Messianic Claims and Institutionalization

Making better sense of the messianic discourse and movements of the early Islamic period requires looking at the political context—the groundbreaking rise and impact of the caliphate—in which both the discourse and the movements unfolded. With relentless missionary and, later, military activity starting from his hometown of Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad (ca. 570–632) spread his message and authority throughout the western Arabian Peninsula and organized his followers into a political community. It was at this time that the Byzantines became aware of an ambitious political and military entity that had not existed only a decade earlier. The Byzantines faced the Muslim armies in the Battles of Mu’ta in the autumn of 629 and Tabuk in 630 in the Ghassān territory on the Syrian border. Muhammad’s greatest impact on his community resulted from the revelations recorded in the Qur’an and from his life as a prophet. His followers embarked, after a fateful debate immediately after his death, on a mission to bring into their fold new nations and territories before the final Hour.

The Legacy of the Early Caliphate

It is often taken for granted that the followers of Muhammad established the caliphate seamlessly after his death and went on to conquer territories. This was certainly not the case for his immediate followers. The famous story of his two leading companions, Abū Bakr and ‘Umar (who later become the first two caliphs), and their reaction to Muhammad’s death shows an ambivalent state of mind. Upon hearing of the death of Muhammad, ‘Umar exclaimed that the Prophet Muhammad did not die but went to his Lord in the same way that Moses did and that Muhammad would be back. It appears that ‘Umar maintained this view until Abū Bakr made his famous remark, in which he reiterated the humanity of Muhammad as noted in the Qur’an and reassured the community that Muhammad had indeed died but that God was ever living and eternal. Although medieval sources tend to maintain that everyone realized ‘Umar’s mistake after Abū Bakr’s intervention, the break of the wars of apostasy and the conquest movement suggest otherwise. In this circumstance the caliphate came about as a by-product of the unexpected success of the conquests, and the resulting responsibility of attending to the needs of administration in the
short and long term required predictability in governance. Yet anxieties continued to clash with institutionalization. It is within this context the politics of early Islamic history unfolded.

Four major civil wars shook the caliphate in the first two hundred years of its existence. Two of the civil wars led to drastic dynastic changes (from the Patriarchal Caliphate to the Umayyads in 661 and from the Umayyads to the ‘Abbásids in 750), and the other two overwhelmed the center of political power and the provinces for more than a decade each. In each of these civil wars, messianic and apocalyptic expectations played a large role. After a chain of disturbances in the provinces and with the assassination of the third caliph, ‘Uthmân b. ‘Affān, in 656, the door was opened for the first civil war (called, reproachfully, *fitna*). This conflict eventually led to the demise of the Patriarchal Caliphate and the rise of Umayyad rule. Several prophecies pointed to the coming of the final day in the year 35/656, projecting the first civil war as a truly apocalyptic battle.²

As a result of these conflicts, the sectarian diversification of the Muslim community also began. The relatively homogeneous community of the Prophet Muḥammad, at least in terms of dogma, broke into diverse subgroups and classes. The golden era of unity, as it would be remembered and invoked in sociopolitical struggles of later times, was gone. From the first to the third civil war, the Muslim community witnessed the emergence of the Khārijī sect and the galvanization and eventual mobilization of the supporters of the family of ‘Alī around a Shi‘ī cause. Both of these movements sheltered extremist subsects whose influence on the social and political life in Islamic history can hardly be overestimated. By the time of the ‘Abbásid revolt in the middle of the eighth century, both sects had been firmly established in religio-political life. These were the most visible sects, but a myriad of other groups also appeared, defining and redefining themselves in relation to other sectarian movements, the caliphate, and increasingly non-Muslim cultural and religious influences.

In the context of confessional and sectarian disputes and of political rivalry in the first Islamic century, the initial use of the concept of the Mahdī appeared. It seems that perhaps during the first civil war, ‘Uthmân and ‘Alī, and shortly afterward the latter’s younger son, al-Ḥusayn, were venerated as Mahdis by their supporters, who coined probably one of the most enduring epithets in Islamic history.³ The use of the title Mahdī soon proliferated. How religio-political factions decided to articulate their claims using messianic vocabulary and attribute to their messianic figures eschatological qualities (for example, concealment, the idea of return) can best be studied within the political and sociocultural context of the first Islamic century. It is quite possible that the title initially meant a rightly guided caliph who would restore Islam to its original perfection, as Madelung suggested, gradually picking up an eschatological dimension.⁴ However, the sudden proliferation of the title with eschatological aspects (as early as the movement of al-Mukhtar, for instance) and its clear
redemptive meaning during middle Umayyad times suggest otherwise. Yet if it is assumed that the figure of the messiah was in place from the beginning, how can its absence from the Qur’an be explained? The title seems to have increasingly acquired a redemptive nuance in a short period of time, as the end-of-time prophecies coincided with its use.

