

## Al-Ma'mūn's alleged apocalyptic beliefs: a reconsideration of the evidence\*

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### Abstract

The designation by the caliph al-Ma'mūn of the 'Alid imām 'Alī al-Riḍā as his successor was an extraordinary event by the standards of the time. Based on a letter that al-Ma'mūn is said to have written to the 'Abbāsids after the death of al-Riḍā, in which he appears to confess that his decision to designate the latter had been influenced by apocalyptic beliefs about the end of the 'Abbāsīd dynasty, Madelung has argued that the caliph's decision can indeed be explained in terms of those beliefs. This article seeks to demonstrate that the relevant passage of the confession is unlikely to have been part of the original document. It goes on to suggest that the passage was probably added by Ibn Ṭāwūs (d. 664/1266), the document's redactor, in an attempt to support his own perceived role as the pre-Mahdīc 'Alid destined to rule after the fall of the 'Abbāsids.

The designation by the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma'mūn of the 'Alid imām 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā as his successor was an extraordinary event by the standards of the time and has received much attention from modern historians. In his letter of designation of al-Riḍā, which is generally believed to be authentic, al-Ma'mūn speaks of his choice as a choice of the most excellent candidate from among the descendants of al-'Abbās and 'Alī.<sup>1</sup> Medieval Muslim sources also mention the caliph's claim to have chosen the most excellent Hāshimite, but other than that they are either silent as to what prompted him to take such a decision or present views that are partisan or fictitious. Thus, for example, the early mainstream historical sources tend to attribute the decision to the influence, or intrigues, of the caliph's Persian vizier al-Faḍl b. Sahl and his brother al-Ḥasan, and this seems to echo the views of al-Ma'mūn's 'Abbāsīd opponents and their supporters at the time of the appointment. Shī'ī sources, on the other hand, attempt to show that behind the caliph's decision lay a conviction that the caliphate belonged to the 'Alids.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā*, ed. M. 'A.-R. Ibrāhīm (Cairo, 1916), 9: 362–6. For an English translation, see P. Crone and M. Hinds, *God's Caliph. Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge, 1987), 133–9.

2 On the different Sunnī and Shī'ī presentations, see Ṣidqī Ḥamdī, "The pro-'Alid policy of Ma'mūn", *Bulletin of the College of Arts and Sciences* (Baghdad), 1, 1956, 96–105. See also T. Bayhom-Daou, "'Alī al-Riḍā", in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Leiden, forthcoming).

Among modern scholars a number of suggestions have been put forward regarding the motivation of the caliph and the factors influencing his decision. For Gabrieli, the designation was part of the wider pro-ʿAlid policy pursued by al-Maʿmūn. It was motivated by personal veneration for ʿAli and his descendants and a desire to redress the injustices suffered by them under Umayyad and ʿAbbāsīd rule.<sup>3</sup> Sourdēl, on the other hand, has pointed to what he took to be the caliph’s Muʿtazilī and Shīʿī convictions regarding the nature of the caliphate and his attempts to assert its religious authority.<sup>4</sup> He suggested that the designation was intended to effect a reconciliation between the emerging Sunnī and Shīʿī wings of Islam, in order to put an end to the incessant ʿAlid revolts and to attempt to establish the caliphate on a more solid basis.<sup>5</sup> Other scholars have rejected the view that the appointment was aimed at placating the ʿAlid rebels or gaining the political support of the ʿAlids and have offered varying suggestions. Thus, for example, Nagel has pointed out that the uprising of Abūʿl-Sarāyā in Iraq had already been suppressed when the caliph nominated al-Riḍā. According to his analysis, the caliph saw the appointment as a means of putting into practice his ideal of the caliphate as “guidance”, but also as a means of discrediting the Imāmī doctrine of the imāmate and undermining ʿAlid claims based on descent from the Prophet.<sup>6</sup>

A somewhat different line of interpretation has been suggested by Madelung, prompted by his discovery of a letter that al-Maʿmūn is said to have written to the ʿAbbāsīds in Baghdad after the death of al-Riḍā. In it the caliph appears to confess that he had designated the latter in the belief that the apocalyptic end of the ʿAbbāsīd caliphate would come about with the death of the “seventh”, that is, with his own death. Madelung has noted that apocalyptic expectations and beliefs concerning the coming of the Mahdī were widespread at the time. This is attested by the historical sources in their descriptions of the ʿAlid uprisings, as well as by the extant work of the contemporary Sunnī scholar Nuʿaym b. Ḥammād (d. 227/842), which contains a number of traditions predicting the end of the ʿAbbāsīd

3 Gabrieli, *Al-Maʿmūn e gli ʿAlidi* (Leipzig, 1929), 29–62 at 34.

4 For the argument that al-Maʿmūn was not a Muʿtazilī, see J. van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra. Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam* (Berlin and New York, 1991–97), 3: 157, 176–9.

5 D. Sourdēl, “La politique religieuse du calife ʿabbasīde al-Maʿmūn”, *Revue des études islamiques*, 30, 1962, 27–48 at 34, 46; English tr., “The religious policy of the ʿAbbāsīd caliph al-Maʿmūn”, in E. Kohlberg (ed.), *Shīʿism* (Aldershot, 2003), art. 17. Similarly, M. Zahniser, who has concluded that by selecting al-Riḍā as his successor the caliph was following the Muʿtazilī principle that the imām should be a man of piety and scholarly excellence and, in addition, he was hoping to gain the support of those who were sympathetic to the ʿAlid cause; “Insights from the ʿUthmāniyya of al-Jāhīz into the religious policy of al-Maʿmūn”, *Muslim World*, 69, 1979, 8–17.

6 T. Nagel, *Rechtleitung und Kalifat* (Bonn, 1975), 414–24. See also Richard Kimber, “Al-Maʿmūn and Baghdad: the nomination of ʿAlī al-Riḍā”, in C. Vazquez de Benito and M. A. Manzano Rodríguez (eds), *Actas XVI Congreso UEAI* (Salamanca, 1995), 275–80. Kimber has argued that the measure was not so much pro-ʿAlid as anti-ʿAbbāsīd/Baghdādī.

caliphate with al-Ma'mūn. Madelung believes that al-Ma'mūn must have been influenced by those predictions. He says:

His (al-Ma'mūn's) wish to bring about a reconciliation between the two branches of the Family of the Prophet and his conviction expressed in the act of appointment that 'Alī al-Riḍā was the most excellent and deserving among all its members were no doubt sincere. But, if he expected 'Abbāsids and 'Alids in the future to share equally in the caliphate, why did he fail to make any provisions to that effect which might have weakened the 'Abbāsīd opposition? He could have appointed an 'Abbāsīd to succeed the 'Alid, or appointed an electoral college composed of distinguished members of both families to choose the successor, or at least to have admonished 'Alī al-Riḍā to choose the most deserving candidate among the members of the two branches.

Al-Ma'mūn's reluctance to appoint another successor after the death of al-Riḍā, which remained with him for most of his life, is seen by Madelung as corroborating evidence for his apocalyptic beliefs and lack of faith in the future of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate.<sup>7</sup>

Needless to say, acceptance of Madelung's interpretation depends on acceptance of the authenticity of the document examined. But it also depends on whether his interpretation is thought to be compatible with other evidence relating to al-Ma'mūn's religious policy. Most scholars of the subject have tended to agree that the document is authentic.<sup>8</sup> Cooperson, in addition, has stated that the caliph's confession regarding his designation of al-Riḍā is compatible with other suggested (and variously corroborated) motives, such as: to redress the injustices suffered by the 'Alids; to bring the Shī'a back to the fold; and to return to the objectives of the original Hāshimite *da'wa*, with its recognition of the 'Alids as members of the *ahl al-bayt* and equally eligible for the caliphate.<sup>9</sup> Crone and Hinds, however, have found the confession hard to reconcile with other documentary evidence, namely, al-Ma'mūn's letter of designation of al-Riḍā, which, in their view, amounts to "a restoration of the Umayyad concept of the caliphate rather than to preparation for the end of the world".<sup>10</sup> They have concluded that al-Ma'mūn's claim was probably not genuine.<sup>11</sup> Tor also has recognized the possibility that al-Ma'mūn's claim

7 "New documents concerning al-Ma'mūn, al-Faḍl b. Sahl and 'Alī al-Riḍā", in W. al-Qādī (ed.), *Studia Arabica et Islamica; Festschrift for Ihsān 'Abbās* (Beirut, 1981), 333–46, at 345–6.

8 Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 94; van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 3: 154; M. Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography. The Heirs of the Prophet in the Age of al-Ma'mūn* (Cambridge, 2000), 30–1; D. G. Tor, "An historiographical re-examination of the appointment and death of 'Alī al-Riḍā", *Der Islam*, 78/i, 2001, 109–10.

9 *Classical Arabic Biography*, 29–31.

10 *God's Caliph*, 95 f.

11 *ibid.*, 94.

was not genuine and that he “merely reacted to and manipulated these eschatological beliefs”.<sup>12</sup>

In this article I propose to argue on the basis of textual and other evidence that, whilst the caliph’s letter to the ‘Abbāsids may be authentic,<sup>13</sup> his confession is unlikely to have been part of the original. I shall go on to suggest that the relevant passage was probably added much later than the time of al-Ma’mūn and by the ‘Alid Ibn Ṭāwūs (d. 664/1266) when he copied out the text of the document into his work entitled the *Kitāb al-Ṭarā’if*.<sup>14</sup>

### Al-Ma’mūn’s letter to the ‘Abbāsids

According to Ṭabarī, after the death of ‘Alī al-Riḍā al-Ma’mūn wrote to his ‘Abbāsīd relatives and the other people of Baghdad, announcing the death, asking them to return to his allegiance, and emphasizing that the only cause of their disapproval of him had been his appointment of ‘Alī as his successor. The ‘Abbāsīds wrote back a reply “couched in the toughest terms by which anyone could ever be addressed”.<sup>15</sup> Ṭabarī is not aware that al-Ma’mūn responded to the ‘Abbāsīds with a second letter, but we have in Ibn Ṭāwūs’s *Ṭarā’if* the text of such a letter by al-Ma’mūn, together with a statement from Miskawayh, its probable first redactor,<sup>16</sup> that it was in response to one written by the ‘Abbāsīds. The letter consists of a defence of ‘Alī as the most excellent companion of the Prophet, and an attack on the ‘Abbāsīds and their corruption, their persecution of the ‘Alids, and their behaviour in the conflict between the caliph and his brother al-Amīn. The caliph also defends at some length his designation of ‘Alī al-Riḍā and justifies his refusal to designate his own son al-‘Abbās; all of this comes in response to points and objections that his relatives had raised in their letter to him.

