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"When the Sun is Shrouded in Darkness and the Stars are Dimmed" (Qurʾan 81:1–2). Imagery, Rhetoric and Doctrinal Instruction in Muslim Apocalyptic Literature

This chapter explores statements in the Qurʾan and in the literary testimonies of two major classical Arabic writers that explicitly speak of the apocalypse, including its signs and events. It offers captivating insights into the remarkably rich body of medieval Muslim apocalyptic literature and its wealth of rhetoric and imagery. It illustrates that scholarly considerations of the end of human life, and of the world and time, have served throughout Islamic history as foundations for religio-politically informed hopes of salvation, and for visions of an ideal "new world" promised by God.

Concepts of the apocalypse, in its specific meaning of "uncovering", "disclosing", or "revealing" (hidden) knowledge of a large-scale catastrophe that ends the world as we know it, are a distinctive feature of Islam. Indeed, throughout Islamic history apocalyptic perceptions have served as the foundations of religio-politically motivated hopes for salvation and visions of an ideal "new world" promised by God. The fundamental ideas underlying such cataclysmic notions are found primarily in the Qurʾan. However, there is also a remarkably rich and popular body of Arabic literature that involves discussion of major eschatological issues, such as the end of human life, the world and time, and the existence of the hereafter. They therefore also include specific apocalyptic scenarios.

Starting from these premises, the first part of this chapter explores certain characteristic Qurʾanic statements that explicitly speak of the apocalypse, its signs and events. These passages in the Qurʾan reveal the powerful images and rhetoric used in Islam's sacred scripture to warn the unbelievers, the unjust, and the immoral world at large that there is no hope of salvation at the end of time, unless the people profoundly change their ways of life toward "the straight path, an upright religion, the faith of Abraham" (Q 6:161) common to the Jews, Christians, and Muslims (Q 6:153, 154–157). Closely connected with these admonitions are the Qurʾanic warnings that "on the Day [of the Apocalypse] some of your Lord's signs come, no soul will profit from faith if it had none before, or has not already earned some good through its faith" (Q 6:158). Hence only the God-fearing will profit from the world's transition into a God-created, new world (Q 14:48; see also the Old Testament,

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Isa. 65:17), the eternal "kingdom" or "realm of the heavens and the earth" (*malakut al-samawat wa-l-ard*, Q 7:185; see also 2:107, 117; 3:189; 5:17, 18 etc.).[1]

The second part of this study will illustrate how certain classical Arabic writers take up the numerous Qurʾanic notions on the end of time and creatively expound on them. Here we will review the respective works of two particularly well-known, yet in their scholarly outlooks rather different Muslim thinkers: al-Ghazali, the highly respected theologian, mystic, and religious reformer of the eleventh to twelfth century CE, and Ibn al-Nafis, a brilliant tirteenth-century medical researcher, physician, and philosopher. This study concludes by providing some observations on the context and details of the apocalyptic accounts in these two texts.

1 Qurʾanic Portents of the End of Time

As a divinely inspired, revealed message, the Qurʾan is essentially apocalyptic in the literal sense of this word. Through the Prophet Muhammad's communication of Qurʾanic revelations, Islam's sacred scripture "discloses" knowledge that had thus far been hidden. Yet there is also a substantial number of individual passages and even entire chapters (suras) in the Qurʾan that need to be characterised as apocalyptic in the more specific meaning of the word. Indeed, these sections offer explicit and, in part, remarkably vivid descriptions of cosmic events preceding, or leading to, the collapse of the natural order of things.

One such intensely apocalyptic chapter is sura 81, entitled "Shrouded in Darkness" (*al-Takwir*). This sura is believed to have been revealed to Muhammad in the city of Mecca at an early stage of his prophethood. It opens with a powerful depiction of the collapse of the world, the day of resurrection, and of divine judgment. It reads:

> When the sun is shrouded in darkness,
> when the stars are dimmed,
> when the mountains are set in motion,
> when pregnant camels are abandoned,
> when wild beasts are herded together,
> when the seas boil over,

1 Arabic expressions in the text are given in simplified transliteration. Different diacritic marks serve here to distinguish between the Arabic consonants *hamza* (ʾ), a voiceless glottal stop, and *ʿayn* (ʿ), a laryngeal voiced fricative. Arabic bibliographical references, however, are transliterated. Quotations from the Qurʾan are from Abdel Haleem's translation unless indicated otherwise, while individual Arabic terms are, at times, given in my own rendering. All dates are Common Era (CE). For ideas on the apocalypse in Islam, see in particular the studies in the volume edited by Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson, *Roads to Paradise*, especially its introduction and the bibliographical appendix; the latter provides extensive information on primary texts in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, along with a number of related studies published in major European languages.

> when souls are sorted into classes,
> when the baby girl buried alive is asked for what sin she was killed,
> when the records of deeds are spread open,
> when the sky is stripped away,
> when Hell is made to blaze and Paradise brought near:
> *then every soul will know what it has brought about*!

The sura continues by affirming that no one can escape "the Day" when God judges every person individually for his or her actions and beliefs in this life. Therefore, the believers are called upon to acknowledge the Truth of the Qurʾan, and consequently to follow "the straight path" of God, apparent in the exemplary life and the actions of the Prophet Muhammad.

