

“A DAY WHEN HEAVEN SHALL BRING A MANIFEST SMOKE”
(Q. 44:10–11): A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE QUR’ĀNIC
AND POST-QUR’ĀNIC IMAGE OF THE MUSLIM PROPHET

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Introduction

This article reveals aspects of the manner in which the post-Qur’ānic sources have elaborated on the relatively modest Qur’ānic image of Muḥammad out of polemical needs as well as due to natural admiration for the Prophet of Islam. The line separating the post-Qur’ānic Muḥammad from the Qur’ānic one is particularly conspicuous in the sphere of Muḥammad’s relationship with the unbelievers, and mainly in the exegesis of passages belonging to Muḥammad’s Meccan period, when he is still unable to offer an effective reaction to the persecution of his opponents. His response as described in the Meccan chapters consists of warnings of the Hereafter and nothing else. But the warnings in themselves contain very vivid descriptions of the horrible fate awaiting the sinners on the Day of Judgement. The Last Judgement, according to early Meccan revelations, will be preceded by cosmic disasters, as is stated for example in Q. 81:1–13: The sun shall be covered, the stars shall be thrown down, the mountains shall be moved away, the pregnant camels shall be left untended, the wild animals shall be mustered, the seas shall be set on fire, etc.

In the post-Qur’ānic *tafsīr* these eschatological cataclysms have been subjected to reinterpretation, which was inspired by the ideas of the exegetes about a new Muḥammad, one who already in the Meccan period was able not only to warn the sinners of the Hereafter, but also to offer a tangible reaction generated by his possession of supernatural powers that yielded immediate results. The post-Qur’ānic reinterpretation has shifted the Qur’ānic warnings from the eschatological sphere to the historical one, and the predicted calamities were identified with Muḥammad’s earthly victories over the unbelievers. Consequently, the difference between the Meccan and Medinan periods of Muḥammad’s career was diminished considerably, and like the Medinan one, the Meccan period came to be marked not only by passive warnings of the

Hereafter but also by temporal triumphant achievements. Thus, the idea was brought forth according to which Muḥammad never suffered from the inability to respond in a proper manner to the challenge of the unbelievers, not even in the Meccan period.

The transition from warning to triumph will be demonstrated in the following discussion through the analysis of the post-Qur'ānic exegesis of Q. 44:10–11, to which we shall refer as the “smoke passage”.

The Qur'ānic Context of the Smoke Passage

In Q. 44:10–11 God addresses Muḥammad, saying: “(10) Keep waiting for a day when heaven shall bring a manifest smoke, (11) that shall overtake the people; this is a painful punishment (*fa-rtaqib yawma ta'tī l-samā'u bi-dukhānin mubīnin yaḡshā l-nāsa hādhā 'adhābun alīm*). This passage belongs in a series of warnings scattered in the Meccan Sūras of the impending eschatological calamities which will take place on the Day of Judgement. Let us begin by looking at the intertextual context of the warning.

A day

The word “day” (*yawm*) which marks the time of the smoke is a characteristic element in the Meccan warnings of the eschatological disasters. For example, in Q. 29:55 the unbelievers are warned of a chastisement that shall cover them from above them and from beneath their feet; and [God] will say: Taste what you did. In the previous verse hell is mentioned explicitly in juxtaposition with this punishment, which means that the “day” that is hereby described is anchored in the eschatological future. The motif of the covering functions in the same way as in the smoke passage, namely, it symbolises the inescapable total punishment.

The “day” at Q. 14:50 is also eschatological, and the covering recurs here too: on that day the fire of hell shall cover the faces of the evildoers (see also Q. 39:16; 7:41). The calamitous day is mentioned in further verses describing various scenes of global disasters that will take place when it comes (Q. 73:14; 50:42, 44; 79:6; 80:34; 101:4). Some of the predicted horrors on that day are explicitly connected to heaven as is also the case in the smoke passage. In Q. 21:104 God rolls up heaven on that day “like the rolling up of the scroll for writings”, and in Q. 25:25 the heaven bursts asunder with the clouds. In Q. 52:9

the heaven moves on that day from side to side, and in Q. 70:8–9 it becomes like molten copper.

In view of these parallels it is evident that the smoke passage, which contains a combination of day, covering and heaven, also predicts an eschatological calamity and forms part of all the other predictions of the Day of Judgement.

The smoke

The theme of the smoke (*dukhān*) has no clear parallel in any of the other Qur’ānic descriptions of the eschatological calamity. Only once is a “shadow” (*zill*) mentioned (Q. 77:30) that has three branches, and this is apparently the smoke that rises above the fire of hell. This is reminiscent of Revelation 14:11 where the smoke of torment of the evildoers goes up for ever and ever. Similarly, in Revelation 9:2 a smoke goes up from the pit of the abyss, like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air are darkened by it.

The eschatological connotation of the smoke vision can be confirmed by means of a Biblical precedent found in Joel 2:30–31 (3:3–4). God says: “I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth; blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes”. The same recurs in the New Testament,¹ and in view of this evidence it can be surmised that in the Qur’ān as well the smoke vision conveys a warning of the Day of Judgement.

The close juxtaposition of heaven, earth, smoke, and the other events in Joel anticipates the Qur’ānic setting, in which the smoke is expected to come from heaven. To this must be added the fact that in the Qur’ān itself smoke and heaven are closely related, as is indicated in Q. 41:11. This verse describes the creation of the world, at the stage when the sky is still “smoke” (*dukhān*), i.e. vapour. From this it may perhaps be inferred that the prediction in the smoke passage that the sky will bring smoke means that it is about to revert to its initial amorphous state.

¹ Joel’s apocalypse is quoted in Acts 2:19–20. And see further Matthew 24:29: “Immediately after the suffering of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken”. (See also Mark 13:24–25).

The Smoke Passage within the Sūra

The clear eschatological background of the smoke passage makes it possible to understand its place within the entire Sūra. At the beginning of the Sūra God describes by way of introduction the sending down of the book (= the Qurʾān) and asserts that He has always warned the people and sent messengers with the mission to convince people to believe in God's unity, but the people have always refused to comply (vv. 1–9). This historical observation is followed by the smoke passage (vv. 10–11) that takes us from history to eschatology. The passage presents the penalty awaiting the unbelievers on the Day of Judgement. The three ensuing verses (12–14) remain on the eschatological level and describe how the unbelievers will respond [on the Day of Judgement] to the smoke that is about to cover them; they will ask to remove the torment [of the smoke] and try to repent, but this will be to no avail, because by then it will be too late to repent after they had turned down the Prophet during their life on earth and had accused him of plagiarism and madness. In the next verse (15), God makes it clear that even if the punishment is temporarily removed they will surely revert [to disbelief], which means that the removal of the punishment is hypothetical and only emphasises the constant disbelief of those punished by the smoke.

References to the last-minute repentance of sinners when facing the punishment on the Day of Judgement occur elsewhere in the Qurʾān. In Q. 6:27–28 God responds to the sinners' appeal by pronouncing that were the sinners given a second chance to live a righteous life upon earth, they would have relapsed into disbelief. A similar scene of useless last-minute repentance is described in Q. 33:66; 21:97; 25:27–29.