The confession the caliph is meant to have made, that he was guided by knowledge of apocalyptic matters, comes in the course of his defence of his decision not to appoint al-‘Abbās as his heir. (Contrary to what is often

12 “Historiographical re-examination”, 110, n. 37.

13 I am inclined to accept the document as authentic, for the reasons mentioned by Madelung (“New documents”, 345) as well as on account of similarities in style, terminology and ideological content between this document and al-Ma’mūn’s document of designation of ‘Alī al-Riḍā. There is also an interesting variation which may be linked to change in the caliph’s plans for his succession after the death of al-Riḍā. These similarities and variations will be pointed out in the course of this analysis. A systematic and in-depth analysis of the two documents will not be made here.

14 Ibn Ṭāwūs, *al-Ṭarā’if*, Qumm 1400/1979–80, 275–82. The document was reproduced from *al-Ṭarā’if* by Majlisī, *Bihār al-anwār*, second rev. ed. (Beirut, 1983), 49: 208–15. When citing excerpts I have relied mainly on Madelung’s translation; “New documents”, 340–4. Where I disagree with his rendering and offer an alternative, I give the Arabic in transliteration.

15 Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1879–1901), 3: 1030; *The History of al-Ṭabarī XXXII*, tr. C. E. Bosworth (Albany, 1987), 85.

16 See below, n. 56.

assumed or stated in the secondary literature, he does not make the confession in the course of defending his decision to appoint al-Riḍā and it is nowhere directly related to it, a point to which we shall return later.) From his response it would appear that in their letter to him the ʿAbbāsids had demanded that the pledge of allegiance be taken for al-ʿAbbās as heir, as a condition for their return to his allegiance.<sup>17</sup> (This would have been an attempt on their part to ensure that the caliph would give up any plans he might have had for appointing another ʿAlid.<sup>18</sup>) The caliph reproaches them by adducing a quranic verse (2:61: “Will you take that which is baser in exchange for that which is better?”) and alluding to their willingness to settle for al-ʿAbbās even though he is still far from deserving of the caliphate and, therefore, not the most excellent.<sup>19</sup> He explains that his son is still a minor who has not yet acquired the requisite experience and knowledge, and that even if he were deserving and possessed of the right qualities, in al-Maʿmūn’s opinion he still would not have a better title to the caliphate than any non-Qurayshī;<sup>20</sup> the reason for this is, presumably, that, as al-Maʿmūn has already said in a previous passage with regards to his

- 17 According to the editor of the Qumm 1400/1979–80 edition of *al-Ṭarāʾif*, the Persian translation he utilized included an additional statement by Miskawayh as part of his introductory remarks, which says that the ʿAbbāsids wrote to the caliph demanding that he reply to them “and [that he take] the pledge with(?) his son al-ʿAbbās for the heir apparenity, and they rebuked him for having taken ʿAlī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā as his heir apparent” (*wa-yasʿ alūnahu al-bayʿa maʿ waladihi al-ʿAbbās bi-wilāyat al-ʿahd wa ʿatabūhu ʿalā ittikhādhihi ʿAlī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā walī ʿahdhi*); *Ṭarāʾif*, 276, n. 1; cf. the slightly different version of this passage by Miskawayh, cited (via the *Ṭarāʾif*) in Hāshim al-Baḥrānī, *Ghāyat al-marām*, ed. ʿAlī ʿĀshūr (Beirut, 1422/2001), 2: 52, brought to my attention by the first referee.
- 18 Abūʿl-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī reports that, after the death of al-Riḍā, al-Maʿmūn tried hard to convince the Ḥasanid ʿAbdallāh b. Mūsā b. ʿAbdallāh to accept the heirship; *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyyīn*, ed. S. A. Ṣaqr, repr. (Iran, 1414/1993–94), 498–502. However, the authenticity of the report may be questioned. It reveals Zaydī bias (this Ḥasanid is said to have had strong support among the Zaydī Shīʿa; *ibid.*, 501) and might have been intended to show that al-Maʿmūn was motivated by a conviction that the imāmate belonged to the ʿAlids and to rebut Imāmī claims that he believed it belonged to the Imāmī imāms. In any case, given that al-Maʿmūn was reluctant to reveal what plans he had for the succession after the death of al-Riḍā, the ʿAbbāsids would have had reason to suspect that he might want to appoint another ʿAlid; see below.
- 19 Another possibility is that here the caliph is alluding to their willingness *in the past* to have settled for al-ʿAbbās even though he was “less meritorious” than al-Riḍā. However, this possibility may be excluded on two grounds: first, the caliph is speaking in the present tense; and second, the sources nowhere report that at the time of, or soon after, the designation of al-Riḍā, al-ʿAbbās was put forward by the ʿAbbāsids in Baghdad as an alternative candidate for the heir apparenity; they are reported to have reacted by renouncing their allegiance to al-Maʿmūn and paying allegiance to another ʿAbbāsīd, Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī; Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 1013–4.
- 20 The expression actually used is “... than any man of ʿAkk and Ḥimyar”, the reference being to South Arabian tribes apparently regarded among early Muslims as not possessing much virtue or sincerity for Islam, having apostatized after the death of the Prophet (in the case of the first) and fought against ʿAlī and on the side of Muʿāwiya at the Battle of Ṣiffīn (in the case of both); *ET2*, s.v. “ʿAkk”; al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī XVII*, tr. G. Hawting (Albany, 1996), index under “Dhū al-Kalāʿ al-Ḥimyarī”.

choice of al-Riḍā, only the choice of the most excellent would be pleasing to God and in accordance with His will.<sup>21</sup> He tells the ʿAbbāsids not to go on talking about this matter (of designating al-ʿAbbās):

for my tongue has not ceased to be guarded from some matters and reports, lest the people should break their oaths<sup>22</sup> when they (these matters and reports) are revealed. [I have done so/kept my tongue guarded] cognizant that “God will attain his design” (Q 65:3) and manifest His decree one day.<sup>23</sup>

This is immediately followed by the crucial passage of the “confession”:

But if you refuse everything but the lifting of the veil and the peeling of the staff, [know that] al-Rashīd has informed me on the authority of his ancestors and of what he found in the *Kitāb al-Dawla* and elsewhere that after the seventh of the descendants of al-ʿAbbās no pillar will remain standing for the Banū l-ʿAbbās. Posterity will continue to be fastened for them to his life. So when I take leave, take you leave from it, and when you are deprived of my person, seek for yourselves a fortified refuge. But alas, there will be nothing for you but the sword. The Ḥasanī, the avenger and destroyer, will come to you and mow you down, and the Sufyānī, the subduer, and the Qāʾim, the Mahdī will not spare your blood, except for just claim.<sup>24</sup>

- 21 *Ṭarāʾif*, 278–9; *Bihār*, 49: 211; “New documents”, 342. Al-Maʾmūn is not saying that his son would not qualify *no matter how deserving or virtuous* he is. What he means, rather, is that if his son is virtuous and deserving but not *the most excellent*, he is (so to speak) as unentitled as a mere ʿAkkī, and al-Maʾmūn would not choose him. The point is also clear from the beginning of the passage where the caliph adduces that quranic verse (2: 61) and speaks of the willingness of the ʿAbbāsids to settle for al-ʿAbbās, a mere youngster (and, hence, not the most excellent).
- 22 *taḥniṭh* (to break an oath) is found in some manuscripts and is preferred to *takhniṭh* (bend or weaken); *Ṭarāʾif*, 280; “New documents”, 343. See also Majlisī’s comments, *Bihār*, 49: 215. The reference is probably to ʿAlids breaking their oaths of allegiance to al-Maʾmūn when they find out that his next successor was going to be a non-ʿAlid; see below and n. 38.
- 23 *fa-lā tukthirū fī hadhā l-maqāl. faʾinna lisānī lam yazal makhzūnan ʿan umūrin wa-anbāʾ, karāhiyata an taḥniṭha al-nufūs ʿindamā tankashif, ʿilman bi-anna allāha bālighun amrahu wa-muzhirun qaḍāhu yawman*; *Ṭarāʾif*, 279 f. Compare Madelung’s translation of this passage: “... lest the people should break their oaths when they [the people] are revealed to knowledge. ‘God will attain his design’ (65: 3) and manifest His decree one day”; “New documents”, 343, lines 16 ff. As will become clear later, the difference between Madelung’s rendering and the one proposed here has a bearing on the question of the internal consistency of the document and whether the passage is original to it.
- 24 I follow closely the translation given by Madelung, except for the last line where my translation gives preference to the variant reading of the Qumm edition of the *Ṭarāʾif*: *wa-l-qāʾim al-mahdī (lā) yaḥqin dimāʾakum illā bi-ḥaqqihā*; *Ṭarāʾif*, 280, lines 3 ff.; Bahrānī, *Ghāyat al-marām*, 2: 56, lines 13 ff. Cf. Madelung: “But your blood will be spared at the advent of the Qāʾim, the Mahdī, except for just claim”; “New documents”, 343, lines 19 ff.; *Bihār*, 49: 212, lines 6 ff.; *Ṭarāʾif*, ms. Garrett 2622, Princeton University Library, fol. 72b, and ʿAlī al-Kūrānī, *Muʿjam aḥādīth*

