

CHRISTOPHER PAUL CLOHESSY*

THEOLOGIES OF RESISTANCE AN INTERTEXTUAL EXAMINATION

SUMMARY: The English idiom ‘the writing is on the wall’, suggesting that quite patently something bad is about to happen or that a situation is going to deteriorate, is taken from a narrative in the Hebrew Scriptures in which, during a drunken and irreverent banquet, a disembodied hand appears before the regent, Belshazzar, and writes on the palace wall a dire judgment against him and his empire. Belshazzar’s crimes are not just dissolution, but more specifically blasphemous acts through his mockery of the sacred vessels stolen from the Jerusalem Temple by Nebuchadnezzar. The idea of a heavenly judgment seems emblematic of something buried deep with the collective psyche, so that it is unsurprising to find similar narratives outside of the Hebrew tradition. In fact, some of the texts of Šī‘ī and Sunnī Islam containing comparative accounts; after the death of al-Ḥusayn, grandson of Muḥammad, on the field of Karbalā’, and during a period when his decapitated head was being transported to the palace of the caliph Yazīd b. Mu‘āwīya by irreverent and at times dissolute soldiers, a disembodied hand appears before them, writing on the wall of the monastery where they have taken shelter a calamitous warning about future retribution for all who were in any way involved in the martyrdom of the son of ‘Alī and Fāṭīma. This article offers a selection of these Šī‘ī and Sunnī texts, providing the possibility of a comparative reading with the Belshazzar story, recorded in the fifth chapter of the Book of Daniel.

The texts which I have chosen to examine according to the parameters of comparative theology, were written centuries apart. The first, an Aramaic-Hebrew text, is taken from the Hebrew Scriptures, the fifth chapter of the book of the prophet Daniel¹.

* Christopher Clohessy is a South African Catholic priest who holds a BST from the Pontifical Urbanianum University in Rome and a PhD from the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI), also in Rome. He is at present a resident faculty member of that Institute, lecturing there in Šī‘ī Islamic studies, Qur’ānic Studies, Islamic Ethics and Christian-Muslim dialogue, and is visiting lecturer at the Pontifical Beda College in Rome, where he lectures in Fundamental Theology, Ecclesiology, Islam and Mariology. He is author of *Fāṭīma, Daughter of Muḥammad* (2009, 2018 2nd edition), and *Half of My Heart: The Narratives of Zaynab bt. ‘Alī* (2018) and *Angels Hastening. The Karbala’ Dreams* (2021), all published by Gorgias Press. In 2021 he was one of the recipients Iranian World Book Award, with the nomination ‘Distinguished Researcher’.

¹ Cfr. A.E. Portier-Young & C.J. Dempsey, “Daniel”, in G.A. Yee, H.R. Page et al. (ed.), *The Prophets*, Fortress Commentary on the Bible Study Edition, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2016, 805-822.

It tells of an incident that occurred during a dinner in which irreligious acts were being carried out. During the banquet, hosted by the Babylonian regent Belshazzar, a hand appeared, writing indecipherable words on the palace wall. Since the advisers and scholars in Belshazzar's service proved unable to decipher its meaning, Belshazzar, on the advice of the queen² sends for young Daniel, the interpreter of dreams, who reveals to him the ominous meaning of the words.

Here we will focus on the fifth chapter, written in Aramaic, which includes thirty-one verses, of which a selection is reproduced here:

King Belshazzar held a great festival for a thousand of his lords, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand. Under the influence of the wine, Belshazzar commanded that they bring in the vessels of gold and silver that his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. So, they brought in the vessels of gold and silver that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and began writing on the plaster of the wall of the royal palace, next to the lampstand. The king was watching the hand as it wrote. Then the king's face turned pale, and his thoughts terrified him. His limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. The king cried aloud to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the diviners; and the king said to the wise men of Babylon: "Whoever can read this writing and tell me its interpretation shall be clothed in purple, have a chain of gold around his neck, and rank third in the kingdom." Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king the interpretation. King Belshazzar became greatly terrified and his face turned pale, and his lords were perplexed. The queen, when she heard the discussion of the king and his lords, came into the banqueting hall. The queen said: "There is a man in your kingdom who is endowed with a spirit of the holy gods. Let Daniel be called, and he will give the interpretation". Then Daniel was brought in before the king. Daniel answered in the presence of the king: "I will read the writing to the king and let him know the interpretation. This is the writing that was inscribed: *mene, mene, tekel, and parsin*. This is the interpretation of the matter: *mene*, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; *tekel*, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; *peres*, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians".

In reality, Daniel's text is full of ambiguity and contains some historical errors. Belshazzar, for example, is presented as the king and as the son of Nebuchadnezzar. History tells us that Belshazzar was neither king nor son of Nebuchadnezzar³; even if Belshazzar appears as a fully authorized monarch, history teaches that he was merely a temporary regent. With regard to this doubt about the terms of kinship, it can be noted that, according to a recurring biblical terminology, the terms 'father' and 'son' could refer respectively to 'ancestors' or 'descendants'; similarly, in Arabic Islamic

² Rather, notes Robert Alter than the 'queen', as found in the text, who would not have had more information about Daniel than her husband the king. Cfr. R. Alter, *The Hebrew Bible. A Translation with Commentary*, vol. III, W. Norton & Company, New York 2019, 9389-9390.

³ Five times Nebuchadnezzar is called Belshazzar's father (Dan. 5:2, 11, 13, 18), and on one occasion Belshazzar is called Nebuchadnezzar's son (Dan. 5:22).

texts, al-Ḥusayn is often referred to by Muḥammad as ‘my son’ when Muḥammad was actually his grandfather.