Though an investigation into the origins of the title Mahdi is outside the scope of this book, suffice it to say that in the turbulent period after the death of the Umayyad caliph Yazid I (r. 680–83), Umayyad opposition did use messianic concepts to articulate their claims. The Shi’i al-Mukhtar, the Meccan Ibn al-Zubayr, and even the Umayyad caliphs themselves expressed their claims and ambitions using messianic vocabulary. In the movement of al-Mukhtar, the title Mahdi became associated with an eschatological redeemer. If previous proto-Shi’i movements had inspired al-Mukhtar’s followers to use the title Mahdi, in the Hijaz region Ibn al-Zubayr promoted the legacy of the Patriarchal Caliphate in Medina against the Umayyads and used messianic language to articulate his claims, perhaps shaping the image of messiah for the following generations. Provoked by the heated confrontation between the Umayyad troops and the forces of Ibn al-Zubayr, a number of curious predictions anticipated the end of time in and around 70/689–90.

The use of the title Mahdi by a diverse group of people shows that it was not perceived to be the prerogative of any single individual, family, or tribe. Even groups or individuals outside the Quraysh tribe developed messianic aspirations of their own, perhaps motivated by tribal competition, which made the claims to messianic status widely accessible. The emergence and spread of prophecies regarding the coming of a south Arabian deliverer, the Qahtani, demonstrate not only the flexibility of messianic ideas to accommodate a range of aspirations but also their currency during Umayyad times. One such prophecy makes the coming of the south Arabian deliverer a portent of the end of time: “The Hour will not come until a man from Qahtani will come forth leading the people with his staff.” Apparently prophecies of this sort encouraged Ibn al-Ash’ath, whose uprising against the Umayyads garnered the support of a large number of jurists, to identify himself with the titles of al-Mansur and al-Qahtani during his revolt in 80/699. In the final decade of the Umayyad caliphate, al-Harith b. Surayj also claimed the title of al-Mansur for himself in his uprising against the Umayyad governor Nasr b. Sayyar. It appears reasonable to conclude that since the end of the first Islamic century, the idea of Mahdi (or an analogous figure) was both widespread and politically meaningful.

It is no surprise, then, that the Umayyad caliphs also relied on prophecies to back their own political claims. The title Mahdi often connoted the rule of justice under the caliph as a title of respect, but not always. With regard to Sulayman b. Abd al-Malik and ‘Umar II, it referred to their redemptive and eschatological roles. Some prophecies depicted even the Umayyad court and
the city of Damascus as refuges for those running away from apocalyptic battles or as gathering points for people of goodwill and saintly vicars, *abādila*. The prime example of Umayyad messianic aspirations is the legend of the Sufyānī. The legend seems to have appeared on the historical scene only after the demise of the Sufyānī branch of the Umayyad family in the second civil war. While its initial use as an Umayyad savior and the Shi‘ī use of it as an anathema still require further investigation, it seems that the Sufyānī prophecies already circulated during Umayyad times, although they proliferated after the establishment of the ‘Abbāsid caliphate. As early as the reign of the first ‘Abbāsid caliph, ‘Abdallāh Abū al-‘Abbās al-Saffāḥ (r. 132–36/749–54), Abū Muḥammad Ziyād b. ‘Abdallāh, one of the grandsons of the second Umayyad caliph, Yazīd b. Mu‘awiyah, claimed the title of al-Sufyānī during his revolt against al-Saffāḥ as the expected savior who would return the caliphate and the fortune, or *dawla*, of the Umayyads to the Sufyānīds.