Although our text seems to link al-Ma'mūn's belief in this apocalyptic prediction to his reluctance to designate his own son as heir, and not to his appointment of al-Riḍā,<sup>25</sup> it may plausibly be inferred from it, as indeed Madelung and others after him have inferred, that this belief provided (some of) the motivation for the caliph's decision regarding al-Riḍā. It is, however, noteworthy that his decision to appoint al-Riḍā is not only discussed in passages separate from the one in which the apocalyptic prediction is given and his refusal to designate al-ʿAbbās is discussed; this decision is introduced as another topic of contention between the caliph and his kinsmen and, moreover, completely different justifications for it, which have nothing to do with apocalypticism, are now given. As we shall see later, within the context of the caliph's arguments regarding his designation of al-Riḍā, the apocalyptic prediction about the end of the ʿAbbāsīd dynasty is either irrelevant or inconsistent with some of those arguments, and this would tend to support our contention that the passage in which he is supposed to have revealed the prediction is not original to the document. This is what the caliph goes on to say concerning al-Riḍā:

As for my intent in respect to the pledge of allegiance for ʿAli b. Mūsā, peace be on him, in addition to his meriting it in himself and my choice of him as the best, it was only that I might become the sparer of your blood and your protector by perpetuating the love between us and them. This is the way I pursue in honouring the kindred of Abū Ṭālib and in giving them a share of the *ḥaqq* in the small amount that accrues to them, even though you claim that I desired that its income and its benefits should pass to them.<sup>26</sup>

In this passage the idea of the caliph as a protector of ʿAbbāsīd interests and sparer of their blood is directly related to his attempt, as he puts it, “to perpetuate the love between us (ʿAbbāsīds) and them”, by which he probably means to pacify the ʿAlids and put an end to their rebellions against the caliphate.<sup>27</sup> In other words, he had hoped that his designation of al-Riḍā would help to achieve this goal. As we know from the letter of

*al-imām al-mahdī* (Qumm, 1411/1990–91), 4: 178, citing the *Ṭarāʾif* from Bahrānī's *Ghāyat al-marām*, where the wording is as follows: ... *wa-l-qā'im al-mahdī wa-ʿinda l-qā'im al-mahdī tuḥqan dimā'ukum illā bi-ḥaqqiha*. (I owe these two references to the first referee.) And note the variation in this passage from the *Ṭarāʾif* between ʿAshūr's edition of *Ghāyat al-marām* (2: 56) and Kūrānī's citation from *Ghāyat al-marām*. For the concept of the Mahdī as a “sparer of blood” and the contrast with the Ḥasanid as an “avenger”, see below and n. 90.

25 Cf. Madelung, “New documents”, 345: “The startling announcement of the letter that al-Ma'mūn appointed ʿAlī al-Riḍā in the belief that the ʿAbbāsīd caliphate was about to come to an end after him...”; and Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, 30 f.: “he (al-Ma'mūn) confesses that he nominated al-Riḍā in expectation of the apocalyptic end of the ʿAbbāsīd dynasty”. But the letter does not really announce that al-Ma'mūn had appointed al-Riḍā in the belief that the ʿAbbāsīd caliphate was about to come to an end; it is merely a possible inference.

26 “New documents”, 343, lines 29–34.

27 On the ʿAlid rebellions as a factor behind al-Ma'mūn's decision to appoint al-Riḍā, see above and notes 5 and 6.

designation and the historical sources, al-Ma'mūn had spoken of the 'Alids as equally eligible for the caliphate. Here, al-Ma'mūn refers to a concomitant of 'Alid eligibility, namely, that they are entitled to a share of the *fay'* revenues.<sup>28</sup> The 'Abbāsids appear to have rejected this on the grounds that these revenues were rightfully theirs and accused the caliph of desiring that the *fay'* income should pass (from the 'Abbāsids) to the 'Alids, thus echoing their other accusation against the caliph, reported in the chronicles, that in designating al-Riḍā his real aim was to transfer the caliphate to the 'Alids (and not merely for them to share in it).<sup>29</sup> The caliph, who goes on to deny their accusation regarding the *fay'*, explains his appointment of al-Riḍā and giving the 'Alids their share of the *fay'* as aimed at winning them over and ensuring thereby safety and protection for the 'Abbāsids.

Of course, it is possible to argue that the two explanations given by the caliph in this document, namely his belief in the apocalyptic predictions about the end of the 'Abbāsīd dynasty, on the one hand, and his desire to protect the 'Abbāsids and spare their blood by recognizing the rights of the 'Alids, on the other, are reconcilable. Thus, for example, Crone and Hinds have suggested as a possible (though unlikely) interpretation that "al-Ma'mūn thought that he could avert wholesale massacre of his kinsmen on the day of judgement by handing over to an 'Alid".<sup>30</sup> However, the difficulty with this interpretation is that in the next passage, where the caliph goes on to justify his appointment of al-Riḍā, he speaks of his concern to protect the 'Abbāsids and to spare their blood in this life and for the long run (not in the hereafter), for he goes on to say to them: "Thus, I am occupied with managing your affairs and with taking care of you and your offspring and sons after you, while you occupy yourselves with carefree amusement...".<sup>31</sup> There is no suggestion here that he was thinking in terms of their fate in an impending apocalyptic drama or end of time.<sup>32</sup> On the contrary, he speaks of the measures he had taken with regard to

28 These are revenues from land conquered by force, one fifth of which was regarded as belonging to the ruler and intended to be divided into five (or six) shares and distributed among five categories of recipients, one of which being the Prophet's family (*dhū'l-qurbā* of Q 8: 41); *EI2*, s.vv. "fay", "khums" (in supplement).

29 Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, 3: 1013; *The History of al-Ṭabarī XXXII*, 62; al-Ya'qūbī, Aḥmad b. Abī Ya'qūb, *Ta'rīkh*, ed. M. T. Houtsma (Leiden, 1883), 547.

30 *God's Caliph*, 94. See also above and notes 9 and 10.

31 "New documents", 343, lines 34 f.; *Bihār*, 49: 213, lines 5 f.; *Ṭarā'if*, 280 lines 13 f.

32 At the beginning of the letter the 'Abbāsids are told that they act as if they "belonged to the bygone nations which perished through being swallowed by the earth..."; "New documents", 340. The use of this apocalyptic imagery represents a kind of warning to the 'Abbāsids that their disobedience and corrupt behaviour might lead them to suffer a similar fate. But the reference is quite different from what we find later in the document in the form of a specific prophecy about an imminent fate. Moreover, a similar reference to perishing nations occurs in the beginning of the letter of al-Walīd II regarding the designation of his successors (see *God's Caliph*, 118, para. 1 and n. 3), on which al-Ma'mūn's letter of designation of al-Riḍā appears to have been directly modelled and where there is no suggestion of any apocalyptic concerns. Thus, its occurrence in this document is not necessarily indicative of an apocalyptic background for its composition, or that the caliph believed an apocalyptic overthrow of the 'Abbāsids was imminent.



al-Riḍā and the recognition of 'Alid rights as having been intended to achieve long-term benefits for the 'Abbāsids and their progeny. Further, the idea that the caliph had sought the well-being of his family and hoped that the appointment would help bring about "their uniting in love and the sparing of their blood" is also attested and emphasized in the document of designation of al-Riḍā, where there is no hint either of any concern with matters or events of an apocalyptic nature.<sup>33</sup>

There are two other main indications that the passage in which the caliph reveals the prediction about the end of the 'Abbāsīd dynasty is not original to the document. Firstly, it sounds rather odd that the caliph should go on to reveal something (related to his refusal to designate al-'Abbās) when he has just told the 'Abbāsīds that he is reluctant to reveal it (that his tongue is still guarded about it)<sup>34</sup> and that they should not to go on speaking about this (i.e. demanding that he designate al-'Abbās) any more; when he has just talked about the adverse effects of revealing it (about people breaking their oaths); and when he has linked his decision not to reveal it to his belief that God will reveal it (His decree) one day and when His design will be attained. Secondly, as it stands, the caliph's alleged espousal of the belief in the end of the 'Abbāsīd dynasty, and giving this as another explanation for his reluctance to designate his son al-'Abbās, would have amounted to saying that, whilst he would never appoint an 'Abbāsīd to succeed him, he has not ruled out appointing another 'Alid. Indeed, if his relatives were meant to take it that his designation of al-Riḍā had been influenced by this prediction, (and that he had envisaged al-Riḍā as head of the community in the final era), they would have been justified in thinking that he might well want to appoint another 'Alid. It is, however, unlikely that at this stage al-Ma'mūn would have wanted them to believe that this was the case – that if he were to appoint a successor it would be another 'Alid. Having told the 'Abbāsīds in his first letter to them that with al-Riḍā dead they no longer had reason not to return to his (the caliph's) allegiance,<sup>35</sup> why would he now risk arousing more opposition on their part by insinuating to them

33 Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ*, 9: 366, line 6; see *ibid.*, 363, lines 15–6 and 364, lines 11, 12, where these same terms are used when describing the caliphs' concern for the well-being of Muslims in general. In both documents al-Ma'mūn speaks of the Day of Judgement in connection with his designation of al-Riḍā, but it is to say that his decision was an act of personal merit which he carried out "in search of safety, firmness of proof, and salvation on the day when people will stand for the Lord of the Worlds", and through which he hoped to gain "safety and escape from fear on the Day of the Greatest Fright"; *Ṭarā'if*, 281, lines 7 f.; *Bihār*, 49: 213, *infra*; "New documents", 344, lines 11 f.; Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ*, 9: 365, *infra*; Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 138, para. 7.

34 It might appear as if the caliph is saying: I have kept quiet about it *until now* but if you insist on "lifting the veil" and knowing why I refuse to designate al-'Abbās I will tell you and here it is. But according to the previous passage, the 'Abbāsīds had been insisting that he designate al-'Abbās, not that he tell them why he refuses to do so. Moreover, without the revelation in question his statement *fa-inna lisānī lam yazal makhzūnan* (my tongue has not ceased to be/is still guarded) conveys the sense that he continues to be quiet about it, not that he has kept quiet "until now but this is about to change".

35 Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, 3: 1030; *The History of al-Ṭabarī XXXII*, 85.

something of that sort? It is more likely that he would have wanted them to think that his next choice might well be an ‘Abbāsīd, but that he did not want to talk about it lest he antagonize the ‘Alids and their supporters. In fact, Ṭabarī’s report about his (first) letter to the ‘Abbāsīds may be taken as a strong indication that al-Ma’mūn had already given up the idea of appointing a ‘Alid to succeed him,<sup>36</sup> although, as his second letter shows, he clearly had not given up his belief in the eligibility of the ‘Alids. He would not, however, have wanted to reveal his thoughts on the matter, lest he be accused of abandoning his belief in ‘Alid eligibility and, in view of the antagonistic attitude of the ‘Abbāsīds towards him, he might not have wanted to give them clear assurances in this regard.