Several other suras likewise predict that the apocalypse would take place because humans fail to concede that the Day of Judgment is certain to come. Sura 82, *al-Infitar* ("Torn Apart"), for example, refers to the cleaving of the sky as one of the most dramatic signs of the End Times. It prophesises:

> When the sky is torn apart,
> when the stars are scattered,
> when the seas burst forth,
> when graves turn inside out:
> *each soul will know what it has done and what it has left undone.*
> Mankind, what has lured you away from God, your generous Lord, who created you, shaped you, proportioned you, in whatever form He chose? Yet you still take the Judgment to be a lie!
> Over you stand watchers, noble recorders who know what you do: the good will live in bliss, and the wicked will burn in the Fire. They will enter it on the Day of Judgment and they will find no escape.
> What will explain to you what the Day of Judgment is? Yes!
> What will explain to you what the Day of Judgments is? The Day when no soul will be able to do anything for another;
> *on that Day, command will belong to God.*

Sura 99 (*al-Zilzal*, "The Earthquake"), depicts, in shocking images, the terror of the utter destruction of the world when the apocalyptic "Hour" is near. The earth will shake violently in its last quaking, and the people cry helplessly. The sura states that on that Day, "people will come forward in separate groups to be shown their deeds" and that "whoever has done an atom's-weight of good will see it, but whoever has done an atom's-weight of evil will see that" (Q 99:6–7).

These and other, similar Qurʾanic verses (the Arabic term for "verse" – *aya* – literally means "[divine] sign" or "evidence") use powerful images to illustrate a range of issues relating to the end of time, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life in the hereafter. In fact, it is not monotheism that forms the core idea of the earliest revelations of the Qurʾan. Rather, the warnings regarding the apocalypse and the Last Judgment are at the very center of the first Qurʾanic messages communicated by the Prophet Muhammad.

1.1 The "Hour of the Apocalypse"

The Qurʾan repeatedly refers to the all-decisive *eschaton* (from Greek ἔσχατα, "the final things") or "The Hour [of the Apocalypse]" (*al-saʿa*). However, only God knows the Hour's exact timespan and when it will happen. Other Qurʾanic designations for The Hour indicating the end of time are *al-haqqa*, "The Indubitable" or "Inevitable [Reality of the Apocalypse]" (Q 69:1–3); *al-waqiʿa*, "The Occurring [Hour of Terror]" (Q 56:1), and *ghashiya*, the "Overwhelming [Hour of Punishment]" (Q 12:107). Although nothing in the Qurʾan explicitly points to historical events that would indicate the advent of the apocalypse, it is stated that the hour of the End Times will occur suddenly and quickly (Q 7:187). People "will not be able to make any will, nor will they return to their folks" (Q 36:50). An earthquake will shake the world so severely that "every nursing mother will think no more of her baby, every pregnant female will miscarry, you will think people are drunk when they are not" (Q 22:2).

Further Qurʾanic statements specify certain "major signs of the Hour":

1. Gog and Magog, two savage peoples whom Alexander the Great (*Dhu l-Qarnayn*) had constrained by a huge iron barrier, will be released and "race down from every slope" (Q 18:94–99; 21:96; see also the Bible, Ezek. 38:39).
2. God will bring "a creature out of the earth (*dabbat al-ard*), which will tell [the people] that people had no faith in Our revelations" (Q 27:82; see the Bible, Rev. 13:13–16, and other parallels in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Minor Prophets).
3. The sky will bring forth "clouds of smoke" (Q 44:10); and
4. Jesus will appear as "a portent of The Hour" (Q 43:61; see also 4:159).[2]

It should be noted that the Antichrist's (*dajjal*) advent and his subsequent death at the hands of Jesus are not mentioned as signs of the approaching Hour in the Qurʾan. These ideas are based on prophetic traditions, as is the oft-quoted eschatological sign that at the dawn of the Last Day the sun will rise in the West.

The Qurʾan does not offer a conclusive picture or sequence of events at the end of the world regarding the resurrection of the dead, the Final Judgment, and entrance into paradise or hell.[3] The key message in this regard, however, is very clear:

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2 Some Muslim exegetes and modern translators understand Q 43:61 as referring to the Qurʾan instead of Jesus. See also *The Qurʾan*, transl. by Abdel Haleem, 319, n. *b*,

3 Modern scholarship assumes that Muhammad's audience must have been familiar with the details of these eschatological scenarios; see Leemhuis, "Apocalypse," 112–113. For an approach towards terms and tropes in the Qurʾan and later key Islamic texts which express an inner revelatory experience, or apocalypse, see Lawson, *Gnostic Apocalypse and Islam*, and "Paradise in the Quran." Angelika Neuwirth in her *Koranforschung – eine politische Philologie*, xxxviii–lxi, offers innovative insights on the question of the apocalyptic in the Gospels and in Qurʾanic eschatology. Shoemaker's *The Apocalypse of Empire* studies Qurʾanic apocalyptic visions within the contemporary context of Late Antiquity; he argues, among other things, that both Christian and Muslim eschatological beliefs were the driving forces behind early Muslim imperial expansions. Demichelis has recently surveyed 900 years of related "orthodox" and "heterodox" views among medieval Muslim scholars in

the unbelievers and evildoers will be damned to punishment in hell, while the pious and righteous will be rewarded with eternal bliss in paradise.

