyptian 
polymath, al-Suyûtî, cites a tradition from the famed Ibn `Abbâs (the Prophet’s 
cousin):

« Early in the morning I [Ibn Jurayj] went to Ibn `Abbâs. He told me: “I did not 
sleep yesterday.” I asked: “Why not?” He replied: “They said that the comet has 
appeared, so I was afraid that the smoke (al-dukhkhân, var. the Antichrist, al-
dajjâl) was already coming in”. » [both of these are signs of the impending end] 
(Heinen, 1987 : 153; Mu`afa b. Zakariyya : III, 70)

However, it should be noted that not all felt the inevitable result of a comet 
fortold doom.

As is well known, the Muslim astronomical tradition was very well-developed 
during this period. However, because the astronomers did not know where to 
place comets, we find no mention of them in astronomical works. It is only in 
the historical literature that comets were recorded faithfully, although interestingly, 
enough the earliest datable notice of a comet (Halley’s Comet appearance of 
143/760) is in the apocalyptic text of Nu`aym. It is not until the following 
century, when Halley appeared again in 222/837, that we begin to find regular 
references to comets in the historical sources. Prior to that date we find only a 
few references, enough to tantalize us, most frequently in Christian Arabic texts.

12. Dall’Olmo, 1978 : 123.
Therefore we are required for the early part of the research to use the Christian historians or European and Chinese records as controls. This does not detract from their overall relevance to our material, since a comet is seen all around the world and is not localized.

In the following sections, attempts will be made to catalog some of the points in Islamic history where the appearance of comets may very well have had an effect upon the launching or upon the course of a messianic or apocalyptic movement. It goes without saying that this is only a selection from a much wider number. For our purposes, both messianic and prophetic movements have been included in the selection.

Tracking the Effects of Comets on Early Apocalyptic and Messianic Movements in the First Century

Following the Prophet’s death in 11/632, the vast expansion of Islam into most of the classical world formed the most obvious and relevant fact in Muslim history. However, tensions within the conquering Arab tribes were constant even at this early stage, and the violent and anarchical tendencies unleashed in the conquests were difficult for the ruling elites to control. Both Muslim and Christian sources bear witness to the fissiparous nature of the Arabs and the constant revolts, frequently only a few dozen men, which later came to be lumped together under the category of “Khârijî revolts” (al-Baladhûrî : IV, a, 138-63). These are not to be seen as necessarily messianic or apocalyptic in nature, although they undoubtedly fed upon the revolutionary messianic atmosphere. Several of these movements were preceded by comets or guest stars (during 42/662, when there were at least 2-3 Khârijî revolts [Yoke, 1962 : 168 (n° 249); al-Baladhûrî : 140-43]). Concurrent with these anarchical tendencies, there were the messianic expectations which were focused on the larger house of the Prophet (not yet specifically on his blood descendants, although they did receive a substantial share of these expectations) (Amir-Moezzi, 1992 : 155-242). The ruling elite of the Umayyads was privy to this adulation as well (Sharon, 1991 : 115-22; Pellat, 1956 : 53-66); however, not to such a degree that it affirmed their exclusive right to rule. Other dispossessed or pushed aside elites waited on the sidelines with their followers bound to them by apocalyptic and messianic expectations as well, some of these just as strong, if not stronger, than those of the Umayyads and the blood descendants of the Prophet. Their power focused on the dynamics of frustration and a powerful memory of ancestral rights denied to them by the Umayyads or by fate.

These tensions came to a head with the death of Mu`âwiya b. Abî Sufyân (661-80), who had dealt with or suppressed most of the revolts during his lifetime. Many re-emerged at the accession of his far less capable son Yazîd I (680-83). Two main groups emerged to challenge Yazîd: one centered around the Prophet’s grandson al-`Îsâ b. `Ali b. Abî Êlibî, the other focused on `Abdallâh b. al-Zubayr, the son of one of the Prophet’s closest companions, and the nephew of ‘A’îsha, his favorite
wife. Al-Ḥusayn was massacred at Karbala in 61/680, leaving the field to his rival Ibn al-Zubayr, who inherited much of the passive support given to al-Ḥusayn as well as the active and angry support of those outraged by the manner of his death.

During this period there were three appearances of major comets which occurred at strategic junctures. The first one of them is only recorded by the Chinese, and appeared between Oct. 17-Nov. 2, 681 (Yoke, 169 [no. 256]). The next one is probably recorded by the Christian ecclesiastic Michael the Syrian:

« At this time a large comet appeared and stayed for eleven days. At this time there was a harsh winter, with much snow and ice… » (Michael the Syrian : II, 471).

