

# Endzeiten

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# Ibn Ṣayyād as an Islamic "Antichrist". A Reappraisal of the Texts<sup>1</sup>

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The Koran remains silent about the antichrist. But the appearance of antichrist-like figures is predicted in the so-called "Traditions of the Prophet" (Arabic: *ḥadīth*). A Tradition – here written with a capital T – is a report that is traced back to the Prophet Muḥammad by means of a chain of transmitters (*isnād*).<sup>2</sup> Accepting that such reports really go back to the Prophet is an act of faith; orientalist tend to date the bulk of them roughly a century after his death or later.

The Arabic word for antichrist is *al-dajjāl*, which goes back to the Syriac New Testament, *m'shīhē daggālē*, "false messiahs" (Matthew 24:24). This collocation is, in the singular, also frequent in the Tradition literature: *al-mashīh al-dajjāl*, as an alternative for simply *al-dajjāl*.<sup>3</sup> Further on we will use the word *dajjāl*.

The Islamic *dajjāl* will establish a tyrannical rule on earth during 40 days (or 40 years). He is fat, has a reddish face and fuzzy hair, and is blind on his right eye that looks like a swollen grape. On his forehead is written *KFR*, "unbeliever". He misguides the people with false prophecies and miracles; sinners, hypocrites and Jews will follow him. His rule is not absolute: he cannot enter Mecca and Medina, the towns of the Prophet. When his time is up, Jesus will fight and defeat him.<sup>4</sup>

David Cook distinguishes various types of *dajjāl*.<sup>5</sup> One of them is a person named Ibn Ṣayyād, who was a little boy during the lifetime of the Prophet

1 There are three recent studies on Ibn Ṣayyād: David J. Halperin, "The Ibn Ṣayyād traditions and the legend of al-Dajjāl," in *JOS* 96 (1976), p. 213–225; Alfred Morabia, "L'Antéchrist (*ad-dajjāl*) s'est il manifesté du vivant de l'Envoyé d'Allah?," in *JA* 267 (1979), p. 81–99, and David Cook, chapter "The Jewish Dajjāl: Ibn Ṣayyād," in his *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, Princeton 2002, p. 110–117. An older book that is still useful for this subject matter is D. S. Attema, *De Mohammedaansche opvattingen omtrent het tijdstip van den jongsten dag en zijn voortekenen*, Amsterdam 1942.

2 An introductory article on this early Arabic genre is G. H. A. Juynboll, "Hadīth," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*.

3 E.g. T16 in the corpus of texts here below. "T1, T2" etc. refer to the corpus of texts here below.

4 A. Abel, "Dajdjāl," in *EF*.

5 Cook, *Studies* (cf. fn. 1), p. 92–120.

Muhammad and suspected to be the *dajjāl*; it is even told that the Prophet was curious and went to see him to establish his true nature. The boy had visions, had some supernatural knowledge and behaved like a pre-Islamic diviner and/or a prophet. The question whether he was the *dajjāl* or not was left undecided. Some of the Prophet's companions met Ibn Ṣayyād in later years and also wondered about him. Both Halperin and Cook call him the Jewish *dajjāl*, and Cook calls him a puzzle at that. Whether he was that Jewish remains to be seen, but a puzzle he is! I cannot solve the whole puzzle, but at least some parts of it. There are some thirty Traditions about Ibn Ṣayyād, which will be presented in translation at the end of this article.

#### *Splinters of "biography"*

Ibn Ṣayyād exists almost exclusively in the said Traditions and has not much of a life.

Even his name is uncertain: Ibn Ṣayyād or Ibn Ṣā'id. Both mean "son of the hunter". His given name is sometimes Ṣāfi; elsewhere it is 'Abdallāh, which is no more than a stopgap. He has no genealogy or tribal affiliation.<sup>6</sup>

He is said to have been instrumental in the Muslim conquest of the Persian city of Sūs by his mere presence, because the monks and priests on the walls claimed that no army could enter unless the *dajjāl* was in it (T27). That conquest took place in 639 CE.