Thus, without the apocalyptic prediction (“But if you refuse everything ... except for just claim”) one could easily interpret the “matters and information (*umūr wa-ambā*)” that al-Ma’mūn is referring to, and that he is reluctant to divulge, as the designation of another successor and information about that successor.<sup>37</sup> Where the caliph speaks of his fear that people might break their oaths when these matters are revealed, this would be a deliberately vague allusion to ‘Alids breaking their oaths of allegiance to al-Ma’mūn if they knew that his next intended successor was going to be a non-‘Alid.<sup>38</sup> And where the caliph says that he has kept quiet concerning those matters, “cognizant that God will attain His design and reveal His decree one day”, the point he is trying to make would be that the appointed time for him to designate his next successor (or, for God’s design concerning his next successor to be accomplished) has not yet come, and until such time that God reveals His decree concerning this (which will be through the caliph when he designates his successor), he will remain quiet about it.<sup>39</sup>

- 36 Apart from Iṣfahānī’s suspect report about an offer he made to the Ḥasanid ‘Abdallāh b. Mūsā after the death of al-Riḍā (see above n. 18), there is no evidence that in the period following the death of al-Riḍā and before his return to Baghdad (or at any other time for that matter) the caliph was on the look-out for another suitable ‘Alid candidate or that he considered appointing a particular ‘Alid. But assuming that the report is genuine, the caliph must have offered the heirship to ‘Alī b. Mūsā, received the latter’s rejection, and abandoned the idea of a ‘Alid successor before he wrote his letter to the ‘Abbāsīds asking them to return to his allegiance.
- 37 This would be the same sort of information that, according to his letter of designation of al-Riḍā, al-Ma’mūn had sought and obtained before reaching his decision concerning al-Riḍā, that is to say, information about the qualifications, circumstances and affairs of all possible candidates from among ‘Alids and ‘Abbāsīds, referred to as *umūruhum* and *akhbāruhum*; Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ*, 365; Crone and Hinds, *God’s Caliph*, 137–8.
- 38 The other possible interpretation, namely that people might revoke their allegiance to the ruling caliph if they knew he was destined to be the last ‘Abbāsīd and his reign would be followed by that of the ‘Alid Maḥdī, may be excluded, as the idea is not a familiar one in the traditions on the rise of the Maḥdī. On the other hand, that people might revoke their oaths of allegiance to the caliph if they found out what he had in mind concerning the question of succession is both plausible and, in the case of al-Ma’mūn, has a basis in historical reality: when he designated al-Riḍā, the ‘Abbāsīds in Baghdad reacted by revoking their allegiance to him and paying allegiance to his uncle as caliph; Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 3: 1013–4.
- 39 Madelung has seen in this reference by the caliph to God’s decree a reference to the advent of the Maḥdī. This is on the basis of an apocalyptic prediction, found in Nu’aym’s work and quoted from it by Ibn Ṭāwūs, which says that the divine decree

This avowed reluctance of al-Ma'mūn to discuss the matter of succession after the death of al-Riḍā is consistent with an actual reluctance to appoint another successor, which remained with the caliph throughout most of his life; it was only when he was virtually on his deathbed that he gave instructions for the succession of his brother, the future al-Muṭaṣim. Contrary to what Madelung has suggested, this reluctance need not be explained in terms of his apocalyptic beliefs. It may rather be said to have reflected the dilemma of translating his declared beliefs concerning the caliphate and the equal eligibility of 'Abbāsids and 'Alids into another act of designation of a successor without antagonizing either the 'Abbāsids or the 'Alids – without being accused of abandoning his belief concerning 'Alid eligibility if his next choice were to be an 'Abbāsīd, or without appearing to confirm the 'Abbāsids' worst fears, that he wanted to transfer the caliphate to the 'Alids, if his next choice were to be another 'Alid.

As for his appointment of his brother al-Muṭaṣim as his successor, and passing over his own son al-'Abbās, Madelung has suggested that the decision appears to have been made at random and was symptomatic of a lack of faith in the future of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate.<sup>40</sup> There is, though, another more plausible explanation. From his letter to the 'Abbāsīds we get a glimpse of the thinking that is likely to have later influenced his decision not to appoint al-'Abbās (or any of his other sons) and, instead, to appoint his brother al-Muṭaṣim. In response to criticism by the 'Abbāsīds concerning his choice of al-Riḍā, the caliph explains that his choice was based on “full discernment” of al-Riḍā's excellence and on knowledge that the pledge of allegiance for him (as heir) was “pleasing to God”. The choice, he says, was not a matter of personal partiality (*muḥābāt*) but one willed by God. Had it been a matter of personal partiality he would have chosen al-'Abbās or one of his other sons, who are “dearer to his heart” (than al-Riḍā).<sup>41</sup> Elsewhere in this letter, and as we have seen earlier, the caliph insists that his son al-'Abbās, even when he comes of age and becomes deserving, would not have a better title to the caliphate than any other Muslim, again implying that possession of the greatest merit, and not hereditary factors or closeness of kinship to the caliph, is (and must always be) the determining factor in the appointment of a Hāshimite successor. Similarly, when he came to appoint al-Muṭaṣim he could claim that merit and not personal partiality determined his choice.

(*al-qaḍā'*) will be in the year 200: “New documents”, 346; Nu'aym, *Fitan*, 422 f.; Ibn Ṭāwūs, *Malāḥim*, 94 f. However, without the passage in question there is no reason to suppose that the caliph is referring to anything other than the matter of succession and the divine decree concerning this matter. Also, the notion that the caliph's decisions regarding the matter of succession were divinely aided and in accordance with God's will occurs elsewhere in this document (*Bihār*, 49: 211, line 12 f.; *Ṭarā'if*, 279, line 6 f.) and in the document of designation of al-Riḍā (Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ*, 9: 364, line 14 f., 365, line 5, 366, line 4; Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 136, 137, 139).

40 “New documents”, 346.

41 “New documents”, 342, lines 27–30; *Ṭarā'if*, 279, lines 5–7.

Of course, in principle it would have been possible for the caliph to identify his son as the most excellent candidate for his succession. However, having described the choice of one's own son as *muḥābāt* and contrasted this with a choice based entirely on discernment and divine inspiration, and being on record as having said so,<sup>42</sup> when he came to designate a successor the caliph would have been careful not to contradict his known views on the matter or lay himself open to criticism, and thus chose his brother. By choosing al-Muṭaṣim no-one could accuse al-Ma'mūn of a decision based on *muḥābāt*, for he could use the same argument as the one he used in his letter to the ʿAbbāsids: that had he been motivated by *muḥābāt*, he would have chosen al-ʿAbbās or one of his other sons.<sup>43</sup> Although, to many, al-Muṭaṣim might not have seemed like an ideal candidate or imām of guidance or the most excellent Hāshimite,<sup>44</sup> according to al-Ma'mūn's theory of the caliphate, it was not up to people to determine whether or not the one chosen was the rightful caliph/imām and "pleasing to God"; it is God who decides this and only designation by the previous imam ensures that God's will is carried out.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, upon closer scrutiny al-Ma'mūn's decision to nominate al-Muṭaṣim and to pass over al-ʿAbbās does not appear to have been made at random or to reflect lack of faith in the future of the ʿAbbāsīd caliphate. On the contrary, one could say that the caliph was careful that his decision was, or appeared to be, compatible with his known views on the caliphal office and, at the same time, it took into account the realities of power within the Empire – the dominant influence of the ʿAbbāsids and their desire to see that the caliphate remained in their family. It might well have been reached long before the caliph's illness and announced only then.<sup>46</sup> In

42 "New documents", 342, lines 19–32; *Tarāʾif*, 278, *infra*, 279, lines 1–7.

43 The argument that merit and not personal partiality determined his choice of successor had also been used by al-Ma'mūn in his letter of designation of al-Riḍā, where, however, he had excluded not only his own sons but also "others to whom he is more closely related (than to al-Riḍā)"; Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ*, 365; Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 138, section 8. This absence of mention of "others" (i.e. other relatives) from the caliph's argument in his letter to the ʿAbbāsids, the later document, is significant. It may be taken as evidence that by the time he wrote this letter he had already given up the idea of appointing an ʿAlid heir and was thinking of appointing a non-filial ʿAbbāsīd relative. Also, the close similarity in the arguments used in both documents is a point in favour of their authenticity.

44 "New documents", 346.

45 Thus, in his letter to the ʿAbbāsids, the caliph says to them that he took the pledge of allegiance for al-Riḍā "knowing that ... it is in agreement with the pleasure (*riḍā*) of God", and he had wanted to appoint someone closer to him in kinship than al-Riḍā but "God wanted another matter"; *Bihār*, 49: 211; *Tarāʾif*, 278 f.; "New documents", 342. For more evidence of the caliph's views, see below, notes 48–50.

46 See n. 43 above. Al-Muṭaṣim had played an important military role during al-Ma'mūn's reign. In 213/828 al-Ma'mūn divided his armed forces into three main groups and placed two of them under the commands of al-Muṭaṣim and al-ʿAbbās. He put al-ʿAbbās in charge of the Byzantine front. This same role had been assigned by Hārūn al-Rashīd to al-Mu'tamin, who was going to be his third heir after al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn; *EI2*, s.v. "al-Ma'mūn". So although the chroniclers depict al-Ma'mūn's choice of al-Muṭaṣim as successor as a random deathbed decision, there may have been more to it than that. It is even conceivable that the caliph had

any case, when he became gravely ill any dilemmas he might have grappled with since the death of al-Riḏā and his return to Baghdad, and any fears he might have had concerning a negative or violent ʿAlid reaction to the designation of an ʿAbbāsīd successor, would have diminished or even become irrelevant; in his mind (and perhaps in the minds of many of those around him) the need to ensure that a successor is nominated and, hence, that his caliphate will be legitimate, would have taken precedence over those other considerations.