In all likelihood, this is the comet which the Chinese observed between Apr. 20-May 15, 683 (Yoke, 169 [no. 257]). The third comet was probably the appearance of Halley’s Comet, which occurred between Sept. 6-Oct. 17, 684:

« Afterwards a great comet appeared again, every evening for 41 days; then others appeared opposite it for seven days beginning in the month of September 995 [682-83= very probably 996/683-84]. » (Michael the Syrian : II, 471)

The identities of the later comets mentioned in this account are still open to question, but the Chinese records list at least two more comets for this year (684) (Kronk).

Despite the dramatic nature of these celestial events, they are not recorded in Muslim historical accounts and it is difficult to line them up with significant events. It seems likely that the comet of 20 April - 15 May 683 had some effect on the revolt in Madina against Yazid I (who died shortly thereafter) and culminated in the Battle of the Harra (Aug. 26, 683) in which the Medinese were wiped out (Kister, 1977). However, most of the other significant events of this time do not seem to fall into this pattern: `Abdallâh b. al-Zubayr had himself proclaimed caliph in Nov. 683, and the Iraqi tawwabûn (the penitents who sacrificed themselves attacking the Syrian army) were active before the appearance of Halley’s Comet in Sept.-Oct., 684. It is possible that the revolt of al-Mukhtar, who took advantage of the situation to gain power in Kufa, and the crowning of `Abd al-Malik in the apocalyptic capital of Jerusalem were influenced by the series of comets immediately previous to these events; however, there is no evidence one way or the other.

Other movements, which were not Muslim, during this period were frequently preceded by the appearance of comets. The Berber revolt of the Kahina in North Africa was one such; a comet was apparent during 80/699 heralding her appearance in 81/700 (Yoke, 170 [no. 259]). It is difficult to tell to what degree her movement was a messianic one; it was certainly designed to liberate her people from the Arabs. Further to the east in Persia, the mysterious revolt of the followers of Abû ‘Īsâ

13. There is probably a mistake here of a year; read 996=683-84; see Yoke, 1962 : 170 (no. 258); and Kronk, who says that it probably was not visible after Oct. 14. He records the Armenian source of Ashot Bagratuni as well for this appearance of Halley.
al-Isfahānī, a Jewish messiah preaching a syncretistic belief system, led by a certain Yudghan in the city of Isfahan, occurred with the comet of July 89/708 (Yoke, 170 [no. 262]; Wasserstrom, 1996, 71-89; Erder, 1996). However, these are movements which were peripheral to the Muslim state and did not affect the course of its history very much.

More important for the Muslims was the comet of 100/718, appearing on Dec. 8 of that year. This year serves as the focus for a great deal of messianic speculation attached to the Umayyad ruler `Umar II (717-20) who, alone of his dynasty, enjoys a reputation for righteousness (Nu`aym : 67-68, 222, 230). Traditions had been circulated for some time previously indicating that the end of the Muslim community was near and that the messianic age was due to dawn. « God has no need of anyone born after the year 100 », « Every community has a limit and the limit of my community is 100 years » (Bashear, 1993 : 87-92), and « The Messenger of God led us in prayer… and said “I was shown your night [i.e., the coming night], and at exactly at 100 years from it [the night], not one who is on the face of the earth will remain”. » (`Abd al-Razzāq : XI, 276). This tradition goes on to interpret this to mean that the Prophet only meant that none of that generation would be alive; however, according to the lists of mu`ammarûn (those who enjoyed exceptionally long lives) among the Companions, this interpretation is not strictly speaking truthful. It seems clear that one of the major elements of `Umar’s messianic reign was the appearance of this comet.

Nor was he the last during this early period to benefit from a fortuitous comet. It is very likely that both `Abdallâh b. Mu`âwiya in the area of Kûfa and south Persia (Tucker, 1980 : 39-57) and Thâbit b. Nu`aym al-Judhâmî in Palestine (Fierro, 1993 : 169-71) were favoured in this manner. It is not certain whether `Abdallâh b. Mu`âwiya’s revolt was touched off by the same comet which probably influenced Thâbit, since the latter’s revolt began slightly afterwards. However, a number of astronomical signs are recorded for this previous occasion as well:

« A mighty sign appeared in the heavens like columns of fire blazing in June and stayed, and this was the first, then another appeared in September like a flame of fire and spread from the east to the west. » (Agapius of Manbij : 511)

`Abdallâh revolted at the beginning of October, 744. More likely the sign for Thâbit was the comet of Jan. 8, 745 (Yoke, 171 [no. 271]). Thâbit claimed the messianic title of al-Asfār al-Qaḥṭānî, who was promised to the southern Arabs.

**Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zâkiyya and the Return of Halley’s Comet (760-62): Comets in the Second Century**

One of the most interesting and misunderstood messianic revolts of the early Muslim period is that of Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zâkiyya, a great-great grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad through `Ali b. Abî Ṭâlib’s elder son, Ḥasan (who ruled
briefly as a caliph in Iraq after his father's assassination in 661). This branch of
the family did not share in the glory accrued to the younger branch, the Ħusaynid
family, following their ancestor's noble death at Karbala (above). The Ħasanid
branch of the family took 70 some years to rehabilitate its reputation enough to
the point where al-Nafs al-Zakiyya could actually proclaim himself to be the
Mahdî in 145/762. His movement was wiped out after a month an a half, but
garnered widespread, albeit passive, support throughout the empire (Zaman,
1990 : 59-65).

However, we are not so much interested in the course of the revolt here,
which has been studied a number of times, as in the reasons that al-Nafs al-Zakiyya
chose this particular time to revolt. For an explanation we must go to a rare
astronomical-astrological tradition in the book of Nu`aym b. Ɨmād, which
incidentally is the earliest record of a datable comet sighting in the Arabic
tradition. It reads:

« al-Walîd [b. Muslim] told us: We saw the earthquake which struck the people of
Damascus during [...]14 days passed in Ramadân, and many people perished in
the month of Ramadân in the year 137 [Feb.-Mar. 754], and we had never seen
[anything like] what was described of the wahiya (the shaking up), and this is the
khasî (= the swallowing up) which is mentioned about the village called Harasta »
(Nu`aym : 132).

These are portents important for the apocalyptist, preparatory to the revelation
of the true Mahdî.

While this material is important in terms of the portents involved, it is not
the principal subject of our interest:

« We saw the comet (najm lahu dhanab) rising in Muḥarram in the year 145 [May
762] with the dawn in the east, and we would see it before the dawn during the
rest of Muḥarram and then it disappeared. Then we saw it after the setting of the
sun in the twilight, and afterwards between the north and the west for two or three
months, and then it disappeared for two or three years » (Nu`aym : 132-33)

This is one of the most interesting and problematic pieces of information to
date, because there is very probably a mistake in the date as it now stands. First
of all, this is almost certainly Halley's Comet in its 760 appearance. According
to the Chinese and the Byzantine sources, Halley's Comet appeared in 760
between May 16 (= Muḥarram 24) and sometime in July of that year. Therefore
if we read the date as 143, things fall into place. The note of Theophanes, the
Byzantine historian, for the year 760 reads: « In the same year a brilliant apparition
appeared in the east for ten days and again in the west for twenty-one »

14. Originally there was probably an exact date here. This earthquake is not mentioned in the
Arabic sources, but it is possible that Theophanes : 119, mentions it.
(Theophanes, 120), which is strikingly similar to the above account. The discrepancies in dating are apparently due to the indistinct memory of the transmitter, Wālid b. Muslim (we should notice how he uncertain he is about everything) or perhaps because of a scribal error.

The tradition continues with the second comet:

« Then we saw a mysterious star with blazing fire the length of a cubit, according to what the eye saw, near Capricorn, orbiting around it like the orbit of a planet, during the months of Jumada and [some of] the days of Rajab. Then it disappeared. » (Nuʿaym, 133)

If we accept the identifications above, then this must have been the comet of 762, which is mentioned by Theophanes as well: « In this year an apparition appeared in the east, and Fāṭima’s son was killed » (Theophanes, 122) In other words, Theophanes notes that there was a causal relationship between the appearance of this probable comet and the revolt of « Fāṭima’s son ». Apparently Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya is the one meant, being a descendant of Fāṭima. When did Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya actually revolt? His revolt began according to al-Ťabarî on the first day of Rajab 145 [25 Sept. 762], during the period in which Halley’s Comet was visible (another account says 23 Sept.) (al-Ťabarî, III, 195). Although apparently the appearance of the comet is not mentioned outside of apocalyptic literature, the historian al-Ťabarî does tell a story about Adam and his knowledge of events by the stars, which could be a hint at it (though this is very tenuous) (al-Ťabarî, III, 165). Thus, we see that this tradition is not something which exists in a vacuum. Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya and his brother Ibrāhīm and the caliph Abû Jaʿfar al-Manṣûr all saw this appearance of Halley, as well as the second comet which followed it, and apparently all of them saw it as a sign. The choice of the time of the revolt was not coincidental.

The tradition is not complete, however. Yet another comet is detailed here about which there can be no final agreement at this present time, since it is not possible to date it closely like the previous two.