Along these lines, the Qurʾan indicates that first there will be an absolute termination of all life and existence (*fanaʾ*), as "everything will perish except His face" (Q 28:88; see also 55:26–27), and this will be followed by a second creation in the hereafter (Q 29:20).

Occasionally, the meaning of "the Hour" extends to, or stands for, the Day of Judgment as such. The "matter" or "order" of this "Hour of Adversity" (Q 9:117) does not take longer than "the blink or an eye, or even quicker" (Q 16:77). Likewise, the period until all this happens will not be extended "for a single hour" (*saʿatan*, Q 7:34; 10:49; 16:61), and after resurrection the people will feel as if they had not tarried but "an hour", long enough to mutually "recognize one another" (Q 10:45; see also 46:35, Q 30:55).[4]

1.2 The Day of Judgment

The Qurʾanic vocabulary for the Day of Judgment is equally rich. It includes frequent designations such as "the Day of Resurrection" (e.g., Q 2:85; about 70 times in the Qurʾan), "the Last Day" (e.g., Q 2:8; 38 times), and "the Day of the Judgment" (e.g., Q 1:4; 13 times). Other terms are: "a dreadful Day" (e.g., Q 6:15; 10 times); "a terrible Day" (Q 11:3); "a painful Day" (Q 11:26) or a "grievous Day" 26:135, 43:65); "an overwhelming Day" (Q 11:84); and "a Day comes when there will be no trading or friendship" (Q 14:31). Furthermore, there are: "the Day of the Appointed Time" (Q 15:38; see also 38:81); "the Day of Remorse" (Q 19:38); "a Day devoid of all hope" (Q 22:55); "the Day of Decision" (e.g., Q 32:29; 7 times); "the Day of Reckoning" (Q 14:41, 38:16, 26, 53 and 40:27); "the Day of Meeting" (Q 40:15); "the ever-approaching Day" (Q 40:18); "the Day you will cry out for to one another" Q 40:32); "the Day you will turn tail and flee with no one to defend you from Go" (Q 40:33; cf. also Q 41:47); "the Day of Gathering" (Q 42:7; 64:9); "the Day [you were] warned of" (Q 50:20); "the Day of everlasting Life" (Q 50:34); "the Day when they hear the mighty blast in reality" (Q 50:42); "a stern day" (Q 54:8); "a Day of anguish for the disbelievers" (Q 74:9); "a predetermined Day" (Q 56:50); "the Day of Gathering, the

his *Salvation and Hell in Classical Islamic Thought*. Likewise noteworthy are Lange's *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions* (2016), his edited volume *Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions* (2015), Smith's "Eschatology" (2002) as well as the present author's "Die Menschen schlafen" (2016), his handbook article "Eschatology and the Qurʾan" (forthcoming 2020, which reviews also the older and contemporary scholarship on the topic) and his study "As the Angels Stretch Out Their Hands."

4 Cf. my article "Tag und Tageszeiten im Qurʾan." For a detailed description of different hereafter scenarios on "the Day" signaled by a blast of the divine Trumpet, followed by resurrection of the dead, reckoning, judgment and retribution, and the award of paradise or damnation to hell, see my forthcoming article "Eschatology and the Qurʾan" (forthcoming 2020).

Day of mutual neglect" (Q 64:9); "the Day of our Lord – a woefully grim Day" (Q 76:10); "a Day that will turn children's hair grey, a Day when the sky will be torn apart" (Q 73:17–18), "a heavy Day" (Q 76:27); and "the promised Day" (Q 85:2).

Judgment Day is characterised as dreadful and painful, all-encompassing and tempestuous. It is a disastrous day for the pagans, but the day of advantage for the believers over the unbelievers, and the day of God's victory. Resurrection and divine judgment will be signaled by the blast of the divine Trumpet (*naqur* in Q 74:8; *sur* in other suras):

> When the Trumpet is sounded a single time, when the earth and its mountains are raised high and then crushed with a single blow, on that day the Great Event will come to pass (Q 69:13–15).

It is the Day when the cosmic structures collapse. The sky "is torn apart and turns crimson, like red hide" (Q 55:37). It "sways back and forth" (Q 52:9); and it will eventually be torn apart and open up like wide portals (Q 78:19), and the angels will be "sent down in streams" (Q 25:25).

The Qurʾan assures believers that those "turned to bones and dust, shall [...] be raised up in a new act of creation" (Q 17:49), and that death is not the end of everything, but rather a new beginning. Moreover, the resurrection of the dead is portrayed as a second act of God's creation in the hereafter and as yet another sign of God's omnipotence: God causes a human being "to die and be buried." Yet, "when He wills, He will raise him up again" (Q 80:21–22).

On that Day of Resurrection, the disbelievers' "hearts will tremble and eyes will be downcast" (Q 79:8–9). The believers, though, and in fact "all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good" – here expressly including Jews, Christians, and Sabians – "will have their rewards with their Lord. No fear for them, nor will they grieve" (Q 2:62).

The resurrected will be called to the place of Judgment by an angel described as "the summoner from whom there is no escape" (Q 20:108), and will line up to finally meet their Lord (*liqaʾ Allah*, as in Q 6:31). God Himself will conduct the reckoning of each person. He will do so individually and instantly, as He "is swift in reckoning" (Q 2:202).

The Day of Judgment is a time of uncompromising ruling and final verdict. However, it is also a time of festive celebration and the triumph of divine power and justice. "The earth will shine with the light of its Lord, the Record of Deeds will be laid open, the prophets and witnesses will be brought in" (Q 39:69), so that divine judgment may begin.

