

Jesus as Eschatological Saviour in Islam: An Example of the ‘Positive’ Apologetic Interpretation of the Christian Apocalyptic Texts in an Islamic Messianic Milieu*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the interpretation of the Christian apocalyptic texts, such as the *Revelation* of St John and the pseudo-Clementine *Book of the Rolls*, by Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī (d. 796/1394), the founder of a mystical and messianic movement which was influential in medieval Iran and Anatolia. This interpretation can be situated within the tradition of ‘positive’ Muslim hermeneutics of the Christian and Jewish scriptures which was particularly developed in Shī‘ī and especially Ismā‘īlī circles. Faḍl Allāh incorporates the Christian apocalyptic texts into an Islamic eschatological context, combining them with Qur’ān and ḥadīth material. Faḍl Allāh’s hermeneutical enterprise, focused on the figure of Jesus, produces an original version of Islamic myths regarding the eschatological Saviour.

If myth is understood as a symbol endowed with the power to influence individual human lives or the course of history as a whole, to generate specific patterns of human behaviour and produce characteristic socio-political manifestations, then the myth of the Saviour is probably one of the most powerful myths of the mankind. In the Islamic context, the stories and beliefs concerning the eschatological Saviour had a strong and lasting impact on the socio-political evolution of Muslim societies from the inception of Islam.¹

* This article is partially based on the introduction to the author’s *Christian Apocalyptic Texts in Islamic Messianic Discourse: The ‘Christian Chapter’ of the Jāvidān-nāma-yi kabīr* by Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī (d. 796/1394), Leiden, 2016. My thanks to Isabel Miller for proofreading this text.

¹ For a well documented overview of the sources and studies concerning the messianic expectations in early Islam see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, ‘Muḥammad le Paraclet et ‘Alī le Messie’, in M.A. Amir-Moezzi, M. De Cillis, D. De Smet and O. Mir-Kasimov (eds.), *L’ésotérisme shi‘ite: ses racines et ses prolongements = Shi‘i Esotericism: Its Roots and Developments*, Turnhout, 2016, pp. 19-54. The idea of the imminent coming of the Saviour was one of the sources of inspiration for the Shi‘i revolts against the Umayyad rulers during the first centuries of Islam, when apparently the term Mahdī acquired its meaning of ‘eschatological Saviour’. See Wadad Kadi, ‘The Development of the Term ‘Ghulāt’ in Muslim Literature with Special Reference to the Kaysāniyya,’ *Akten des VII Kongresses für Arabistik und Islamwissenschaft*, 1976, pp. 295-319. The coming of the Saviour and the restoration of the just rule was one of the central narratives that legitimised the Abbasid revolution, and it was later exploited by the Abbasids and their opponents alike, becoming an important political factor during the Abbasid period. See Hayrettin Yücesoy, *Messianic Beliefs and Imperial Politics in Medieval Islam: The ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate in the Early Ninth Century*, Columbia, 2009. Messianic beliefs also played a significant

Jesus is one of the central figures of the Islamic eschatological myth, and is sometimes identified with the Maḥdī, the expected Saviour.² A substantial part of the material that fed into the formation of the Islamic myth of Jesus was taken from various Christian sources, which underwent islamisation and circulated in the Islamic world as part of the ‘Stories of the prophets’ (*qışaş al-anbiyā*), and were also incorporated into such genres of Muslim literature as collections of traditions (*ḥadīṭ*), exegetical (*tafsīr*) and historical (*ta’rīḥ*) works.³

Parallel to the incorporation of the Christian material through the intermediary of the retold and islamised ‘stories of the prophets’, Christian texts, biblical as well as apocryphal, were also available to Muslims directly, in Arabic translations.⁴ Muslim scholars compared these texts with the Qur’an and hadith, commented upon them and sometimes incorporated them in their doctrinal discourse. Muslim biblical scholarship was divided between two contradictory attitudes, both warranted by different sets of Qur’ānic verses.⁵ The ‘negative’ exegesis was based on the thesis that Jews and Christians had falsified their scriptures, either textually (*tahrīf al-naṣṣ* or *tahrīf al-laḫẓ*) or through erroneous interpretations (*tahrīf al-ma’nā*). This kind of exegesis scrutinised Jewish and Christian texts in order to reveal their inconsistencies.⁶ The grounds for the ‘positive’ exegesis were provided by the Qur’ānic verses suggesting that the previous scriptures contain predictions concerning the Prophet Muḥammad and the rise of Islam.⁷ This point of view implied that at least some parts of the pre-Islamic scriptures represent authentic and unfalsified prophetic revelations, which placed them on a level of sacredness

role in the rise of the Abbasid’s rivals, the Fatimids. In various ways and to various extent, messianic ideology was instrumental for many other significant Islamic policies, including Umayyad Caliphate in Spain, Almohad, Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal Empires.

² David Cook discusses the possibility that Jesus was the original messianic figure in Islam, but was later ‘downgraded’ to the role of the Maḥdī’s assistant. See David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, Princeton (NJ), 2002, pp. 212-213. See also Amir-Moezzi, ‘Muḥammad le Paraclet et ‘Alī le Messie’, p. 36.

³ For the representation of Jesus in Islamic tradition see Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*, Cambridge (Mass.), 2001.

⁴ On the Arabic translations of the biblical texts, see Sidney H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the “People of the Book” in the Language of Islam*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2013.

⁵ For the Qur’ānic verses used as a scriptural basis for the polemic and apologetic approaches to the Jewish and Christian texts, see Jane D. McAuliffe, ‘Qur’ānic Context of Muslim Biblical Scholarship’, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 7/2 (1996), pp. 144-145 and 148-149.

⁶ On *tahrīf al-naṣṣ* and *tahrīf al-ma’nā* see Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, ‘Tahrīf’, *EI2*.

⁷ On the apparent contradiction between the thesis of corruption on the one hand, and the predictive use of the biblical texts on the other, see McAuliffe, ‘Qur’ānic Context’, pp. 141-158.

comparable to that of the Qur'ān and made possible their inclusion in the sphere of the Muslim scriptural exegesis.

Both 'negative' and 'positive' approaches to the interpretation of the pre-Islamic scriptures were represented in the majority, that is, Sunnī and Shī'ī, branches of Islam. However, it seems that the specific doctrinal positions of Shī'ī Islam provided a particularly fertile ground for the development of 'positive' exegesis. It is also in the works of the Shī'ī authors that we find the examples of what can be called the 'cross-scriptural' interpretation, when the material of the pre-Islamic scriptures is combined with the material of the Islamic scriptural sources as if they were all parts of one extended universal scripture.⁸

In the following section, I would like to outline the development of the 'positive' exegesis of the pre-Islamic scriptures by Muslim authors. The second section discusses the place of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī (d. 796/1394), an Iranian mystical and messianic thinker, within this trend of 'positive' exegesis.⁹ In the final section I will provide some examples of the cross-scriptural interpretation concerning the eschatological role of Jesus from the *Ġāvidān-nāma-yi kabīr*, the major work of Faḍl Allāh. In his description of Jesus as eschatological Saviour, Faḍl Allāh combined Christian apocalyptic texts, including the Gospel of St John, *Revelation* of St John, and the apocryphal *Book of the Rolls*, with material from the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth*.¹⁰

Messianism and 'Positive' Muslim Exegesis of the Pre-Islamic Scriptures

As mentioned, several doctrinal positions specific to Shī'ī Islam could explain why the 'positive' exegesis of the pre-Islamic scriptures was more developed in Shī'ī than in Sunnī milieus. First, since the Shī'ī world view emphasises the role of the Prophet's family in the preservation and transmission of the revelation after the death of the Prophet, the Qur'anic mandate concerning the mention of the Prophet in the pre-Islamic scriptures tended to be

⁸ On the Sunnī side, Ibrāhīm b. 'Umar al-Biqā'ī (d. 885/1480) in his *tafsīr* extensively used authentic biblical material to interpret the Qur'ān. One of his central arguments was that Muslims are allowed to use the Bible if they are able to distinguish the corrupted sections from the uncorrupted ones on the basis of the Qur'ān. On al-Biqā'ī, see Walid A. Saleh, *In Defence of the Bible: A Critical Edition and an Introduction to al-Biqā'ī's Bible Treatise*, Leiden and Boston, 2008.

⁹ On Faḍl Allāh and his followers, which came to be known under the name of Ḥurūfīs, see Orkhan Mir-Kasimov, 'Astarābādī, Faḍlallāh' and 'Ḥurūfiyya' in *EI3* and references there.