Returning to the Daniel text, Belshazzar was in fact the eldest son of Nabonidus, the last king of the Babylonian empire, and acting regent for his father, absent from the city for a prolonged period. It is for this reason that all that Belshazzar can offer Daniel as a reward for deciphering the words on the wall is the third place of importance in the kingdom, since he himself occupied the second place as regent and his father, the real king, the first place. Finally, almost certainly, the reference in the text to the queen is incorrect: it is more likely that it was the queen mother who advised to call Daniel, since only she could know him.

Not surprisingly, a substantial percentage of scholars suggest that the Book of Daniel can be categorized as a work of historical fiction, precisely because it contains this series of inconsistent details. In themselves, the inaccuracies do not detract from the story. Furthermore, Daniel’s reference to Belshazzar as king, although not true, is no different from other inconsistencies such as, for example, in the Gospel of Matthew (14:1, 9) the episode in which Herod Antipas is called ‘king’ although he is only governor (tetrarch).

What is of concern for our purposes is the story of the feast, found in the fifth chapter, where Belshazzar plays a key role and which contains a series of similarities with a group of Islamic texts, all of which describe a very similar story, although each carries different details. We will examine four groups of Islamic texts that are frequently found in both the Sunnī and the Šī‘ī traditions. The four groups are the texts about the soldiers, those about the monastery, those concerning a Byzantine church and those detailing a discovery in a hole in the ground.

The First Group of Texts: the Band of Soldiers

The first of the four describes a band of soldiers from the army which had defeated the army of al-Ḥusayn at Karbalā’: they are traveling to Kūfa, to the palace of governor Ibn Ziyād, with the head of the martyred al-Ḥusayn (in some texts, the group is already leaving Kūfa and heading to Damascus to the caliph, Yazīd b. Mu‘āwīya). The following narrative is reported by al-Hayṭamī in his book ‘The Collection of Additions and the Source of Benefits’ (*Mağma‘ al-zawā‘id wa manba‘ al-fawā‘id*):

On the authority of Abu Qabīl, who said: When al-Ḥusayn was killed, they cut off his head and were sitting down on the first leg of the journey, drinking wine and striking the head, when an iron pen appeared and wrote in a line of blood: “Can a nation that killed al-Ḥusayn hope for the intercession of his grandfather on the day of the reward?” They fled, leaving the head, and returned (to Ibn Ziyād)⁴.

⁴ al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu‘ğam al-kabīr*, vol. III, n. 2873, 123; al-Ḥawārizmī, *Maqal al-Ḥusayn*, Part Two, bb. *fi bayān ‘uqūba qātil al-Ḥusayn*, n. 28, 105-106; Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīḥ madīnat Dimašq*, vol. XIV,

Al-Hayṭamī notes that it is transmitted from the 3rd/9th century al-Ṭabarānī (“in his transmission there is someone I do not know”) so that his criticism seems to focus more on the chain of transmission (*isnād*) than on the contents (*matn*).

An Egyptian Sunnī *muḥaddiṭ* of the Ṣāfi’ī school, al-Hayṭamī distinguished himself in the field of *zawā’id* (‘additions’), and collected his material from scholars such as Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), al-Bazzār (d. 292-3/904-5), Ibn Ḥibbān (d. 354/965), al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/971) and Abū Ya’lā (d. 458/1065): this collection gave rise to his great work, *Maḡma’ al-zawā’id wa manba’ al-fawā’id*. The author omitted the chains of transmission for reasons of brevity, and classified each narration by its authenticity (considering both the transmission line and the content). He mentioned the names of the narrators about whose work he had doubts or who he judged unreliable. Not having investigated chains of transmission is certainly a flaw in this work, because this information must be sought elsewhere; despite this, al-Hayṭamī was appreciated for his work by his contemporaries and later scholars.

The text under consideration is also reported by Sunnī historian Ibn ‘Asākir, and, reporting from him, Ibn Kaṭīr. Ibn ‘Asākir’s line of transmission dates back to Abū Qabīl (Ibn Hānī’ al-Ma’āfirī, 2nd/8th century, lauded by Ibn Ṣayba and used by numerous Sunnī scholars, such as al-Tirmidī). Ibn Sa’d and Ibn Lahī’a, among others, also refer to Abū Qabīl. Ibn Lahī’a, Egyptian historian, *muḥaddiṭ* and the first judge in Egypt to be directly appointed by a caliph, died at the end of the 2nd/8th century, four years after his library was destroyed by a fire, as reported by al-Ḍahabī.

In this particular form, the narrative appears relatively late in Ṣī’ī texts and we have to ask ourselves why. It is perhaps because the Ṣī’a concentrated all their early efforts on the eradication of theological extremism and the affirmation of crucial doctrines such as the nature of the imamate and the justification of ‘Alī. The theology around al-Ḥusayn, as distinct from the mourning rites, would develop later. In the