The Qurʾān describes futile contrition not only in the eschatological future, but also in the historical past. Some instances are those of Pharaoh who persistently reverted to sin whenever a punishment was removed from him (Q. 7:134–135; 43:50). The same applies to unbelievers of Muḥammad's time who whenever God agrees to pardon and release them from a certain hardship in return for their claimed repentance, return to disbelief (Q. 10:12; 16:54).

In the present Sūra, the passage about the predicted vain regrets on the Day of Judgement concludes with a further allusion to the eschatological punishment; this time God declares (v. 16): "On the day when We will seize (them) with the greatest seizing (*al-baṭshata l-kubrā*);

surely We will inflict retribution”. The *baṭsha* (seizing) is the chastisement awaiting the unbelievers in the fire of hell, and elsewhere in the Qurʾān the same is called *al-baṭsh* (Q. 85:12).

But the term *baṭsha* appears also in Q. 54:36, this time standing for the divine punishment of which Lūṭ has warned his people, so that, as in the case of Pharaoh, we have here another instance of symmetry between eschatological and historical wrath.

The *baṭsha* is described in our passage as “greatest” (*kubrā*), which designation can be elucidated according to Q. 32:21. Here, a clear line is drawn between the “greater” (*akbar*) chastisement—the eschatological one—that will be preceded by the “nearer” (*adnā*) chastisement, i.e. the temporal one. It here follows that *al-baṭsha l-kubrā* is indeed an eschatological punishment, one that brings the fate of the doomed to its final and greatest manifestation. This observation is supported by further Qurʾānic parallels in which the masculine form *akbar* (greater) is used in verses declaring that the chastisement in the next world will be “greater” than the temporal one that already befell the unbelievers in previous generations (*wa-la-ʿadhābu l-ākhirati akbaru*) (Q. 39:26; 68:33). Accordingly, the punishment in the world to come is sometimes referred to merely as *al-ʿadhāb al-akbar* (the greatest punishment) (Q. 88:24), and also as “the greatest horror” (*al-fazaʿ al-akbar*) (Q. 21:103).²

The allusion to *al-baṭsha l-kubrā* in our Sūra is followed by the statement: “surely We will inflict retribution”. This idea recurs in the Qurʾān on interchanging eschatological and historical levels. On the one hand, God’s retribution was already meted out to sinners like Pharaoh who sank in the sea (Q. 7:136; 43:55), or the sinful people of al-Ayka and of Lūṭ (Q. 15:79), as well as the enemies of any given messenger sent by God (Q. 30:47; 43:25). On the other hand, God is about to inflict His punishment also on sinners of Muḥammad’s own time (Q. 32:22; 43:41), which is reserved for them on the Day of Judgement. Accordingly God is often called *dhū ntiqām* (Lord of Retribution), a title occurring in a clear eschatological connotation (Q. 5:95; 3:4; 14:47; 39:37).

The ensuing passage in Sūra 44 goes back from eschatology to history. It deals with Pharaoh, who serves as an example of what awaits

² For a similar eschatological context of *akbar/kubrā*, see Q. 79:34; 87:12.

the unbelievers of Muḥammad's time in the eschatological future (vv. 17–33). The passage concludes with a condemnation of those who disbelieve in the idea of resurrection (vv. 34–6), which is immediately followed by another historical lesson, this time of the sinful people of Tubba' (v. 37). In the following verses God is declared as the creator, then eschatology emerges yet again with a description of the Day of Judgement (*yawm al-faṣl*) and the punishment of the unbelievers in hell as well as the reward of the believers in paradise (vv. 38–57). The final passage offers the practical conclusion to the prophet: He must beware of his enemies' plots against him.

In sum, Sūra 44 assembles two layers, eschatological and historical, which together represent a characteristic symmetry between the fate of sinners that were destroyed in past generations and the prognosticated eschatological fate of Muḥammad's contemporary unbelievers. The smoke passage represents the eschatological layer and contains a pictorial depiction of the disaster that will signal the onset of the Day of Judgement.

The post-Qur'ānic Exegesis of the Smoke Passage

Post-Qur'ānic exegesis has projected onto the Meccan smoke passage ideas inspired by what the post-Qur'ānic exegetes already knew about Muḥammad's life in Medina, where he established his position as leader of the community of believers and defeated his various opponents. This image of Muḥammad the triumphant in this world has superseded his image as a warner of a belated punishment on the Day of Judgement, and has determined the reinterpretation of the Meccan smoke passage. The transition from Muḥammad the warner to Muḥammad the triumphant ran parallel to the transition from eschatology to history, as the smoke was turned from a portent of the Hour into a miraculous sign of an immediate success of Muḥammad in his conflict with the unbelievers.

Tanwīr al-miqbās; Mujāhid

We begin with a source containing a commentary attributed to the Prophet's cousin Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687–8). It is named *Tanwīr al-miqbās min tafsīr Ibn 'Abbās* and was compiled by al-Firūzābādī (d. 817/1414). The entire text of this commentary is already available

almost verbatim in the *Tafsīr* of Ibn Wahb al-Dīnawarī (d. 308/920).³ Here, as well as in al-Fīrūzābādī, the material is related on the authority of Muḥammad b. al-Sā'ib al-Kalbī (d. 146/763), from Abū Ṣāliḥ (d. 100/719), from Ibn 'Abbās.⁴ Even if the attribution to Ibn 'Abbās is questionable, it is helpful to start with it, because it provides a good example of the post-Qur'ānic shift of the smoke passage from eschatology to history.⁵ This source asserts that the smoke is the “famine” (...*wa-huwa l-jū'*). The request of the unbelievers to remove the punishment is explained as an appeal to bring the famine to an end, while declaring that they now believe in God, in His book and in His prophet. In this manner the discourse between the doomed unbelievers and God on the Day of Judgment has become a bargaining in this world about a temporal hardship, i.e. a famine. God's response concerning the removal of the punishment for a limited time is no longer hypothetical, and means temporary termination of the famine. Accordingly, the *Tanwīr al-miqbās* goes on to explain that after the famine was lifted, the unbelievers resumed their hostile attitude and therefore God destroyed them in the battle of Badr (2/624). The allusion to Badr as the moment of the destruction of the unbelievers clearly reflects the back projection of a situation in Medina onto the Meccan period, while switching the context of the smoke passage from the next world to this one. This testifies to the pressing urge of the exegetes to present the Islamic victory at Badr as the height of a divine scheme that presumably has already been foretold in a Meccan Sūra warning the unbelievers of a colossal punishment. One witnesses here the magnification of a battle which, according to the accounts in Muḥammad's *sīra*, indeed marked a decisive defeat of the Quraysh, but not their total annihilation. It is only in the post-Qur'ānic *tafsīr* that this Islamic victory has gained apocalyptic dimensions resembling the calamities of the Day of Judgement. This magnification of Badr

³ Ibn Wahb al-Dīnawarī, *al-Wāḍiḥ fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm*, Aḥmad Farīd (ed.), 2 vols., Beirut, 2003. On the identity of the author of this work see Andrew Rippin, “*Tafsīr* Ibn 'Abbās and criteria for dating early *tafsīr* texts”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* vol. 18, 1994; Harald Motzki, “Dating the so-called *Tafsīr* Ibn 'Abbās: Some additional remarks”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* vol. 31, 2006.