¹⁰ These texts and their use in the *Ġāvidān-nāma* will be discussed further below.

extended in the Shī'ī context to the prophetic family as well, and in particular to the Imāms who are regarded as the legatees and successors of the Prophet. This means that the Shī'ī authors attempted to demonstrate that not only the Prophet, but also other central figures of Shī'ī Islam had parallels in previous religions. Another Shī'ī belief came to corroborate this attitude. According to Shī'ī doctrine, not only Muḥammad, but also all previous prophets had their Imāms or 'legatees' (*waṣī* pl. *awṣiyā'*). Their function was to preserve the invarying inner truth of religion (*bāṭin*), while its external form (*ẓāhir*) varied from one prophet to another. There were therefore parallels between the Imāms of Islamic era and the legatees of the previous prophets.¹¹

Second, the Shī'ī Imāms were believed to be endowed with special hermeneutical knowledge which allowed them to access the divine truths contained not only in the Qur'ān, but also in any other prophetic books.¹² The Imāms were also believed to possess unaltered and unfalsified copies of all prophetic books.¹³ These beliefs attenuated to a certain degree the thesis of corruption which dominated the Sunnī polemical approach to the pre-Islamic scriptures, especially when Shī'ī authors claimed to write under authority of a present or hidden Imām who could clearly distinguish the authentic part of any scripture from the falsified one.

¹¹ On this idea, see Uri Rubin, 'Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shī'a Tradition', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 1 (1979), pp. 41-65.

¹² On the exceptional hermeneutical authority ascribed to the Imām in Twelver and Ismā'īlī branches of Shī'ism, see Meir M. Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imāmī Shiism*, Leiden, Boston, Cologne and Jerusalem, 1999, pp. 93-101; Bar-Asher, 'Outlines of Early Ismā'īlī-Fāṭimid Qur'ān Exegesis', *Journal Asiatique* 296.2 (2008), pp. 257-295; Bar-Asher, 'The Authority to Interpret the Qur'ān', in Farhad Daftary and Gurdofarid Miskinzoda (eds.), *The Study of Shi'i Islam: History, Theology and Law*, London, 2014, pp. 149-162; Mahmoud Ayoub, 'The Speaking Qur'ān and the Silent Qur'ān: A Study of the Principles and Development of Imāmī Shī'ī *tafsīr*', in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin, Oxford, 1988, pp. 177-198, in particular pp. 178-183; Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Āshūrā' in Twelver Shī'ism*, The Hague, Paris and New York, 1978, p. 62; Ayoub, 'Towards an Islamic Christology: An Image of Jesus in early Shia Muslim Literature', *Muslim World* 66 (1976), pp. 163-188; and Ismail K. Poonawala, 'Ismā'īlī *ta'wīl* of the Qur'ān', in *Approaches*, ed. Rippin, pp. 199-222. On the Shī'ī belief that the Imāms are bearers of the universal prophetic knowledge, transmitted by Muḥammad to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law and the first in the line of the Imāms, see Uri Rubin, 'Prophets and Progenitors', p. 45 ff.

¹³ See Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering*, p. 63; Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *Le guide divin dans le shī'isme originel: aux sources de l'ésotérisme en Islam*, Lagrasse, 1992, pp. 185-189; and Poonawala, 'The Imām's Authority During the Pre-Ghaybah Period: Theoretical and Practical Considerations', in *Shī'ite Heritage: Essays on Classical and Modern Traditions*, ed. L. Clarke, Binghamton (NY), 2001, pp. 103-122, in particular p. 107.

In the traditional lore of the major Shīʿī branches, that is, Twelvers and Ismāʿīlīs, the last Imām, identified with the eschatological Saviour, has a particular hermeneutical mission. While the knowledge of hermeneutics was attributed to any Imām, the last Imām, the *Qāʾim*, was also expected to introduce an era when the innermost truth of all prophetic revelations will be disclosed to mankind as a whole.¹⁴

Therefore, if the Shīʿī doctrinal context in general fostered the development of the ‘positive’ exegesis of pre-Islamic scriptural sources, this development should be most visible in those branches of Shīʿism which were most permeated by messianic expectations and most focused on the figure of the last Imām with his universal hermeneutical mission.

Among the major Shīʿī branches, it is arguably the Ismāʿīlīs who have entertained the highest level of messianic aspirations throughout their history.¹⁵ Significantly, it is also in the works of Ismāʿīlī authors that the Shīʿī exegesis of the Jewish and Christian scriptures attained its most developed form. Ismāʿīlī exegetical literature contains examples of the actual interpretation of the Jewish and Christian stories placed under the authority of the last Imām, the *Qāʾim*. The *Sarāʾir al-nuṭaqaʾ*, ascribed to the Fāṭimid dāʿī Ḡaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman (fl. mid 4th/10th century), contains ample interpretations of Jewish and Christian material apparently warranted by the exegetical authority of the *Qāʾim* and the belief that at the end of time the *Qāʾim* will reveal the hidden meanings of all previous prophetic

¹⁴ For this belief and relevant traditions, see Amir-Moezzi, ‘Fin du Temps et Retour à l’Origine (Aspects de l’imamologie duodécimaine VI)’, in *Mahdisme et millénarisme en Islam*, ed. Mercedes García-Arenal, *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la méditerranée*, 91/4 (2000), pp. 53-72, in particular pp. 68 and 163-164; Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shiʿism*, Albany, 1981, pp. 163-164. For similar beliefs related to the *Qāʾim* within the framework of Ismāʿīlī prophetology, see Wilferd Madelung, ‘Das Imamāt in der frühen ismailitischen Lehre’, *Der Islam* 37 (1961), pp. 43-135, in particular pp. 53-54; Heinz Halm, *Kosmologie und Heilslehre der frühen Ismāʿīliya: Eine Studie zur islamischen Gnosis*, Wiesbaden, 1978, p. 25; Farhad Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs, Their History and Doctrines*, Cambridge 1990 (2nd edition 2007), pp. 139-140; David Hollenberg, ‘Interpretation after the End of Days: the Fāṭimid-Ismāʿīlī Taʾwīl (Interpretation) of Jaʿfar ibn Maṣṣūr al-Yaman (d. ca. 960)’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2006), p. 8.

¹⁵ This can be at least in part explained by the fact that the Ismāʿīlīs do not have an equivalent of the greater occultation of the Twelvers. Therefore, even if the doctrine of the imamate was reformulated under the Fatimids in order to postpone the messianic expectations to indefinite future, the Ismāʿīlī Imām remained closer to his community and more accessible than the hidden Imām of the Twelvers. The presence of the Imām or of his direct representatives stimulated messianic manifestations, such as the Druze movement or the Nizārī Ismāʿīlī doctrine of Resurrection (*qiyāma*), in the course of Ismāʿīlī history. On the Druzes, see Daniel De Smet, *Les Épîtres sacrées des druzes, Rasāʾil al-ḥikma: Introduction, édition critique et traduction annotée des traités attribués à Ḥamza b. ʿAlī et Ismāʿīl at-Tamīmī*, Leuven, 2007. On the *qiyāma* episode, see Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs*, pp. 386 ff. and references there.

revelations.¹⁶ Other examples of Ismā'īlī hermeneutics (*ta'wīl*) of Jewish and Christian sources range from subtle allusions and parallels to Ismā'īlī concepts and doctrines based on impressive first-hand biblical erudition, as in the *A'lām al-nubuwwa* of Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, to more direct interpretations, usually focused on such topoi as biblical references to the Ismā'īlī Imāms and the hierarchy of the *da'wā*, as in the *Kitāb al-yanābī* of Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī, the *Kitāb al-maṣābīḥ fī iṭbāt al-imāma* of Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, and the *Ḥwān al-iḥwān* of Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw.¹⁷

Is the Ismā'īlī approach to the pre-Islamic, and in particular Jewish and Christian scriptures absolutely exceptional in Muslim religious literature? It certainly might appear as such when compared with the Sunnī anti-Jewish and anti-Christian *polemical* works. But the contrast with the Sunnī *apologetic* literature is less sharp. Even if Ismā'īlī hermeneutics go well beyond the typical themes of Sunnī apologetic literature, both Sunnī apologetic literature and Ismā'īlī hermeneutics interpret the pre-Islamic scriptures as supporting their respective understanding of the sacred history of mankind and their specific doctrinal views.