Allegedly, he was welcomed by the Jews of Iṣfahān during its conquest by the Muslims in 642 CE.<sup>7</sup>

He claims to have had much trouble on account of his reputation of being the *dajjāl*, – but he does so in a prophetic Tradition, which is hardly a historical source (T19–21).

The poet al-Farazdaq<sup>8</sup> is said to have come out of Ibn Ṣayyād's house in Medina (T28). To fit in with the poet's biography, this should have happened after 675. Since Medina was believed to be out of bounds for the *dajjāl*, this would exonerate him – but apparently the text merely aims at emphasising the poet's bad company.

He was reported missing at the battle of al-Ḥarra in 683 (T29). However, the source is a Tradition again, and that battle is very "apocalyptical" and therefore suspect.<sup>9</sup>

6 Is his patronymic a remote reminder of Namrūd (Nimrod), the hunter, who was taught sorcery and divination by the Devil (al-Kisāʾ, *Yūta prophētūrum*, ed. I. Eisenberg, Leiden 1923, p. 125, l. 2)? As for his improbable name Ṣāfi, mentioned in T2, T3, it means "pure".

7 Cook, *Studies* (cf. fn. 1), p. 115. The original Arabic texts are not available to me.

8 Well-known Arabic poet (d. ± 730), see R. Blachère, "al-Farazdaq", in *EF*.

9 L. Vecchia Vaglieri, "al-Ḥarra", in *EF*; Cook, *Studies* (cf. fn. 1), p. 115 and General Index.

Traditions of the Prophet are of no use for historiography, and the few other fragments are all suspicious.

#### *The Jewish dajjāl*

Some of his attributes are indeed Jewish:

In T5, a *dajjāl* is born from a Jewish family, although the identification with Ibn Ṣayyād is only made outside the Tradition, in a short comment by the transmitter. In T10, his mother is Jewish.

In T4a, 4b Ibn Ṣayyād is not Jewish; only in the version T4c he is "a Jewish boy (*ghulām*) with a dangling lock of hair".<sup>10</sup>

The Jews of Iṣfahān welcome him (see above).

When the Prophet asks Ibn Ṣayyād, "Do you testify that I am the Apostle of God?" he answers, "I testify that you are the apostle of the gentiles," and insolently asks whether the Prophet testifies that *he*, Ibn Ṣayyād, is the apostle of God (T1, T3). Wherever is spoken of gentiles, the opposite is Jews. When Muhammad is the apostle of the gentiles, Ibn Ṣayyād must be the apostle of the Jews – the true prophet from his perverted point of view, but of course a horror in the eyes of Muslims. Another *dajjāl*, the one who lived on an island, in the story of the Jassāsa, also referred to Muhammad as "the prophet of the gentiles," there apparently with no degrading intention.<sup>11</sup> The rest remains a puzzle.

Muhammad subjects Ibn Ṣayyād to tests, one of which reminds us of his dealing with Jews. He asks him about the soil of paradise and, as the Prophet has to admit, Ibn Ṣayyād gives the right answer, "White flour, pure musk" (T13).<sup>12</sup> The Prophet himself knows the right answer, since he saw paradise during his ascension, but how could Ibn Ṣayyād obtain such knowledge? In another Tradition Muhammad asks "the Jews" what is the soil of paradise. Their answer is half-baked, for they say, "dough," whereas it should have been "white flour", as in T13. The Prophet comments, "Dough comes from flour,"<sup>13</sup> thereby more or less honouring their attempt. In disputes with Jews, their answers are always incorrect, but often suggest that they do have some knowledge. Either they

10 The lock is not a Jewish characteristic. In pre-Islamic time, young boys (*siḅyān*) wore forehead-locks; their heads were shaven with the exception of one lock. Hence, the lock made Ibn Ṣayyād a young boy, although he is called a *ghulām* here, a somewhat older boy (see below under "Precocity"), and also repulsive, since the Prophet disliked or even forbade this haircut (A. J. Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane*, Leiden 1938–1988, s.v. *dhu'āba* and *qaza'*).