⁴ Cf. Andrew Rippin, “Al-Zuhri, *naskh al-Qur'ān* and the problem of early *Tafsīr* texts”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* vol. 47, 1984.

⁵ *Tanwīr al-miqbās min tafsīr Ibn 'Abbās*, in the margin of Suyūṭī, *Durr*, vol. V, 153–9 (= Ibn Wahb al-Dīnawarī, *Tafsīr*, vol. II, 296).

is reflected in the interpretation of the term *al-baṭsha l-kubrā*. The *Tanwīr al-miqbās* explains that the words *yawma nabṭishu l-baṭshata l-kubrā* mean “We shall punish them the greatest punishment, on the day of Badr, with the sword” (*nu‘āqibuhumu l-‘uqūbata l-‘uzmā yawma Badrin bi-l-sayfi*).

But the eschatological sense was not entirely abandoned; a reminiscence of it is contained in the assertion of the *Tanwīr al-miqbās* that some hold that the whole passage deals with the day of resurrection (*wa-yuqālu yawma l-qiyaṃa*). But this possibility is recorded only as a second option.

The perception of the smoke in the sense of a temporal famine persists in Mujāhid’s (d. 104/722) *Tafsīr*. He explains that the passage deals with aridity and drought that beset the Quraysh. As for the expression *al-baṭsha l-kubrā*, Mujāhid too explains that it stands for the battle of Badr.⁶

In order to understand how the smoke could be linked to a famine, one has to bear in mind that the idea of famine as representing divine retribution occurs in the Qur’ān itself, and especially in Q. 16:112–14. Here, a parable is recounted about a town safe and secure to which means of subsistence came in abundance from every quarter; but it became ungrateful for God’s favours, and God therefore made it taste the utmost degree of hunger and fear because of what they wrought. There came to them an apostle from among them, but they rejected him, so the punishment overtook them while they were unjust.

Islamic exegesis has associated the parable with a blockade that was imposed on Mecca by groups loyal to Muḥammad, thus reading into the Qur’ān Muḥammad’s reported success in exerting economic pressure on the Quraysh, which compelled them to come to terms with him.⁷ The explanations provided by the *Tanwīr al-miqbās* and Mujāhid indicate that apart from this parable, the smoke passage, too, was linked to the same blockade and subsequent famine. The association of smoke with heat, or fogginess of vision, or dust rising from arid land, could facilitate the link.

The early Qur’ān exegetes found an allusion to the blockade of Mecca in some additional Qur’ān verses. Especially noteworthy is the Meccan

⁶ Mujāhid b. Jabr, *al-Tafsīr*, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sūrātī (ed.), 2 vols., Beirut, n.d., vol. II, 588.

⁷ See Fred McGraw Donner, “Mecca’s food supplies and Muḥammad’s boycott”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 20, 1977.

passage of Q. 23:75–7, which deals with a certain hardship suffered by the unbelievers. As in the smoke passage, God asserts here that if that hardship was to be removed they would persist in their inordinacy, blindly wandering on. But God goes on to state that “already We overtook them with chastisement, but they were not submissive to their Lord, nor do they humble themselves. Until when We open upon them a door of severe chastisement, lo! they are in despair at it” (vv. 76–7). The exegetes explain that the “chastisement” (*adhāb*) stands for the famine that was caused by the cutting off of food supplies sent to Mecca from the Yamāma (eastern Arabia) around 6/628 at the hands of one of Muḥammad’s allies, namely, Thumāma b. Uthāl from the tribe of Ḥanīfa. It is further related that the distress caused by Thumāma’s blockade made one of Mecca’s leaders, namely, Abū Sufyān, come to Muḥammad in Medina to implore him to have mercy on the Quraysh and make Thumāma lift the blockade. Muḥammad reportedly complied and the blockade was lifted.⁸

Although the affair of the blockade took place after the *hijra*, the exegetes did not fail to connect it to the Meccan smoke passage, in which the Meccans plead for the removal of the distress of the smoke. Explicit allusion to the affair appears in the *Tafsīr* of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) to which we now turn.

Muqātil b. Sulaymān

With Muqātil’s commentary,⁹ a new image of Muḥammad starts to emerge, that of a prophet who is already able to generate all by himself the divine chastisement of the smoke. Muqātil explains that the smoke passage alludes to an event in which Muḥammad prayed to God imploring him to punish Quraysh, saying: “O God, assist me against

⁸ See e.g. the commentary on Q. 23:75–77 in Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 30 vols., Būlāq, 1323/1905 (repr. Beirut, 1972), vol. XVIII, 34–35. On Thumāma’s boycott of Mecca see further ‘Abd al-Malik b. Hishām, *al-Sira al-nabawiyya*, Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā, Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī, & ‘Abd al-Ḥāfiẓ Shalabī (eds.), 4 vols. Repr. Beirut, 1971, vol. IV, 287–8; Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā al-Balādhurī, *Jumal min ansāb al-ashraf*, Suhayl Zakkār & Riyād Ziriklī (eds.), 13 vols., Beirut, 1996, vol. VII, 182. See also Uri Rubin, “Muḥammad’s curse of Muḍar and the blockade of Mecca”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 3, 1988. And see further M. J. Kister, “‘O God, tighten Thy grip on Muḍar...’: Some socio-economic and religious aspects of an early *ḥadīth*”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 24, 1981.

⁹ Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, ‘Abdallāh Maḥmūd Shihāta (ed.), 5 vols., Cairo, 1979, vol. III, 818–9.

them with years of drought like the years of Joseph” (see Q. 12:48). Thereupon they were inflicted with hardship till they were forced to eat dry bones, dogs and carrion. The famine was severe to the degree that the famished saw an image of smoke rising before their eyes and covering the horizon. Muqātil goes on to relate that Abū Sufyān and other leaders of the Quraysh¹⁰ came to the Prophet entreating him to intercede for them and remove the drought. Muqātil goes on to explain that in compliance with the request of Abū Sufyān and his companions, Muḥammad supplicated for rain and the drought was alleviated for a while, till the day of Badr. Then God took vengeance on them because they reverted to their former enmity, and this is the meaning of *al-baṭsha l-kubrā*. Muqātil adds that the *baṭsha* was called *kubrā* because the defeat at Badr was a greater blow to Quraysh than the famine in Mecca.

Thus Muqātil continues the tendency discerned already in the *Tanwīr al-miqbās* to switch the smoke passage and the subsequent verses to the temporal level. The real smoke that is supposed to be seen during the events of the end of the world has come to represent the fogged sight caused by hunger. But some traces of the eschatological level have nevertheless been preserved in Muqātil, who concludes his comments with the assertion that God’s revenge was in the fact that the souls of the unbelievers killed in Badr were hastened to hell.

As for Muḥammad, he emerges in Muqātil with one of the features that characterize his post-Qur’ānic image, a person blessed with a miraculous power of supplication that can generate anything, including a calamity of biblical dimensions like seven years of drought. This power of prayer functions as a most effective weapon in Muḥammad’s struggle against the Quraysh.