The wider scope of the Shī'ī and in particular Ismā'īlī exegesis of the pre-Islamic scriptures could be viewed, not as a definitive departure from the exegetical principles accepted by the Sunnī authors, but as their extension resulting from a different interpretation of the Qur'ānic warrant concerning the 'positive' exegesis of pre-Islamic texts. The Sunnī 'positive' exegesis of Jewish and Christian sources is based on a 'narrow' interpretation of the Qur'ānic mandate which limits the hermeneutics to the indications concerning the Prophet Muḥammad and the rise of Islam. The Shī'ī, and in particular

¹⁶ Ja'far b. Manṣūr al-Yaman wrote on behalf of the Fāṭimid caliph al-Mu'izz li-dīn Allāh (d. 365/975), who was regarded as the representative of the *Qā'im*. For the interpretation of biblical texts in the works of Ja'far, see Hollenberg, 'Interpretation after the End of Days', in particular p. 299 ff., and his 'Disrobing judges with veiled truths: an early Ismā'īlī Torah Interpretation (*ta'wīl*) in service of the Fāṭimid mission', *Religion* 33 (2003), pp. 127–145.

¹⁷ Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *A'lām al-nubuwwa*, ed. and trans. by Tarīf Khalīdī as *The Proofs of Prophecy*, Provo (UT), 2011; Ḥamīd al-Dīn Aḥmad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Kirmānī, *al-Maṣābīḥ fī iṭbāt al-imāma*, ed. and tr. Paul E. Walker as *The Master of the Age: An Islamic Treatise on the Necessity of the Imamate*, London - New York, 2007, especially pp. 24–26 and 96–97; D. De Smet and J. M. F. Van Reeth, 'Les citations bibliques dans l'oeuvre du dā'ī ismaélien Ḥamīd ad-Dīn al-Kirmānī', in *Law, Christianity and Modernism in Islamic Society*. Proceedings of the Eighteenth Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants, eds. U. Vermeulen and J. M.F. Van Reeth, Louvain, 1998, pp. 147–160. For the interpretations of the Gospels and Christian symbolism in Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī's *Kitāb al-Yanābī* and their extensive incorporation in Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw's *Ḥwān al-iḥwān* see Walker, *The Wellsprings of Wisdom*, Salt Lake City (UT), 1994, in particular pp. 93–95, 105, 177–179, 185, and Henry Corbin, *Trilogie ismaélienne*, Tehran - Paris, 1961, p. 112, n. 235; pp. 114–116, n. 238; pp. 116–117, and p. 117, n. 240.

Ismā'īlī, 'positive' exegesis extends the Qur'ānic mandate to include the indications not only to the Prophet of Islam, but also to his family and especially his successors, the Imams, and makes this mandate much more flexible by placing the hermeneutical enterprise under the authority of the Imams regarded as being the living embodiments of the Qur'ān, the 'speaking Qur'āns'.¹⁸

From this perspective, there is a continuity between the Sunnī and Shī'ī forms of 'positive' exegesis of Jewish and Christian sources. The Shī'ī doctrine of the exegetical authority of the Imām – who, guided by divine inspiration, is enabled to recognise the authentic parts of the Jewish and Christian scriptures and to reveal their innermost meaning – echoes the position of the original Sunnī thinker Ibrāhīm b. 'Umar al-Biqā'ī (d. 885/1480) who implied that any Muslim scholar with a thorough knowledge of the Qur'ān could discern the authentic parts of the Bible, thus making the thesis of its falsification irrelevant.¹⁹

Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī and his 'Positive' Exegesis of the Christian Apocalyptic Texts

The broad 'positive' apologetic approach to the interpretation of the Jewish and Christian scriptural sources developed in Shī'ī circles, in particular with reference to the figure of eschatological Saviour, was apparently not restricted to Shī'ī groups alone. In the second half of the 8th/14th century, we find an example of the extended interpretation of the Jewish and Christian sources, harmoniously interwoven with the material from the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth*, in the milieu of Iranian messianic movements impregnated by Sufi and Shī'ī ideas. This interpretation is found in the *Ġāvidān-nāma-yi kabīr*, the major work of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī (d. 796/1394), who was an original thinker and the founder of a mystical and messianic trend which came to be known under the name of Ḥurūfiyya.²⁰

The 8th/14th and 9th/15th centuries were characterised by a close rapprochement between Sufism and Shī'ism and the emergence of the doctrines which freely combined elements from Sunnī and Shī'ī mysticism. Faḍl Allāh's mystical and messianic doctrine

¹⁸ For the Imām as speaking Qur'ān, see Ayoub, 'The Speaking Qur'ān and the Silent Qur'ān: A Study of the Principles and Development of Imāmī Shī'ī *tafsīr*', in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin, Oxford, 1988, pp. 177-198, pp. 178-183.

¹⁹ See Saleh, 'A Fifteenth-Century Muslim Hebraist: Al-Biqā'ī and His Defence of Using the Bible to Interpret the Qur'ān', *Speculum* 83/3, pp. 629-654, p. 646.

²⁰ See n. 9 above. All references to the manuscript folios of the *Jāvidān-nāma* correspond to British Library manuscript Or. 5957.

reflects this tendency and therefore cannot be unambiguously characterised as either Sufi or Shī'ī. Consequently, the *Ġāvidān-nāma* does not explicitly refer to the hermeneutical powers and authority of the Imāms. However, Faḍl Allāh's doctrine contains two features that are similar to the doctrinal positions which fostered the development of the 'positive' exegesis of the pre-Islamic scriptures in Shī'ī Islam.

The first of these features is an elaborate doctrine of authoritative, divinely inspired hermeneutics (*ta'wīl*).²¹ Even though, unlike the Shī'ī groups, Faḍl Allāh does not explicitly attribute this kind of hermeneutical knowledge to the divinely inspired Imāms, he does associate the hermeneutics, as part of the 'maternal' (*ummī*) knowledge, with the line of 'maternal' prophets and saints.²² This line begins with Jesus, includes Muḥammad and then continues through a succession of unspecified saints. The main task of the 'maternal' prophets and saints is the revelation of the most fundamental, original, 'maternal' elements of the divine creative Word. This brings the 'maternal' ones, the *ummiyūn*, close to the Shī'ī Imāms, whose mission is precisely the revelation of the innermost truths of the divine Word manifested through the prophets. This similarity between the two lines is emphasised in the *Ġāvidān-nāma* by the passages discussing the fact that the words *imām* and *ummī* are derived from the same Arabic root 'mm.²³

The second feature that Faḍl Allāh's doctrine shares with Shī'ī beliefs is the idea of a universal revelation of the innermost meaning of all prophetic books which will take place during a more or less imminent messianic age. This universal hermeneutics will be performed by the eschatological Saviour, Mahdi or Qa'im, at the end of time. Consistent with the parallelism between the *ummīs* of the *Ġāvidān-nāma* and the Shī'ī Imāms, Faḍl Allāh identifies the Saviour not with the last in the line of Imāms, as is the case in the Twelver and Ismā'īlī branches of Shī'ism, but with Jesus, who will return at the end of time to close the line of the *ummīs*. However, in the *Ġāvidān-nāma* as in Shī'ī doctrine, the

²¹ On the meanings of the term *ta'wīl* in various currents of Islam and in particular Twelver and Ismā'īlī Shī'ism see David Hollenberg, 'Disrobing judges with veiled truths: an early Ismā'īlī Torah Interpretation (*ta'wīl*) in service of the Fāṭimid mission', *Religion* 33 (2003), pp. 127–145, in particular pp. 129–130.

²² On the definition of the concept of 'maternal' knowledge in the thought of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī, see Orkhan Mir-Kasimov, *Words of Power: Ḥurūfī Teachings between Shi'ism and Sufism in Medieval Islam*, London and New York, 2015, Glossary pp. 451–452.

²³ For a more detailed account on the similarity between the Shī'ī conception of Imām and Faḍl Allāh's interpretation of the term *ummī* see Mir-Kasimov, 'Ummīs versus Imāms in Ḥurūfī Prophetology: An Attempt at a Sunni/Shī'ī Synthesis?', in *Unity in Diversity: Mysticism, Messianism and the Construction of Religious Authority in Islam*, Orkhan Mir-Kasimov (ed.), Boston and Leiden, Brill, 2013, pp. 221–246.

universal hermeneutics, which reveals the divine truths in every form of the created world and leads to the manifestation of the original divine Word constituting the source and the supreme goal of all prophetic revelations, is the central task of the eschatological Saviour, whether he is identified with the last Imām as in Shīʿism or with Jesus as in the *Ġāvidān-nāma*.

