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"The Wonderful Apathy of the Oriental": Famine, War, and Apocalypse in Early Modern Iran

Abstract: Famine and the sword are central symbols of total destruction in the apocalyptic literature of Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Islam. This symbolic framework also shaped early modern interpretations of natural disasters and wartime devastation. This paper examines how apocalyptic beliefs influenced the interpretation of famine and war in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iran. While historians have extensively documented these crises, the religious and cultural transformations that accompanied them remain underexplored. Moreover, the concept of apocalypse in Islam—particularly within the Shi'ite tradition—has received limited scholarly attention. In Qajar Iran, a period marked by frequent famine, conflict, and epidemic disease, apocalyptic thinking flourished. Crises were increasingly interpreted through religious archetypes and cosmic narratives. Drawing on understudied sources such as memoirs, laments, marginalia, and visual representations, this study demonstrates how apocalyptic discourse provided a framework for comprehending catastrophe and imagining redemption through destruction. Using a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach, the paper treats apocalyptic symbolism as a dynamic form of religious interpretation, emphasizing the interplay between cosmic upheaval (*qiyāmah*) and personal transformation through tribulation (*balā*). The portrayal of famine and war as apocalyptic events entails a confrontation with existential questions about the self and its place in divine order. It invests the natural world with theological agency, presenting famine and disaster as expressions of divine intervention and internal moral decay. Apocalyptic

discourse, in this context, not only critiques existing theodicies but also destabilizes Qajar political theology, which sought to legitimize hierarchical authority through claims to divine favor and historical continuity.

Keywords: apocalypse, famine, war, Iran, eschatology.

Introduction

For those who endure mass suffering caused by drought, hunger, and thirst, nature may come to signify the absence, wrath, or imminent arrival of a just God; or, alternatively the presence of malevolent deities. In apocalyptic literature, however, catastrophe is described as the "Day of God." Famine (the 'white death') and war (the 'red death') are often depicted as manifestations of divine wrath and as harbingers of the end of the world — or the dawn of a new creation — across the apocalyptic traditions of Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam.

Yet, this symbolism is not confined to the so-called 'elementary' forms of religion. Believers are often expected to interpret signs in their world and read them in relation to eschatological expectations. Famine and war continue to symbolize the disruption of natural cycles and the collapse of human order. They carry with them warnings of an impending end. They represent two modalities of apocalypse: one emerging from below, through human transgression; the other descending from above, as divine judgment. Whether seen as the nihilistic self-destruction of humankind, the collective suffering of the divine, or a stage in the universe's final transformation, this duality reflects an enduring tension between divine will and human evil. What, then, do famine and war signify for communities that engage apocalyptic literature as a lens for interpreting their own historical crises?

In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Qajar Iran — a period marked by repeated famines, wars, and epidemics — this question acquired particular urgency.[1] Two contrasting depictions of famine in this era illustrate how suffering could be interpreted: A British Army officer who witnessed the Great Persian Famine remarked: "Nobody could endure such scenes if he were not endowed with *the wonderful apathy of the Oriental*: It is the will of God! So, the people die, and no one makes any effort to help" (Dunsterville 2012, 80). Yet, the painter Hossein Behzad complicates this perception of apathy. In his work *The Famine of 1295/1916 in Iran* (Figure 1), Behzad places himself in the foreground as a witness to the devastation. His drawing portrays famine as chaos. The emaciated bodies

1 The Great Persian Famines of the twentieth century are considered one of the most tragic events in the early modern economic and social history of Iran. Valentine Chirol, a British journalist, observed at the beginning of the twentieth century: "Hardly a year passes without famine in some province of Persia" (Chirol 1903, 97). These famines resulted not only from drought, but also from military operations and disruptions in agricultural and food distribution systems. Accounts found in memoirs and historical books provide vivid descriptions of the famines that plagued Persia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the best documented case being the Great Famine of 1288/1871-72. These historical records paint a grim picture of desperation, with people resorting to eating weeds, skeletal remains, bones, and even unburied corpses, which were left to be devoured by scavenging dogs in the streets (see Planhol 1998). Among the most horrifying accounts are those of cannibalism and the killing of children (Smith 1876, 361).