After judgment, people will be grouped in three classes: "those on the left" who will go to hell; "those on the right" who will go to paradise; and those in front – ahead indeed in terms of faith and good works who will be the first to enjoy the bliss of paradise (Q 56:7–10).

Indeed, the Qurʾan is rather clear about the course and final objective of life, which consist of coming into being through God's act of creation, passing away at the point of human death, being brought back to life at the Day of Resurrection, and culminating in the eternal reality of paradise and hell. Thus for Muslims this course of life is among the clearest manifestations of God's eternal existence, omnipotence, and mercy.

2 Apocalyptic Visons in Classical Arabic Literature

Specific apocalyptic ideas, presented as key components of eschatological scenarios, are encountered in a large variety of genres and categories of Arabic-Islamic writing. They encompass compilations of prophetic traditions (*hadith*), Qurʾan commentaries, philosophical-theological treatises, historical and ethical writings, compilations on law, rhetorical, lexicographical and belletristic works, as well as manuals on mysticism – to name only some of the vast spectrum of relevant sources. Most texts in this diverse body of Muslim writings touching on eschatological issues to a large extent dwell on Qurʾanic images of the apocalypse. Interestingly, however, many of these scholarly and literary treatments also introduce a considerable number of extra-Qurʾanic ideas. Their authors thus draw more elaborate and, in part, more definite pictures of the apocalypse than those given in the Qurʾan. The classical Arabic works expressly devoted to issues of eschatology and the apocalypse are still little known to most Western readers. The great popularity of these remarkably imaginative books in the Muslim world, however, attests to the topics' importance throughout Muslim history. It also shows how firmly rooted these ideas are in Muslim life and culture.[5]

The expression *ʿulum al-akhira* ("branches of knowledge concerning the hereafter") is mainly used by Muslim scholars in reference to Arabic writings expressly dealing with Islamic eschatology in the broadest sense of the word. It seems to serve best as the generic term for Muslim eschatological literature as such.[6] This literature consists of the following main categories:

5 For a discussion of the spectrum of Muslim works devoted to "heavenly journeys", see my article, "Paradiesvorstellungen und Himmelsreisen im Islam." See also the insightful study by Tottoli, "Muslim Eschatological Literature and Western Studies." On death rites and related beliefs about the afterlife among Muslim communities, see Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, esp. 197–233.

6 For the "crucial affairs taking place prior to the day of resurrection", as the renowned religious scholar and jurist Abu l-Fidaʾ Ibn Kathir (ca. 1300–1373) determined them, see Ibn Kathīr, *Kitāb al-Nihāya*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā, 3. Furthermore, see Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 230–268, el-Hibri, *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History*, and Günther, "The Poetics of Islamic Eschatology," 194–195.

1. INDIVIDUAL ESCHATOLOGY: Works on dogmatic issues relating to the origin, destination, and meaning of life and death, as well as to questions regarding the postmortem existence (of the body and soul). More specific treatments of *al-qiyama* ("the resurrection" of the dead), cover themes such as the revivification of the body, the gathering of the resurrected for divine judgment, and the divine judgment on Judgment Day.[7]
2. UNIVERSAL ESCHATOLOGY, including HISTORICAL ESCHATOLOGY: Works dealing with political, economic, and moral developments in Muslim history as factors that precede or lead to the apocalyptic end of the world and of time. The expression *al-fitan wa-l-malahim* ("dissensions and fierce battles") is therefore found particularly in book titles of "a kind of Islamic apocrypha that combines historical commentaries with eschatological stories".[8] These works deal with "the signs and conditions of the *eschaton*" (*ashrat al-saʿa*), leading to the end of the world and the universe. However, they also address "the crucial affairs taking place prior to the day of resurrection" (*al-umur al-ʿizam allati takunu qabla yawm al-qiyama*), as the renowned religious and legal scholar Abu l-Fidaʾ Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373) noted.[9]
3. TOPOGRAPHIC ESCHATOLOGY: Works of different genres containing "previews" of the landscape of the hereafter as well as of the events and locations of Judgment Day, along with specific details of paradise and hell. These treatments of "the garden and the fire" (*al-janna wa-l-nar*) frequently offer detailed and remarkably vivid descriptions of the different domains of the hereafter.
4. Finally, the LITERATURE ON THE HEREAFTER (*al-adab al-ukhrawi*) is a specific, belletristic subcategory of eschatological writing. The respective works stand out for their sophisticated, fiction-like plots, their refined literary style, and their often delightfully entertaining presentations.[10]

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7 For a concise account of Islamic views on these issues, see van Ess, "Leben nach dem Tod," and "Eschatologie;" and for detailed classification of eschatological concepts, see Donner, "Typology of Eschatological Concepts."

8 El-Hibri, *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History*, 16. See also the discussion of this literature in Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, esp. 230–268 (on the idea of "moral apocalypse" in Islam, in connection with political events, religious establishments, and attitudes toward certain cities).

9 Ibn Kathīr, *Kitāb al-Nihāya*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā, 3. In addition, this literature includes treatments of the *barzakh* (Q 23:100), that is, the intermediate place or transitional state between death and resurrection. On this topic, see Tesei, "*Barazakh* in the Intermediate State of the Dead," and Archer, *Place between Two Places*.