These doctrinal features provide the context for an ample use in the *Ġāvidān-nāma* of the Christian apocalyptic texts which describe the eschatological role of Jesus. These texts include the canonical books of the New Testament, such as the Gospel of St John and the Revelation of St John, as well as the apocryphal text known under the title of the *Book of the Rolls*, and including the Syriac *Cave of Treasures* and the pseudo-Clementine *Arabic Apocalypse of Peter*.²⁴ These Christian texts are incorporated into the *Ġāvidān-nāma*'s messianic discourse and interpreted in accordance with its doctrinal framework, in combination with the Islamic scriptural sources, that is, the Qur'ānic verses and the *ḥadīṭ*. This interpretation of the Christian apocalyptic texts often takes the form of an apologetic discourse addressed to the Christians, and represents a case of 'positive' Islamic exegesis of pre-Islamic scriptural sources in line with the 'positive' exegetical trend discussed above.

Consistent with the Qur'ānic outlook, Jesus is essentially regarded in the *Ġāvidān-nāma*, as being the Word of God.²⁵ Therefore, the *Ġāvidān-nāma* argues that only Jesus can realise the ultimate revelation of the divine Word at the end of time. As mentioned, a

²⁴ The Arabic *Book of the Rolls* is a huge compilation of Christian pseudepigrapha. Some manuscripts are divided into eight books, including the *Cave of Treasures* and several other books, which propose a specific outlook on sacred history, include exegetical and apologetic traditions and legends, and address such topics as the Trinity, the hierarchy of angels, descriptions of Paradise and the apocalyptic vision of kings and kingdoms. According to August Dillmann, 'Bericht über das äthiopische Buch Clementinischer Schriften', *Nachrichten von der G.A. Universität und der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*, 17-19 (1858), pp. 185-226, in particular 201ff., the work was composed in Arabic in the middle of the eighth century. I am not aware of any comprehensive study of the Arabic pseudo-Clementine tradition, but many works on the Syriac *Cave of Treasures* contain a more or less detailed discussion of the Arabic *Book of the Rolls*. The Arabic text of the *Cave of Treasures* was edited by Carl Bezold, *Die Schatzhöhle*, Leipzig, 1888, and Margaret Dunlop Gibson, under the title 'Kitāb al-Mağāll, or the Book of the Rolls', in *Studia Sinaitica*; 8 (1901), Arabic text pp. 1-57, English translation pp. 1-59. Bezold and Gibson also provided respectively German and English translations of this text. Antonio Battista and Bellarmino Bagatti, *La Caverna dei Tesori: Testo arabo con traduzione italiana e commento*, Jerusalem 1979, reprinted the Arabic texts of Bezold and Gibson with an Italian translation. Alphonse Mingana edited and translated the remaining part of the *Book of the Rolls* from a Karshuni manuscript, *Apocalypse of Peter*, in *Woodbrooke Studies*, Cambridge, 1931, vol. 3 (hereafter *AP*), pp. 93-450.

²⁵ As it can be expected, one of the most cited Qur'ānic verses in the *Jāvidān-nāma*'s passages related to Jesus is 4:171: 'The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and His Word that He committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him'.

significant part of the passages containing the interpretation of the Christian sources is addressed to the Christians, and conveys the following views. During Jesus' historical mission, mankind was unprepared for the full revelation of the divine Word. Therefore, Jesus had to conceal a part of his teachings in parables and metaphors, and the Christians received only an incomplete knowledge of Jesus' true nature and message. Most importantly, they ignore the way in which the divine Word will be revealed in the person of Jesus at the end of time in its most perfect locus of manifestation, which is the form of the human body.²⁶ This final revelation, which constitutes the innermost truth of Christianity, will only be possible after the completion of the prophetic cycle by the Prophet Muḥammad, and as culmination of the hermeneutics accomplished in the line of the *ummī* saints. Therefore, what the Christian Chapter seems to suggest, in particular in the passages explicitly addressed to the Christians, is that true Christianity can only be discovered through Islam. It consists of the full revelation of the primordial divine Word realised by Jesus, who is himself the pure manifestation of this Word. That final revelation will be the ultimate fulfilment of Islam,²⁷ Christianity and all other religions. For this reason, the Christians are called upon to recognise the eminence of Muḥammad as a prophet with the ability to realise the perfection of their own faith.²⁸

In addition to the Gospels, which were commonly referred to and quoted by Muslim authors, more intriguing is the use and interpretation in the *Ġāvidān-nāma* of fragments from two Christian apocalyptic texts, namely the canonical *Revelation* of St John and the apocryphal *Book of the Rolls*. The material from both texts is interpreted in line with the *Ġāvidān-nāma*'s messianic and eschatological doctrine, together with relevant Muslim scriptural sources. The *Ġāvidān-nāma* is probably one of the very few texts where Christian apocalyptic material and its symbolism are so intimately incorporated into an Islamic eschatological narrative.

²⁶ On the *Jāvidān-nāma*'s idea of human form as the most perfect form of manifestation of the divine Word, see Mir-Kasimov, *Words of Power*, pp. 95-139.

²⁷ Cf. fol. 176a, paragraph 14, which suggests that the second coming of Jesus will be the revelation of the secret of Muḥammad's heavenly ascension (*mi'rāj*).

²⁸ *Shī'ī ḥadīth* literature contains accounts that can be interpreted in the sense that Islam encompasses the esoteric meanings of the Christian scriptures and rites. These meanings, ignored by the Christians, are known to the Imāms who are initiated into the innermost significations of the Islamic revelation. Cf. Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, Beirut, 1403/1983, 110 vols., vol. 2, pp. 321-322, and Ibn Bābawayh, *Amālī*, Najaf, 1389/1970, pp. 199-200, where 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib explains the esoteric meaning of the church bell to his companion al-Ḥārith al-A'war. When al-Ḥārith transmits 'Alī's words to the Christian monk who was ringing the bell, the latter immediately recognises their truth and becomes a Muslim.

The *Revelation* of St John was apparently virtually unknown to Muslim scholars at the time of Faḍl Allāh. This author has found only some echoes of the *Revelation* in the ḥadīth literature, mostly focused on the creatures surrounding the divine Throne (*Revelation* 4:7).²⁹ But this is not surprising given that the *Revelation* was not much in circulation among the eastern Christian communities, and therefore the means for its transmission to the Muslim audience were limited. However, Arabic translations of the *Revelation* were apparently available in 7th/13th and 8th/14th centuries,³⁰ and two Arabic commentaries on the *Revelation* were written by Coptic Christian authors, Būlus al-Būšī and Ibn Kātib Qayṣar in 7th/13th century Egypt.³¹ Henry Corbin describes interpretations of the 12th chapter of the *Revelation* by two Twelver Shīʿī authors of the 19th and 20th centuries, ʿAlī Yazdī Ḥaʾirī (d. 1324/1906) in *Ilzām al-nāṣib fī ithbāt ḥuḡḡat al-ḡāʾib*, and ʿAlī Akbar Nahāvandī Mašhadī (d. 1369/1950), in *al-Kitāb al-ʿabqarī al-ḥussān fī aḥwāl mawlānā ṣāḥib al-zamān*.³² Of course, by that time there existed Persian and Arabic translations of the entire canonical Bible including the *Revelation*. The interpretations of Ḥaʾirī and Nahāvandī deal mainly with the Shīʿī doctrine of the imamate, and the occultation and manifestation of the twelfth Imām. They do not bear any similarity to the interpretations found in the *Ġāvidān-nāma*, nor do they include the same material from the *Revelation*. The fact that Faḍl Allāh never mentions the name of John, and consistently ascribes the citations or paraphrases of the text of the *Revelation* to Simon Peter suggests that the copy of the *Book of the Rolls* consulted by him included some fragments similar to the canonical *Revelation*.³³ It is also possible that Faḍl Allāh's citations are based on an oral source, and that the two texts, the *Revelation* and the *Book of the Rolls*, were amalgamated in the process of oral transmission.³⁴

²⁹ See examples and references in Stephen R. Burge, *Angels in Islam: Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī's al-Ḥabāʾik fī akhbār al-malāʾik*, London, 2012, Index, *Revelation*.