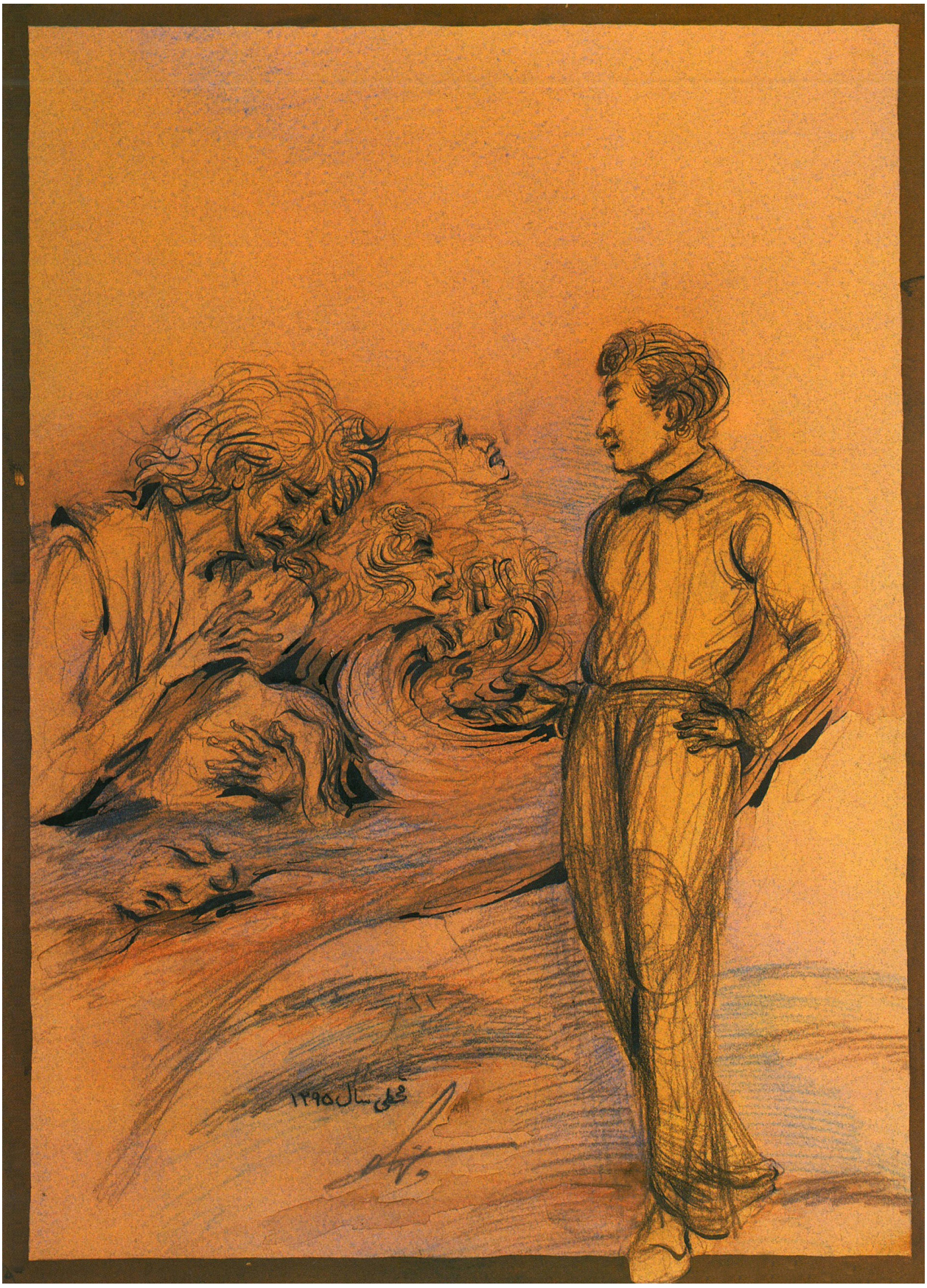

Figure 1. Hussein Behzad, The Famine of 1916 (1916), Maestro Behzad Museum.

of the victims, stripped of clothing and dignity, convey not only physical suffering but a spiritual and cosmic crisis. What the British officer saw as apathy, Behzad might have seen as apocalypse. The wider religious and political implications of this apocalyptic self-understanding in early modern Iran remain largely unexplored, as does the concept of apocalypse in Islam itself. This article does not aim to engage in theological debates or reassess historical findings concerning the Great Persian Famines, nor does it seek to develop a comprehensive eschatological framework. Historians have documented the economic impact of famine and war in this period, but the cultural and religious transformations they unleashed remain understudied.[2]

Abbas Amanat's *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shiʿism* (2009) provides a foundational starting point. He sheds light on a popular apocalyptic sentiment persisted beneath the surface of authoritative political theology, having its roots in the ancient cultural and religious heritage of the region (Amanat 2009, 50). Whereas Amanat focuses on prominent theologians and state institutions, this study shifts the lens to lesser-known clerics and the broader religious imagination of the period. It examines how apocalyptic frames shaped not only popular interpretations of famine and war, but also the theological foundations of political authority in early modern Iran.