bb. 1566 (*al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib b. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib b. Hāšim b. ‘Abd al-Manāf*), 244; Ibn Šahrāšūb, *Manāqib āl Abī Ṭālib*, vol. IV, bb *Fī imāma Abī ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥusayn*, 61; al-Šāmī, *al-Durr al-naẓīm fī manāqib al-a’imma al-lahāhīm*, bb. 5 (*Faṣl fī ḍikr maqal al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī*), 570; Ibn Ṭā’ūs, *Kitāb al-luḥūf fī qatlā al-ṭufūf*, 101 (omits any details of the place in which the group had stopped); Ibn Namā al-Ḥillī, *Muṭīr al-aḥzān wa munīr subul al-ašḡān*, 96; al-Ṭabarī, *Daḡā’ir al-’uqbā*, Part One, bb. 9, 248; Ibn Kaṭīr, *al-Bidāya wa al-nihāya*, vol. XI, bb. *al-iḥbār maqal al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī*, 573 (omits any details of the place in which the group had stopped); al-Hayṭamī, *Maḡma’ al-zawā’id wa manba’ al-fawā’id*, vol. IX, bk. 37 (*Kitāb al-manāqib*), bb. 95 (*Manāqib al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī*), n. 15177, 233; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Ḥaṣā’iṣ al-kubrā*, vol. II, 455; al-Bahrānī, *Madīnat al-ma’āğiz fī mu’ğizāt al-a’imma al-aḥbār*, vol. IV, n. 180/1127, 116; al-Mağlisī, *Biḡār al-anwār*, vol. XLIV, bb. 30, n. 4, 224, vol. XLV, bb. 39, n. 1, 125, bb. 46, n. 4, 305; al-Iṣfahānī, *‘Awālim al-’ulūm wa al-ma’ārif al-aḥwāl min al-āyāt wa al-aḥbār wa al-aqwāl*, vol. XVII, ch. 10, bb. 17, n. 3, 111, ch. 16, bb. 4, n. 19, 425, ch. 21, bb. 6, n. 1, 603; al-Ğazā’irī, *Riyāḍ al-abrār fī manāqib al-a’imma al-aḥbār*, vol. I, Part One: 245. In his *Madīnat al-ma’āğiz* al-Bahrānī also records the words as an unidentified voice heard during the journey with the head: “Does a nation which killed al-Ḥusayn hope for the intercession of his grandfather on the Day of Reckoning? They have angered and doggedly opposed the Prophet, and have no dread of him for the Day of Torment. Will not God not curse the Banū Ziyād, and settle them in torment in Hell?” (al-Bahrānī, *Madīnat al-ma’āğiz fī mu’ğizāt al-a’imma al-aḥbār*, vol. IV, n. 170/1117, 107).

6th/12th century, Ibn Šahrāšūb, Šī‘a, *muḥaddiṭ* and jurist, claims to transmit the narration starting from the book *Dalā’il al-nubuwwa* of al-Bayhaqī, although I have found no trace of this in al-Bayhaqī. In fact, Ibn Šahrāšūb’s editor mistakes Ibn Qabīl for Ibn Qubayl. There is indeed an Ibn Qubayl among the Islamic transmitters, but it is not the same person mentioned here.

A 12th/18th Šī‘ī encyclopaedist, al-Baḥrānī, in his book enumerating the miracles attributed to the Imāms (*Madīnat ma’āğiz al-a’imma*), reports the verse, with additions, as pronounced by an unidentified voice heard during the journey (rather than writing made with a supernatural pen, as other narratives report): “Can a nation that killed al-Ḥusayn hope for the intercession of its grandfather on the day of the reward? They angered the prophet, and stubbornly resisted him, and they are not afraid of him for the Day of Torment”. He concludes with a malediction that is regularly found in Šī‘ī texts: “May God curse the tribe of Ziyād and set them in torment in Hell!”.

A number of texts, transmitted by later Šī‘ī encyclopaedists such as al-Baḥrānī, al-Mağlisī, al-Iṣfahānī and al-Ġazā’irī, completely remove this phrase from the context of the mysterious writing on the wall, and instead enumerate it as one of the cosmic consequences of the killing of al-Ḥusayn, as seen and heard in Medina and Jerusalem. The most important of these is the famous *Kāmil al-ziyārāt*, the 4th/10th century book of prayers for approaching the tombs of the Imāms, written by the Šī‘ī scholar Ibn Qūlawayh al-Qummī (d. 369/979). “The Šī‘a exaggerate the day of ‘Āšūrā”, laments Ibn Kaṭīr in his work *al-Bidāya wa al-nihāya*, “and they come up with monstrous falsehoods, from the incident of the veiled sun during the day to the retreat of the stars”.

These events echo the gospel of Matthew (27: 51-53) which records what happens in the city of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus’ death (“And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom, the earth trembled, the rocks crashed, the tombs opened and many bodies of the saints, who slept, rose again; and, having come out of the tombs after his resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to many”). In the case of al-Ḥusayn, says Ibn Qūlawayh, in addition to blood under every stone, red walls and a shower of blood for three days, an unknown voice is heard saying: “Can a nation that killed al-Ḥusayn hope for intercession of his grandfather on the day of the reward?” The verses go on to warn that God will forbid them the intercession of Muḥammad and consequently also the intercession of ‘Alī, because they have killed “the best of the riders on horseback and the best of those from the old to the young”⁵.