« Then we saw a star which did not glow rising from the right, the opposite side of Syria, its blazing fire spreading from the south to the north, to Armenia. I noted this to an elderly learned man from among the people of the Sakasik, and he said: ‘This is not the expected star’. » (Nuʿaym : 133)

Two comets stand out for consideration here: the one of Jan. 21-Feb. 10 (?), 767 and that of spring 768 (Yoke,1962 : 171 [nos. 277-78]). For our purposes, the comet will be assumed to be the second of the two, since it is attested by Muslim sources, and therefore can be proven to have been observed. Furthermore, the attested place in which it appears is an early apocalyptic text (al-Kindi’s Risāla fi mulk al-ʿarab). There was a serious apocalyptic revolt during the latter year, that of Shaqya b.ʿAbd al-𝐖âhid the Berber in Andalus (Muslim Spain) (Ibn
The Moroccan historian, Ibn `Idhârî, mentions a Fâtimî claimant in 153/770, which was also preceded by the appearance of a comet during May 26-June 19 of that year (Ibn `Idhârî, II, 54; Fierro, 1996, p. 135f.; for the comet Yoke, 172 [no. 279]). Thus, the second century of Islam has yielded a number of matches between messianic movements and the appearance of comets.

Messianic Movements and Comets in the Third Muslim Century

As the third century of Islam dawned, more and more notices of comets appear from Muslim historians, and consequently we have to rely a good deal less upon the Chinese and European records, except as controls. We will skip over the apocalyptic events close to the year 200/815-16 since they have been covered elsewhere (Cook, forthcoming). Suffice it to say that a number of comets appear around the time of this meaningful year which could very well have influenced the apocalyptic atmosphere. One of these traditions is translated in the first section (« The end of Banû `Abbâs will be with a star… »).

Bar Hebreus brings us an interesting tradition about the year 214/829, during which there was a guest star in November:

« At this time the Kurdanaye people, who were Muslims, rebelled against the Arabs, because there had appeared to them a king, the long-expected Mahdî. This man threw a covering over his face, and he called himself Christ and the Holy Ghost. And crowds of people gathered about him, and he fortified a camp in the mountains of the country of the Kardawaye. And even Ma`mûn trembled before him and he sent Hasan, the captain of the host, against him and Hasan captured him in Tur `Abdîn whilst he was plundering the monastery of Kartamin. And the Kurdanaye were broken, and the Mahdî fled to the country of Isaac Bar-Ahud the Armenian. And Isaac caught him and cut off his head » (Bar-Hebreus, I, 131-32; Yoke, 173 [no. 288] - it lasted the entire month).

Unfortunately, it is not clear what sparked this movement, and there is little comparative Muslim material about it.

Curiously and almost uniquely the appearance of Halley’s Comet in 222/837 did not bring any apocalyptic manifestations which could be discerned (Ibn al-Jawzî : XI, 73; Ibn al-Athîr : VI, 476). This is one of the few appearances of Halley in Muslim history (the other notably being that of 700/1301, which does not seem to have been attested) which were not accompanied by some form of messianic speculation, or at least according to the sources examined thus far. However, there is of course the question of hidden influence upon later movements, since the 227/841 appearance of the Sufyânî (Madelung, 1986), the Syrian messianic figure, of Abû Ḥarb al-Mubarqa` followed it after a certain time. This Sufyânî appearance also occurred during the wake of a major comet, that of Dec. 22, 841-Feb. 9, 842 (Yoke, 175 [no. 296]), and perhaps did not need the impressive sight of Halley’s Comet to communicate his message of protest against the central government.
« Abû Ḥarb used to appear openly during the daytime and sit out, veiled, on the mountain in which he had taken refuge, and people would see him and come to him. He would exhort them and enjoin upon them good behavior and the prohibition of evil actions, and he would mentioned the central government and how it oppressed the people and would speak scathingly of it. He persisted in doing this habitually until a group of peasant cultivators from that region and also the villagers responded to his call. He used to assert that he was an Umayyad, with the result that those who responded to him said: “This man is the Sufyânî!” When his adherents and followers from this class of people grew numerous, he summoned the members of the leading families and notables of the region. Out of these a good number of the Yemenis responded to his call… » (al-Tabari, III, 1320, trans. Bosworth, 1991)

Since we will never know what exactly his call was, we can only speculate about the coincidence of the appearance of the comet at that time.

Comets were seen before the series of ‘Alawite rebellions in 250/864 (Yoke, 1962 : 176 [no. 300], dated to June 21, 864). This was the period in which Yahyâ b. ‘Umar b. Yahyâ b. al-Ḥusayn b. Zayd b. ‘Ali b. al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Ali b. Abî Ṭâlib revolted in Kūfâ on Aug. 20, 864 (al-Tabari, III, 1516-23). Another ‘Alawite claimant revolted in Tabaristân in the year 299/911, called al-Ḥasan b. Zayd b. Muḥammad b. Ismâ`îl b. al-Ḥasan b. Zayd b. al-Ḥasan b. ‘Ali, whose appearance was also preceded by that of a comet. While the former was quickly suppressed, the latter claimant eventually managed to found one of the earliest ‘Alid states in Tabaristan.