Muḥammad’s prayer that brings famine upon his opponents is only secondarily linked to the exegesis of the smoke passage and is originally an autonomous motif that appears in other sources in various contexts independent of each other. In some traditions recorded in these sources, Muḥammad prays in retaliation for the massacre of the believers at Bi’r Ma’ūna (4/625). In this case no mention is made of the approach of any Meccan leader to alleviate the hardship invoked

¹⁰ The rest of the names are ‘Utba b. Rabī’a, al-‘Āṣ b. Wā’il, Muṭ’im b. ‘Adī, Suhayl b. ‘Amr and Shayba b. Rabī’a. Cf. Kister, “Muḍar”, 248.

by Muḥammad.¹¹ Further versions are recorded in the *Muṣannaf* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827),¹² and in them there is already mention of a delegation of Qurashī leaders to Muḥammad, but still with no mention of the smoke passage. The first tradition (no. 4907) is quoted from Ibn Jurayj (Meccan d. 150/767) who relates on the authority of Ḥabīb b. Abī Thābit (Kūfan d. 119/737) that Muḥammad prayed to God for assistance against Muḍar (the north-Arabian tribal confederation to which Quraysh belonged) by making them suffer drought, and then a man of Muḍar came to tell him about the hardships caused by the drought and beseeched the Prophet to pray again and remove the curse. Muḥammad refused but the man of Muḍar went on pleading till the Prophet consented and turned unto God in prayer for rain, and soon afterwards rains started pouring down. A similar tradition (no. 4908) about an anonymous representative of Muḍar who asked Muḥammad to remove the curse of the drought is transmitted from al-A‘mash (Sulaymān b. Mihrān, Kūfan d. 148/765). The version of Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna (Meccan d. 196/811) (no. 4909), which is attributed to Sālim b. Abī l-Ja‘d (Kūfan d. 98/716), adds an instructive detail according to which Muḥammad uttered his prayer while standing on the *minbar* (pulpit). This means that the event took place in Medina, already after the *hijra*, when the Prophet already had a ceremonial pulpit.

In the version recorded in one of the epistles of al-Jāhīz (d. 255/869), the famine caused by Muḥammad’s curse of Muḍar compels one of the leaders of the Tamīm, Ḥājib b. Zurāra, to appeal to the Sassanid king to let his cattle pasture in the region of the Sawād.¹³

A further version about Ḥājib b. Zurāra as recorded by al-Balādhurī (d. 279/892) is already linked to the smoke passage. It contains a gloss to the effect that the famine brought about by Muḥammad’s curse was the reason for the revelation of the smoke passage (*wa-fī dhālika nazalat: yawma ta’tī l-samā’u bi-dukhānin mubīn*).¹⁴

¹¹ Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-maghāzī*, Marsden Jones (ed.), 3 vols., London, 1966, vol. I, 349; Ibn Sa‘d, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt*, 8 vols., Beirut, 1960, vol. II, 53.

¹² ‘Abd al-Razzāq Abū Bakr b. Hammām al-Ṣan‘ānī, *al-Muṣannaf*, Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A‘zamī (ed.), 11 vols., Beirut, 1970, vol. III, 89–90. Cf. Kister, “Muḍar”, 245.

¹³ ‘Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāhīz, *al-Rasā’il*, ‘Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn (ed.), 4 vols., Beirut, 1991, vol. III, p. 267. See also Kister, “Muḍar”, 246.

¹⁴ Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-ashraf*, vol. XII, 21.

With the attachment of Muḥammad's invocation to the smoke passage, the Meccan and Medinan periods of Muḥammad's prophetic career were turned into consecutive parts of an ongoing career of successive triumphs of Muḥammad, the Prophet whom Allāh blessed with unlimited control of the fate of his opponents.

Farrā'; Abū 'Ubayda

Muḥammad's curse of his opponents keeps emerging in later interpretations of the smoke passage. This is the case with al-Farrā' (d. 207/823),¹⁵ who links the smoke to the fogginess of vision caused by the famine that was the result of Muḥammad's curse. Abū 'Ubayda (d. 210/825), too, supports the same line of interpretation, and accepts the view of Ibn 'Awn (Baṣran d. 150/767) according to which the smoke stands for an event that has already taken place, and notes that the purport of the passage is the drought that was generated by Muḥammad's curse of Muḍar. He explains the *baṭsha* in the same temporal context and identifies it with the defeat of the unbelievers at Badr.¹⁶

'Abd al-Razzāq

The post-Qur'ānic unconditional adaptation of the smoke passage to a temporal situation halts at the *Tafsīr* of 'Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827). Here, he has included some traditions that take the smoke passage back to its eschatological context.¹⁷ In one of them Ibn Jurayj (Meccan d. 150/767) relates that the Meccan scholar Abū Bakr b. 'Ubaydallāh b. Abī Mulayka visited Ibn 'Abbās one day, and the latter told him that he could not sleep a wink the other night and explained: "I heard that the tailed star had risen and I was afraid that the smoke had come". In this story Ibn 'Abbās is aware of the ominous eschatological significance of the Qur'ānic smoke passage. A similar tradition is the one which Ma'mar b. Rāshid (d. 154/771) reports on the authority of Qatāda (d. 117/735), according to which the Prophet declared: "Has-ten to do good deeds before six events occur: the rising of the sun

¹⁵ Yaḥyā b. Ziyād al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, Aḥmad Yūsuf Najātī, Muḥammad 'Alī al-Najjār, 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Ismā'īl Shalabī (eds.), 3 vols., Beirut, n.d., vol. III, 39.

¹⁶ Abū 'Ubayda Ma'mar b. al-Muthannā, *Majāz al-Qur'ān*, Muḥammad Fu'ād Sezgin (ed.), 2 vols., Beirut, 1981, vol. II, 208.

¹⁷ 'Abd al-Razzāq Abū Bakr b. Hammām al-Ṣan'ānī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Muṣṭafā Muslim Muḥammad (ed.), 3 vols., Riyad, 1989, vol. 2, 205–207.

from the west; the arrival of the Dajjāl (Antichrist); the coming of the smoke; the emergence of the creature from the earth;¹⁸ the inevitable demise of each one of you, and [the misfortune of] being nominated to run public affairs”.¹⁹ The first four events represent a series of portents of the Hour (*ashrāt al-sā‘a*), whereas the other two are personal misfortunes. This statement of Muḥammad, which includes the smoke in the list of eschatological calamities, appears also in the classical *ḥadīth* sources on the authority of Muḥammad’s Companion Abū Hurayra²⁰ and Anas b. Mālik.²¹ In these sources the smoke appears in yet another list of the portents of the Hour, this time in a statement of the Prophet transmitted by the Companion Ḥudhayfa b. Asīd (Abū Sariḥa. d. 42/662), about ten signs that will mark the Hour. The first three are again the rise of the sun from the west, the Dajjāl and the smoke.²² But in one of the versions of Ḥudhayfa about the ten signs as counted by the Prophet, the smoke is not included.²³ It seems that the smoke was deliberately omitted from the list as part of the switch of this motif from eschatology to history.