As for Madelung's observation that, contrary to what one would expect of a caliph concerned with the future of the caliphate, at the time of his designation of al-Riḏā al-Ma'mūn did not concern himself with the question of succession in the future and did not make any provisions for that, there are other possible explanations than those based on the caliph's alleged apocalyptic beliefs. Firstly, given his essentially Shīʿī view of the caliphate and succession to it, namely that it was based on divinely inspired designation by the previous imām/caliph and did not depend on election by, or the consent of, the community, the caliph would not have entertained the idea of an electoral college. The caliph's views on the subject are clearly attested in this letter,<sup>47</sup> in the document of designation of al-Riḏā,<sup>48</sup> in *risālat al-khamīs*,<sup>49</sup> and in a report of an encounter he allegedly had with a

an understanding with al-Muʿtaṣim that the latter would pass the caliphate on to al-ʿAbbās, but that al-Muʿtaṣim later decided to pass it on to his own son al-Wāthiq instead. This could explain the reported change in al-ʿAbbās's relationship with al-Muʿtaṣim: at the time of the first military coup against the caliph al-ʿAbbās was reluctant to have his uncle deposed and himself recognized as caliph, and insisted on paying allegiance to him. Later, in 223/838, he was willing to conspire with army officers to have his uncle overthrown and lost his life as a result; *EI2*, s.v. "al-Muʿtaṣim Bi'llāh". Cf. the view that al-Muʿtaṣim's accession was the result of a sudden coup effected soon after the death of al-Ma'mūn; cited by M. S. Gordon in *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords: A History of the Turkish Military of Samarra (A.H. 200–275/815–889 C.E.)*, (Albany, 2001), 47 f., from a study in preparation by Michael Bates and brought to my attention by Michael Cooperson. Bates's interpretation does not appear to take into account the "documentary" evidence discussed here concerning al-Ma'mūn's reluctance to designate his son al-ʿAbbās as his successor.

47 See n. 45 above.

48 According to the document, God inspires His caliphs with choosing for Him those who succeed them, and when al-Ma'mūn was exerting himself in the matter of choosing his heir he asked God to inspire him with that which pleased Him; Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ*, 9: 364, 365; Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 136, para. 5, 137, para. 6.

49 A. Z. Ṣafwat, *Jamharat rasā'il al-ʿArab* (Cairo, 1937), 3: 377–97, at 383 f. In this epistle the caliph argues against the idea of election by the community: the whole community, as represented by its leading authorities in all lands of the empire, who practise inquiry and *ijtihād*, can never come to an agreement concerning a candidate. This is because the goal (of ascertaining the most suitable candidate) is unattainable to ordinary Muslims. Death would come to them before they are able to reach the highest degree of exerting themselves in research and inquiry, and before they are able to visit the various countries in order to examine qualified candidates. Moreover, there would soon arise different opinions among them as to who they should choose. See also A. Arazi and A. Elad, "L'Épître à l'armée.

Ṣūfī.<sup>50</sup> Secondly, it is true he could have appointed an ‘Abbāsīd to succeed al-Riḍā; there were well established precedents for appointing two or more successors. But such an act might be construed as a precautionary measure against appropriation of the office by al-Riḍā and his descendants and could give the ‘Abbāsīds more reason to be suspicious of al-Riḍā and to question the practicability of sharing the caliphate. It is also possible, given the background of a turbulent succession history within the ‘Abbāsīd dynasty and his own experience of conflict with his brother al-Amīn who had been designated as first successor by al-Rashīd, that al-Ma’mūn was wary of designating more than one successor. He might have seen in it a potential for future conflict and rivalry and thought that it would not necessarily allay the fears of the ‘Abbāsīds or weaken their opposition or make for a smoother transfer of power between one caliph and his successor. Or, most likely, because the caliph was known to have emphasized the role of divine inspiration in the designation of a successor, he would have had to assume (or appear to assume) that al-Riḍā would designate his own successor, relying on his own wisdom and divine inspiration and knowledge of current circumstances.

Thirdly, and regarding Madelung’s suggestion that he could at least have stipulated in the appointment document that, when it came to choosing the next successor, al-Riḍā too should choose the most excellent candidate from among the Hāshimītes, there is a good reason as to why the caliph would have been reluctant to do so, especially in a public announcement: it could be interpreted as amounting to an admission that the principle of choosing the most excellent Hāshimīte was an innovation, which the caliph himself introduced and was now attempting to impose on his successor. The caliph, however, would have wanted to maintain the fiction that the principle was a *sunna* and had been upheld by the previous caliphs of the Family of the Prophet when they designated their successors; it was just that this time round the most excellent Hāshimīte was found to be an ‘Alīd. For any suggestion on his part that his ‘Abbāsīd predecessors had ignored the principle and/or excluded the ‘Alīds could be interpreted as calling into question the legitimacy of those predecessors and even his

Al-Ma’mūn et la seconde *da‘wa*”, *Studia Islamica*, 66, 1987, 27–70 at 44–9, and 67, 1988, 29–73 at 55.

- 50 Al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, ed. Ch. Pellat (Beirut, 1973), 4: 315 f., paras 2727, 2728. According to this report, the caliph admitted to his Sufī visitor that he did not have the universal consent of the community and expressed his willingness to hand over the caliphate to a man on whom all Muslims would be united in their consent. Privately though, and as is implied by what he later tells his *qādī* Yaḥyā b. Aktham, the caliph believed that such a man could never be found. He had led the Sufī to believe that he too was seeking the consent of all Muslims, but only in order to stave off trouble from that quarter. Whilst the account may be fictional, the views ascribed to the caliph in it may be taken as a good reflection of his actual views; its implicit rejection of the requirement of consent and election by the community and the notion that the community can never agree on a single candidate have parallels in *risālat al-khamīs*; see previous note.

own.<sup>51</sup> Thus, he would have preferred not to state the obvious, taking it for granted that al-Riḍā would choose his successor in the same manner and on the basis of the same principles. In this connection it is also noteworthy that when, in his letter of designation of al-Riḍā, the caliph defends his choice the emphasis is *not* on the equal entitlement or eligibility of the two families, which is mentioned twice as a given,<sup>52</sup> nor is it on the doctrine of *al-afḍal* as such, but on “the fact” that his decision concerning al-Riḍā as the most excellent candidate has been reached after much investigation and exertion of his reason and with help and inspiration from God.<sup>53</sup> We would not, therefore, expect to find him instructing al-Riḍā on what he deemed to be the obvious course for an imām of guidance to choose his successor.

Thus, the fact that at the time of al-Riḍā's designation as heir the caliph made no mention of the subject of succession after him does not necessarily support the hypothesis that he was influenced by apocalyptic predictions about the end of the ʿAbbāsīd dynasty; there are other, more plausible, explanations as to why he did not broach the subject.<sup>54</sup> There are also other

- 51 Nowhere does al-Ma'mūn question the legitimacy of his predecessors, or imply that they (or some of them) had usurped positions which rightfully belonged to ʿAlids or that they had been “less excellent”. This is the case even when he speaks of the ʿAbbāsīd persecution of the ʿAlids. In the letter to the ʿAbbāsīds he refers to ʿAbbāsīd rule as God given: “Thus we (ʿAbbāsīds) and they (ʿAlids) were in league, as you claimed, until God decreed the power for us. Then we frightened them ... and killed them more than the Banū Umayya had killed them; “New documents”, 342; *Ṭarāʾif*, 278; *Bihār*, 49: 210. In *Risālat al-khamīs* he refers to his predecessors as *a'immat al-hudā* who have succeeded one another in an unbroken chain, and as *ahl bayt al-nabī wa-khātam mīrāthihi*. The only one excepted is his brother al-Amīn, but this is not on the grounds that a ʿAlid was more deserving of that position. In fact, on two occasions al-Ma'mūn comes close to suggesting that al-Amīn had usurped his own authority and was not just an erring caliph who had to be deposed. In *risālat al-khamīs* he speaks of the sequence of the imāms of guidance as having continued uninterrupted until it fell to him when he was staying in Khurāsān among his supporters, and of his brother as having challenged him in the matter (*nāzaʿahu fī'l-amr*); *Ṣafwat, Jamharat*, 385. In his letter to the ʿAbbāsīds, when he reproaches them for the support they had given to al-Amīn, he speaks as though this (and the death of al-Amīn) occurred during his own reign; “New documents”, 342; *Ṭarāʾif*, 279; *Bihār*, 211. From the letter that al-Amīn is said to have written to his commanders in 195/810 during the conflict with al-Ma'mūn, it is clear that the latter was asserting that he was the rightful caliph; see Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 3: 796; *The History of al-Ṭabarī XXXI*, tr. M. Fishbein (Albany, 1992), 48–9. In view of this evidence, it is unlikely that al-Ma'mūn would have thought of himself as the “seventh” or adduced reports that referred to him as such.
- 52 Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ*, 330; Crone and Hinds, 137–8.
- 53 *Ṣubḥ*, 328–30; Crone and Hinds, 136–8. A similar emphasis is found in his letter to the ʿAbbāsīds, where he defends his choice of al-Riḍā as based on *istibṣār* (discernment) and knowledge of the divine will, and where the eligibility of the ʿAlids and the doctrine of *al-afḍal* are taken for granted. As may be inferred from his response, even his opponents appear to have accepted that the successor must be *al-afḍal* and disputed only his claim to have had that special knowledge concerning al-Riḍā; Majlisī, *Bihār*, 49: 211; *Ṭarāʾif*, 278 f.; “New documents”, 342.
- 54 The arguments presented above are made on the assumption that al-Ma'mūn's intentions for al-Riḍā to succeed him and for the ʿAlids to share in the caliphate

explanations for his reluctance to designate another successor after the death of al-Riḍā. In addition, the document examined here contains textual and doctrinal inconsistencies and statements which are incompatible with the confession the caliph is supposed to have made about his apocalyptic beliefs. This leads us to suspect the authenticity of the passage in question. Let us now turn to the question of its redaction.