11 Muslim, *Fitan* 119. About this *dajjāl* see Cook, *Studies* (cf. fn. 1), p. 117–120.

12 The reversal in T13 f seems secondary. The narrator must have thought of the creed-episode, where it is also Ibn Ṣayyād who interrogates the Prophet.

13 Tirmidhī, *Tafīr sūra* 74, 3; shorter text in Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* iii, 361.

know the right answer only approximately, or they deliberately falsify it.<sup>14</sup> The frightening thing here is that Ibn Ṣayyād has exactly the right answer to the question. In this respect, he is as good as the prophet himself, and therefore far more dangerous than the average Jew; that seems to be the point of this Tradition. Someone may have isolated this motif from the narratively richer *kāhin*-context (see below) and applied it in a way that reminded of Jews.

Since other Traditions predicted that the *dajjāl* would have followers among the Jews,<sup>15</sup> it is no wonder that Ibn Ṣayyād was given Jewish characteristics. The empty shell of his name was filled up with anything unpleasant, threatening or creepy, and to those who proliferated the Traditions, being Jewish was such a thing. But Ibn Ṣayyād's being a Jew occurs only occasionally. The Jewish characteristics are secondary and not omnipresent enough to call him "a Jewish *dajjāl*".

In T21, Ibn Ṣayyād complains about the way people treat him and argues he is not the *dajjāl*, since he is not Jewish.

In T26, Ibn Ṣayyād himself is not Jewish, but he has a Jewish man accompanying him, which is enough to make him suspect.

#### *Ibn Ṣayyād the kāhin.*

Ibn Ṣayyād has some characteristics of a *kāhin*, a pre-Islamic diviner.<sup>16</sup>

The hairy cloak and murmuring sound are typical. The young Ibn Ṣayyād was lying on his mattress in a hairy cloak of his, from which a murmuring or a low, distant sound was audible (T2, T3, T5, T10).

The Prophet put Ibn Ṣayyād's faculties as a *kāhin* to the test, as people used to do in pre-Islamic times,<sup>17</sup> by concealing something in his mind that the boy had to guess. It was the word *dukhān*, "smoke", or more fully, a koranic verse in which this word occurs, "A day when heaven shall bring a manifest smoke" (Q 44:10). Ibn Ṣayyād only managed to give "*dukkī*" for an answer (T1, T3, T6, T7–8, T10, T15, T18).

Attempts to explain *dukkī* by a speech defect of Ibn Ṣayyād (T18) or as a dialectal variant of *dukhān*,<sup>18</sup> only distract from the tenor of this Tradition,

14 The Jews are supposed to confuse the true with the false and to hide the truth knowingly (Koran 3:71). Cf. Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, p. 382, 295; Muslim, *Ḥudūd* 26.

15 E.g. Muslim, *Ḥudūd* 124.

16 T. Fahd, "Kāhin," in *EF*; idem, *La divination arabe*, Leiden 1966, p. 92–104 et *passim*.

17 Abū al-Faraj al-Isfahānī, *Kiṭāb al-Aghānī*, 24 vols. Cairo 1927–1974, ix, p. 54, quoted by Halperin, *Ibn Ṣayyād Traditions* 219a: a man concealed a grain of wheat in his horse's penis and said to the *kāhin*: "I have concealed something for you that I may test you; see what it is." The *kāhin* knew where to find it.

18 Muḥammad Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī discusses and rejects such attempts in a footnote to his edition of Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Cairo 1955 (at *Ḥudūd* 86=T6a).

which amounts to showing the inadequacy of *kāhin*-knowledge: the boy comes near to the right answer, but fails to produce it in full.

The koranic verse Q 44:10 itself is often apocalyptically explained. There is no unanimity among the exegetes about what the smoke exactly is, but it is counted among the "portents of the Hour that have already passed"<sup>19</sup> – as Ibn Ṣayyād was one himself, if he were the *dajjāl*.