However, the verse is generally associated with those carrying al-Ḥusayn’s head or, as we shall see, with a group of Muslims who find these verses written far from

⁵ Ibn Qūlawayh, *Kāmil al-ziyārāt*, bb. 24, n. 2, 160; al-Baḥrānī, *Madīnat al-ma’āğiz fī mu’ğizāt al-a’imma al-aḥbār*, vol. IV, n. 263/1210, 186; al-Mağlisī, *Bihār al-anwār*, vol. XLV, bb. 40, n. 6, 204; al-Iṣfahānī, *‘Awālim al-‘ulūm wa al-ma’ārif al-aḥwāl min al-āyāt wa al-aḥbār wa al-aqwāl*, vol. IV, bb. 7, n. 2, 110, vol. XVII, ch. 17, bb. 1, n. 2, 466; al-Ġazā’irī, *Riyāq al-abrār fī manāqib al-a’imma al-aḥbār*, vol. I, Part One, 266. Abū Turāb (‘the father of dust’) is a nickname given to ‘Alī by Muḥammad

Karbalā'. In his book *Riyāḍ al-abrār fī manāqib al-a'imma al-aḥḥār* ('The Garden of the Pious in the Virtues of the Pure Imāms'), the Šī'ī encyclopaedist al-Ġazā'irī clearly associates the words with a large group traveling from Kūfa to Damascus under the command of a man named Mufaḥḥar b. Ṭa'laba: there are indeed many transmitters who write about Mufaḥḥar and his transport of the head of al-Ḥusayn, but most of these propose a completely different series of verses, or omit them completely⁶:

As for Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya, he wrote to Ibn Ziyād ordering him to carry the head of al-Ḥusayn and his companions, his women and his luggage. Ibn Ziyād summoned Mufaḥḥar b. Ṭa'laba; he greeted the heads and women with peace, and travelled with them, in the way the unbelievers would travel with prisoners, their faces visible to the people of the regions. They dismounted on the first leg of the journey and began to drink, when a hand with an iron pen came out of the wall and wrote in a line of blood: "Can a nation that killed al-Ḥusayn hope for the intercession of its grandfather on the day of recompense?"⁷.

The fact that this narrative entered the Šī'ī collections so late suggests that this text is not just a Šī'ī invention, an apology for al-Ḥusayn or an attempt to give divine approval to his martyrdom. Sunnī writers are more likely to view it as divine disapproval of civil war, its dangers and potential harm. Furthermore, the alternation in the text between the word 'nation' or community (*umma*) and the word 'group' (*ma'ṣar*) is relevant because, depending on how one chooses to interpret these terms, 'group' can refer to the soldiers who are carrying the head, or to a larger group, including the caliph Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya and his governor Ibn Ziyād, while 'community' comes dangerously close to an accusation against the community of Muḥammad, that is, the Sunnī.

The Second Group of Texts: the Christian Monastery

In a second group of narrations, the stopping place is specified as a Christian monastery. The scene begins in Mecca, where the narration concerns the gravity of a sin so serious that it cannot be narrated in the sanctuary. This recalls the Hebrew Scriptures, which underscore not only the theft of sacred objects by Nebuchadnezzar, but also the consequent depravity and blasphemy of Belshazzar during his feast (among the debauchery, we must also take account the polytheism found in the very name of Belshazzar which, in the Akkadian language, translates as a blasphemous invocation to the god Bel to save the king).

⁶ Cfr. for e.g. al-Mufīd, *al-Irṣād fī ma'rīfat ḥuḡaḡ Allāh 'alā al-'ibād*, vol. II, bb. *Tārḥ al-Imām al-Ḥusayn*, 131; al-Ṭabarṣī, *I'lām al-warā bi-'lām al-hudā*, vol. I, bb. 2, 160; Ibn Ṭā'ūs, *Kitāb al-luhūf fī qatlā al-ṭufūf*, 84-85; Ibn Namā al-Ḥillī, *Muṭīr al-aḥzān wa munīr subul al-aṣḡān*, 90; al-Mūsawī, *Tasliyat al-muḡālis wa zaynat al-maḡālis*, vol. II, *maḡlis* 8, 373; al-Baḥrānī, *Madīnat al-ma'āḡiz fī mu'ḡizāt al-a'imma al-aḥḥār*, vol. III, n. 744, 84-85; al-Maḡlisī, *Bihār al-anwār*, vol. XLV, bb. 39, n. 1, 124, 130; al-Iṣfahānī, *'Awālim al-'ulūm wa al-ma'ārif al-aḥwāl min al-āyāt wa al-aḥbār wa al-aqwāl*, vol. XVII, ch. 17, bb. 4, n. 19, 425, 430.

⁷ al-Ġazā'irī, *Riyāḍ al-abrār fī manāqib al-a'imma al-aḥḥār*, vol. I, Part One, 245.

The most complete text is found in al-Quṭb al-Rāwandī (not to be confused with the 4th/10th century Ibn al-Rāwandī, a *mu'tazila* who became a Šī'a and subsequently an atheist) in his *al-Ḥarā'iğ wa al-ğarā'ih fī al-mu'ğizāt* ('The Emanation and Wonderful Effects of Miracles'); al-Rāwandī was a 6th/12th century Šī'ī *muḥaddiṭ*, historian, exegete, jurisprudent, philosopher and theologian and his work is an apologetic for the miracles of the Muḥammad and of the Imāms in support of their claims:

On the authority of Sulaymān b. Mihrān al-A'maš who said: I was doing *tawāf* when I saw a man praying and saying: "O Lord, forgive me, even if I know you will not". At that point, I got up and walked over and said: "Hey, you! You are in the sanctuary of God and the sanctuary of his messenger and these are holy days in a great month, so do not despair of forgiveness!" He replied: "It is my sin that is great!" I said: "Bigger than Mount Tihāma?" He replied in the affirmative. So, I said: "Comparable to the mountains of *rawāsī*?"⁸ He replied: "Yes! If you want, I'll tell you". I said: "Tell me!" He replied: "Let's leave the sanctuary", so we left.