10 The *Risalat al-Ghufran* ("The Epistle of Forgiveness") by the philosophical freethinker and poet Abu l-ʿAlaʾ al-Maʿarri (d. 1057) is a pioneering example of this belletristic literature. It is a kind of Arabic *Divine Comedy*, in which a poet visits paradise and there encounters pre-Islamic poets whose paganism God had "forgiven". See al-Maʿarri, *Epistle of Forgiveness*, ed. Gelder and Schoeler. On the genre more generally, see Ṭulba, "al-Ramz fī l-adab al-ukhrawī, riḥlat al-miʿrāj (*Symbolic Representation in Eschatological Literature, The Ascent to Heaven*)," 90–91.

In what follows, two prominent examples from the Arabic eschatological literature will serve to illustrate the approaches, literary tools, and themes used in classical Muslim scholarship to address key issues of the apocalypse, and to instruct their readers in these matters.

2.1 Al-Ghazali (1058–1111)

A truly remarkable classical Arabic text devoted to Islamic eschatology and questions of the apocalypse is *al-Durra al-fakhira fi kashf ʿulum al-akhira* ("The Precious Pearl Embodying the Disclosure of the Knowledge of the Hereafter"), a work traditionally ascribed to Abu Hamid al-Ghazali.[11]

Al-Ghazali is one of the most respected theologians in Islam. He was a mystic and religious reformer, born in Tus, near the city of Mashhad in Iran. He and his younger brother Ahmad (later a noted mystic in his own right) were orphaned at an early age. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali pursued most of his education and higher studies in Nishapur and Baghdad. In 1091, at the age of 33, he accepted the head teaching position at the newly founded Nizamiyya College, the most important institution of higher learning in Baghdad, and perhaps the entire Muslim world, in the eleventh century.

In 1095, however, at the age of 38, he suffered a personal crisis. A nervous illness caused him to abandon his professorship and leave Baghdad on the pretext of conducting the pilgrimage to Mecca. Disappointed by the corruption of the scholarly establishment of legal thinking that he was involved in, and troubled by increasing doubts concerning the validity of existing doctrines – and even the usefulness of knowledge acquisition as such – this spiritual crisis triggered in al-Ghazali "a violent internal conflict between rational intelligence and the spirit, between this world and the hereafter."[12] This difficult personal situation went so far that al-Ghazali himself observed that he was afraid he would go to hell.[13] In addition, certain contemporary political turbulences in Abbasid Baghdad seem to have contributed to making al-Ghazali apprehensive for a certain period of time. At a later stage in his life, however, he returned to teaching, albeit in Nishapur and later in Tus, not in Baghdad.

The Precious Pearl Revealing the Knowledge of the Hereafter does not contain any explicit indications that would link this work directly to al-Ghazali's personal

11 This treatise was drafted after al-Ghazali's multi-volume *Iḥyaʾ al-ʿulum* (*The Revitalization of the Studies of Religion*). See my "Poetics of Islamic Eschatology," 195–196.

12 Nofal, "Al-Ghazali," 520.

13 In his autobiographical work *Deliverance from Error,* al-Ghazali writes in this regard, "When I considered my circumstances, [...] I was in no doubt that I stood on an eroding sandbank, and was in imminent danger of hell-fire if I did not busy myself with mending my ways," noted by Watt, *Muslim Intellectual*, 136.

crisis. However, although written at a later stage of his life, it nonetheless clearly redirects the reader's attention from the "trivialities" of this world to the importance of the next. Apparently an extract of al-Ghazali's fortieth and last book of his opus magnum, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulum al-din* ("The Revitalisation of the Studies of Religion"), *The Precious Pearl* stands out for its particularly imaginative, narrative descriptions of death, resurrection, and the various aspects and events of divine judgment. Moreover, it is unique among the eschatological literature in that it presents these themes within its very own, remarkably well-crafted framework of discussion and analysis – a fact that has significantly contributed to its popularity among Muslims up to the present day.

The Precious Pearl addresses in great detail three of the four main eschatological themes, i.e. human death (including the soul's departure from the body, peacefully or painfully), the apocalyptic transformation or transcendence of history, and Judgment Day (see category 2, above). The fourth theme, the final consignment to paradise or hell, although repeatedly referred to in the book, does not receive any specific treatment. Instead, the lengthiest descriptions of the work concern the Hour of the Apocalypse and the Day of Judgment, with all their manifold events. The reader is thus instructed of:

(a) The arrival of the apocalyptic Hour and the destruction of the earth;
(b) The Trumpet's first blast, signaling the Day of Judgment;
(c) Creation of a new earth, resurrection, and revivification of the dead bodies;
(d) The Trumpet's second blast, heralding the arrival of God's Throne;
(e) The individual reckoning and judgment of the people according to their deeds;
(f) Entrance of the judged into either paradise or hell; and finally,
(g) God's rolling-up of the heavens and earth.[14]

In this work, the author makes effective use of powerful imagery, including metaphors, similes and symbols, to help his readers visualise the terrible end of the world, with all its inescapable consequences for those who fail to heed the Qurʾan's passionate warnings of the final, cosmic apocalypse. Most impressive are certain passages in *The Precious Pearl* in which the catastrophic occurrences are described using quotations from or paraphrasing Qurʾanic verses. The author states that, as a result of apocalyptic events, everything in both the material and spiritual worlds – in fact all forms of existence – will be destroyed by God and will vanish:

> [T]he blowing of the trumpet will usher in the arrival of the Hour [...] Then the mountains will be scattered and the clouds; the seas will gush forth one into the other and the sun will be rolled up and will return to black ashes; the oceans will overflow until the atmosphere is filled up with water. The worlds will pass into each other, the stars will fall like a broken string of pearls and the sky will become like rose balm, rotating like a turning millstone. The earth will shake with a tremendous shaking, sometimes contracting and sometimes expanding like a

14 Al-Ghazālī, *The Precious Pearl*, trans. Smith, 13–16.

> skin until God orders the stripping of the spheres. In all of the seven earths and the seven heavens, as well as the vicinity of the Throne, no living being will remain, their souls all having departed. Even if one is spiritual, his spirit will depart. The earth will be empty of its inhabitants and the sky of its dwellers, including all of the various species of creatures.[15]

In "this scene of stark emptiness [...] like before creation", there will be nothing in existence but God.

> Then God extols His own praise as He so desires; He glorifies His eternal existence and His lasting power and never-ending dominion and victorious omnipotence and boundless wisdom. Three times He asks, "To whom belongs the Kingdom this day?" No one answers Him so He answers Himself, saying, "To God who is one alone, victorious!"[16]

The author's use of vivid images of these tremendously powerful, overwhelming events serves to underscore several principal issues of Islamic faith and ethics, while always focusing on one central theme: the unconditional acceptance of *tawhid*, the belief in God the One, Almighty. In this regard, the straightforward literary style, in combination with the deliberate use of parables and similes, is instrumental in addressing a wider, more general readership, for which this book was apparently composed. This is evident in the numerous authorial remarks which al-Ghazali uses throughout his book to ensure that the messages he wishes to convey are unequivocal and completely understood by his audience. Thus, he makes clear that

> the explanation of His word (*tafsir qawlihi*), 'Is the one who walks with his head bowed better guided, or the one who walks evenly on the straight path?' (Q 67:22) [...] is a parable (*mathal*) which God has drawn to the day of resurrection concerning the gathering together of the believers and the unbelievers.[17]

In a similar fashion, al-Ghazali creates powerful images when speaking of the good soul slipping out of the body at the point of death "like the jetting of water from a water-skin". The profligate's spirit (*ruh*) instead squeaks "like a skewer from wet wool". When the angel of death takes the profligate's spirit in his hand, it shudders "like quicksilver", while the face of the profligate at the point of death is "like the one who eats [bitter] colocynth".[18]

Descriptions such as the voices of the two black angels who interrogate the dead in the grave being "like cracking thunder"; their eyes "like flashing lightning", and their breath "like a violent wind" may evoke strong emotions in the reader. Finally, on the day of the apocalypse, the mountains are returned to sand "like a level

15 Al-Ghazālī, *al-Durra al-fākhira*, 38–39; al-Ghazālī, *The Precious Pearl*, trans. Smith, 44–45.

16 Al-Ghazālī, *al-Durra al-fākhira*, 39; al-Ghazālī, *The Precious Pearl*, trans. Smith, 44–45. See also Smith and Haddad, *Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, 72.

17 Al-Ghazālī, *al-Durra al-fākhira*, 51; al-Ghazālī, *The Precious Pearl*, trans. Smith, 51.

18 Al-Ghazālī, *al-Durra al-fākhira*, 5, 7, 17; al-Ghazālī, *The Precious Pearl*, trans. Smith, 22, 23, 29.

dune", and on the Day of Resurrection, as each dead person is sitting upon his grave, awaiting divine judgment, there are some whose light is "like a weak lamp". Others are more fortunate and their lights are "like a strong shining lamp" or "like a bright star", even "like the moon" or "like the light of the sun".[19]

The author concludes his book by again stressing the crucial significance of belief in bodily resurrection, divine judgment, and eternal life in the hereafte for the faithful, how central these creeds are in orthodox Islamic faith, and how important it is for Muslims to acquire adequate knowledge of the tenants of faith. Al-Ghazali's final sentences thus underline the book's intention that was so programmatically expressed in its title:

> *The Precious Pearl* was [...] written to unveil the knowledge of the hereafter, with praise to God, and by His grace and generosity. Praise be to God, Lord of all the worlds![20]

2.2 Ibn al-Nafis (1210–1288)

In the thirteenth century, a very different treatment of the End Times was penned by ʿAli ibn Abi Hazm Ibn al-Nafis. Ibn al-Nafis of Damascus, probably best known for his commentaries on the medical and philosophical works of Hippocrates, Aristotle, and Ibn Sina (Avicenna), along with his original expositions on medical topics such as nutrition, ophthalmology, and child diseases, was already in his lifetime recognised as an exceptional philosophical thinker.

He lived at a time of great turmoil, of changing political alliances, and wars, but it was also a period of significant economic wealth and scientific advancement. Ibn al-Nafis witnessed the downfall of the Ayyubids in Egypt and Syria, and the rise of the Mamluks, the politically powerful military class who ruled these countries from 1250 to 1517. He saw numerous Ayyubid and Mamluk campaigns against the Crusaders, and experienced also the ever-growing danger of the Mongol hordes who destroyed Baghdad in 1258 and subsequently threatened the boundaries of the Syro-Egyptian realm, but who were eventually stopped by the third Mamluk sultan in 1260 in the Battle of ʿAyn Jalut.