³⁰ Georg Graf, *Geschichte der Christlichen arabischen Literatur*, Vatican City, 1944, vol. 1, pp. 182-185.

³¹ On these two authors, see Shawqi Talia, 'Bulus al-Bushi's Arabic Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John: An English Translation and Commentary', (Ph.D. dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1987), and Stephen J. Davis, 'Introducing an Arabic Commentary on the Apocalypse: Ibn Kātib Qayṣar on Revelation', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 101/1 (2008), pp. 77-96.

³² Corbin, 'L'idée du Paraclet en philosophie iranienne', in *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme: herméneutique et soufisme*, Paris, 1983, pp. 311-358, in particular pp. 317-327.

³³ The known versions of the *Arabic Apocalypse of Peter* contain some parallels to the *Revelation* of St John (cf. Alphonse Mingana, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Woodbrooke Studies*, Cambridge, 1931, vol. 3, p. 100), but I have been unable to identify the passages from the fifth chapter of the *Revelation* cited in the Christian Chapter of the *Jāvidān-nāma* in any of the versions I was able to consult.

³⁴ Simon Peter has a prominent place in the Shīʿī tradition. See Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering*, pp. 203-204; and, more particularly, for the Ismāʿīlī view, Halm, *Kosmologie* p. 35. In the *Sarāʾir al-nuṭaqāʾ* attributed to the Fāṭimid dāʾī Jaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman, Simon Peter is described as the keeper of the true knowledge of Jesus, which he transmitted to Clement, while the Gospels were written by

The Arabic pseudo-Clementine compilation, known variously under the names of *Book of the Rolls* (*Kitāb al-mağāll*), *Revelations of Peter to Clement*, *Arabic Apocalypse of Peter* (*Ġalayān Buṭrus*), or *Apocalypse of Simon* (*Iktišāf Šam'un*), was probably better known to Muslim authors than the *Revelation of St John*. At least, this holds true for one important text included in the *Book of the Rolls*, the *Cave of Treasures*, even though its original relationship with the pseudo-Clementine literature is not direct.³⁵ Starting from the early years of Islam, the *Cave of Treasures* significantly influenced Muslim religious literature, including such genres as *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, *ḥadīth*, *tafsīr*, historical works, and could even have affected the Qur'ānic retelling of biblical stories.³⁶ Explicit traces of the *Cave of Treasures* can be discerned in the work of such prominent Islamic scholars as al-Ya'qūbī.³⁷ Even though it apparently left fewer traces in Islamic literature, it can be reasonably supposed that the remaining part of the *Book of the Rolls* which, as mentioned, is included as an extension of the *Cave of Treasures* in a number of Arabic manuscripts, and translated by Mingana under the title of '*Arabic Apocalypse of Peter*', was available to the Muslim authors as well.³⁸

The *Ġāvidān-nāma* of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī corroborates this supposition. In particular, it contains some fragments from the part of the *Book of the Rolls* which follows the *Cave of Treasures*. The citations from the *Book of the Rolls* are closely integrated into original doctrinal developments of the *Ġāvidān-nāma*. Moreover, concepts in the *Book of the Rolls* such as divine manifestation in the form of Jesus, and its particular interpretations of

Jesus' followers and do not contain authentic prophetic knowledge. See Hollenberg, *Beyond the Quran: Early Ismaili Ta'wil and the Secrets of the Prophets*, Columbia, 2016 (my thanks to the author for sharing with me the draft of this book).

³⁵ Concerning the relationship between the *Cave of Treasures* and the pseudo-Clementine tradition, see Albrecht Götze, 'Die Schatzhöhle, Überlieferung und Quellen', *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse*, 1922, 4. Abhandlung, pp. 60-66.

³⁶ See Götze, 'Die Nachwirkung der Schatzhöhle', *Zeitschrift für Semitistik* 2 (1923), pp. 51-94, and 3 (1924), pp. 53-71, 153-177 (Muslim authors are mentioned in the second part of the article published in 1924); Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*, Leiden, New York and Köln, Brill, 1996, p. 16; Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, pp. 92-93

³⁷ See Götze, 'Die Nachwirkung', 3 (1924), pp. 60-71; traces of the *Cave of Treasures* in the works of al-Ṭabarī and al-Mas'ūdī are discussed on pp. 153-155 and 169; Adang, *Muslim Writers*, p. 38; Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 184ff.; and Griffith, 'The Gospel, the Qur'ān, and the Presentation of Jesus in al-Ya'qūbī's *Ta'riḥ*', in John C. Reeves (ed.), *Bible and Qur'ān: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, Atlanta, 2003, pp. 133-160.

³⁸ In the following text, '*Book of the Rolls*' refers to the Arabic pseudo-Clementines as a whole, including the *Cave of Treasures* and the following text, while '*Arabic Apocalypse of Peter*' designates the text following the *Cave of Treasures*. For a broader reflection on possible parallels between the pseudo-Clementine literature and Islamic, and more particularly Shī'ī, doctrines, see Alain Le Boulluec, 'La doctrine du vrai Prophète dans les écrits pseudo-clémentins', in *Shi'i Esotericism: Its Roots and Developments*, eds. Amir-Moezzi, De Cillis, De Smet, Mir-Kasimov, Turnhout, 2016 ; pp. 139-162.

the Trinity, where the Father is identified with the Power without beginning, the Holy Spirit with His Voice, and Jesus with His Speech, deeply influenced the central doctrinal topics of the *Ġāvidān-nāma*, such as its doctrine of the human being as the locus of divine manifestation and manifestation of the primordial Word from the eternal divine Essence. The description of the members of the Trinity from the *Book of the Rolls* as being ‘with everything and without everything’, and having ‘no length, breadth or depth’, is applied verbatim in the *Ġāvidān-nāma* to express the transcendent character of the divine Word.³⁹ In the next section, some examples of the use of Christian apocalyptic texts and symbols in the *Ġāvidān-nāma* will be discussed.

Christian Apocalyptic Texts and Symbolism in the Ġāvidān-nāma-yi kabīr of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī

The passages of the *Ġāvidān-nāma* that contain citations from and interpretations of the Christian texts are focused on Jesus, who is one of the central prophetic figures of the *Ġāvidān-nāma*. Jesus has three major roles in the *Ġāvidān-nāma*: he represents the original Word of God which presided over the creation of the universe; he was a historical prophet whose mission initiated the line of the *ummiyūn*; and he is the eschatological Saviour who will reveal the ultimate truths of the universe and of the prophetic books at the end of time. Originally, Jesus represents the pre-eternal divine Word, the first emanation of the divine Essence and the Imperative by which the universe was created. He is the primordial Voice and Speech by means of which the Word and its 28/32 components, that is, the

³⁹ On the cosmogonical and anthropogonical myths in early Shīʿī literature, where the cosmic Imām is described as the locus of the manifestation of God, see Amir-Moezzi, *Le guide divin*, pp. 73-154. It is remarkable that, instead of just borrowing these cosmo- and anthropogonic theories from Shīʿī sources, and in particular from the early Shīʿī *ḥadīth* literature which he could hardly ignore, Faḍl Allāh chooses to combine allusions to Shīʿī traditions with explicit or implicit references to the Christian apocalyptic texts in his theoretical constructions. In a sense, this choice revives the question of the influence of Christian literature in the formative period of Shīʿism: as, in the 8th/14th century, a Muslim author used the Christian canonical texts and pseudepigrapha to reproduce some of the most fundamental doctrinal positions of early Shīʿī literature, could not the early Shīʿī authors then also have been inspired by the same Christian texts? On the basis of his impressive study of Shīʿī traditions, Kohlberg argues that the biblical material is mostly incorporated there from the already islamised *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* literature and not from a direct study of Jewish and Christian texts. However, he notes some parallels with the *Book of the Rolls*. See Kohlberg, ‘Some Shīʿī Views of the Antediluvian World’, *Studia Islamica* 52 (1980), pp. 41-66, in particular n. 4 p. 58 and n. 5 p. 59. Some early Shīʿī scholars, such as al-Yaʿqūbī, knew and extensively used the *Cave of Treasures* which, as mentioned, is associated with the *Book of the Rolls* in several Arabic manuscripts, especially in relationship with the Shīʿī concept of spiritual designation (*waṣiyya*). See Adang, *Muslim Writers*, p. 38.