### The case for Ibn Ṭāwūs as interpolator of the caliph's "confession"

The letter examined above is preserved in the *Kitāb al-Ṭarāʾif* of Ibn Ṭāwūs,<sup>55</sup> an Imāmī scholar who lived in Baghdad at the time of its capture by the Mongols and was appointed by them as *naqīb* of the ʿAlids. The author says that he found it in *Nadīm al-farīd* of Miskawayh (d. 421/1030).<sup>56</sup> His younger contemporary, al-Irbilī (d. 693/1293), also mentions seeing the letter in *Kitāb al-Nadīm*, as he calls it, but adds that the book was not available to him at the time of his composition.<sup>57</sup> Majlisī, who included the letter in his *Bihār*, tells us that it was missing from most copies of the *Ṭarāʾif* that he has seen.<sup>58</sup> According to Kohlberg, the *Ṭarāʾif* was written before the Mongol conquest and during a prolonged stay in Baghdad.<sup>59</sup> But Kohlberg has also observed that Ibn Ṭāwūs was in the habit of interpolating passages and chapters in his own works, sometimes several years after he finished writing those works.<sup>60</sup> It is, therefore, possible that the letter was missing from the initial composition of the *Ṭarāʾif* and was added at some later stage.<sup>61</sup> As we shall see, there is good evidence that in the period after the Mongol conquest and the fall of the

were genuine. Another possibility, which must not be overlooked, is that al-Maʿmūn did not really expect that al-Riḍā, who was twenty years older than himself, would succeed him, or that the ʿAlids in the future would share in the caliphate, and intended that the succession would revert to the ʿAbbāsids. In that case the appointment would have been envisaged as a temporary measure that would help restore the legitimacy and religious authority of the caliphate, and that would give the ʿAlids official recognition as members of the *ahl al-bayt* (and entitlement to the *fayʿ*) but no real opportunity to accede to the caliphate. This scenario would also provide an explanation as to why the caliph did not broach the subject of succession to al-Riḍā at the time of his designation.

55 Qumm 1400/1979, 275–82.

56 It is conceivable that al-Maʿmūn's letter had been kept in the archives of the official chancery in Baghdad, in which case Miskawayh would have been in a position to have direct access to it. Between 340/953 and 352/963 he was a chancery official and secretary and boon companion to al-Ḥasan al-Muhallabī, the vizier of the Būyid amīr Muʿizz al-Dawla, who was given the task of enforcing pro-Shīʿī religious measures. The letter, much of which is devoted to the defence of ʿAlī and his descendants, would thus have been of considerable interest and paradigmatic value to the vizier and his secretary; see *Elr* s.v. "Meskawayh"; *EIJ*, s.vv. "Miskawayh", al-Muhallabī, "Abu Muḥammad al-Ḥasan".

57 ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā al-Irbilī, *Kashf al-ghumma* (Tabrīz, 1381/1961), 2: 284.

58 *Bihār*, 49: 208–15; Madelung, "New documents", 340.

59 Kohlberg, *A Medieval Muslim Scholar at Work: Ibn Ṭāwūs and his Library* (Leiden, 1992), 57–9.

60 *ibid.*, 38, 60–1.

61 As Kohlberg has noted, Ibn Ṭāwūs does not always identify his interpolations as such; *ibid.*, 38.



ʿAbbāsids Ibn Ṭāwūs would have found it to be of some use in his attempt to support a particular apocalyptic prophecy and his own perceived position in the apocalyptic scheme of things, and he had reason to ascribe that confession to the caliph and to interpolate it in the letter.<sup>62</sup>

As related by Kohlberg, after his appointment as *naqīb* of the ʿAlids by the Mongols Ibn Ṭāwūs came to believe that it was his duty to hold a position of leadership and began to envisage himself as the just person of the Family of the Prophet, who was destined to rule the community after the fall of the ʿAbbāsids and before the rise of the Maḥdī. In his work entitled *Kitāb al-Iqbāl*, or more specifically, in a chapter he added to that work in 662/1264, when it occurred to him that he was that just person, Ibn Ṭāwūs tells us that he read in the *Malāḥim* of Baṭāʾinī (a Shīʿī apocalyptic work from the third/ninth century which is not extant) that Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq had talked about such a person and the circumstances of his appearance.<sup>63</sup> In fact, Ibn Ṭāwūs appears to have developed a keen interest in the apocalyptic tradition, as is suggested by the fact that at about the same time he began to compose his work known as *al-Malāḥim wa'l-fitān*.<sup>64</sup> Much of the material for that work was taken from the Sunnī apocalyptic tradition, a common practice at that time among Imāmī authors who tried to prove that descriptions of the Maḥdī in Sunnī Ḥadīth were actually descriptions of the twelfth imām.<sup>65</sup>

The Sunnī and the Shīʿī apocalyptic traditions contain a few references to an ʿAlid (or, occasionally, to a Hāshimī) other than the Maḥdī, who will play some role in the events associated with the advent of the latter. For example, it is said that a Hāshimī, identified as a paternal brother or a cousin of the Maḥdī, will lead an army against the Sufyānī and will be defeated by him. He will then flee to Mecca and when the Maḥdī appears he will join him.<sup>66</sup> Other traditions speak of the killing of an ʿAlid, or of the ʿAlid Pure Soul, in Medina as one of the events preceding the advent of the Maḥdī.<sup>67</sup> Some predict that a Ḥusaynid or a Ḥasanid calling to his father will be killed in Kūfa at the hands of the Sufyānī.<sup>68</sup> There are also references to ʿAlids or men of the house of the Maḥdī who will rule *after* him.<sup>69</sup> More research is needed, but as far as I can tell, a role for that other ʿAlid, such as that envisaged by Ibn Ṭāwūs and in the tradition he cites from Baṭāʾinī on

62 No motive of this, or of a similar, nature can be found for Miskawayh, the letter's earlier (and probably its first) redactor. He has, therefore, been excluded as a possible culprit in this analysis.

63 *Iqbāl al-aʿmāl*, ed. H. al-Aʿlamī (Beirut, 1996), 78–9; *EIR.*, s.v. “Ebn Ṭāwūs” (Kohlberg); idem., *Medieval Muslim Scholar*, 12, 38.

64 *Medieval Muslim Scholar*, 60–1.

65 *ibid.*, 60; *EI2*, s.v. “Maḥdī” (Madelung), 1236b.

66 Nuʿaym b. Ḥammad, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. S. Zakkār (Beirut, 1414/1993), 192 f., 197–8; see also *ibid.*, 216, for another forerunner of the Maḥdī identified as *raḥul min ahli baytīhi*.

67 Nuʿaym, *Fitan*, 199, 200, 204, 206 f.; see also “Maḥdī”, *EI2*, 1234a.

68 Nuʿaym, *Fitan*, 171, 174. For references to these and other figures in the Imāmī tradition, see al-Mufīd, *al-Irshād*, ed. Muʿassasat Āl al-Bayt li-Taḥqīq al-Turāth (Beirut, 1414/1993), 2: 368, 369, 371, 372.

69 Nuʿaym, *Fitan*, 235, 239, 245; cf. al-Mufīd, *Irshād*, 387.

the authority of Jaʿfar al-Šādiq, is not otherwise attested.<sup>70</sup> I would suggest that the absence of such a figure from the apocalyptic literature, and his single appearance in the work of Ibn Ṭāwūs, provides a strong indication that our author has probably taken liberties with his transmission from Baṭāʾinī, with the intention of providing traditional Shīʿī proof for his idea of a pre-Mahdic ʿAlid ruler. Following from this, I would also suggest that he would have had an interest in depicting al-Maʾmūn, when he appointed ʿAli al-Riḍā as his successor, as having been motivated by his apocalyptic beliefs and knowledge about that ʿAlid ruler; his aim would have been to provide what he perceived to be unequivocal Sunnī evidence that would support the authenticity of the Shīʿī reports on which he claimed to have based his belief.

Ibn Ṭāwūs was familiar with the work of the apocalyptist Nuʿaym b. Ḥammād (d. 227/842), the *Kitāb al-Fitan*, and relied extensively on it in the composition of his own work *al-Malāḥim waʾl-fitan*. Nuʿaym was a contemporary of al-Maʾmūn, and Ibn Ṭāwūs clearly knew that in that work the caliph’s reign was associated with prophecies about the end of the ʿAbbāsīd dynasty.<sup>71</sup> But he must also have known that when the caliph designated al-Riḍā as his successor he did not envisage him, and nowhere referred to him, as the ʿAlid Maḥdī. Ibn Ṭāwūs could therefore draw the conclusion that the caliph must have acted on the basis of knowledge that after the fall of the ʿAbbāsīds, and before the coming of the Maḥdī, the empire would be ruled by an ʿAlid, and he must have envisaged al-Riḍā as that pre-Mahdic ʿAlid ruler.

Ibn Ṭāwūs could not, however, argue his case persuasively in the face of objections from Sunnī and other opponents.<sup>72</sup> (The work in which he included this document is a highly polemical anti-Sunnī work.)<sup>73</sup> To begin with, Sunnīs would not have accepted as authoritative Imāmī apocalyptic predictions concerning the accession of that ʿAlid ruler, such as the one cited by Ibn Ṭāwūs, ostensibly from Baṭāʾinī. Moreover, and as noted already, none of the Sunnī traditions that were available to Ibn Ṭāwūs, and on which he relied in order to strengthen the Imāmī position concerning the twelfth imām as the Maḥdī, appear to speak of that member of the *ahl*

70 Kohlberg, *Medieval Muslim Scholar*, 12, n. 80, refers to a similar tradition in a work by Yūsuf al-Baḥrānī, according to which the ʿAbbāsīd empire will be destroyed by a Turkish [i.e. Mongol] king who will then hand over power to a just person from the Prophet’s family. There, however, that person is said to be either the Maḥdī or the founder of the Šafavīd dynasty, clearly not the same figure as that envisaged by Ibn Ṭāwūs; his ʿAlid ruler is neither the Maḥdī nor the founder of a dynasty, but a single ruler who would come before the rise of the Maḥdī.

71 Traditions concerning this, and taken from Nuʿaym, are cited by Ibn Ṭāwūs in his *Malāḥim* (Beirut, 1398/1978), 39–40. Cf. Nuʿaym, *Fitan*, 125–6.