The wandering of the smoke between eschatology and history is clearly reflected in two additional traditions recorded by ‘Abd al-Razzāq in his comments on the smoke passage. These traditions testify to a bitter conflict that broke out between the partisans of the two perceptions. In one of the traditions, ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib declares that the smoke has not yet arrived; (when it comes) the believers will inhale it and feel its effect as a flu-like illness (*zūkām*). Unbelievers will be inflated, and then burst and die. The fact that ‘Alī insists that the smoke has not yet come, i.e. that it is one of the portents of the Hour, means that he refutes the contention that the smoke is a historical event that already occurred during Muḥammad’s lifetime.

The most avid supporter of the historical perception appears to be the Kūfan Companion ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd (d. 32/652–653). This is

¹⁸ See Q. 27:82. Cf. John 11:7.

¹⁹ In this version *amr al-‘amma* is explained by Qatāda as *yawm al-qiyāma*, which is unnecessary.

²⁰ Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 8 vols., Cairo, n.d., vol. VIII, 207–208 = *Fitan* (52), *Bāb baqīyat aḥādīth al-Dajjāl*; Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, 6 vols., Beirut, 1978, vol. II, 337, 372, 407, 511.

²¹ Muḥammad b. Yazīd b. Māja, *al-Sunan*, Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Bāqī (ed.), 2 vols., Cairo, 1952, vol. II, 1348 (no. 4056) = *Fitan* (36), *Bāb al-āyāt* (28).

²² *Ibid.*, vol. II, 1341 (no. 4041); 1347 (no. 4055) = *Fitan* (36), *Bāb ash-rāt al-sā‘a* (25), *Bāb al-āyāt* (28).

²³ Tirmidhī/*Tuḥfa*, vol. VI, 413–4 (no. 2274) = *Fitan* (31), *Bāb mā jā’a fī l-khasf* (21).

indicated in a further tradition recorded in ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s exegesis of the smoke passage. The Kūfan scholar Abū l-Ḍuḥā (Muslim b. Ṣubayḥ) (d. 100/718) relates on the authority of the Kūfan Masrūq b. al-Ajda‘ (d. 63/682) that Ibn Mas‘ūd was once visited by a man who told him that he had just heard a man announcing that smoke was about to come, that would suffocate the unbelievers, but the believers would only feel it as a flu-like effect. Ibn Mas‘ūd became enraged and declared that one should not say things which one knows nothing about. He went on to relate that the Quraysh persecuted Muḥammad and rejected him as an impostor and therefore the Prophet prayed and made them suffer years of drought like Joseph’s years. Because of the hunger their sight became foggy as if smoke was covering the sky. Abū Sufyān came to Muḥammad asking for mercy. Ibn Mas‘ūd goes on to assert that this is the meaning of the smoke passage and rules out categorically the eschatological perception. He states accordingly that the *baṭsha* was already implemented at Badr and adds that the punishment (*al-lizām*) with which God threatens the unbelievers in Q. 25:77 also stands for their defeat at Badr. All this already happened in the past, just as the predicted victory of the Byzantines on the Persians (Q. 30:2–4) already occurred. This tradition gained access into the canonical *ḥadīth* compilations,²⁴ and it is noteworthy that in some of its versions the name of Abū Sufyān is missing, and instead it is said that “a man” (*rajuḷ*) came to ask for the Prophet’s mercy.²⁵ The obscuring of Abū Sufyān’s name seems to have been designed to eliminate the chronological gap between the Meccan smoke passage and Abū Sufyān’s mission to Muḥammad which only took place after the *hijra*.

At any rate, we see that Ibn Mas‘ūd is the most devoted advocate among the early Qur’ān exegetes for the historical perception of the smoke passage. He does his utmost to affirm the relationship between it and Muḥammad’s powerful prayer that enabled him to overcome the opposition of the unbelievers in this world. This shift from eschatology to history was one of the elements that signalled the emergence of a new post-Qur’ānic image of Muḥammad, a prophet who even in

²⁴ E.g. Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 9 vols., Beirut, n.d., vol. VI, 142–3 = *Tafsīr* (65) on Q. 30:39; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. VIII, 130–1 = *Ṣifat al-qiyāma wa-l-janna wa-l-nār* (51), *Bāb al-dukhān*; Tirmidhī/*Tuḥfa*, vol. IX, 132–5 (no. 3307) = *Tafsīr* (44) on Q. 44:10.

²⁵ E.g. Muslim, *ibid*.

the Meccan period was never short of immediate means to withstand the opposition of the unbelievers.

The transition of the smoke from eschatology to history is further indicated in another version of the tradition about Ibn Mas‘ūd, as transmitted by Ibn Sīrīn (Muḥammad, Baṣran d. 110/728). In this version, Ibn Mas‘ūd draws a clear line between predictions that have already come true during Muḥammad’s lifetime and those which are about to portend the Hour in the eschatological future. He declares that whatever God and his messenger promised the believers has already been put into effect, except for four things: the rising of the sun from the west; the Dajjāl; the beast from the earth, and Gog and Magog. As for the smoke, Ibn Mas‘ūd asserts that it has already occurred in the past, with the seven years of drought like those of Joseph. He also alludes to Q. 54:1 “The hour drew nigh and the moon has split”, and pronounces that the moon, too, was already split in the past (*fa-qad inshaqqa*), and the *baṭsha* was implemented at Badr.²⁶ In this tradition the smoke, as well as the splitting of the moon and the *baṭsha*, is deliberately isolated from the portents of the Hour.²⁷

One is able to observe in these texts the disparity between the attitude of early *mufasssirūn* represented by Ibn Mas‘ūd who read the Qur’ān out of the urge to put Muḥammad’s earthly triumphs at the centre of the Qur’ānic message, and the approach of other scholars who have remained aware of the intertextual Qur’ānic context. The latter have circulated traditions on the authority of several Companions, in which the smoke is still one of the portents of the Hour. But in contrast to the case of the moon, in which the temporal interpretation has gained the support of the majority of the exegetes,²⁸ in the case of the smoke passage, both lines, the eschatological as well as the historical, retained their impetus through the ages. The reason was that unlike the splitting of the moon, which is an event described in the past (*inshaqqa*), the smoke is something which the Prophet is instructed

²⁶ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr fī l-tafsīr bi-l-ma‘thūr*, 6 vols., Cairo, 1314/1869, repr. Beirut, n.d., vol. VI, 28 (from ‘Abd b. Ḥumayd).

²⁷ On the smoke in its non-apocalyptic context, cf. David Cook, *Studies in Muslim apocalyptic*, Princeton, N.J., 2002, 281.

²⁸ See Uri Rubin, “Muḥammad’s message in Mecca: Warnings, signs, and miracles: The case of the splitting of the moon (Q. 54:1–2)”, *The Cambridge companion to Muḥammad*, Cambridge, 2010.

to expect in the future (*fa-rtaqib*). Therefore the latter could retain its eschatological context more easily than the splitting of the moon.