primary ‘words’ or sounds, were originally expressed.⁴⁰ The scriptural proof texts that the *Ġāvidān-nāma* cites to support these statements include a passage that echoes the prologue of the Gospel of St John (‘The first thing that came from the heavens was the Word, and God was with that Word, and I was that Word.’); and close paraphrases of passages from the *Arabic Apocalypse of Peter*.⁴¹

The following passages from the *Arabic Apocalypse of Peter* are included in the *Ġāvidān-nāma* with reference to the primordial manifestation of Jesus as the Word of God. When asked ‘where were you before the heavens were created?’, Jesus replies: ‘I was in the Father and the Father was in me.’⁴² This means that Jesus is the Word and Speech of God rooted in His Essence. As such, Jesus represents the principle of divine manifestation, because God cannot be manifested, and so known, without the Word and Speech which ‘convey the information concerning the existence of God and His discourse.’ Jesus’ saying: ‘I am with everything and without everything. Length, width, depth [and colour], which are corporeal [characteristics] have no access to me’ means, according to the *Ġāvidān-nāma*, that Jesus is the pure Word of God and therefore beyond the dimensions and characteristics proper to the material world. This is also the original condition of the 28/32 primary ‘words’ before they become associated with the visible forms of their loci of manifestation, or letters.⁴³ Another passage which is an almost verbatim citation from the *Arabic Apocalypse of Peter* attributes to Jesus the following words: ‘The Father is Power without

⁴⁰ According to the *Jāvidān-nāma*, the divine Word which emanated from the unfathomable Essence contained a limited number of simple units named ‘words’ (*kalima* pl. *kalimāt*). The number of primary ‘words’ is represented in the *Jāvidān-nāma* by two numerals, 28 and 32. Depending on the context, the fullness of the original Word is expressed either by the sum of two series, i.e., the number 60 which corresponds to the divisions of time and space (as 60 minutes in an hour or in a degree of the heavenly sphere), or as the completion of the most fundamental series of 28 by the four additional ‘words’. In the original condition of divine Unity, all ‘words’ are unified within the single Word, and can be thought of as facets or aspects of the latter. After differentiation which initiates the creation, the 28/32 ‘words’ appear as separate sounds, each of which expresses a fundamental ontological meaning (*ma’nā* pl. *ma’ānī*) or truth (*ḥaqīqa* pl. *ḥaqā’iq*) of the divine Word. For a more detailed description of what can be called Faḍl Allāh’s ‘ontological linguistics’ see *Words of Power*, pp. 45-210.

⁴¹ Fol. 56b, 177a-b, 197b, 321a-327b, 386b, 395b, 396a, 396b, 397a, 397b, 421a, 421b, 422b, 423a-b, 425a-426a, 427a-b.

⁴² Fol. 425a. *AP*, p. 105: ‘Before you created heaven, earth, angels and men, where was your abode? . . . My abode was in my Father before the created beings were created . . . The Father was in me, glorifying me, and I in the Father . . .’

⁴³ Fol. 322a, 323a, 422b, 423b. *AP* p. 106: ‘And we have neither length nor breadth . . . We have no depth . . .’

beginning, I am His Speech, and the Holy Spirit is His Voice, and all three are one.’⁴⁴ This conception of the Trinity from the *Arabic Apocalypse of Peter* deeply influenced not only the christological discourse of the *Ġāvidān-nāma*, but also one of the *Ġāvidān-nāma*’s most fundamental concepts, that of the original divine Word and its emanations. In several passages of the *Ġāvidān-nāma*, the original divine Word is described as ‘Power without beginning,’ while the 28/32 primary sounds in their undifferentiated condition constitute the primordial Voice.⁴⁵

This brings us to the idea of omnipresence of Jesus expressed in several passages of the *Ġāvidān-nāma* where the reader is insistently called upon to discern and observe Jesus in every existing thing.⁴⁶ Some passages cite, in this regard, another excerpt from the *Arabic Apocalypse of Peter*: ‘We are with everything and we are without everything; nothing encompasses us but we encompass everything.’⁴⁷ Jesus is the existence-giving Spirit breathed into everything existent, be it a physical object or being or mental image. At this point, the *Ġāvidān-nāma* alludes to Jesus’ power to give life to inanimate objects and resurrect the dead as described in the Gospels, in the Islamic ‘stories of the prophets’ literature and in the Qur’ān.⁴⁸ All sounds produced by inanimate objects, by animals and humans, whatever language they speak, are ultimately part of the 28/32 primary ‘words’ of the ontological Speech represented by Jesus. One of the scriptural texts often cited in the *Ġāvidān-nāma* to support these statements is the Qur’ānic verse 41:21, where the skins of the damned bear witness against them saying: ‘God gave us speech, as He gave everything speech.’⁴⁹ Through these sounds inhabiting the things and inscribed in their visible forms, the seeker initiated in the secrets of spiritual hermeneutics (*ta’wīl*), which is the central topic of the *Ġāvidān-nāma* as a whole and of its *Ġāvidān-nāma* in particular, can attain the divine Speech and therefore recognise Jesus.

Although during his historical mission Jesus, like Adam, was a perfect manifestation of the original divine Word and possessed the full knowledge of the metaphysical meanings

⁴⁴ Fol. 155a, 244b, 326b, 396a, 422b, 470b-471a. AP p. 107: ‘My Father is Mind, I am its Word and the Spirit is its Voice.’

⁴⁵ Cf. *Words of Power*, p. 62 ff.

⁴⁶ Fol. 322a-b, 323a-b, 324a, 327a-b, 333b, 395a, 395b, 396b, 397b, 419b, 424a-b, 425a-426a, 469b.

⁴⁷ Fol. 422b, 425b, 426a. AP p. 106, 107, 121: ‘We contain everything and nothing contains us . . . No heaven contains us, and no earth encompasses us’; ‘We are inside all created things and outside them’; ‘We are in all places, and no place is deprived of us, and we are not that place.’

⁴⁸ Fol. 193a, 323b, 422b, 424a, 473a.

⁴⁹ Fol. 56b, 323a, 334a, 420a.

of its 28/32 constituent ‘words,’ he was not able to fully express his knowledge at that time. This is because all of these ‘words’ were not yet revealed to mankind at the time of Jesus’ historical mission, and his means of expression were therefore limited.⁵⁰ Unable to convey his message by adequate means, Jesus spoke by allusions and parables. When he was approaching the end of his historical mission, Jesus promised his followers that he would return at some point in the future in order to explain the true meaning of his allusions and parables.⁵¹ Consequently the apostles, and the Christian community as a whole, did not receive the full message of Jesus. This full revelation had yet to be prepared by the mission of the Prophet Muḥammad and the ‘maternal’ (*ummī*) saints following him.

Therefore, the *Ġāvidān-nāma* calls upon the Christians to recognise the mission of the Prophet Muḥammad *in order to access the true message of Jesus*. Muḥammad was aware of the true nature of Jesus and predicted his second coming as the Word of God.⁵² Muḥammad discovered the innermost truth of the divine Word, which is identical to Jesus, during his heavenly ascension. For this reason, at the time of his second coming, Jesus will come from the heavens.⁵³ Since both the Qur’ān and Jesus represent the divine Word, they are identical to each other.⁵⁴ The true nature of Jesus is attested in the Qur’ān, in particular the verse 4:171: ‘The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and His Word that He committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him.’ Therefore, whoever denies Muḥammad denies Jesus.⁵⁵

The third manifestation of Jesus and the one most discussed in the *Ġāvidān-nāma* is his expected return as the eschatological Saviour. The passages of the *Ġāvidān-nāma* relevant to the eschatological mission of Jesus make an extensive use of the text and symbolism of the *Revelation* of St John.

The main task of Jesus during his eschatological mission will be the direct revelation of his original nature, which is nothing other than the divine Word itself. This task, which could not be carried out during his historical mission, will be made possible at the end of time, after the ‘descent’ (*tanzīl*) of the basic elements of the divine Word has been completed by the Prophet Muḥammad and their hermeneutical ‘ascension’ (*ta’wīl*) has been

⁵⁰ Fol. 427b.

⁵¹ Fol. 151a, 155a, 325a, 421a, 426a.

⁵² Fol. 322b.

⁵³ Fol. 176a.

⁵⁴ Fol. 177a-b and 323a.