72 Several Sunnī scholars from the middle of the seventh/thirteenth century are known to have adopted the Imāmī belief that the twelfth imām was the expected Maḥdī; *EJ2*, s.v. “al-Maḥdī”, 1236b f. But this would not necessarily have predisposed them also to accept the idea of a pre-Mahdic ʿAlid ruler.

73 Kohlberg, “Alī b. Mūsā ibn Ṭāwūs and his polemic against Sunnism”, in B. Lewis and F. Niewöhner (eds), *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter* (Wiesbaden, 1992), 325–50.

*al-bayt* who would rule before the Mahdī. Nor would the Sunnīs have accepted the argument that in his appointment of al-Riḍā, al-Ma'mūn was acting upon such predictions; there was nothing in the historical and apocalyptic traditions to indicate that al-Ma'mūn himself had held such beliefs. So what better way for Ibn Ṭāwūs to support his claim regarding al-Ma'mūn's knowledge and motives than to let the caliph speak for himself? And what better place to do so than in a document in which the caliph himself defended his designation of the 'Alid? (In this connection it is important to mention that, according to Ibn Ṭāwūs, "a Sunnī authority provides more impressive proof for the correctness of a Shī'ī view than does a Shī'ī one".<sup>74</sup>) And lest it be objected that al-Ma'mūn's Sunnī credentials were not beyond question, Ibn Ṭāwūs has the caliph declare that he had received this knowledge from his predecessors through his father al-Rashīd, the latter having also found this information in the *Kitāb al-Dawla*, a second/eighth-century history of the 'Abbāsids said to have been regarded as authoritative by 'Abbāsīd loyalists.<sup>75</sup> That Ibn Ṭāwūs chose to make the caliph adduce his apocalyptic beliefs to justify his refusal to designate al-'Abbās, and only indirectly his decision to designate al-Riḍā, was probably determined by the original text itself: because the caliph speaks of his reluctance to divulge "some matters" in the course of responding to 'Abbāsīd demands that he designate al-'Abbās, it would have seemed only logical that, if he were to relent and confess all, it would have to be within that context.<sup>76</sup>

For Ibn Ṭāwūs it would not have mattered so much that, as regards timing, the caliph's knowledge had turned out to be deficient or his act of designating a 'Alid premature. As pointed out by Madelung, when in his *al-Malāḥim wa'l-fitan*, Ibn Ṭāwūs cited those traditions on the "seventh 'Abbāsīd" as the last of the line he felt free to "correct" this detail: "I say it is the seventh after the thirtieth".<sup>77</sup> Similarly, he would have been able to claim that whilst the prediction was well known to and accepted by the 'Abbāsīd caliphs, al-Ma'mūn or someone else in the caliphal chain of transmission had simply got this detail wrong. After all, it was only now, during Ibn Ṭāwūs's own lifetime, that the 'Abbāsīd caliphate had come to an end, and the caliph al-Musta'ṣim, who was overthrown and killed by the Mongols, was the 37th 'Abbāsīd caliph. What mattered to Ibn Ṭāwūs would have been his claim to have found Sunnī evidence indicating that the end of 'Abbāsīd rule would be followed by the accession of a 'Alid and that

74 Quoted by Kohlberg from Ibn Ṭāwūs's *Kitāb al-Yaqīn*; "Polemic against Sunnism", 326 f., n. 5; see also idem, *Medieval Muslim Scholar*, 63.

75 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, ed. Riḍā Tajaddud (Tehran, 1391/1971), 120.

76 It is true that as a result of this interpolation, the caliph ends up being inconsistent and all his assertions – that he would only consider appointing the most excellent Hāshimite – have been rendered superfluous, even dishonest, by the suggestion that he had all along excluded the 'Abbāsīds. But Ibn Ṭāwūs would not have been too concerned with the aspects of coherence and consistency in the caliph's presentation of his arguments and justification of his behaviour. His main concern would have been to provide "evidence".

77 *Malāḥim*, 40.

this would take place before the rise of the Mahdī. This evidence, in the form of a confession and a claim to have acted on the basis of a prediction transmitted by his Sunnī predecessors, which Ibn Ṭāwūs attributes to the caliph, would have been envisaged by him as more compelling than the circumstantial evidence that might be inferred from the apocalyptic and historical traditions but that Sunnīs and others could easily refute.

The following two anachronisms would reinforce our suspicion and give away the passage as a later interpolation.

The first is that in this passage al-Ma'mūn refers to the awaited Mahdī as *al-qā'im al-mahdī*. But in the time of al-Ma'mūn, and probably for some time afterwards, the concept of the Mahdī as *al-qā'im* (which signified “the riser from death” or “the one who never dies”)<sup>78</sup> and the use of the term were still associated with Shī'ī extremists/messianists (those labelled *ghulāt*

78 According to Madelung's view, already in early Shī'ī circles of the second/eighth century the term *al-qā'im* signified “the riser” against illegitimate government, who was expected to restore justice on earth, and it was meant to distinguish the activist imāms from the quietists or “sitting” (*qā'id*) ones; *EI2*, s.vv. “Kā'im Āl Muḥammad”, “al-Mahdī”, 1235b. However, this view is not strongly supported and appears to be based on late sources. It is contrary to the evidence of the early (second century) heresiographical tradition where descriptions of the early Shī'ī sects and their belief in *al-qā'im al-mahdī* (or in an imām who has his characteristics but is not identified by either of these titles) refer to him only as “the riser from death” or “the one who never dies”, and this is the case even when these sects are explicitly stated to have associated *al-qā'im al-mahdī* with militant action; al-Nawbakhtī, al-Hasan b. Mūsā, *Firaq al-Shī'a*, ed. H. Ritter (Istanbul, 1931), 28, 30, 54, 68, 70, 80, 84, 87. Those who believed that al-Ṣādiq was the Mahdī who never dies are said to have spoken of him as *ṣāhib al-sayf* (master of the sword), not as a “riser with the sword”; *ibid.*, 57. Sa'd al-Qummī ascribes to an early Shī'ī group the conception of the Mahdī and Qā'im as an avenger and seems to contrast this with the role of the returning (Imāmī) imām/Mahdī as a teacher. According to his description, the group envisaged the *qiyām* of the Qā'im and the *khurūj* of the Mahdī as return (*raf'a*) from death; Sa'd al-Qummī, *al-Maqālāt wa'l-firaq*, ed. M. J. Mashkūr (Tehran, 1963), 71. The identification of the Shī'ī Qā'im as the one who never dies is also prevalent in *Uṣūl al-nihal* of pseudo-Nāshī'; J. van Ess, *Frühe mu'tazilitische Häresiographie: Zwei Werke des Nāshī' al-Akbar (gest. 295 H.)*, (Beirut, 1971), text, most clearly in para. 73. A figurative contrast between quietists and activists occurs only in the description of Imāmī-Zaydī polemic over eligibility for the imāmate: the terms *khurūj* and *qiyām* are used to describe the activism of a Zaydī imām, and the Imāmī imām is described as someone who practises *qu'ūd*, shuts his door and lets down his drapes, but the figure of al-Qā'im/al-Mahdī is not part of that polemic; Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 48, 53. Other evidence from the middle of the third/ninth century also indicates that both Imāmīs and Zaydīs used the expression *qiyām bi-amr allāh* (carrying out the order of God) to describe the role of their imāms and they disputed whether or not that role involved the taking up of arms against opponents; al-Faḍl b. Shādhān, *Kitāb al-Īdāh* (Beirut, 1982), 208 (where he refers to the claim of the 'Alid al-Ḥasan b. al-Ḥasan). Imāmī attempts to identify all the imāms as *mahdī* (in the sense of rightly guided) and *qā'im bi-amr allāh* are attested for the period after the disappearance of the twelfth imām, when Imāmīs advocated the belief in the natural state of existence of that imām in hiding (in *satr* not *ghayba*) and his imminent appearance, but such attempts may well go back to an earlier period; cf. Sa'd al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, 102 ff., at 102, 104 (in his description of Imāmī beliefs in the time of the twelfth imām); Abū Ja'far al-Kulīnī, *al-Kāfi*, ed. 'A. A. Ghaffārī, fourth rev. ed. (Beirut, 1401/1980–1), 1: 526, 536 f. The

and distinguished from the moderate Shīʿī legalists).<sup>79</sup> In the early Sunnī tradition the Mahdī was associated with militant action and establishing the rule of justice, but he did not acquire the epithet of *al-qā'im* or any of the other ideas associated with it in Shīʿī messianist circles.<sup>80</sup> It is thus unlikely that al-Ma'mūn would have used this epithet for the Mahdī, especially when addressing the ʿAbbāsids of Baghdad; the latter would not have recognized the Mahdī as a “riser from death” or “the one who does not die”,<sup>81</sup> and there is no evidence that al-Ma'mūn himself had adopted any of the beliefs of the pro-ʿAlid or pro-ʿAbbāsīd Shīʿī *ghulāt*. A later Imāmī scholar (such as Ibn Ṭāwūs, the redactor of this document), on the other hand, would have been uninhibited in his use of the term *al-Qā'im*; in

foregoing evidence would suggest that the use of the term *qā'im/qiyām bi-amr allāh* to describe the role of their imāms originated among early Imāmīs as a means of countering the docetic doctrine of *al-Qā'im*, and that the notion of *al-Qā'im* as a riser “with the sword” arose among Zaydīs and was meant to counter the quietist Imāmī understanding of the term *al-qiyām bi-amr allāh*.