Very secondary is the application of the *dukhān*-motif in a Tradition that deals with the difference of opinion among Muslims: textual variants of Ibn Ṣayyād's answer (*zubb*, *zubb*, *dikk*, *dakk*); obviously all misreadings or misspellings of the original *dukkī* are a motive for the Prophet to reprehend Muslims for having difference of opinion (T15).

The Prophet asks Ibn Ṣayyād what he sees. He answers, "I see a throne upon the sea (or: the water), with snakes around it." Then the Prophet comments, "That is the throne of the Devil" (T4, T10, T12).

"What do you see?" is a normal question to ask a *kāhin*,<sup>20</sup> but here the answer is outright diabolical. Primarily, it was God's throne that was upon the water while He created the heavens and the earth in six days.<sup>21</sup> But the Devil will put his throne on the water as well, as we read in a Tradition:

The throne of the Devil is on the sea (or: the water). (Then) he shall send out his hosts, and the people shall be tempted, and the highest (in rank) with him is the greatest seducer [...].<sup>22</sup>

This counter-throne is presented as one of the portents of the Last Hour. No wonder that Ibn Ṣayyād can see it, for he has knowledge of these portents – being one himself! – and is closely connected to the Devil. God's throne cannot be seen by ordinary mortals, let alone by a shady diviner.

#### *Ibn Ṣayyād the pseudo-prophet*

It is no wonder that Ibn Ṣayyād acts as a prophet, for a Tradition predicts that the Last Hour will not come "before thirty *dajjāls* have gone out, each of them alleging that he is the apostle of God".<sup>23</sup>

There is a certain overlap between diviner and prophet. That Muḥammad used a hairy cloak himself while receiving revelations could hardly be denied, since the Koran alludes to it.<sup>24</sup> But the diviner's typical murmuring sound was explicitly said *not* to be produced by the Prophet.

19 Artama, *Mohammedaansche opvattingen* (cf. fn. 1), p. 29–35.

20 Already the witch of Endor in 1 Samuel 28:13 was asked this question.

21 Koran 11:7.

22 Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* iii, 332, 366, 384; slightly different *ibid.* iii, 314, 354; Muslim, *Ṣiḥīḥ al-munāfiqīn* 66, 67.

23 E.g. Abū Dāwūd, *Mulāḥim* 16/4333.

24 Koran 73:1; 74:1.

Ibn Ṣayyād's claim to prophecy is most manifest in the "creed"-unit (T1, T-4, T8-10). When asked, he recognises Muḥammad only as the apostle of the gentiles; or he does not even answer, but wants to be recognised as the true apostle himself. But Ibn Ṣayyād has many more prophetic characteristics:

"He alleges that there is nothing he meets on his way that does not speak to him" (T14). Muḥammad was spoken to by trees and stones before the first revelation.<sup>26</sup> Ibn Ṣayyād claims the same for himself, thereby implying that he is a prophet.

"My eyes sleep, but my heart does not sleep," says Ibn Ṣayyād in T5. Muḥammad said the same about himself, but it holds true for all prophets in general, "The eyes of prophets sleep, while their hearts are awake".<sup>27</sup>

Ibn Ṣayyād is an exceptional child. Whereas Muḥammad's parents were of outstanding nobility and distinction, the parents of Ibn Ṣayyād are most peculiar, if not creepy (T5). His mother did not give birth for thirty years and then was pregnant with him for twelve months (T18). The pregnancy of Muḥammad's mother did not last that long, but was very special as well, she saw a light coming out of herself, by which she could see the castles of Buṣrā in Syria.<sup>28</sup> Ibn Ṣayyād was born circumcised and with his navel-string cut (T11), just like Muḥammad.<sup>29</sup>

Ibn Ṣayyād's precocity is another attempt to make him resemble a prophet, for prophets are precocious. When Muḥammad was with his wet-nurse, "he grew up like no other boy and before he was two years old, he could eat solid food."<sup>30</sup> Or even stronger, "He grew in one day as much as [another] child in a month, and when he was six months old, he could eat solid food".<sup>31</sup> Jesus was twelve years old when they found him "sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions",<sup>32</sup> and the Gospels of the Infancy

25 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* (= 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hishām, *Das Leben Muḥammads nach Muḥammad ibn Ishāq*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld, 2 vols., Göttingen 1858-60), p. 171; translation by A. Guillaume, *The life of Muḥammad. A translation of Ishāq's (sic!) Sīra* Rasūl Allāh, Oxford 1955. References are here to the pages of the Arabic original only, which are also printed in the margins of the translation; Fahd, *Drumation* (cf. fn. 16), p. 173.