The narrator, Abū Muḥammad Sulaymān b. Mihrān al-Asadī al-Kāhilī, a Sunnī scholar, member of the second generation (*tābi'ūn*), and famous as a reciter and a *muḥaddiṭ*, was given the nickname *al-A'maš* because he was very short-sighted, as well as being funny and sarcastic. A famous anecdote tells that when a group of visitors arrived at his house, he went out and announces to them: "Were it not for the fact that there are people in my house whom I hate more than you, I would not have bothered coming out to talk to you".

The narrative purposely intends to amplify the as yet unspecified sin: this is described as greater than the great month (*dū al-ḥiğğā*), large enough to be compared to the Tihāma mountains in south-western Saudi Arabia and the *rawāsī* (a Qur'ānic word used for mountains in general), so grave that it cannot be narrated in the sanctuary and, apparently, does not merit forgiveness. Therefore, in the eyes of al-Rāwandī, and to those who have transmitted the text directly from him, it is a sin equal to that of equating someone with God, that is, *širk*, which in itself is an element present during Belshazzar's banquet:

He told me: I was one of those of the cursed army, the army of 'Umar b. Sa'd, may he be cursed, when al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī was killed. And I was one of the forty who took al-Ḥusayn's head from Kūfa to Yazīd. On the way to Syria, we went down to a Christian monastery; we had the heads fixed on spears and guarded by sentries, and they gave us food. We sat down to eat when a line was written in blood on the monastery wall by a hand: "Can a nation⁹ that killed al-Ḥusayn hope for his grandfather's intercession on the day of the recompense?" We were deeply uncomfortable; some of us went to the hand to grab it, but it vanished and my companions returned¹⁰.

⁸ The Tihāma mountains lie in south-west Saudi Arabia; the Arabic *rawāsī* is a Qur'ānic word used for mountains in general (Q. 13:3, Q. 15:19, Q. 16:15, Q. 21:31, Q. 27:61, Q. 31:10).

⁹ Here, the word is *umma* ('nation'); in other versions, *ma'şar* ('company' or 'group')

¹⁰ al-Rāwandī, *al-Ḥarā'iğ wa al-ğarā'ih fī al-mu'ğizāt*, vol. II, Part Three, bb. 14, 578; Ibn Namā al-Hillī, *Muṭīr al-aḥzān wa munīr subul al-aşğān*, 96-97; al-Şāmī, *al-Durr al-naẓīm fī manāqib al-a'imma*

Many of the narratives that mention the monastery choose this moment as the place of the end of the story. Al-Rāwandī, however, adds more:

Then my companions came back to their meal; suddenly the hand returned, writing like the first time: “No, by God, there is no intercessor for them; on the Day of Resurrection, they will be tormented”. Our comrades went across, and it disappeared. They returned to the food, and it came back, writing: “They killed al-Ḥusayn by virtue of unbridled deviance; their judgment is in contrast with the judgment of the Book”.

These additions, which manipulate the text, changing it from a general warning against civil war to a definitive divine disapproval of the killing of al-Ḥusayn, are found in prominent Šī‘ī scholars such as the 11th/17th century *muḥaddiḥ* al-Ḥurr al-‘Āmilī, and are subsequently transmitted by the encyclopaedist al-Baḥrānī, and, in an extended narrative, by al-Maḡlisī, reporting from al-Rāwandī¹¹.

The figure of the man praying without hope of mercy resonates through the stories of guilt and punishment after the death of al-Ḥusayn; in al-Rāwandī’s report, al-A’maš interrupts his *tawāf* to approach and give advice to the man whose desperate prayer he has heard. In the subsequent conversation, the seriousness of even a secondary association with the death of al-Ḥusayn is underlined and the story ends not with a tone of mercy but of despair. Once again, we are faced with a more complex and perhaps manipulated development of an earlier and simpler narrative.

Curiously, both al-Ḥurr al-‘Āmilī and al-Rāwandī omit to mention the pen; in the story of Belshazzar, the appearance of a finger instead of a pen recalls that God wrote on the two stone tablets of Mount Sinai and that he promised that He would write His law in the hearts of people. Perhaps there is even an echo of the New Testament, with particular reference to the episode in which Jesus wrote with his finger on the ground. In Islamic texts, the pen calls to mind *sūrat al-‘alaq* (Q. 96:4) (“He who taught by the quill”), suggesting a forgetfulness of all that God previously taught, and the need for Him to teach again.

The Third Group of Texts: the Byzantine Church

The mention of monasteries and monks leads us inexorably into the field of Muslim-Christian polemics; a third series of texts takes the reader away from the monastery and the carrying of the head of al-Ḥusayn, to a Byzantine church and a group of Muslim scholars:

al-lahāhīm, bb. 5 (*Faṣl fī dīkr maqṭal al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī*), 562; al-Bayyāḍī, *al-Širāt al-mustaḡīm ilā mustaḥaqq al-taqdīm fī al-imāma*, vol. II, n. 8, 179 (who omits the iron pen and simply has a hand emerge from the wall and begin to write); al-Ḥurr al-‘Āmilī, *Iṭbat al-hudāt bi-l-nuṣūṣ wa al-mu’ḡizāt*, vol. IV, bb. 15, n. 33, 46 (who also omits mention of a pen); al-Baḥrānī *Madīnat al-ma’āḡīz fī mu’ḡizāt al-a’imma al-aṭhār*, vol. IV, Part Four, n. 193/1140, 139; al-Maḡlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, vol. XLV, bb. 39, n. 31, 180; al-Iṣfahānī, ‘*Awālim al-‘ulūm wa al-ma’ārif al-aḥwāl min al-āyāt wa al-aḥbār wa al-aqwāl*, vol. XVII, ch. 16, bb. 4, n. 2, 399; al-Ġazā’irī, *Riyāḍ al-abrār fī manāqib al-a’imma al-aṭhār*, vol. I, Part One, 167, 258.