- 79 On them see Bayhom-Daou, “The second-century Šīʿite *ḡulāt*: were they really gnostic?”, *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 5, 2003, 13–61. Regarding the early Imāmīs, given their legalism and their doctrine of a continuous imāmate, it is reasonable to assume they would have been opposed to most, if not all, forms of Mahdism, and not just to the doctrine of *al-Qā'im*, and this would seem to be largely confirmed by the *firaq* work of Hishām b. al-Ḥakam. However, Hishām appears to have regarded the eschatological Mahdī of the Kaysāniyya/Mukhtāriyya, who will be a living imam and the last of the line (not one who will return from death or *ghayba*), as a relatively moderate doctrine. It is not clear whether he would have advocated a similar doctrine of the Mahdī linked to the line of Imāmī imāms; cf. Bayhom-Daou, “Hishām b. al-Ḥakam (d.179/795) and his doctrine of the imām’s knowledge”, *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 48/1, 2003, at 92 f. Al-Faḍl b. Shādhān is reported to have composed a work on *al-Qā'im* and a number of traditions on the subject are given on his authority in later sources, e.g. in Ṭūsī’s *Kitāb al-Ghayba* (Tehran, 1965), 260–3, 265–77, 281–6; Najāshī, *Kitāb al-Rijāl* (Tehran, 1968), 236. However, the authenticity of those traditions must be suspect. In *al-Īdāh* al-Faḍl uses the terms *imām ʿadl*, *mithl ʿalī*, and *ʿalim bi-mā yaʿtī wa-yadhurr* (who knows what will happen and come forth) for the imām who will establish the rule of justice. It is his opponents, the *ahl al-sunna waʾl-jamāʿa*, who appear to refer to that figure as the Mahdī, and it is they (not the Shīʿa) who ascribe to Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad (al-Bāqir), a tradition about the rising of the Qā'im and his killing of those who falsely profess to be devoted to the imāms. Although al-Faḍl does not attempt to disacknowledge this figure, he clearly prefers to refer to him as *imām ʿadl* and believes he will be one of the living imāms (“like ʿAlī”); *Īdāh*, 208 f.
- 80 The term *qā'im* does not occur in the description of the Mahdī in Nuʿaym’s *Fitan* and, as in the early Shīʿī tradition, the term *khuruḥ* is used much more frequently than *qiyām* to denote his rising to claim the rule; e.g. *Fitan*, 205–7, 208, 215. Where the Mahdī is identified as Jesus, his advent is referred to as *nuzūl* (descent); *ibid.*, 346, 353.
- 81 According to pseudo-Nāshīʿ (d. 236/850), whose account reflects current attitudes within ʿAbbāsīd Shīʿism, the doctrine of “the one who does not die” was held by ʿAbbāsīd *ghulāt* or Khurramiyya groups in Eastern Iran, whereas the Rizāmiyya, whom he envisages as moderate ʿAbbāsīd Shīʿa and believers in a permanent imāmate that would last until the end of time, are credited with the belief that the Mahdī will be the last of the line; *Uṣūl al-Niḥāl*, 32, 35 f. For an analysis of the heresiographical tradition on the ʿAbbāsīd Shīʿa, see Bayhom-Daou, “The second-century Šīʿite *ḡulāt*”, 54–61.

classical post-*ghayba* Imāmism it had become interchangeable with the term al-Mahdī.

Secondly, the caliph mentions the figure of the Ḥasanid whom he identifies as “the avenger and destroyer” and seems to envisage him (as he envisages the Sufyānī) as one of the players in the apocalyptic events surrounding the career of the Ḥusaynid Mahdī. Whilst it is not inconceivable that, like many other Muslims of his time, both Shīʿī and mainstream, our caliph had adopted the belief in a Ḥusaynid (rather than a Ḥasanid or an ʿAbbāsīd) Mahdī,<sup>82</sup> there is a problem with accepting that he had envisaged the Ḥasanid as the avenger and, from the way he refers to him, as a commonly known figure in the apocalyptic tradition. Such a figure is not found in the apocalyptic tradition, where occasionally the Mahdī himself is identified as a Ḥasanid or this identification is explicitly denied in favour of the Mahdī as a Ḥusaynid, and where the slaughterer of the ʿAbbāsīds and destroyer of their caliphate is usually the Sufyānī, himself identified as “the avenger” (*al-thāʿir*) in some traditions.<sup>83</sup> Where a Ḥasanid is mentioned he is either identical with the Pure Soul, the descendant of the Prophet who will be killed in Medina, or a rebel on behalf of his father in Kūfa, whose killing, like that of the Pure Soul, is believed to be one of the signs of the rising of the Mahdī.<sup>84</sup> There are also references to the Ḥasanid as a rival of the Mahdī (but not as the avenger). In the work of the Imāmī al-Nuʿmānī (d. 360/970) the Ḥasanid who rises in Mecca is one of the signs of the Mahdī, which, interestingly, also include internal disputes among the ʿAbbāsīds and the waning of their power. This Ḥasanid hastens to fight ahead of the Mahdī, when the latter himself is about to come out, but he is killed by the Meccans.<sup>85</sup> In a work on the Mahdī by the seventh/thirteenth century Sunnī traditionist al-Sulamī the Ḥasanid appears after the advent of the Mahdī, when large armies have rallied round the latter and they are

82 *EI2*, s.v. “al-Mahdī”.

83 In Nuʿaym *al-thāʿir* is an unidentified figure who rises in Syria after the defeat of the Berbers by Arabs(?) led by a descendant of Ismāʿīl. He is depicted in an unfavourable light and appears to be an enemy of the Banū Hāshim; *Fitan*, 160. According to another tradition, “an avenger”, who is identified as a Qurayshī or a Sufyānid and by the name of ʿAbdallāh, will appear between the first and the second rising of the Sufyānī; *ibid.*, 178. Or, it is the Sufyānī himself who will take vengeance on the ʿAbbāsīds; *ibid.*, 180 f. See also Madelung, “The Sufyānī between tradition and history”, *Studia Islamica*, 63, 1986, 5–48, esp. 46 f. As we have seen, there are also references to a ʿAlid (or, occasionally, to a Hāshimī) other than the Mahdī, who will play some role in the events associated with the advent of the latter. But this figure is nowhere identified as *al-thāʿir* or al-Ḥasanī *al-thāʿir* or associated with wreaking vengeance on the enemies of the Mahdī or of the ʿAlids.

84 For references in Nuʿaym’s *Fitan*, see above notes 66, 67. Cf. Muḥīd, *al-Irshād*, 2: 368, where the Ḥasanid is not the same figure as the Pure Soul, but the killing of both is listed among the signs of the advent of the Mahdī.

85 Al-Nuʿmānī, Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm, *Kitāb al-Ghayba*, ed. ʿA. A. Ghaffārī (Tehran, 1397/1976–7), 270, where the terms used to describe the rising of the Ḥasanid are *taḥarraka* (stirred/rebelled against) and *khurūj*. Nuʿmānī also has a reference to the rising of the avenger (*yathūr al-thāʿir*), which takes place before the rising of the Mahdī, but he is not a rival claimant and nothing identifies him as a/the Ḥasanid; *ibid.*, 275.

marching to the north of Medina. There the Ḥasanid challenges the Mahdī's right to the title, but when the latter performs a miracle he submits to him peacefully and joins his army.<sup>86</sup> As Madelung has rightly observed, accounts such as these were meant to counter earlier predictions making the Mahdī a Ḥasanid.<sup>87</sup> But there is no suggestion in them that this Ḥasanid rival of the Mahdī was conceived of as the avenger. Finally, in the Shī'ī tradition the Mahdī himself, and not a rival of his or some other apocalyptic figure, was sometimes cast in the role of avenger of the blood and rights of 'Alids. This is a role which some Imāmī Shī'īs,<sup>88</sup> as well as mainstream Muslims, tended to reject, although it appears to have been widely accepted among both that his career would involve fighting his enemies and killing those who refuse to submit to his authority.

Madelung has made two other relevant observations: in the seventh/thirteenth century there was much debate between Imāmīs and Sunnīs concerning the identity and descriptions of the Mahdī; and the works of al-Sulamī and later Sunnī traditionists who wrote on the subject are characterized by a general tendency to harmonize the divergent apocalyptic traditions, such as those concerning whether the Mahdī would be a Ḥasanid or a Ḥusaynid.<sup>89</sup> In light of this, it is a reasonable inference that the idea of the Ḥasanid avenger originated in the context of those debates and probably in Imāmī circles. It would have been intended to counter the Shī'ī traditions that ascribed to the Mahdī himself the role of avenger of 'Alid rights. Our redactor Ibn Ṭāwūs, who was active in that period, would have been familiar with the concept and approved of it (he might even have been responsible for formulating it), as it dissociated the twelfth imām and Mahdī from the idea of wreaking vengeance on other Muslims<sup>90</sup> and could serve to make him more acceptable to Sunnīs.<sup>91</sup> When he tried to imagine what al-Ma'mūn would have said about the impending advent of the Mahdī and how he would have threatened with dire consequences his relatives who were persisting in withholding allegiance and demanding that he appoint a 'Abbāsīd successor, Ibn Ṭāwūs might have assumed that the caliph would have been familiar with the "Ḥasanid avenger". Or, more likely, he might have had the caliph mention this figure in a conscious attempt to provide Sunnī corroboration for him. In any case, the evidence examined here would suggest that this figure was unknown in the apocalyptic tradition and unlikely to have existed in the time of al-Ma'mūn. For this reason, and for all the other reasons suggested in this

86 Yūsuf b. Yahya al-Sulamī, *ʿIqd al-durar fī akhbār al-muntaẓar* (Beirut, 1418/1997), 73 f., 101.

87 Madelung, "al-Sufyānī", 8, n. 12, 17 f., n. 46.

88 E.g., Saʿd al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, 71.

89 "al-Mahdī", *EI2*, 1235a, 1236b.

90 Note that in the passage under examination, and in the words of al-Ma'mūn, we are provided with contrasting images of the task of the Ḥasanid as avenger and destroyer and that of the Mahdī as sparer of the blood of Muslims (the unrepentant excepted): the 'Abbāsīds are warned that the Ḥasanid will mow them down and the Mahdī will not spare their blood except for just claim; see above n. 24.

91 See above n. 72.

paper, one may conclude that the caliph himself could not have made that “confession” and, hence, there is no good reason to suppose that in his appointment of al-Riḍā he was motivated by beliefs about the apocalyptic end of the ‘Abbāsids. It remains a valid view that his conception of the caliphal office was the main factor behind the appointment.

### **Postscript**

In his doctoral dissertation “The seventh of the ‘Abbāsids and the millennium: a study of the fourth civil war and the reign of al-Ma’mūn (193–218 A.H./808–833 C.E.)” (University of Chicago, 2002), 199–200, Hayrettin Yucesoy has also suggested that the confession does not appear to be authentic and the relevant passage might well have been an addition.