⁵⁵ Fol. 395b.

brought to its final stage in the line of the ‘maternal’ saints. Because it is situated at the end of the ‘ascending’ phase of the *ta’wīl*, which completes the ‘descent’ of the divine Word realised by the prophets, the eschatological mission of Jesus is to complete, not to abrogate, the previous prophetic missions, including his own historical mission.⁵⁶ In fact, the eschatological mission of Jesus is nothing other than the culmination and completion of the *ta’wīl*, when the metaphysical truth of the divine Word and its 28/32 constituents will be disclosed to mankind without any intermediary, such as the hidden forms of physical objects or metaphorical discourse of the prophetic books.⁵⁷

The opening of the sealed Book in the *Revelation* of St John is interpreted in the *Ġāvidān-nāma* as an act of ultimate and universal hermeneutics.⁵⁸ The seven seals of the apocalyptic Book correspond to the seven ‘maternal’ facial features of Mary (the hairline, two eyebrows and four eyelashes). Their opening means the revelation of the innermost meaning of the most foundational, ‘maternal’ elements of the original Word. The knowledge of these ‘maternal’ elements gives access to the knowledge of the full set of the 28/32 primary ‘words’ which constitute the original nature of the human face and bodily form, ultimately represented by the face and body of Adam. Since Adam was the first and the most complete Book of God, the perfect locus of manifestation of the original divine Word, the ontological hermeneutics of the bodily form and facial features of Adam realised by the opening of the apocalyptic Book will disclose the metaphysical truths contained in all prophetic books.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Fol. 322a, 396a, 397b, 426a. For the relationship between the *tanzīl* and *ta’wīl* see Mir-Kasimov, ‘The Word of Descent and the Word of Ascent: Canonical and Extra-Canonical Texts in the Spectrum of the Sacred in Islam’, in Daniel De Smet and Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (eds.), *Controverses sur les écritures canoniques de l’islam*, Paris, Cerf, 2014, pp. 297-336.

⁵⁷ According to the *Ġāvidān-nāma*, the forms of the visible objects and beings are the loci of manifestation of the invisible ontological ‘words.’ The discourse of the prophetic books is necessarily metaphorical, because the direct expression of metaphysical truths in human languages is impossible. On the *Ġāvidān-nāma*’s theories concerning the relationships between the divine and human languages, see *Words of Power*, pp. 237-258.

⁵⁸ The passages cited in the ‘Christian Chapter’ mostly correspond to the fifth chapter of the *Revelation* of St John. However, the name of John is not mentioned in the ‘Christian Chapter’ nor in the rest of the *Ġāvidān-nāma*, and the source of the citations is consistently indicated as the ‘Book of Peter.’ As mentioned, the *Arabic Apocalypse of Peter* does contain some elements of the *Revelation*, including the vision of the heavenly throne and the book of life (see *AP*, p. 145). But I was not able to find the entire episode of the opening of the book and sacrifice of the Lamb in any version of the *Arabic Apocalypse of Peter* that I consulted.

⁵⁹ Fol. 177a-b, 323b-324a, 326b, 334a, 395a, 397b, 422b. Some passages suggest that the seven lines on the Mary’s face, multiplied by the number of four natural elements (fire, air, water and earth) are identical to the 28 ‘words’ of the Qur’ānic revelation (fol. 397b). In this case, the opening of the

Because the opening of the apocalyptic Book will reveal that the human form is the perfect locus of manifestation of the original divine Word, everyone will be able to contemplate God and His Word directly in the human body and face. Mankind will be thus united in one religion, and delivered from the diversity of languages, because the divine Word is the source of all human languages. Everyone will speak the universal ontological language and be able to hear this ontological language of the divine Word, represented by Jesus, coming from every object and being.⁶⁰ Jesus will lead people to perfection and teach them the hermeneutics (*ta'wīl*).⁶¹

The opening of the apocalyptic Book and the direct revelation of the divine Word in the human form will mark the return of mankind to the condition of Paradise, which was the original condition of Adam and Eve. Several passages of the *Ġāvidān-nāma* emphasise the idea that Adam cannot return to Paradise before Jesus returns and sacrifices himself.⁶² This could have been inspired by the pseudo-Clementine literature.⁶³ The sacrifice of Jesus here refers not to the crucifixion at the end of his historical mission, but to the sacrifice of the Lamb described in the *Revelation* of St John and cited in several other passages of the *Ġāvidān-nāma*.

In light of the preceding, it is not surprising that the *Ġāvidān-nāma* claims to provide the key to the understanding of the deepest level of Jesus' prophetic message and his second coming. This understanding remains inaccessible to Christians so long as they do not accept the revelation that followed the historical mission of Jesus, that is, the manifestation of the divine Word in the Qur'ān and its ontological hermeneutics (*ta'wīl*) carried out by the 'maternal' saints after the death of Prophet Muḥammad. Many passages of the *Ġāvidān-nāma* address the Christians, calling them to accept the theories advocated by the author and thus understand the true nature of Jesus, the meaning of his facial features and bodily form, and his situation with regard to both Mary and Adam. The

apocalyptic Book from the *Revelation* of St John could also be interpreted as, more specifically, the ultimate hermeneutics of the Qur'ān.

⁶⁰ This is consistent with the first, cosmic or metaphysical manifestation of Jesus as the divine Word inherent in every atom of the creation.

⁶¹ Fol. 155a, 322a, 324a, 327a, 395a, 397b, 421b, 426a.

⁶² Fol. 56b, 425b.

⁶³ Cf. M.D. Gibson, 'Kitāb al-Mağāll,' p. 15-16, still more explicitly stated in the Ethiopic version, which is partly derived from the Arabic. See S. Grébaut, 'Littérature éthiopienne pseudo-Clémentine,' *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*, 16 (1911), p. 169, and 17 (1912), p. 341. On the relationship between the Arabic and Ethiopic versions, see Andreas Su-Min Ri, *Commentaire sur la Caverne des Trésors: étude sur l'histoire du texte et de ses sources*, Louvain, 2000, p. 66.

realisation of this understanding enables the reader to contemplate Jesus as the divine Word present in everything, and to develop a true belief in Jesus' return based upon personal spiritual awareness.⁶⁴

The following excerpts provide an illustration of the *Ġāvidān-nāma*'s Christological discourse and its use of the Christian apocalyptic texts:

What are the specific marks of Christ? One of the specific marks of Christ [in his second coming] is that: *'I will open the Book of Life sealed with seven seals.'* *The inhabitants of heaven and earth were asked: 'Who is bold enough to step forward and to open this Book of Life, that I have sealed with seven seals?'* *None of the prophets, saints and angels stepped forward.*⁶⁵ *[Then] Christ said: 'O Peter, all that I closed, I will open.'*⁶⁶

Learn now [what are] this seal and the Book of Life. When Christ comes [a second time] and says: *'All that I closed, I will open,'* this means that this Book of Life, corresponding to the facial lines of Adam, Eve, Mary, and [all] the descendants of Adam, is a counterpart of the divine Word. They are created by the Word without beginning and without end, which is the Imperative *Be!* The latter is inseparable from the divine essence and identical to it. This is why [Jesus] said: *'All that I closed, I will open.'*

This means that the original nature of those seven seals and those seven lines of divine [writing on human face] stems from the Word rooted in the essence of the Real. And [Jesus said]: *'I will become that Word, I produced those lines and seals [of the Book of Life], and therefore I will come [a second time] as Word, and I will open my seals and explain my knowledge, which is that of the divine Word. I will manifest my 32 [ontological] 'words' in everything, and I will bring the dead back to life by the Book of Life.'*

That book is called the 'Book of Life' because, unlike the books of the Gospel and the Torah, which are written down [by human scribes], that is a divine book in divine script. It is [literally] the Book of Life, because opening and reading it produces eternal life. It gives access to the secret of the 32 divine 'words,' which first came from the heaven to Adam, by means of which Adam was created, and the number of

⁶⁴ Fol. 321b-322b, 323b, 324b-325b, 327b, 395a-397b, 421b, 427a.

⁶⁵ Cf. Revelation 5:2-3.

⁶⁶ Cf. Revelation 3:7.

which is [reflected in proportions] of his face and of all members of his body. Christ said: 'I am that Word.'

That lamb with seven horns, which opened the Book [of Life] and sacrificed itself before the Father, thus delivering the servants of God from the divergence of languages, was Christ. The divine Word manifested in Adam was also Christ, for Christ said that 'The first thing that came from the heaven was the Word, and I was that Word, and God was with that Word. I will come back at the end of time.' Then the original nature of Adam's face, on which the knowledge of the 32 divine 'words' is manifested, will be explained. Christ will come and testify to the truthfulness of all the prophets. And all the prophets mentioned the [future] coming of Christ (323b-324a).