Ibn Qutayba; Huwwārī

The balanced competition between the two exegetical approaches to the smoke passage continues in the commentaries of later generations. Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) presents just the temporal historical perception,²⁹ explaining that the smoke is what the famished imagine to see before their eyes, and adds the possibility that it might represent the dust of a dry land in years of drought. Al-Huwwārī (d. 280/893), whose *Tafsīr* is based on that of Yaḥyā b. Sallām (d. 200/815), opens his comments on the smoke passage³⁰ with a clear-cut declaration that this passage deals with the drought and dearth that beset the Quraysh, but when moving on to explain the following verses, the picture is no longer as clear. In contrast to the historical explanation of the smoke passage, al-Huwwārī says that the *batsha* stands for God's retribution on the day of resurrection, but in the same breath he goes on to quote Ibn Ma'sūd's tradition in which he asserts the historical context of the smoke and the relationship between God's punishment and the defeat of the unbelievers at Badr. Moreover, al-Huwwārī also reports that al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) swore that the smoke had not yet come. The same is reported about al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī in other sources where he asserts that the smoke will be the first sign of the Hour.³¹ Al-Huwwārī adduces also a tradition about 'Abdallāh b. 'Umar who likewise described the emergence of the smoke at the end of days, together with the emergence of the beast from the earth and the rising of the sun from the west.

It follows that in spite of the tendency to place the temporal historical interpretation of the smoke passage at the top of the exegetical priorities, and thus glorify the powers of Muḥammad's invocation, the adherence to the eschatological option never died out. It retained its momentum and served the didactic need to instruct the believers

²⁹ 'Abdallāh b. Muslim b. Qutayba, *Tafsīr gharīb al-Qur'ān*, Aḥmad Ṣaqr (ed.), Beirut, 1978, 402.

³⁰ Hūd b. Muḥakkam al-Huwwārī, *Tafsīr kitāb Allāh al-'Azīz*, Belḥāj Sharīfī (ed.), 4 vols., Beirut, 1990, vol. IV, 127–9.

³¹ Suyūṭī, *Durr*, vol. VI, 29 (from 'Abd b. Ḥumayd).

and prompt them to improve their ways in preparation for the Day of Judgment.

Al-Ṭabarī

In his commentary of the smoke passage, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) is aware of the various exegetical options and presents each of them through traditions of the sort already known to us from the above sources.³² The first option on his list is the temporal-historical one, which is represented mainly in traditions about Ibn Mas‘ūd who rejects the eschatological approach outright and supports the relationship of the passage to the accounts about the famine in Mecca as invoked by Muḥammad. Included here is a tradition according to which Zayd b. ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn (Medinan d. 122/740) supported the idea that the smoke was one of the portents of the Hour, but then he happened to hear what Ibn Mas‘ūd thought about it, and changed his mind accordingly. From further traditions quoted by al-Ṭabarī we learn that apart from Ibn Mas‘ūd the Companion, those who supported the historical interpretation of the smoke passage were Successors like Abū l-‘Āliya (Baṣran d. 90/709), Ibrāhīm al-Nakha‘ī (Kūfan d. 96/714), and al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (Khurāsānī d. 102/720). As for the perception of the smoke as one of the portents of the Hour, al-Ṭabarī adduces an anonymous tradition pronouncing that on the Day of Judgement the earth will be like a house in which fire is burning with no outlet for the smoke. Among the Companions who related the eschatological interpretation of the smoke passage al-Ṭabarī mentions the names of Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī, Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān and Abū Mālik al-Ash‘arī. Upon deciding between the two options, al-Ṭabarī adopts Ibn Mas‘ūd’s view as the correct one. In so doing he relies upon the quality of the *isnāds* of the various traditions. In this manner he contributes—perhaps unconsciously—to the post-Qur’ānic tendency to affirm the relationship between the Qur’ān and Muḥammad’s temporal success as a prophet blessed by God with an overwhelming power of supplication. Nevertheless, al-Ṭabarī does not entirely neglect the eschatological aspect and suggests that there may be two kinds of smoke, one being the historical one, to which the smoke passage alludes, and another being that of the Day of Resurrection. The former already

³² Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, vol. XXV, 66–71.

beset Muḥammad's opponents, whereas the latter shall torment the rest of the unbelievers in the Hereafter. This is a typical method of harmonization used by the scholars whenever confronted with contradicting traditions and interpretations.

As for the *baṭsha*, al-Ṭabarī adduces several traditions connecting it with the defeat of Muḥammad's opponents at Badr. They are transmitted on the authority of Ibn Mas'ūd, the Kūfan Masrūq b. al-Ajda' (Kūfan d. 63/682), Mujāhid, Abū l-ʿĀliya, Rufay' b. Mihrān (Baṣran d. 90/709), Ibn ʿAbbās, al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim, Ibn Zayd (ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, Medinan d. 182/798), and the Companion Ubayy b. Ka'b. Al-Ṭabarī mentions the eschatological option as well, but this is represented by a shorter list of authorities, including Qatāda who traces it back to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. Al-Ḥasan's view about the connection between the *baṭsha* and the Day of Judgement corresponds to his view concerning the eschatological sense of the smoke (see above) and recurs in further sources.³³

Further traditions recorded by al-Ṭabarī indicate once again that a heated dispute broke out between the adherents of each exegetical option of the *baṭsha*. In one of them ʿIkrima (Medinan *mawlā* of Ibn ʿAbbās, d. 105/723) reports that his master Ibn ʿAbbās used to say: "Ibn Mas'ūd contends that the greater *baṭsha* is the battle of Badr, but I say that it stands for the Day of Resurrection". According to another tradition, however, Ibrāhīm al-Nakha'ī (Kūfan d. 96/714) asked the same ʿIkrima about the significance of the *baṭsha*, and the latter answered that it was a divine punishment that would occur on the Day of Judgement. Ibrāhīm reminded him that Ibn Mas'ūd thought that it stood for Badr, and therefore from then on, ʿIkrima always used to explain that the *baṭsha* was Badr.

Such pressure to abandon the eschatological exegetical option reflects the intensity of the need to detach the warnings addressed in the Qur'ān to the unbelievers from the eschatological sphere and connect them instead to the temporal triumphs of Muḥammad. This helped glorify his image as a successful prophet and highlight the idea that already before the *hijra* he had not only warned of the Hereafter but achieved triumphs in this world.

³³ Suyūfī, *Durr*, vol. VI, 29 (from ʿAbd b. Ḥumayd).

As for al-Ṭabarī's preference, he confines himself to referring the reader to what he has said about the smoke and hence it is clear that in the case of the *baṭsha* he continues to adhere to the temporal option.

From al-Zajjāj to al-Wāhidī

During the next few generations after al-Ṭabarī, the *mufasssirūn* continued to prefer the temporal option of the interpretation of the smoke passage, the one that praises the powers of Muḥammad's prayer when dealing with his enemies. Al-Zajjāj (d. 311/924), still a contemporary of al-Ṭabarī, notes accordingly that the majority of the exegetes hold that the smoke is an event that already took place in the past. According to him, the *baṭsha* as well occurred already, i.e. at Badr.³⁴

Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 327/938), too, adduces traditions representing the temporal historical perception.³⁵ One of them, not yet encountered in previous *tafsīr* sources (no. 18032), states that the smoke stands for the conquest of Mecca. This interpretation, which is attributed to al-A'raj (Medinan d. 117/735) and is found in further sources,³⁶ demonstrates the expansion of the temporal historical basis of the smoke passage and its application to a victory even later than Badr, one that marks the height of Muḥammad's series of triumphs. With this far-reaching interpretation, the sense of the smoke changes, being detached from the idea of hunger and coming to signify the dust rising above a mighty army marching safely towards a succumbing town. As for the eschatological aspect, this is represented in Ibn Abī Ḥātim in one single tradition in which 'Alī states that the event of the smoke has not yet occurred.