The claims of the Umayyads were kept in check by the counterclaims of the opposition. The decades leading to the ‘Abbāsid revolution in 132/750 unleashed a rich array of messianic movements, including that of the ‘Abbāsids, which was born of a Shi‘ī religio-political sect, the Kaysāniyya, whose members were fervent with messianic ideas. The messianic claims of the ‘Abbāsids contrast starkly with the pessimistic tone of Umayyad and anti-‘Abbāsid prophecies. As the revolt raged in Khurāsān, prophecies for the cause of the ‘Abbāsids foretold the collapse of the Umayyads and the dawn of a new era of justice. Although the majority of the prophecies concerning the black banners and the ‘Abbāsids date back to the final decade of the Umayyad caliphate, ‘Abbāsid historiographical memory would like to date the movement to the end of the first Islamic century, the year 100 A.H. In fact, such a date might be plausible because the year 100 A.H. marked a unique moment of apocalyptic anxiety and messianic expectations in the early Islamic period. Prophecies about the Umayyad downfall are sufficiently numerous (even though the overwhelming majority of them come down to us in later sources) to suggest their widespread circulation among the Umayyads and their opposition. The disruption of social life and the resulting anxiety concerning the future instilled terror in the minds of many observers as prophecies predicted “excessive killing and speedy death and horrifying hunger” befalling the Bedouin Arabs (*al-‘arab*) after the year 125/743. Even the survival of the community up to the year 125/743 seemed uncertain in the circulating prophecies. Even if the community survived that date, there still would be apocalyptic battles, “all of which mentioned in the [prophecies of] the end of times.” Indeed the ongoing political and military strife often called to mind total annihilation around the year 125/743 and shortly afterward.

Intra-Umayyad conflicts and the ascension of Marwān b. al-Ḥakam to the caliphal seat certainly gave the impression to many observers that after the year...
The 'Abbāsīd revolutionary movement increased the troubles for the Umayyad dynasty. The 'Abbāsīd revolt cut across sectarian and confessional lines and was suffused with messianic expectations. A wealth of prophecies recorded the appearance of people with “strange garments” advancing from the East and the ransack of Damascus by the holders of black banners as a portent signaling the end of the world. The 'Abbāsīd revolutionary militia, decorated with black banners, seemed to have no mercy for the Umayyads: “The black banners will rise in 129/747 and the leader [Abū Muslim?] will appear with a group of insignificant people, whose hearts are like [pieces of] iron, their hair reaching their shoulders; they have neither mercy nor compassion for their enemies.” The prophecy offers a detailed account of the rebels, yielding insight into the social origins of the revolutionary army: “They bear nicknames, and their tribes are villages. They wear garments like a dark night’s color, he [the Akbash] will lead them to the 'Abbāsīds, and that is their fortune.” Iranian-Zoroastrian apocalyptic prophecies in the eastern parts of the caliphate also seem to be informed by the emergence of the 'Abbāsīds, as Pāzand speaks of “black banners and black garments.”

Eventually the Umayyad caliphate collapsed under the weight of mounting problems of questionable legitimacy, tribal and provincial discontent, and pious opposition. Unable to cope with socioeconomic transformations that they themselves largely had shaped and the attendant political complications, and failing to establish political institutions around which they could rally popular support, the Umayyads vanished under the impact of a popular uprising. The remnants of the Umayyad family fled to North Africa and Spain to establish the celebrated Umayyad Emirate there.

The 'Abbāsīd revolution of 750 in Khūrāsān was born out of the growing sectarian, particularly Shī‘ī, opposition against the Umayyads and out of the social and political expectations of converts to Islam, who were called Mawālī, clients, and were considered inferior to the Arab Muslims. Certainly the socio-political rift between the center of political power and the periphery, in particular the Iranian provinces, played a large role in the revolt. The revolt was organized by nobility belonging to the 'Abbāsīd family—the descendants of al-'Abbās, the paternal uncle of Muhammad—and was structured so as to shore up as much support as possible from the ranks of the opposition to the Umayyads. The 'Abbāsīds operated from the town of Ḥumayma in today's southern Jordan at the beginning of the second/eighth century, but the propaganda centered in Khūrāsān, the region east of the Caspian Sea, with Marw as its hub. The armed rebellion toward the middle of the eighth century, the bulk of whose participants came from converts to Islam in Khūrāsān, sealed the fate of the Umayyads. It also eliminated other contenders for the caliphate—most notably
the ‘Alids, the descendants of the paternal cousin of the Prophet Muḥammad and his son-in-law, the fourth caliph, ‘Alī—from within the ranks of the revolt.