Seek the following narrative in the Book of Peter: *'One night, I saw in a dream the Book of Life sealed with seven seals and placed on a high pedestal. I saw [there] all the angels of heaven and the prophets. An angel spoke and asked: "Who, of the inhabitants of the heaven and earth, is brave enough to step forward, open the seals of this Book of Life and read it?" None of the prophets and angels stepped forward or answered the question. I have seen Christ who said [to me]: "O Peter, what I have closed, I will open."⁶⁷ [He] meant: "I am the person who will open the Book of Life, which I sealed with seven seals." All of a sudden, I saw a Lamb with seven horns. It came and brought down the Book of Life [from its pedestal], and then sacrificed itself before God the Most High. All together, the angels and prophets prostrated themselves before this Lamb and said: "By your sacrifice before God the Most High, you delivered us from ancient and varied generations,⁶⁸ brought us into the kingdom of heaven and opened to us the way to eternal life."⁶⁹*

Hear now, O true seeker, what is the 'Book of Life' sealed with the seven seals and brought down by the Lamb with seven horns. O seeker, learn that the face of the Virgin Mary bears seven [lines of the divine ontological] writing: the hairline, two eyebrows and four eyelashes, located on the seven parts [of the face]. This divine writing constitutes the first seven seals... [follows a passage describing how seven lines, together with the line of balance, and multiplied by four natural elements,

⁶⁷ Cf. Revelation 3:7.

⁶⁸ For some reason, *dūdman*, 'tribe, generation' is used here instead of usual *luḡat-hā*, 'languages'.

⁶⁹ This is the longest paraphrase of *Revelation* 5:1-9 in the *Jāvidān-nāma*. The fact that a fragment from the 3rd chapter of *Revelation* is also included in the narrative, along with the approximate character of the paraphrase, suggests that Faḍl Allāh drew not upon the canonical text, but used some different source for his citations.

produce 32 lines]. [These 32 lines] are the counterpart to the 32 divine ‘words’, and Adam was created by God as their locus of manifestation. For this reason, the angels received their instruction from Adam.⁷⁰ They prostrated themselves before Adam because Christ said, ‘*The first thing that came from heaven was the Word, and God was with that Word and I, Christ, was that Word*’.⁷¹

O seeker, learn now that God said concerning the original nature of Adam’s face: ‘*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air... So God created Adam*’. Therefore, Adam was created in the form of God, and Christ acquired this form [of his body] from Adam. He thus had the [bodily] form of Adam, and he said: ‘*I am this Word of God, I am inseparable from God. The first thing that came from heaven was the Word, and God was with that Word, and I was that Word*’.

Now, Christ is the Word of God, and he is inseparable from God. The reason for bestowing the divine form upon Adam was to ensure that the speech emitted by the tongue of Christ should be divine Speech. For, just as the divine form reached Christ from Adam, the divine Speech also reached Christ from Adam (422b-423a).⁷²

Interaction between Christian and Islamic scriptural material can be observed throughout the *Ġāvidān-nāma*. To conclude this article, I would like to mention some examples of interaction.

The Qur’ānic verse 4:171, ‘The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and His Word that He committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him,’ is probably the most frequently cited verse in the *Ġāvidān-nāma*’s passages relating to Jesus. In several passages this verse is contextually linked to the beginning of the Gospel of St John (in a form slightly different from the canonical text) and to the saying attributed to Jesus in the *Arabic Apocalypse of Peter*.⁷³ The Q. 41:21, ‘God gave us speech, as He gave everything speech,’ is linked to Jesus’ saying ‘I am His [i.e., the Father’s] Speech’ from the *Arabic Apocalypse of*

⁷⁰ Allusion to Q 2:33.

⁷¹ This suggests that the angels prostrated themselves before Christ because Christ was the Word taught by God to Adam and then taught by Adam to the angels.

⁷² This passage apparently emphasises the fact that the speech of Jesus is identical with the ontological names taught by God to Adam.

⁷³ Fol. 56b, 321a, 325a, 327a, 470b.

Peter;⁷⁴ and is also used as a text that proves Jesus' omnipresence, together with another citation from the *Arabic Apocalypse of Peter* and Faḍl Allāh's reading of the first verses from the Gospel of St John.⁷⁵ Together with some other Qur'ānic verses (6:38, 13:39 and 23:62), the verse 41:21 is associated with the opening of the apocalyptic Book from the *Revelation* of St John.⁷⁶ The Qur'ānic verses 4:171, 41:21, 9:33 and *ḥadīṭ* material are used to contextualise the beginning of the Gospel of St John.⁷⁷ The verse 28:88, 'All things perish, except His Face' is interpreted, together with the opening of the apocalyptic Book from the *Revelation* of St John, as an indication of the divine ontological writing which can be discerned on the female face.⁷⁸ A passage in fol. 176a establishes a link between the heavenly ascension of the Prophet Muḥammad and Jesus' return as the Word of God coming from the heavens, in a formulation which echoes the beginning of the Gospel of St John. The Qur'ānic verse 20:108, 'Voices will be hushed to the All-merciful' is linked to the saying attributed to Jesus in the *Arabic Apocalypse of Peter* which mentions the Holy Spirit as the Voice of the heavenly Father. The description of Jesus as the Word of God, mostly with reference to the beginning of the Gospel of St John, is consistently matched by the Qur'ānic episode where God teaches names to Adam (Q. 2:31), to show that these names are identical with the divine Word who is Jesus.⁷⁹ Jesus' birth from the Virgin Mary, mentioned with reference to Matthew 1:23, is associated with the virginity of the *houris* in Paradise, with reference to the Q. 55:72-74.⁸⁰ The Qur'ānic verse 7:172, usually described in Muslim religious literature as an account on the primordial Covenant when the prototypes of the future mankind were extracted from the loins of Adam and witnessed their Lord, is interpreted in the *Ġāvidān-nāma* with reference to the specific conception of the Trinity (the Father is the Power without beginning, the Holy Spirit is His voice, and Jesus is His speech) found in the *Arabic Apocalypse of Peter*.⁸¹

Conclusion

⁷⁴ Fol. 56b.

⁷⁵ Fol. 323a.

⁷⁶ Fol. 334a.

⁷⁷ Fol. 420a.

⁷⁸ Fol. 57a.

⁷⁹ Fol. 321b, 423a.

⁸⁰ Fol. 420a.

⁸¹ Fol. 470b.

The *Ġāvidān-nāma* of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī contains substantial interpretations of Jewish and Christian scriptural sources, including canonical Biblical texts and apocrypha. In this article, it is proposed that these interpretations be regarded as part of what was called ‘positive Muslim exegesis of the pre-Islamic scriptures’, an apologetic trend in Muslim biblical scholarship which coexisted alongside the critical standpoint of Muslim anti-Jewish and anti-Christian polemical works. Although this positive exegetical trend was present in the Sunnī apologetic works, it was particularly developed by the Shīʿī and more specifically Ismāʿīlī authors.

Faḍl Allāh’s *Ġāvidān-nāma* shares some fundamental principles, which underlie its approach to the interpretation of pre-Islamic scriptures, with Shīʿī exegetical works. Among these principles, an elaborated theory of *ta’wīl*, understood as a divinely inspired hermeneutical knowledge leading to authoritative interpretation of all prophetic books, and the related conception of the *ummī* prophets and saints whose central task is the progressive realisation of *ta’wīl* until its culmination with the second coming of Jesus. With regard to divinely inspired hermeneutical knowledge, the *ummīs* of the *Ġāvidān-nāma* are similar to the Shīʿī Imāms, and the definitive accomplishment of the universal hermeneutics that the *Ġāvidān-nāma* ascribes to Jesus echoes the Shīʿī expectations associated with the figure of the last Imām.

However, the *Ġāvidān-nāma*’s interpretation of Jewish and Christian sources is aligned with the specific doctrinal positions developed in this work and goes well beyond the characteristic topoi of Shīʿī exegetical literature. Particularly noteworthy is Faḍl Allāh’s use of Christian apocalyptic texts, including the *Revelation* of St John and the *Book of the Rolls*. In combination with the Islamic scriptural material, these texts support the *Ġāvidān-nāma*’s description of the messianic era presided over by the returned Jesus. They thus provide an example of the use of Christian apocalyptic texts in Islamic messianic discourse.

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