Al-Samarqandī (d. 375/985),³⁷ too, puts the temporal option first on his list. Only at the end of his comments does he mention the eschatological option of the smoke passage. The same applies to al-Tha'labī

³⁴ Abū Ishāq al-Zajjāj, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān wa-ī'rābuhu*, 'Abd al-Jalīl Shalabī (ed.), 5 vols., Beirut, 1988, vol. IV, 424–5.

³⁵ 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Muḥammad b. Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm*, As'ad Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib (ed.), 10 vols., Mecca & Riyad, 1997, vol. X, 3287–8.

³⁶ Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. II, 142.

³⁷ Abū l-Layth Naṣr b. Muḥammad al-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 'Alī Mu'awwad, 'Ādil 'Abd al-Mawjūd & Zakariyyā al-Nawtī (eds.), 3 vols., Beirut, 1993, vol. III, 216–7.

(d. 427/1035),³⁸ al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058)³⁹ and al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1075).⁴⁰ They repeat the traditions encountered already in the earlier sources, with the exception of al-Māwardī, who adds a curious if not bizarre explanation that has come down to him. According to it the chastisement which the unbelievers ask to remove in v. 12 of the smoke passage is the snow (!). Al-Māwardī is at a loss to understand it.

Zamakhsharī; Ibn ‘Aṭīyya; Ibn al-Jawzī

With al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1143),⁴¹ the temporal approach loses predominance. The eschatological perception appears first, and only then follows the account about Muḥammad’s curse and its effects on the Meccans. As for the *batsha*, here too al-Zamakhsharī prefers the eschatological interpretation. This change of priority exemplifies further the unresolved competition between the two options and the occasional rise of the eschatological one to the top of the list.

The eschatological option continues to appear first in the commentaries of Ibn ‘Aṭīyya (d. 546/1151)⁴² and Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200).⁴³ but as for the *batsha*, the latter puts the temporal option back in first place.

Al-Rāzī

Al-Rāzī (d. 607/1210) begins his comments on the smoke passage⁴⁴ with the temporal historical option, but immediately goes on to mention the eschatological interpretation and even adds arguments in refutation of the temporal one. The main argument is that since the smoke is defined as “manifest” (*mubīn*), it should be understood in

³⁸ Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Tha‘labī, *al-Kashf wa-l-bayān ‘an tafsīr āy al-Qur’ān*, Abū Muḥammad b. ‘Āshūr and Naẓīr al-Sā‘idī (ed.), 10 vols., Beirut, 2002, vol. VIII, 350–1.

³⁹ ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-‘uyūn fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, ‘Abd al-Maḥsūd b. ‘Abd al-Raḥīm (ed.), 6 vols., Beirut, 1992, vol. V, 246–8.

⁴⁰ ‘Alī b. Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī, *al-Wasīṭ fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-majīd*, ‘Ādil Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Mawjūd et al. (eds.), 4 vols., Beirut, 1994, vol. IV, 86–7.

⁴¹ Jārullāh Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ‘an ḥaqā’iq al-tanzīl* (4 vols. Cairo, 1977), vol. III, 501–2.

⁴² Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq b. ‘Aṭīyya, *al-Muḥarrar al-wajiz fī tafsīr al-kitāb al-‘azīz* (16 vols. Rabat, 1975–1991), vol. XIV, 285–8.

⁴³ Abū l-Faraj ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr fī ‘ilm al-tafsīr* (9 vols. Beirut, 1984), vol. VII, 339–43.

⁴⁴ Fakhr al-Dīn Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 32 vols., Tehran, n.d., vol. XXVII, 241–4.

the literal sense, which means that it cannot stand for the foggy vision of the famished. It is rather a real smoke that will come from the sky on the Day of Judgement. As for the *baṭsha*, al-Rāzī argues that this too is an eschatological punishment and not the defeat at Badr. Badr was not as colossal to be described as *al-baṭsha l-kubrā*. Al-Rāzī then is sober enough not to yield to the need to read into the Qurʾān the post-Qurʾānic legendary image of Muḥammad.

Al-Qurṭubī

Like al-Rāzī before him, al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273) too has the eschatological interpretation at the top of his priorities.⁴⁵ He substantiates it through traditions that retain the place of the smoke in the lists of the portents of the Hour. Among them there is one not yet encountered in the above-mentioned *tafsīr* sources. He quotes it from Muslim’s *Ṣaḥīḥ*, where it is related by the Companion Ḥudhayfa b. Asīd. In it the Prophet enumerates ten signs portending the Hour, and the smoke appears first on the list.⁴⁶ The second exegetical option for the smoke passage in al-Qurṭubī’s commentary revolves around Muḥammad’s cursing of the unbelievers with years of drought, and the third is the conquest of Mecca. As for the *baṭsha*, the first option is the one of Badr, which means that the eschatological option is not always Qurṭubī’s top priority. This attests again to the balanced status of the two options in the commentaries of the relatively late medieval *mufasssirūn*.

Bayḍāwī; Ibn Kathīr

The temporal perception of the smoke passage reappears in first place on the list in the interpretation of al-Bayḍāwī (d. 716/1316).⁴⁷ But when this exegete comes to the *baṭsha* he mentions first the eschatological option, which means that like al-Qurṭubī before him, he, too, does not have a firm preference as regards the two options.

⁴⁵ Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, 20 vols., Cairo, 1967, vol. XVI, 130–4.

⁴⁶ Muslim *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Fitan* (52), *Bāb fī l-āyāt llatī takūnu qabla l-sāʿa* = vol. 8, 179. See also Abū Dāwūd, *al-Sunan*, 2 vols., Cairo, 1952, vol. II, 429–30 = *Malāḥim* (36), *Bāb imārāt al-sāʿa* (12); Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, vol. II, 1341 (no. 4041), 1347 (no. 4055) = *Fitan* (36), *Bāb aṣhrāt al-sāʿa* (25), *Bāb al-āyāt* (28); Aḥmad, *Musnad*, vol. IV, 7.

⁴⁷ Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-taʾwīl*, 2 vols., Beirut, 1988, vol. II, 381–2.

Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373)⁴⁸ opens his comments with the temporal option that revolves around Muḥammad's powerful supplication, and quotes a host of relevant traditions of the sort known to us from the earlier sources. Nevertheless, Ibn Kathīr does not fail to quote the traditions suggesting an eschatological connotation for the smoke, and even goes on to assert that this is the "manifest" (*ẓāhir*) meaning, i.e. the literally correct one. Like al-Rāzī before him, he points out that the smoke is real, such as is about to emerge from the sky on the Day of Judgement. It follows that the two options continue to coexist side by side while the exegetes seem to grow more in favour of the eschatological one. Ibn Kathīr is indeed consistent in supporting the eschatological interpretation as regards the *batsha* as well. His unwavering adherence to this perception is particularly manifest in his *al-Nihāya fī l-fitān* which, as indicated by its title, is dedicated to eschatological materials. This book contains a special chapter dedicated to the emergence of the smoke on the Day of Judgement, and the author repeats here the arguments in refutation of Ibn Mas'ūd's temporal approach.⁴⁹ Ibn Kathīr points out that Ibn Mas'ūd is the only Companion on whose authority the temporal interpretation was transmitted, in contrast to the eschatological interpretation, which is based on the opinion of the Companions Ḥudhayfa b. Asīd and Abū Hurayra who quote Muḥammad himself. He repeats the argument that the smoke bears a literal sense, which means that it can only stand for its calamitous emergence in the eschatological future.