A number of events both comet and messianic occurred in 255/868-69. There was a comet during Sept.-Oct. 869 (Yoke, 1962 : 176 [no. 304]). There were messianic revolts in Kūfâ and Egypt and the area of Barqa (apparently an ‘Alid) (Ibn al-Athîr : VII, 217). This was also the year in which the Zanj messianic revolt occurred (of the black slaves in southern Iraq), at the nadir of the fortunes of the ‘Abbasid dynasty during this century. For a brief time, the revivelist caliph al-Muhtadî (869-70) tried to wrap himself in messianic garb and likened himself to Ṭ’umar II, in the hopes of saving the independence of the ‘Abbasid family (Mu`affa b. Zakariyya, II, 384-86). However, this attempt was swept away by the Turkish generals who controlled the capital of Samarra. There was another Sufyânî appearance in 294/906-07, possibly after a comet appearing during Apr. 7-15, 907 (Yoke, 1962 : 178 [no. 322]). Although al-Ṭabari dismisses him by saying that he was suffering from delusions, this is a very common accusation against those who make messianic claims (al-Tabari : III, 2277). Other movements close to the year 300 will be dealt with in another study.

**Messianic Movements and Comets During Later Centuries**

One of the most important and little understood movements of early Islam among the Berbers – that of the prophet Ḥa Mîm b. Mann Allâh al-Mahkâșî in
the Maghreb – was set off by a comet. Fortunately, the Muslim sources also give us a description of what it looked like:

« In the land of Egypt there appeared a huge star with brilliant rays and it was boisterous (?) and sparks followed it… [with a further description of a terrifying falling star on July 1, 925] » (Eutychius of Alexandria : 83; probably the same as Yoke, 1962 : 179 [no. 327] for Oct. 30, 925)

Ḫa Mîm is known to have began his revolt during 313/925, but little else can be said about him with certainty (Halima Ferhat and Hamid Trki, 1988 : 5-28; [R. Le Tourneau : 137]). Further apocalyptic occurrences happened in the eastern part of the Muslim world: during 322/933 there was a prophetic appearance in the area of Chaghaniyan15:

« In this year, a man claiming prophecy appeared in Basand, one of the provinces of Chaghaniyan, and wave after wave [of people] came to him. A great number followed him and those who opposed him fled, and a great number of those who disbelieved in him were killed. His following was great among the people of Shash especially. He was the master of tricks and would put his hand in a container full of water, and bring it out filled with dinars, and other tricks like that » (Ibn al-Athîr : VIII, 289-90; Bosworth, 1981 : 5, 9).

At this same time, in Baghdad, one Abû Ja`far Muḥammad b. `Alî al-Shalmaghânî (known as Ibn al-Qarâqîr) appeared, supposedly claiming divinity (rubûbiyya) (Ibn al-Jawzî, XIII, 342; Ibn al-Athîr, VIII, 290-1). Although neither of these movements is exactly unknown, the studies about them should be supplemented with the fact that there was a shower of falling stars on Oct. 14, 934, and a comet on Dec. 19, 934 (Dall’Olmo, 1978 : 127; Yoke, 1962 : 179 [no. 331]).

Two prophetic claimants in 344/955-56, follow in the wake of the comet of Mar. 13, 956 (Yoke, 1962 : 180 [no. 340]).

« A man appeared in the province of Dinawand who claimed prophecy and was killed, and another man appeared in Azarbayjan who claimed that he was forbidding meat and whatever is produced by animals, and that he knew the hidden matters (ghayb)… [he was later exposed by a trick] » (Ibn al-Athîr : VIII, 512).

It is unfortunate that we know so little about these movements.

The messianic appearance of Akhû Muslim during 364/974-75 (al-Maqrîzî : I, 202-7) coincided with a comet appearing during this year which was seen all over the Muslim world:

« On the night of Monday, 21 Dhu al-Qa`da [Aug. 3] a star with locks of hair rose from the direction of the east, and it had what was like elongated locks of hair, about 9 degrees (rumblayn), according to what the eye saw. It continued like that every night until 19 Dhû al-Ḥijja [Aug. 31] » (Ibn al-Jawzî : XIV, 237; Ibn al-Athîr : VIII, 662; al-Maqrîzî : I, 223; Rodgers, 1952 : 179; Dall’Olmo, 1978 : 128).

15. In the present time, in southern Afghanistan.
Shortly before the messianic appearance of Abû Rakwa in 394/1003-4, who claimed to be the Umayyad Mahdî in the North African town of Barqa (Aguade, 1986 : 68; Yahyâ b. Sa`îd al-‘Antakî : 188; Ibn Khaldûn : IV, 120-23), there was a powerful comet. It is best described by the Armenian chronicler Matthew of Edessa:

« During the reign of Basil the Greek emperor and in the year 452 of the Armenian era [Mar. 21, 1003-Mar. 19, 1004] a certain star appearing in the form of fire arose in the heavens, an omen of the wrath of God towards all living creatures and also a sign of the end of the world (Matthew of Edessa : 52; Ibn al-Athîr : IX, 178). »

Again, very little is known about the fate of this would be Mahdî.