The ‘Abbāsīd revolution championed the family of the Prophet and called for an acceptable leader among his family, al-ridā min al Muḥammad, the Hāshimites. The Zoroastrian text Jāmāsp Namak clearly refers to the ‘Abbāsids as the descendents of Hāshim: “Afterwards there come up Tājiks who bring up their seeds from the branch of Hāshim.” The ‘Abbāsids made the black banners their symbol and kept black as their royal color even after they succeeded in overthrowing the Umayyads. Leaving aside the discussion of when exactly ‘Abbāsīd political claims began and whether the color black as a symbol of rightful resistance originated in Khurāsān among the non-Arab supporters of the ‘Abbāsids, the use of black banners as a symbol of political resistance certainly proliferated in the later Umayyad period.

The enthronement of the first caliph, al-Saffāh, in 132/749 fulfilled prophecies that promised that the leadership would be transferred from one family to another and opened a new caliphal phase based in the small Iraqi town of Hāshimiyya near the city of al-Kūfā, which was known as a center of Shi‘ī opposition. The capital eventually was moved to a new city near a small village known as Baghdad. Named the City of Peace, Madinat al-Salām, Baghdad was founded by the caliph al-Manṣūr in 762 on the west bank of the Tigris River, leaving Damascus a discontented provincial town in the ‘Abbāsīd era. It seems certain that the title al-Mahdī was chosen to honor the first ‘Abbāsīd caliph. He was addressed not only as al-Mahdī but also as the Qa‘īm, he who would rise.

Other traditions making the Mahdī a descendant of al-‘Abbās (“the Mahdī will be from the progeny of al-‘Abbās”) and identifying him as ‘Abdallāh date most probably from the later stages of the ‘Abbāsīd revolt, even though a few accounts place such prophecies at earlier times. A piece of epigraphic evidence found on the walls of the al-Saffāh mosque in Yemen strongly supports the idea that he was presented as the Mahdī.

The messianic aspects of the ‘Abbāsīd revolt were not a recently cultivated ideology. The ‘Abbāsids were intimately involved with the Kaysāniyya sect and other extremist movements, ghulāt, especially in Iran. The origin of the ‘Abbāsīd revolt is outside the purview of this book, but the manner in which the ‘Abbāsids became a part of various sectarian formations of the Kaysāniyya sect and its subbranches merits a brief discussion. The Kaysāniyya was both the cradle of the ‘Abbāsīd claims and a powerful religio-political movement during the time of the Umayyads and the early ‘Abbāsids. During the Umayyad period, the Kaysāniyya in its various branches constituted the bulk of the radical wing of the Shi‘a. Although the movement appeared to be disintegrating after the middle of the second/eighth century, it left a permanent mark on the ‘Abbāsīd identity.
Since the movement of al-Mukhtār, who claimed to have operated on behalf of Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya (d. 81/701), the younger son of the fourth caliph, ʿAlī, the opposition to the Umayyads, most particularly the ʿAlids and the ʿAbbāsids, harbored messianic beliefs. In fact al-Mukhtār designated Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya the Mahdī. The supporters of Ibn al-Ḥanafīyya continued to believe that he was the Mahdī even after the defeat of al-Mukhtār. Some of his ardent supporters, who gave birth to the Kaysāniyya movement, began to claim soon after his death that Ibn al-Ḥanafīyya was not dead but was in hiding and that they expected his return. A poem attributed to Kuthayyir ʿAzza, (d. 105/723) illustrates this belief: “Behold the imams from the Quraysh, possessors of the truth. . . . [Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya] shall not taste death until he advances at the head of his cavalry with his banner before him. He has gone into concealment at Raḍwā, where he lives on honey and water.” After the death of Ibn al-Ḥanafīyya, his supporters split into several subsects, because they disagreed on the identity of the imam after him.

Among the most prominent of such supporters was Ibn al-Ḥanafīyya’s son Abū Ḥāshim, who died childless (d. ca. 98/717–18). His party, known as the Ḥāshimiyya, split into several groups after his death. One group claimed that Abū Ḥāshim was the Mahdī and that he was alive, hiding in the mountains of Raḍwā. Another group maintained that the imamate had passed to the ʿAbbāsid Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. ʿAbbālāh b. al-ʿAbbās. According to the ʿAbbāsid historical memory, the ʿAbbāsid family held not only the imamate but also the knowledge of future events. For instance, the ʿAbbāsids maintained that Abū Ḥāshim gave Muḥammad b. ʿAlī the prophetic Yellow Script, ʿal-s.āh.ī fa al-s.āfāra’, which foretold the rise of the black banners of Khurāṣān. According to ʿAbbāsid apologetics, the script passed from one person to another through a prominent line of the Ḥāshimites all the way from ʿAlī to the founder of the ʿAbbāsid revolutionary movement, Muḥammad b. ʿAlī. Though the legend of the Yellow Script must be seen in light of the competition over legitimacy between the ʿAlids and the ʿAbbāsids, it nevertheless shows the occultist and messianic concerns of the dynasty.