Al-Ālūsī

Al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1853) begins his interpretation⁵⁰ with the temporal option and touches upon the chronological gap between the Meccan date of the smoke passage and the Medinan setting of the reports about the famine and Abū Sufyān's appeal to Muḥammad. He suggests that there were two instances of such an appeal, one at Mecca immediately following the famine which Muḥammad had invoked upon the Quraysh, and another after Muḥammad's *hijra* to Medina. Al-Ālūsī

⁴⁸ Ismā'īl b. 'Umar b. Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-aẓīm*, 4 vols., Cairo, n.d., vol. IV, 138–40.

⁴⁹ Id., *al-Nihāya fī l-fitān wa-l-malāḥim*, Aḥmad 'Abd al-Shāfi (ed.), Beirut, 1988, vol. I, 114–5.

⁵⁰ Abū l-Fadl Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī*, 30 vols., repr. Beirut, n.d., vol. XXV, 117–20.

also tries to harmonize between the eschatological and historical perception of the smoke and suggests that there are two types of smoke, one that emerged in the past, and another which has not yet come. As for his own opinion, al-Ālūsī is definitely in favour of the historical perception which, he says, corresponds best with the temporal hardships of Quraysh which, he holds, are also dealt with in the subsequent verses.

The Shīʿī exegetes

The Shīʿī exegetes do not exhibit any clear inclination towards either option. Al-Qummī (d. 307/919) presents only the eschatological interpretation of the smoke passage,⁵¹ while al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067) begins with the temporal approach and then proceeds to the eschatological one.⁵² The same order is followed by al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1153).⁵³

Summary

In sum, the first generations of *tafsīr* witnessed unreserved inclination towards the temporal interpretation of the smoke passage, which put Muḥammad’s powerful supplication at the centre and marked the transition from warning to triumph. Later on, however, and in spite of the urge to read Muḥammad’s post-Qur’ānic legendary image into the Qur’ān, the eschatological option regained impetus. The latter preserved the intertextual context of the passage.

But there was one field in which the temporal interpretation of the smoke passage gained exclusive status, and that is the *dalā’il al-nubuwwa* compilations.

The Smoke in the dalā’il al-nubuwwa Literature

The temporal historical interpretation of the smoke passage matched the needs of the compilers of the *dalā’il al-nubuwwa* materials which

⁵¹ ‘Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī, *al-Tafsīr*, 2 vols., Beirut, 1991, vol. II, 264–5.

⁵² Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, Aḥmad al-‘Āmilī (ed.), 10 vols., Beirut, n.d., vol. IX, 226–8.

⁵³ Al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī, *Majma’ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 30 vols., Beirut, 1957, vol. XXIV, 108–10.

were designed to bring out Muḥammad's unsurpassed superhuman powers. It is therefore in these sources that one finds the clearest representation of the temporal interpretation of the smoke passage.

A special chapter dedicated by al-Khargūshī (d. 406/1015) in his *Sharaf al-Muṣṭafā* to Muḥammad's miracles (*al-mu'jizāt*),⁵⁴ contains the tradition about Muḥammad's curse of Muḍar which is adduced to demonstrate the power of Muḥammad's prayer as a weapon in his struggle against the Quraysh. Al-Khargūshī's version is the one about Ḥājjib b. Zurāra who was compelled to look for pastures in the Sawād due to the severe drought in the Hijāz that came as a result of Muḥammad's curse. The author stresses that this was the event that is dealt with in the smoke passage, and explains that the smoke symbolises the dust rising from the dry land. He also adds that the smoke cannot stand for the eschatological sign because the Qur'ān alludes further on to the *baṭsha*, which, he holds, was already implemented at Badr, and therefore the smoke must also have occurred already.⁵⁵

A selection of versions of the story of Muḥammad's cursing of the unbelievers with famine, and especially those of Ibn Mas'ūd, are recorded in further *dalā'il al-nubuwwa* compilations.⁵⁶ Shī'ī sources as well contain chapters dedicated to Muḥammad's miracles, which serve as a precedent for the *imāms* whose image is elaborated on the model of Muḥammad's person. Here too are found various versions about Muḥammad's supplication, which is explicitly linked to the smoke passage.⁵⁷

Here again, the temporal interpretation of the smoke passage represents a post-Qur'ānic elaboration on the image of Muḥammad, who has thus been turned into a person blessed with the power to produce miracles serving the cause of the Islamic religion.

⁵⁴ Al-Khargūshī, *Sharaf al-nabiyy*, MS Br. Lib., Or. 3014, fol. 112a ff. This chapter is missing in the otherwise defective printed edition of the book (Ed. Nabil al-Ghamri. 6 vols. Mecca, 2003).

⁵⁵ Ibid., fol. 134a–b.

⁵⁶ Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il al-nubuwwa*, 'Abd al-Mu'tī Qal'ajī (ed.), 7 vols., Beirut, 1988, vol. II, 324–9; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Khaṣā'is al-kubrā*, Muḥammad Khalil Harās (ed.), 3 vols., Cairo, 1967), vol. I, 369–71.

⁵⁷ Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib āl Abī Ṭālib*, 3 vols., Najaf, 1956, vol. I, 93, 189.

Present-day tafsīr

For a good idea of the present-day Islamic *tafsīr* of the smoke passage one may consult the lecture of the Egyptian Salafī shaykh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl al-Muqaddam.⁵⁸ He seems to be interested in keeping open the various exegetical options so as to ensure the relevance of the sacred scripture to all kinds of situations and not confine it to one single track of thought. For this reason he records the various options under three headings: i. The smoke as symbolising the foggy sight of the famished when suffering the hunger generated by Muḥammad’s curse; ii. The smoke as one of the signs of the Hour; iii. The smoke as standing for the dust rising above Muḥammad’s army that conquered Mecca. Two of these headings (i, iii) represent the temporal historical perception and they seem to indicate the survival of the need to commemorate the heritage of the glorious history of early Islam. But the eschatological option is also retained, and the shaykh explains that the concise and compressed style of the Qur’ān makes it hard to prefer one interpretation to the other.

Another angle of present-day *tafsīr* is revealed in Muhammad Hisham Kabbani’s, *The approach of Armageddon?*⁵⁹ Here we learn that in modern times the smoke passage has been occasionally perceived in its purely eschatological sense. However, the expected calamity has been detached from the traditional scene of the Day of Judgement, being identified instead with colossal temporal disasters witnessed during the 20th century, such as the atomic explosion at Hiroshima in 1945. We thus realize that apart from reinterpreting the smoke passage in order to glorify Muḥammad, the passage was also employed to prove the futurist validity of the divine text as previewing all kinds of calamitous events in the universal history of humankind.

⁵⁸ <http://audio.islamweb.net/audio/index.php?page=FullContent&audioid=169054>.

⁵⁹ Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, *The approach of Armageddon? An Islamic perspective* (Islamic Supreme council of America, 2003), 242–4.

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