In 483/1090 an astrologer sent Basra into an uproar, and the whole area of south Iraq for the next couple of years because of astronomical predictions that he was the Mahdî:

« During Jumâda I [July] a man reached Basra, who was proficient in astronomy, called Talîya and he led the crowd astray, and claimed that he was the Imam, the Mahdî. He burned Basra and the library which was founded before ‘Adûd al-Dawla – that was the first library made in Islam – and the waqf lands of Basra which were endowed on the waterwheels that turn and carry the water were destroyed… »

(Ibn al-Jawzî, XVI, 289, 292).

During this year and the following years in which this figure was active, a number of guest stars are reported to have been sighted (on Mar. 31, 1090 lasting for several months, and Jan. 8-May 7, 1092), in addition to meteor showers (Yoke, 186 [nos. 388-89]; Dall’Olmo, 128).

During 499/1105-6, there were a number of prophetic appearances occurred in the area of Nihawand in the wake of a great comet, at least one of whom is said to have been knowledgeable in astronomy (Ibn al-Jawzî : XVII, 95; al-Yâfi`i : III, 161; al-Sibt b. al-Jawzî, VIII, 16):

« In this same year a very awesome, yet marvelous, comet appeared, one which instilled fear in those observing it. It occupied the whole south-western portion of the sky, and its tail extended over the greatest part of the heavens. This all occurred on the 13th of February [1106], during the night before the Feast of the Purification. The manifestation of this comet continued for fifty days, and its appearance caused wonderment in all living creatures, for the movement of its tail resembled a meandering river. No one had ever seen such an amazing phenomenon as this »

(Matthew of Edessa 357; and compare Ibn al-Athîr, X, 414-15; Yoke, 186 [no. 391]; Dall’Olmo, 129-30 for numerous meteor showers about that time).

Again, little is known about the prophets, except that their movements were eventually suppressed.

A number of messianic movements from Morocco were influenced by the appearance of comets. While it is very difficult to tell whether the messianic movement of Ibn Tûmart, eventually to be called the Muwahhidûn, was
influenced by it, it is significant to note that a comet appeared during the year in which he began his campaigns against the Murâbiṭûn (517/1123-24), approximately the same time in which he was proclaimed Mahdî.

« And a great star appeared, the length thereof was from south to north, and the width thereof was like the neck of a horse, and it was visible for two months » (Bar Hebreus, 251; compare Yoke, 187 [no. 395], who dates this to Aug. 11).

Several years later in 521/1127, the Moroccan Jewish community was convinced by one Mûsâ Darʿî, a Jew from Draʿa, that the coming of the messiah was imminent. He adduced heavenly portents to gain adherents (unfortunately which portents are not specified):

« He told them that the Messiah was about to appear on the first night of Passover. He advised them to sell all of their property and to become indebted as much as possible to the Muslims, to buy from them a thing worth a dinar for ten dinars and thus to fulfill the words of the Torah: “the Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing.” [Ex. 12:35] As Passover came and went and nothing happened, these people perished for they had sold all of their property and their debts overwhelmed them » (Encyclopedia Judaica s.v. « messianic movements »; Ferhat and Triki, 1988 : 12). This occurred in the wake of a comet during the months previous to Passover of that year (Yoke, 1962 : 187 [no. 397]).

The leader of the Muwahhîdun leader `Abd al-Muʿmin likewise appeared for the first time after a series of comets in 541/1146-47 (Yoke, 188, [nos. 407-8]). He is said to have been knowledgeable about the stars and used apocalyptic books to guide him in his conquests (books of malâhim) (Ibn Abî Dînâr, 117; Ibn Qunfudh, 100). Although many more examples can be adduced from later periods of Muslim history, these are sufficient to show that the appearance of comets was indeed a significant factor in the timing of messianic and apocalyptic movements during the first six centuries of Islam.