The followers of Bayān b. Samʿān (d. 119/736), known as the Bayāniyya, believed that Abū Ḥāshim would return as the Mahdī. ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAmr b. Ḥarb, one of the Ḥāshimiyya, claimed that the imamate had passed to him after Abū Ḥāshim. After Ibn Ḥarb died, he was believed to be still alive and was expected to return. The Khidāshiyya were the followers of ʿAmmār b. Yazīd, nicknamed Khidāsh, who was an ʿAbbāsid propagandist active in the area of Nishapur and Marw. After Muḥammad b. ʿAlī and Khidāsh had a falling out over doctrinal differences, the supporters of Khidāsh announced that Muḥammad b. ʿAlī had given up the imamate and that it had passed to Khidāsh. After the execution of Khidāsh in 118/736, his supporters claimed that he was alive and had been raised to heaven by God.
Consisting mainly of the former Ḥarbiyya, the Janāḥiyya sect supported the
imamate of ‘Abdallāh b. Mu‘awīya.49 ‘Abdallāh b. Mu‘awīya is reported to have
encouraged their extremist beliefs, claiming that the Divine Spirit had been
transferred through the prophets and imams to him and that he was able to
resurrect the dead. After he died in 131/748–49 in the prison of Abū Muslim,
who was a Khurāsānī and the head of the ‘Abbāsid revolutionary army, a group
of ‘Abdallāh b. Mu‘awīya’s followers claimed that he was alive and hiding in the
mountains of Isfahān.50 Some said that he would return as the Mahdī, while
others held that he would surrender the leadership to a descendant of ‘Alī
before his death.51

Abū Muslimiyya was a subgroup of the Kaysāniyya and maintained that the
imamate had passed from the first ‘Abbāsid caliph, al-Saffāh, to Abū Muslim,
whom the group considered its leader.52 After the execution of Abū Muslim by
the caliph al-Mansūr in 137/755, some of the supporters of Abū Muslim main-
tained that the imamate had been transferred from al-Saffāh to Abū Muslim
and that Abū Muslim was still alive.53 This group, called the (Abū) Muslimiyya,
believed that al-Mansūr had killed not Abū Muslim but a person who only
resembled him and that Abū Muslim had gone into hiding. Opposed to them
were the Rizāmiyya, named after their chief, Rizām b. Sābiq, probably one of
the Rawandī extremists who upheld the succession of al-Mansūr to the ima-
mate. Though they refused to repudiate Abū Muslim, they affirmed that the
imamate would remain in the ‘Abbāsid family until the resurrection, when a
descendant of al-‘Abbās would be the Mahdī.54

Khurāsān and Transoxiana, the centers of ‘Abbāsid political and military
might, continued to be hotbeds of numerous religio-political movements with
messianic overtones. The ideas behind some of these movements were mixed
with local beliefs and traditions that fell outside the limits of either Shi‘ī or
proto-Sunnī orthodoxy. Among the leaders of such movements, one may note
Sunbād, a wealthy Zoroastrian from Nishapur and an associate of Abū Muslim.
Believing that Abū Muslim was not killed and would return to rule, Sunbād
revolted only two months after Abū Muslim’s murder in 755 to avenge his
death, but was defeated.55 Another revolt in Transoxiana in the name of Abū
Muslim was led by al-Muqanna’, the Veiled One, in Marw in 777. His was an
ideology of incarnation and transmigration of souls, as he claimed to be divine
and an incarnation of Adam, whom God created in his image. He claimed to
have been incarnated in Noah and reincarnated in Moses, Jesus, Muhammad,
and finally Abū Muslim. His movement began in his native Marw and spread
to Samarqand and Bukhārā before ending in a spectacular suicide in fire with
all the members of his family and the most loyal of his followers.56