¹¹ Cfr. al-Ḥurr al-‘Āmilī, *Iṭbat al-hudāt bi-l-nuṣūṣ wa al-mu’ḡizāt*, vol. IV, n. 33, 46.

On the authority of scholars of the Banū Sulaym, who said: We made a foray into Byzantium and entered one of their churches, where we found a verse written: “Can a group that killed al-Ḥusayn hope for intercession of his grandfather on the day of the recompense?” We asked: “Since when has he been in your church?” They replied: “For three hundred years before your prophet was sent”¹².

The text is narrated by numerous transmitters. The reference here (*al-rūm*) is to Byzantium; the Byzantines, mostly Greek-speaking Christians, would not have referred to themselves as ‘Byzantines’, which is a much later term, but they would have called themselves ‘Romans’, because they considered Byzantium as an extension of the Roman Empire. A number of transmitters offer variations in some details: while most of the texts report ‘three hundred years’, Ibn ‘Asākir (and from him, Ibn al-‘Adīm) in one narrative records ‘six hundred years’.

The Fourth Group of Texts: the Hole in the Ground

Finally, in a fourth series of reports, some transmitters relate the story of an anonymous Christian man. Al-Mağlisī takes this text from Ibn Namā al-Ḥillī in his book *Muṭīru-l-aḥzān* (‘The Stimulant of Sorrows’):

‘Abd Allāh b. al-Šaffār, companion of Abū Ḥamza al-Šūfī said: We made a raid and took prisoners. Among them was an old man from among some discerning Christians; we treated him with deference and were friendly to him, and he told us: “My father informed me, on the authority of his fathers, that they were digging a well in the land of the Byzantines, three hundred years before Muḥammad the Arab was sent, and they struck a stone on which was written this verse in *al-musnad*: “Can a band that killed al-Ḥusayn hope for the intercession of his grandfather on the day of the recompense?” *Al-Musnad* and the language of the people of Seth.

Noteworthy is the change in terminology from *umma* or *ma‘šar* (‘nation’ or ‘group’) to *uṣba*, which means a gang or group, but which also suggests an element of bigotry and fanaticism in its root; by its usage here, the word can limit the guilt to a

¹² al-Ṭabarī, *Bišārat al-muṣtafa*, Part Seven, 201; al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu‘ğam al-kabīr*, vol. III, n. 2874, 124; Ibn Bābawayh, *Kitāb al-amālī fī al-aḥādīṭ wa al-aḥbār*, mağlis 27, n. 6, 131; Ibn al-Fattāl, *Rawḍat al-wā‘iẓīn wa tabṣīrat al-mutta‘iẓīn*, vol. I, mağlis fī ḍikr maqtal al-Ḥusayn, 193; al-Ḥawārizmī, *Maqtal al-Ḥusayn*, Part Two, bb. fī bayān ‘uqūba qātil al-Ḥusayn, n. 29, 106; Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīḥ madīnat Dimašq*, vol. XIV, bb. 1566 (*al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib b. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalīb b. Hāšim b. ‘Abd al-Manāf*), 243; al-Šāmī, *al-Durr al-naẓīm fī manāqib al-a‘imma al-lahāhīm*, bb. 5 (*Faṣl fī ḍikr maqtal al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī*), 570 (who situates the church “close to Constantinople” [al-Qusṭanṭīniyya]) [al-Qusṭanṭīniyya]); Ibn al-‘Adīm, *Buğyat al-ṭalab fī tāriḥ ḥalab*, Part Six, 2653; Ibn Namā al-Ḥillī, *Muṭīr al-aḥzān wa munīr subul al-ašğān*, 96-97 (who situates the church “close to Constantinople” [al-Qusṭanṭīniyya]); Ibn Kaṭīr, *al-Bidāya wa al-nihāya*, vol. XI, bb. *al-iḥbār maqtal al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī*, 573; al-Hayṭamī, *Mağma‘ al-zawā‘id wa manba‘ al-fawā‘id*, vol. IX, bk. 37 (*Kitāb al-manāqib*), bb. 95 (*Manāqib al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī*), n. 15178, 233-234; al-Mağlisī, *Bihār al-anwār*, vol. XLIII, bb. 30, n. 3, 224-225 (who situates the church “close to Constantinople” [al-Qusṭanṭīniyya]); al-Iṣfahānī, *‘Awālim al-‘ulūm wa al-ma‘ārif al-aḥwāl min al-āyāt wa al-aḥbār wa al-aqwāl*, vol. XVII, ch. 10, bb. 7, n. 2, 110; al-Ġazā‘irī, *Riyāḍ al-abrār fī manāqib al-a‘imma al-aḥār*, vol. I, Part One, 167.

small group of fanatics, or it can be a radical accusation by a Šīrī scholar of a much larger group, namely the Sunnī. Ibn Namā lived five hundred years after Ġa'far al-Šādiq, the sixth Imām who did much to eradicate extremism and anti-Sunnī sentiment among the Šī'a, so that it could be no more than a reference to a small group of fanatics. The linguistic reference (*al-musnad*)¹³ is to an ancient South Arabian script, considered, as one of the texts notes, the language of the sons of Seth (Šayt), son of Adam¹⁴. This is only the first of the four possibilities for the language of the writing.