The Question of the Apocalyptic Atmosphere of the Prophet Muḥammad’s Mission

All of this leaves us with the question of the importance of astronomical events for the very beginnings of Islam. This subject has been deliberately ignored until the end of this article for the simple reason that it is impossible to prove and must remain speculative (despite Casanova; Donner). Unlike most of the other apocalyptic movements in Islam, the one began by the Prophet Muḥammad did not fail. It was not transformed into becoming the vehicle for absolute rule (like that of the `Abbasids or the Fatimids), and it was not just political propaganda for the ignorant masses. It was and continues to be a vital religious movement whose message speaks to its numerous adherents until our own day.
On the other hand, it is not to be denied that much of the early message of the Quran is couched in terms with which we are familiar from apocalyptic sources, using stellar imagery and apocalyptic doom in the same verse. Some few examples will suffice for this: « By the star when it falls… » (Quran 53:1) [« Par l’étoile quand elle s’abîme »] « The Hour is near, the moon has been split. But if they see a sign, they turn away and say: “Magic continuous”. » (Quran 54:1-2) [« L’Heure approche, la lune se fend. S’ils voient un signe, ils s’écartent, disent: magie continuelle »] « I swear not by the places where fall the stars… » (Quran 56:75) [« Non! j’en jure par les coucheurs des étoiles… »] « When the sun shall be veiled, when the stars shall become murky… » (Quran 81:1-2) [« Quand le soleil sera obscurci, quand les étoiles seront ternies… »] « When the heavens shall be rent, when the stars shall be scattered… » (Quran 82:1-2) [« Quand le ciel s’entrouvrira, quand les planètes se disperseront… »] Although these passages are usually explained in terms of the dramatic picture which the author of the Quran is painting of the end of the world, the fact remains that most of them can be explained in terms of comets and falling stars seen by the inhabitants of Mecca during the period in which the Quran was being revealed (Ahmad 1989-93; Rada and Stephenson, 1992). However, these interpretations seem to have left little impression upon the early interpreters of the Quran. None of the commentators would seem to have used these verses to support a historical recollection of the appearance of a comet (on the other hand, as Patricia Crone has pointed out, there is a decisive break between the text of the Quran and the commentary upon it, which would seem to indicate that this is to be expected even if comets were the original events behind the verses [Crone, 1994 : 36-37]). It is not until comparatively later that hagiographic material about the Prophet uses celestial signs as portents of the truth of his mission.

It is very likely that the apocalyptic beginnings of Islam have been concealed in order to provide Islam with a sense of establishment and to deny the original imminent sense of the end of the world, or that it was at least as important as the text of the Quran reveals it to have been. Was the Prophet inspired to believe in the end of the world by events other than the cataclysmic war which raged for 20 some years between the Byzantine and the Sasanian empires? A number of historians have postulated these events as a possible source of inspiration, and their views have some support in the Quran (for example 33:1-4) (Bashear, 1989). However, one should note that when the apocalyptic sense does appear in the Quran, it is frequently connected to cosmic events. This lends some support to the idea that these self-same events were both historical and visible portents used to back up the truth of the Prophet’s revelation and message of the imminent end of the world.

In this context, we are referring to the fact that Halley’s Comet appeared in the year 607, just before the Prophet’s first revelations (according to the traditional scheme). There were a number of other comets recorded by Chinese and European historians during the Prophet’s lifetime, and it is very likely that he did in fact
see them. However, it is difficult to match up the appearance of comets with historical events. The only one known to have occurred during the dateable post-\textit{hijrî} period of the Prophet’s ministry in 5/626 does not seem to correspond to any event in particular (Kronk, during the month of March 626). Beyond these recorded astronomical events, there are an unknown number of other more modest spectacles available: other less spectacular comets, meteors, meteor showers, novae and eclipses which could have been used as object lessons for the veracity of the Prophet’s teachings. The fact that a number of similar events do appear in the text, and the author of the Quran continually swears by them (see above), shows their relative importance. However, it must be emphasized that there is no word for comet in the text of the Quran as it now stands, let alone for some of the other more arcane phenomena. The word \textit{shihâb} [in later Arabic terminology, shooting star] does occur (Quran, 72:8, where the sky is said to be full of \textit{shuhub}) (see Ahmad b. Hanbal : V, 299); however, it is very uncertain what exactly it means in its Quranic context.

One danger in interpreting these phenomena, which should be avoided, is the use of hagiographical material about the Prophet for historical sightings of comets or meteors. For example, Rada and Stephenson sought to date the Prophet’s birth absolutely by using the date of a supposed meteor shower close to his putative birth year of 570. This is very difficult to accept, and one cannot emphasize enough that the preferred method requires one to find the celestial events (whatever they may be) \textit{outside} of the Muslim tradition, since the hagiographic tendency to produce such events is very strong inside of it, especially as the tradition now stands. Exact calculations of this nature, therefore, must be avoided.\footnote{Rada and Stephenson, 1992 : 9-11, where the assumption is made (which is to the highest degree unlikely) that the Prophet was \textit{exactly} 40 years old at the beginning of the revelations and that this event occurred \textit{exactly} 13 years before the \textit{hijra}. On the difficulties with these dates see L. Conrad, 1987 ; Kister, 1993.}