One of Ibn al-Nafis's most imaginative works is the theologically motivated novel *al-Risala al-kamiliyya fi l-sira al-nabawiyya* ("The Treatise of Kamil on the Prophet's Biography")[21] – a particularly creative example of a belletristic treatment of the hereafter (thus falling into category 4 above). Conceived as what could be called a theological science-fiction narrative, in the final two chapters of this work the author attempts a scientific explanation of the religiously significant scenarios

19 Al-Ghazālī, *al-Durra al-fākhira*, 23, 41, 46; al-Ghazālī, *The Precious Pearl*, trans. Smith, 33, 46, 49.
20 Al-Ghazālī, *al-Durra al-fākhira*, 110; al-Ghazālī, *The Precious Pearl*, trans. Smith, 88.
21 Also known as *Risālat Fāḍil ibn Nātiq* ("The Book of Virtuous, Son of Speaking").

of the apocalypse.[22] Kamil, the novel's protagonist, is portrayed as a "mythical universal prophet-scientist", a human "who foretells all the important events which will take place one earth and knows their immediate causes in this lower world and their ultimate cause in the upper".[23] Through the protagonist's eyes, the author describes how Muslim society is steadily moving away from the moral principles and virtuous standards known from the days of the Prophet Muhammad, and how humankind is rapidly drifting toward a catastrophic end.

Ibn al-Nafis's powerful verbal imagery reveals to the reader the struggles and fights for power that broke out after the Prophet's death, along with the sins committed in the community, and the punishment inflicted on the community by God through the hands of infidels. The reader learns of the great dangers and the suffering that will happen when seemingly energetic and popular leaders emerge: leaders who promise the people protection and security, but then turn out to be cruel and merciless dictators.

The book culminates with the protagonist Kamil foreseeing the collapse of human civilisation, the earth, and the universe. In this way, the author makes the readers observe how the movements of the stars, the sun, and the moon will become irregular to the extent that the sun will eventually rise in the West. The reader of this book learns that there will no longer be seasons. Moreover, "the regions far from the equator will become exceedingly cold and those near it intensely hot". The climate eventually becomes unsuitable for humans, and the characters of the people change so that "crimes and troubles become prevalent".[24]

The final section of the book describes how both nature and human society fall apart. Wars, bloodshed, and insanity predominate; evil people have the upper hand and the good people are in the background. We read:

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22 Ibn al-Nafis wrote this work as a direct response to the philosophical coming-of-age story *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* ("Living, Son of Wakeful") by the Spanish Muslim philosopher Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185), which tells the story of a youth who was spontaneously generated. Kamil, the Arabic name of Ibn al-Nafis's protagonist, meaning "the Complete" or "the Perfect", is a boy who was also spontaneously generated, but in a cave and coming to life around the age of ten. Without an early childhood, he grows up on a deserted island where he learns by himself, and acquires knowledge of physics and metaphysics, but also of prophecies, as well as the way of life and the religious law of the Seal of the Prophets, the Prophet Muhammad, and the events that will occur after his own death. Eventually, Kamil finds God. He does so by observation, reflection, and self-education, without a human teacher or any contact with the outside world. At a more advanced age, when other humans accidentally arrive on his island, he gets in touch with civilisation. These people teach Kamil how to speak a human language and inform him about the conditions of their cities. Cf. also Mahdi, "Remarks on the *Theologus Autodidactus*," 202–206; and Lauri's "Utopias in the Islamic Middle Ages," 23–40.

23 Mahdi, "Remarks on the *Theologus Autodidactus*," 198.

24 Ibn al-Nafis, *Theologus Autodidactus*, trans. and ed. Meyerhof and Schacht, 72. The edition and translation were based on the only two extant Arabic manuscripts, an early fragment preserved in Cairo; and a later, complete text from Istanbul. Cf. Ibn al-Nafis, *Theologus Autodidactus*, trans. and ed. Meyerhof and Schacht, 36–37.

> Then a fire will start in Yemen and spread over all the regions near the equator. There will be much smoke and this will produce unhealthy winds, thunderstorms, and terrific lightning, and there will be many frightening signs in the air. On account of the abundant smoke the air will become hazy and opaque, and in consequence of this the soil there will lose many of its earthy and watery parts and its substance will be very much reduced, so that the soil in the regions near the poles will become very heavy in comparison. Therefore, great parts of the surface of the earth will break down, the mountains will collapse and become flat, and water will become very scarce, as it will flow near to the equator on account of the subsidence there, and will evaporate by the power of the heat. Consequently, many trees will become dry, and the [surface covered by] soil will be reduced because a great part of it will evaporate and go up. Therefore, the hidden treasures of the earth will become manifest.[25]

These developments will cause people to migrate. People from the South will move to the more temperate regions in the North, and wild and violent peoples from the East will travel towards the civilised world, endangering its existence. Struggles between people will intensify, prices will rise, and fortunes will become small. Due to the many wars, many men will be killed, and women will be in the majority. As a consequence, women will become "lustful and lecherous as they cannot find enough men to satisfy them; and there will be much female homosexuality".[26] Human society, the earth, and the universe will collapse. The Last Day has arrived.