In the Islamic texts, al-Irbilī, a 7th/13th century Šīrī *muḥaddiṭ*, historian and poet notes that the writing is in Arabic¹⁵. Al-Mağlisī, on the other hand, transmits a story in which the words are written in Byzantine Greek (*al-rūmiyya*) and the visiting scholars must avail themselves of the support of someone among the Syrians who can read the language. Ibn Namā (a member of the large Šīrī family al-Ḥillī, and active in the 7th/13th century) and after him al-Mağlisī, also carries a transmission that claims that the script is in Himyaritic characters (a Semitic language spoken in the ancient Yemen, by the Himyarites); once again scholars are forced to ask some Syrians for help in translating it.

Ibn Šahrāšūb, with reference to an unnamed book of Ibn Baṭṭa, records a story that confirms the written text (“and in the book of Ibn Baṭṭa that they found it written in a church”). I have been unable to find this narrative, with this formulation, in any of Ibn Baṭṭa's works; his writings certainly present stories about verses on gold tablets, but never this particular plot or these particular verses. Ibn Šahrāšūb also carries a narration on the authority of Anas b. Mālik, a story that tells of a man from the city of Nağrān, which is predominantly Christian. The author moves the context from Byzantium to Arabia:

Anas b. Mālik said: A man from Nağrān dug a hole, in which a gold tablet was found on which this (same) verse was written, followed by: “They came to him with a deviant judgment, but their judgment was in contrast with the judgment of the Book. Tomorrow, Yazīd, you will be punished by the Merciful! What a punishment yours will be!” So, we asked: “Since when has he been in your church?” They replied: “For three hundred years¹⁶ before your prophet was sent”¹⁷.

¹³ In these two passages, the reference is to an ancient south Arabian script (H. Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 1980, 507). As one of the texts notes, it is reputed to be the language of the children of Seth (Šayt) who lived prior to Nūḥ. (E.W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, vol. IV, 1968, 1444). It is noted by al-Irbilī that the verse was written in the church in Arabic; cfr. al-Irbilī, *Kašf al-ğumma fī ma'rifat al-a'imma*, vol. II, 54. Ibn Namā calls it the ‘Himyaritic’ script (Ibn Namā al-Ḥillī, *Muṭīr al-aḥzān wa munīr subul al-ašğān*, 96-97).

¹⁴ Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, vol. IV, 1968: 1444.

¹⁵ al-Irbilī, *Kašf al-ğumma fī ma'rifat al-a'imma*, vol. II, 54.

¹⁶ While most of the texts read ‘three hundred years’, Ibn ‘Asākir (and from him, Ibn al-‘Adīm) in one transmission reads ‘six hundred’.

¹⁷ Ibn Šahrāšūb, *Manāqib āl Abī Ṭālib*, vol. IV, bb *Fī imāma Abī ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥusayn*, 62; al-Mağlisī, *Bihār al-anwār*, vol. XLV, bb. 46, n. 5, 306; al-Išfahānī, ‘*Awālim al-'ulūm wa al-ma'arif al-aḥwāl min al-āyāt wa al-aḥbār wa al-aqwāl*, vol. XVII, ch. 21, bb. 6, n. 6, 60.

The Readings of Daniel

The book of Daniel is a theology of resistance¹⁸; it functions as a discourse of confrontation and as an invitation to effective action – but in Daniel it is a question of non-violent resistance, through obedience to the Covenant, not without occasional adaptation. This adaptation partly explains the reason for the textual mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic. The theologies built around Karbalā' and its consequences are equally a theology of resistance; unlike Daniel, however, they launch an appeal for violent confrontation against Yazīd's model of Islam and as a way of obedience to God.

Especially in the writing on the monastery wall, we have a specific link with the Belshazzar event. While the Arabic texts do not say anything explicit about this issue, Daniel's text defines the authorship of the writing: *Therefore, he sent the hand that wrote the inscription* (Dan. 5:24). It is not the hand of God, and the hand and God are not identical. Instead, the hand was sent from the presence of God. This element is presented differently in Arabic texts, where the hand, in most cases, holds an iron pen.

The words on Belshazzar's wall are made up of consonants only, and the Chaldean scholars and sages are unable to make sense of them. These are in fact Aramaic words written without vocalization; the difficulty faced by the Babylonian sages is therefore to read aloud an ambiguous consonantal text because, as mentioned, the sentence is written with a series of Aramaic abbreviations. Rembrandt, in his famous painting called 'The Feast of Belshazzar', depicts the letters written one on top of the other, adding another element of complexity to the enigma of the words.

Daniel reads them, providing the vowels in two different ways: first, so that the words are read as nouns, and second, so that they are read as verbs. The reading provides a list of coin weights (rather than the coins themselves), but the interpretation provides something different. Ancient versions tell us that the writing on the wall was originally composed of nine letters, which can be divided and vocalized to produce a number of different Aramaic phrases. The interpretation given by Daniel divides this series into three words of three letters, each with various levels of meaning, depending on the vocalization chosen.

The first level represents the Aramaic names of weights and monetary values, vocalized as *mānê*, *ṭāqêl*, *uparsîn* (plural of *pārês*), that is, a Hebrew mina (or sixty shekels), a shekel, and a half mina: therefore, three units of weight. The second level represents God's evaluation actions; God did the math, weighing and evaluating. Finally, Daniel vocalizes the noun as a verb; God weighed the Babylonian empire like silver on the scales. He evaluated it and established its value as a means of payment. The third level represents the result of God's evaluation of Belshazzar and his empire:

¹⁸ Cfr. A.E. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire. Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2011.