If there are so many comets, is it not bound to be just chance that some of them line up with significant apocalyptic events in Muslim history? Why should so much significance be placed on them, anyway? And if they were happening all the time, how was it that people saw them as something important? One cannot ignore the fact that there are numerous comets recorded in the Muslim history books which do not seem to have provoked any messianic speculation (the most obvious examples are Halley’s Comet of 222/837 and 458/1066). These facts cannot and should not be ignored when theories are made about the influence of comets on messianic movements. But, by the same token, our knowledge of messianic movements in Islam is filled with gaps. It is very likely that only a small percentage of all of these movements actually entered the history books. While \textit{argumentum ex silentio} is not very convincing, it should give pause at this stage.
of the research. At the very least, one can say absolutely that comets and celestial events were a significant part of Muslim apocalyptic beliefs, though obviously not an essential one.

It is rather curious that when I first began researching Muslim apocalyptic movements, I noticed that there were several conflicting cycles of activity. One of those seemed to be connected to an approximately seventy-year cycle (very similar to that of Halley’s Comet) and the other one seemed to be connected to the one-hundred year cycle. This latter cycle has long been known, since it is believed that at every one hundred year mark, God will send a renewer to the Muslim community. This tradition has a number of overlapping applications, but suffice it to say that it encouraged numerous speculations at the turn of every century, and a number of movements took their first momentum from the excitement generated then.

However, the second cycle is the one which is more important to us here. It is apparently the cycle of Halley’s Comet, which is the most visible and powerful comet known. Every time it appeared there was apocalyptic speculation. It is sort of a wild card in the equation, since it always came upon the Muslim world (as it did to the rest of the world until Edmund Halley began to predict its return in 1705) as a surprise, and furthermore its cycle is not precise, but varies between 72-79 years. In fact, at one point, it even overlapped with the excitement of the turn of the century prediction (700/1300), since it appeared in 1301. However, this cycle goes a long way towards explaining why excitement was generated and how it was able to hold up. During this period, Halley’s cycle just about covered two generations, enough for memories to die down and anticipation to grow once again.

Other comets do not fit into any noticeable pattern. It is by no means certain that the records are complete as far as historical comets go, since while the Chinese and European records are impressive, new comets are discovered in other traditions frequently. Therefore, the list of comets to which the Muslim community bore witness may very well grow much larger in the future. The use of the comet in apocalyptic movements is probably a function of its luminosity, its occurrence close to significant political and social events, and the inclination of the apocalyptic or messianic figure to actually use it. For the list of portents is long, and many others are available for a demagogue to use.

There is the additional question which is frequently asked: what is an astronomical event supposed to herald? Is it always a negative omen which is dominant or is there a more positive attitude? In this regard, one should note a tradition from an early collection:

« Šālīh b. Sulaymān b. Abī Ḥākim al-‘Attār al-Wāṣiṭī said: Ghazwan told me: A comet (kawkab al-dhanab) rose and so my father sent me to Ziyād b. al-Rābī‘a to ask him [about it]. He said: “Say to him that this comet rises every thirty years and when it rises that year will be fruitful”. And it was as he said » (Bakhshal : 173).
There are a number of similar, more positive interpretations of the effects of a comet in the historical material, yet it can hardly be denied that the dominant tendency is negative, omenous.

Why are comets so rarely connected with movements inside the texts? For example, in the case of Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya, we possess detailed texts about his life, mission, revolt and death. None of them mention a comet in conjunction with his decision to revolt. Similar statements could be made about all of the other movements (with the possible and ambiguous exception of the Prophet Muhammad). It is very rare that notices of a given movement actually contain mention of the comet occurring at their beginning. Several reasons can be suggested for this omission. First of all, the fact is that bringing out the appearance of the comet would lend some legitimacy to the failed movement in the eyes of the historian’s audience. After all, the prediction of a comet before the appearance of the Mahdî is a legitimate belief in both Sunnî and Shi‘î Islam. To emphasize the comet would show that in some small degree these aborted movements had the same level of legitimacy as the future promised Mahdî does. Secondly, it is rare that Muslim historians exhibit much concern about the causes of apocalyptic movements. Attention is given to successful apocalyptic movements, like the ‘Abbasids, but it is striking how little someone like al-Ṭabarî really knows about the inner workings of the ‘Abbasid propaganda machine (which is to be expected, since the ‘Abbasids were hardly likely to trumpet their methods to the public, lest they be emulated), or what exactly was the means by which it gained its followers. For the vast majority of the failed messianic movements, we have little information, and what information we do have is usually focused on the grisly ending of their leaders.

Hopefully in the future scholars who study messianic and apocalyptic movements in Islam will maximize the use of the material indicating the atmosphere of the area in which the movement flourished. The study of comets and other celestial portents are some of the most important in this regard and are essential in understanding the mass communication used by many apocalyptic leaders to gain their audiences.

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