The ‘Abbāsids developed their messianic ideology in part vis-à-vis the ‘Alids,
who had their own messianic claims in orthodox and extremist forms both in-
side and outside the Kaysāniyya movement. The followers of Mughīra b. Sa‘īd
al-Bajali, a blind old man who practiced magic and jugglery, supported the belief that the Ḥasanid Muḥammad b. Ṭābil, the Pure Soul, would come forth as the Mahḍi. When Muḥammad b. Ṭābil vanished from the authorities’ sight, the Mughirīyya claimed that he was alive, hiding in Mount al-Tamiyya, which was located east of the route from al-Hajir to Mecca. In his doctrine, Mughira b. Sa’īd al-Bajalī elevated the ‘Alid imams to the rank of divinity. Nevertheless, until the appearance of the Pure Soul as the Mahḍi, al-Mughira taught that he himself was the imam, the imamate of the ‘Alids having elapsed.57 He claimed to be a prophet and taught that Muḥammad b. Ṭābil had given him from his mouth the Holy Spirit, with which he was able to bring the dead to life and to heal those who are blind or have leprosy.

After the failure of the revolt of Muḥammad b. Ṭābil and his death in 145/762, some of the Mughirīyya claimed that a devil had taken the shape of Muḥammad and that the real Muḥammad still would rise and rule the world.58 The Pure Soul’s fame among the more moderate Shīʿas as the expected Mahḍi in Medina was also widespread. His popularity increased to the degree that no one, if we believe al-Isfahaṇī, had any doubt that he was the Mahḍi. In fact he honored himself with this name in one of his addresses to his supporters: “You have no doubt that I am the Mahḍi, I am indeed he.”59 After him, his brother Ibrāhīm, who adopted the title al-Hādī, led an unsuccessful uprising against al-Mānsūr.60 After Ibrāhīm’s death, some of his supporters claimed that he was the expected one. In the Ḥusaynid branch of the ‘Alids, some of the followers of Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq and his father, Muḥammad al-Baqir, saw them as Mahdis.61 Later the followers of the Ḥusaynid Mūsā al-Kāẓim (d. 799) declared him to be the messianic Qāʾim. When he died, they awaited his return from concealment.62 These were known as the Wāqifa, who circulated among Shīʿa groups a tradition, attributed to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, that stated, “your seventh imam is your Qāʾim.” The Wāqifa thus stopped the imamate with the seventh Shīʿa imam, Mūṣā al-Kāẓim.63

In this context the ‘Abbāsid family found it necessary to justify their rule by referring to prophecies of the most eschatological kind: “By God, then there will be [rulers] from our family, the Saffāḥ, the Mānsūr, and the Mahḍi who will hand it [the caliphate] over to Jesus the son of Mary.”64 When the court poet Abū Dulāma praised the second ‘Abbāsid caliph, al-Mānsūr, as the Mahḍi, or when al-Mānsūr claimed to have a vision in which he saw the Prophet entrusting him with a banner until he fought against the Antichrist, al-Dajjāl, they were reacting to the claims of their opponents and responding to the ideological context of their time.65 Although the second ‘Abbāsid caliph seems to have gradually distanced himself from the extremism of the Rizāmiyya, he assumed the title al-Mānsūr immediately after he defeated Muḥammad b. Ṭābil, the Pure Soul, in 145/762, implying that he was the forerunner who would pave the way for the Mahḍi.66 As his actions indicate, al-Mānsūr
honored his son, Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh, as the Mahdī around the year 143/760–61, even before his victory over the Pure Soul and before adopting his own title, al-Manṣūr, and made a concerted effort to publicize this.67 He did not shy away from publicly arguing that the Mahdī was indeed his son, not the Pure Soul.68 In the succession dispute within the ‘Abbāsid family, the caliph al-Manṣūr forced the heir apparent in line, ‘Īsā b. Mūsā, to cede his place to his son Muḥammad because, al-Manṣūr argued, “he was the expected Mahdī.”69 Al-Mahdī himself, while still an heir apparent, used for the first time in ‘Abbāsid history the title al-īmām on a coin minted in Bukhārā in 151/768. The issue was minted when al-Manṣūr was still the ruling caliph. Bates quite reasonably concludes that such an anomaly resulted from “revolutionary enthusiasm” in Khurāsān rather than from deliberate manipulation for political gains.70

After his accession, al-Mahdī sought to live up to messianic expectations by releasing political prisoners and handing out gifts, especially in the holy cities.71 Al-Hādī and al-Rashīd also preferred to see themselves not as ordinary rulers but as caliphs who were commissioned to bring about divine justice, religious purity, and military victories.72

The messianic dimension of the ‘Abbāsid rule should not stand in the way of recognizing the difficult realities of administering a far-flung empire on a day-to-day basis. How well did messianic rhetoric mesh with the mundane tasks of ruling? Perhaps the most relevant response to this question comes from Ibn al-Muqaffā, who served the Umayyads and briefly the ‘Abbāsids as secretary until his execution under orders from the caliph al-Manṣūr.