26 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 151; Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wal-mulūk (Annales)*, ed. M.J. de Goeje *et al.*, 16 vols., Leiden 1879-1901, i, p. 1143.

27 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 266, 375; Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt* I, i, p. 113; Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, i, p. 274; Bukhārī, *Manāqib* 24. The wording goes back to Song of Songs 5:2.

28 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* p. 102.

29 M. J. Kister, "... and he was born circumcised ... Some notes on circumcision in Ḥadīth," *Oriens* 34 (1994), p.10-30, esp. p. 12.

30 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* p. 105.

31 Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Nihāya fī gharaīb al-ḥadīth wal-atḥār*, 5 vols., Beirut (Dār al-Fikr) n.d., i, p. 277.

32 Luke 2:46.

abound in examples of his precocity. In his role as a prophet, Ibn Ṣayyād had to follow suit. As a newly born baby he screamed like a boy of one month or even two months old (T18). He was already acting like a *kāhīn* while he was still a child and living with his mother (T2, T3, T5, T10). In another story he was "playing with the boys, being a boy himself" when Muḥammad came to see him (T1, T3, T8, T9). Muḥammad himself once was approached and hit by an invisible person when he was playing with the boys of Quraysh. That person - was it an angel? - came to warn him and gave him a painful punch, because he had uncovered himself during his play, which does not suit a prophet.<sup>33</sup> In another text Gabriel approached him "while he was playing with the boys" in order to open his breast and to purify his heart.<sup>34</sup>

Several Traditions reveal some editing efforts with reference to Ibn Ṣayyād's age. The phrase "being a boy himself" in T1 seems tautologous. The word *ghulām* (pl. *ghilmān*) that is used here means either "boy" in general, or "adolescent boy". T3b-e add that he "had approached puberty", i.e. not yet reached it, which makes him a little boy. A number of texts prefer the word *ṣībān*, "little boys" (T3d-e, T9b-c). In T4c Ibn Ṣayyād is called a *ghulām*, but the fact that he is wearing a forehead-lock makes him a little boy.<sup>35</sup> Why was it so important to make him a little boy? One may assume that sexual maturity is a prerequisite for being a prophet. In the case of Muḥammad, boyhood stands for purity and freedom from sin. From the sins he might have committed as an adult, he was specially protected by God. With Ibn Ṣayyād this is different. He was already associated with evil as a little boy; he was just an evil prodigy.

Two beings (angels, men or birds) come to check on Ibn Ṣayyād. The Prophet's question, "What is it that comes to you?" he answers by saying, "A truth-teller and a liar come to me" (T1). In another story the question is, "What do you see?" and the answer, "I see two truth-tellers and a liar, or: two liars and a truth-teller" (T4).

To begin with, this is reminiscent of the fantastic story about the two angels that will accompany the *dajjāl*:

[...] with him [sc. the *dajjāl*] will be two angels, [...] one on his right side and the other one on his left side, and that is a temptation. The *dajjāl* will say: "Am I not your Lord? Do not I give life and do I not make to die?"<sup>36</sup> Then one of the two angels will say to him: "You lie," which no man will hear; only the other one, who will say to him: "You tell the truth," which will be heard by men, so that they think that he declares the *dajjāl* tells the truth, and that is a temptation [...].<sup>37</sup>

33 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* p. 117.

34 E.g. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. Muḥammad Fu'ād 'Abd al-Baqī, 5 vols., Cairo 1955-56, *Imān* 261.

35 Cf. fn. 10.

36 God says this of himself in Koran 7:172 and 2:258; cf. 44:8.

37 Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* v. 221-222.