Yet Ibn al-Nafis's book does not end on this pessimistic note. Nor does it give an outlook on paradise or hell, or finish with some kind of dogmatic statement, like al-Ghazali's work. Remarkably, after his depiction of the catastrophic disorder in the universe and the complete destruction on earth, in the book's conclusion Ibn al-Nafis offers a science-oriented explanation of what happens next. After these disasters, the stars will assume their regular movements again and the earth will return to its previous condition, with the soil and the air becoming suitable for supporting animal life again. A mix of intensive rain and the heat of the sun will cause fermentation so that bodies of animals and humans will be formed out of clay. Eventually, the soul, constantly emanating from the Divine, will attach itself to a body part known as the coccyx. The coccyx is said to feed that small part of the body to which the human soul is attached. This makes the bodies formed from clay complete; they will be resuscitated. And, Ibn al-Nafis states in his final sentence,

> This is the rising of the dead – praise be to God the Powerful and All-Knowing.[27]

25 Ibn al-Nafis, *Theologus Autodidactus*, trans. and ed. Meyerhof and Schacht, 72–73.
26 Ibn al-Nafis, *Theologus Autodidactus*, trans. and ed. Meyerhof and Schacht, 73.
27 Ibn al-Nafis, *Theologus Autodidactus*, trans. and ed. Meyerhof and Schacht, 74.

3 Conclusions

In conclusion, our exploration of apocalyptic notions in classical Islam highlighted the following points:

First, the strikingly vivid imagery of the apocalyptic depictions presented in the Qurʾan were a source of great inspiration for classical Muslim scholars writing on related issues. In this respect, the two examples from classical Arabic literature discussed in this chapter – one by the eleventh–twelfth century theologian and mystic al-Ghazali, the other by the tirteenth century scientist and philosopher Ibn al-Nafis – share fundamental literary features; they both bring apocalyptic ideas to fruition through the use of powerful literary imagery and a sophisticated narrative. Furthermore, the two authors promote the view that apocalyptic perceptions in Islam go beyond religious beliefs and display additional, ideological dimensions. Indeed, through their own particular descriptions, both authors convey – sometimes explicitly, at other times more subtly – the notion that human deeds and ethical standards will lead to either damnation or salvation.

However, the two texts fundamentally differ in both their strategic presentation of certain ideas and their literary objectives. Whereas al-Ghazali's *Precious Pearl* is a dogmatic treatise written to instruct the common faithful in fundamental Islamic beliefs, Ibn al-Nafis's *Treatise of Kamil* is a theologically framed coming-of-age story and a science-fiction narrative which probably appealed to an academic audience much more than common readers. Also, while al-Ghazali promotes a spiritually driven vision of the apocalypse, Ibn al-Nafis, by contrast, advances a rationalist, scientific view.

Second, al-Ghazali, already in his lifetime an influential scholar, apparently crafted his work in response to what he saw as an urgent need: to help counter the corrupt society of his day, and to revive the arena of religious learning, by redirecting the outlook of the faithful from the pitfalls of everyday life to divine judgment and the hope of eternal life in the hereafter.[28] Within this wider context of al-Ghazali's life and work, his *Precious Pearl* is a profound reflection on its author's theological convictions and his objective to provide dogmatic instruction and spiritual guidance to the Muslim community concerning this world and the next. Ibn al-Nafis's *Treatise of Kamil*, however, offers a perceptive socio-religious critique of the – in his view – "dangerous" course that Muslim society had taken since the "ideal" time of the Prophet Muḥammad in the seventh century. Let us also recall here that Ibn al-Nafis wrote this treatise sometime between 1268 and 1277 CE,[29] a time of devastating political catastrophes, including the Mongol conquest of Baghdad, the temporary occupation of Syria, and the threat to conquer Egypt. Ibn al-Nafis thus seems to

28 For further discussion, see Günther, "'Only Learning that Distances You from Sins Today Saves You from Hellfire Tomorrow'," and Heck, "Teaching Ignorance: The Case of al-Ghazālī".

29 Fancy, "Pulmonary Transit and Bodily Resurrection," 207.

have believed, like many of his compatriots, that these invasions were a divine punishment, or even the first signs of the apocalypse, brought about by the Muslim faithful's having gone astray from the "straight path" of God and departed from the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad. This perception of the cause and effect of religious practice and spirituality in society, or the lack of them, seem to be the motive for Ibn al-Nafis to write a fictional narrative that deals with these large-scale political and religious difficulties.

Third, al-Ghazali's meticulous description of divine judgment points his reader back to the importance of living a pious *versus* a sinful life in this world. As a highly respected theologian and accomplished educator, he uses this retrospective as a stern warning of the consequences that actions in this world have for the next. By contrast, the gifted scientist and philosopher Ibn al-Nafis seems to fully endorse the rational realities of society, history, and life in general when he attempts in his treatise a scientific explanation of the apocalyptic events prophesised in the Qurʾan. Ibn al-Nafis therefore ends his book with a more optimistic outlook than al-Ghazali. Indeed, Ibn al-Nafis envisages the return of life on earth and a new beginning once the prophecies of the apocalypse have been fulfilled.

Yet the distinctive feature of both these classical Arabic works, as well as of the Qurʾanic passages on the apocalypse, that perhaps stands out the most is the human longing, so exquisitely expressed in these texts, "to come full circle" and "taste eternity" – an idea which appears to be as deeply rooted in Islam as it is in other major religions.

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