Ibn al-Muqaffā’s diagnosis of the seriousness of the clash between ‘Abbāsid revolutionary charisma and the institutional need for predictability is a telling account of the ambivalence of ‘Abbāsid politics, dynastic identity, and imperial culture. Having observed the severity and disruptive nature of the veneration of ‘Abbāsid caliphs among the members of the military and administration, he wrote to advise the caliph how to place the caliphate on an institutional military and administrative track. His treatise addresses significant questions regarding the ‘Abbāsid army and administration, and, more important, the image and perception of the ‘Abbāsid caliphs among their followers. Ibn al-Muqaffā warns the caliph that his followers went too far in bestowing semidivine attributes upon him. He informs the caliph that many of the generals claim that if the caliph orders the mountains to move, they will move, and if he demands that the qibla, the direction of prayer, be turned around, it will be done. He therefore advises the caliph to curb this potentially dangerous mood of veneration and devotion among the Khurāsānī army and put a system of duties and rights in place for the civil and military bureaucracy to follow.73

Ibn al-Muqaffā had an incisive observation. Though he perhaps committed a mistake that cost him his life by downplaying the salvific nature of the caliph, which al-Manṣūr seems to have maintained, he brought into sharp focus the
struggle of the caliphs since the time of al-Manṣūr to find a way to balance stability and revolutionary zeal, which the successors of the caliph al-Manṣūr seem to have managed only until the outbreak of the fourth civil war at the end of the second Islamic century. The civil war proved not only that the ‘Abbāsids were reluctant to abandon their messianic claims but also that messianic beliefs could emerge again as a meaningful religio-political ideology. An argument can be made that the ‘Abbāsids merely employed messianic beliefs for their own pragmatic interests or attempted to forge an anti-ideology for the purposes of dampening anti-‘Abbāsid propaganda; however, such an argument has to explain how the ‘Abbāsids themselves managed to stay immune to the effects of such beliefs and justify why a rich messianic and apocalyptic tradition among Muslims and non-Muslims should be dismissed as inconsequential. Looking into how non-Muslims and Muslims dealt with each other through the prism of prophecies will better clarify the context in which the ‘Abbāsids operated.

Muslims and Others: A Process of Conflict and Confluence

Having been united under a single political umbrella, Muslim and non-Muslim communities shared similar experiences and eventually developed striking similarities in their expectations and visions. A two-century-long interaction contributed significantly to the ideas and expectations during the early ‘Abbāsid period and made possible for the observers among diverse confessions to imagine political developments in a messianic or apocalyptic light. Many remarkable prophecies dating back to the first Islamic century vividly illustrate a process of coexistence. Initially the immediate reaction of Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Christian communities to the rise of Islam was apocalyptic. While apocalyptic prophecies had already been circulating within the respective confessional communities independent of the rise of Islam, new ones clearly arose in response to this and to the Muslim expansion. The emerging faith fed Jewish messianic hopes, reminded Christians of the proximity of the end of time, and pushed the Zoroastrian communities into despair. Muslim expansion compelled all to revisit their end-of-time scenarios. Defensive in nature, non-Muslim prophecies reflected the need of those communities to explain adverse developments that they had faced, to reassure themselves of their legitimacy as communities of faith, and to interpret both their past and their future in ways that confirmed their beliefs.

Numerous Christian apocalyptic prophecies throughout the first Islamic century exposed a persistent sense of apprehension and anxiety, fluctuating from self-blame as in the sermons of Sophronius Patriarch of Jerusalem (d. ca. 639) to a sense of disappointment and hopelessness in the face of Muslim military conquests. Soon the caliphate replaced the Roman Empire as the fourth beast in numerous Danielic prophecies. The rapid advance of the Muslim military