‘You were found lacking in weight. You will be handed over to the Medes and the Persians’¹⁹.

Conclusion

Ultimately, there are striking similarities in the Aramaic and Islamic texts; the sacred vessels, brought to Babylon from the temple of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and deeply ridiculed during a banquet, could be placed in parallel with the head of the martyr al-Ḥusayn, the sacredness of which, given the numerous miracles related to it, is derided by a group of soldiers. It is true that Belshazzar, despite his oppressive tyranny, was less malevolent than Nebuchadnezzar, whose wickedness is the catalyst of history; a verse from the prophet Amos (5:19) – “as when one flees from a lion and runs into a bear” – is thought to refer to Nebuchadnezzar and the less valiant Belshazzar. Belshazzar is mostly described with derision, as rude and drunk as the soldiers who carry the head of al-Ḥusayn and who run away frightened at the appearance of the hand.

While the writing on the regent’s palace wall is directed to Belshazzar, as an indictment of his reign, the verses seen by soldiers and others associated with al-Ḥusayn’s death are directed to an entire section of Muḥammad’s community. The 7th/13th century al-Šāmī in his book ‘The String of Pearls in the Virtues of the Inspired Imāms’ (*al-Durr al-naẓīm fī manāqib al-a’imma al-lahāhīm*) reports a text in which the verses are addressed directly to Yazīd b. Mu’āwiya himself: he had drunk a quantity of wine when a hand emerged from the wall in front of him and wrote the verses with blood. While this brings Yazīd in closer parallel to Belshazzar, it remains an extremely rare tale and is out of harmony with most other narratives.

However, in both stories, the excessive consumption of alcohol plays a central role, underscored by the Islamic texts as yet another accusation against those who are linked to the martyr’s death, starting with Yazīd himself. Belshazzar’s use of wine is a crucial detail, linking his status to that of the soldiers carrying al-Ḥusayn’s head. Under the influence of wine, Belshazzar orders that the vessels of the temple be brought to him. The word ‘influence’ often appears in biblical Aramaic in relation to the official exercise of power. The fact that Belshazzar follows the promptings of excessive wine raises the question of his ability not only to remain sober but also to hold political authority. In the case of the Arabic texts, the consumption of wine is an accusation often levelled against Yazīd. He becomes one of the key elements in the accusation that he is not an acceptable or suitable head for the house of Islam. A sense of debauchery and drunkenness pervades his life and authority. Either way, whether it is the soldiers eating the food of hospitality in a monastery (and thus associating

¹⁹ Cfr. D.C. Polaski, “Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin: Writing and Resistance in Daniel 5 and 6”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123/4 (2004) 649-669, A. Wolters, “The Riddle of the Scales in Daniel 5”, *Hebrew Union College Annual* 62 (1991) 155-177.

unsuspecting monks with the killing of al-Ḥusayn) or a feast in the regent's citadel, eating and drinking is described in falsely celebratory terms that quickly turn negative.

On both occasions, the story takes place in a public place, be it a banquet hall, monastery, church, or other location on the road between Kūfa and Damascus, and a variety of people provide eyewitness accounts. The cryptic language of writing in the halls of Belshazzar challenges understanding; in some Islamic texts, the writing is in a language not understood by the reader and, as with Belshazzar's queen mother who suggests asking for Daniel's help, scholars must seek the support of local Syrians.

In conclusion, the writing on Belshazzar's wall turns out to be his end, marking the end of his reign and life. The divine threat in Islamic texts concerns a spiritual punishment instead of a temporal loss; it would be the loss of the crucial intercession of Muḥammad, a possibility also present in the Sunnī texts which generally reject the possibility of intercession, on the day on which lives will be weighed and accounts given. The sentence read by Daniel to Belshazzar could equally apply to the murderers of the grandson of the prophet of Islam: "God has counted your kingdom and put an end to it. You have been weighed on the scales and have been found missing".

RÉSUMÉ

Le dicton anglais : 'the writing is on the wall', qui suggère de façon presque évidente que quelque chose de mauvais est sur le point de se produire ou qu'une situation est en train de se détériorer, est extrait du récit de la Bible (Daniel 5,1-30) selon lequel, durant un banquet orgiaque, une main amputée apparut devant le roi Baltassar et écrivit sur le mur du palais une terrible sentence contre lui et son empire. Les crimes de Baltassar n'étaient pas seulement la corruption, mais plus spécialement les actes blasphématoires de sa moquerie envers les ustensiles sacrés dérobés dans le temple de Jérusalem par Nabuchodonosor. L'idée d'un jugement céleste semble être emblématique de quelque chose de profondément enraciné dans la psyché collective, si bien qu'il n'est pas étonnant de trouver de semblables récits en dehors de la tradition juive. En effet, quelques textes de l'islam šī'ite et sunnite contiennent des considérations semblables. Après la mort d'al-Ḥusayn, petit-fils de Muḥammad, sur le champ de bataille de Karbalā', et durant le transport de sa tête tranchée vers le palais du calife Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya par des soldats irrespectueux et dissolus, une main amputée apparut devant eux, écrivant sur le mur du monastère où ils s'étaient réfugiés, un terrible avertissement relatif à la rétribution de tous ceux qui s'étaient compromis d'une manière ou d'une autre dans le martyre du fils de 'Alī et de Faṭīma. Cet article offre une sélection de ces textes šī'ites et sunnites, procurant ainsi la possibilité d'une lecture comparative avec l'histoire de Baltassar, rapportée dans le cinquième chapitre du Livre de Daniel.