Divine Wrath and Messianic Hope

Religious communities in Qajar Iran frequently drew upon Islamic sources to interpret the 'signs' of famine and social upheaval. To uncover the mythic dimensions of such modern discourse, one must explore the ancient associations of the symbolic. This study, therefore, cannot be confined to Islamic sources alone. The fabric of Islamic apocalypticism itself is interwoven with Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian components. Across biblical, Zoroastrian, and Islamic apocalyptic traditions, the dual motifs of 'sword and famine' consistently reveal a shared symbolic grammar of divine wrath and eschatological hope. *Jeremiah* 14:15, *Ezekiel* 5:17, and *Lamentations* 4:9 depict famine and sword as divine curses, culminating in the apocalyptic narrative of the Four Horsemen in *Revelation* 6:1–8. [3] There, the horsemen are empowered to kill "by sword, famine, plague, and wild beasts of the earth." In the Zoroastrian *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg*, the last millennium of Zoroaster is marked by great plague, famine, black snow, red hailstones, and devastating war. Particularly, it envisions a bloodshed so vast that "of mankind one part in three parts will not survive" (Modi

2 For example, see the article "The Social and Economic Impact of Cholera in the Qajar Period" (Nategh 1978).

3 The formula is reiterated fourteen times throughout Jeremiah. Likewise, in Exodus 5:3, Moses and Aaron express apprehension about divine punishment, fearing that Yahweh "may strike us with plagues or with the sword" (The Holy Bible: New International Version). Similarly, in Deuteronomy 32:23–24, the Song of Moses portrays God's judgment through images of wasting famine, consuming pestilence, and deadly plague. The same duality appears in 2 Samuel 24:13, where David faces a choice between famine, fleeing from enemies, and plague as forms of divine retribution.

1903, 34–36). Islamic apocalyptic literature, known as *al-Malāḥim wa al-Fitan*, encompasses a broad spectrum of extraordinary celestial events, terrestrial upheavals, social turmoil, and the emergence of the Dajjāl ("the deceiver," also known as the Antichrist). Famine, hardship, sword, and plague constitute the central apocalyptic signs (*malāḥim*), with the great famine said to originate in the East, accompanied by a tower of fire and widespread war—likely alluding to the uprising and massacre led by al-Sufyānī, a foreboding figure in Shiite eschatology. Like the Zoroastrian myth, only one-third of humanity survives these catastrophes, heralding the dawn of a new world (Algar 1993). This duality is further emphasized in the narrative that "the Mahdī will not come until one-third have died and one-third are killed" (b. Ṭāwūs 1991, 58). Muḥammad al-Bāqir similarly characterizes the apocalypse as a "time of fear and terror," marked by "a sword among the Arabs" and a hunger so severe that people will long for death (al-Nuʿmānī 1997, 337–38). To the apocalyptic imagination, these signs are not confined to the past or to prophecy but resonate as present realities in times of social and political turmoil.

Alongside war and famine, apocalyptic texts sometimes expand the catalogue of signs to include plague, wild beasts, black snow, and red hailstones. At first glance, the motif of war may seem incongruent with the rest of the apocalyptic signs, since war originates in human will, whereas natural disasters appear beyond human control. This ambiguity extends to the diverse and sometimes contradictory answers that apocalyptic literature offers to the question of whether the destruction is inherently evil, ordained by God, or a natural consequence of human sin. It sets the stage for the interpretive frameworks of apocalyptic literature.

Apocalyptic sources could be classified into two broad strata: historical and metahistorical-mythical.[4] On the one hand, apocalyptic texts can be read as *ex eventu* interpretations of historical catastrophes, retrospectively framed as prophetic. This perspective is implied when Domenico Agostini and Samuel Thrope interpret the Zoroastrian *Bundahišn* (Primal Creation) as a form of consolation in the face of the collapse of the Sasanian Empire. Similarly, Sara Kipfer relates the dichotomy of famine and sword in the Hebrew Bible to gendered experiences of destruction: famine reflects internal, feminine-associated suffering within the city, while the sword represents external, masculine death in warfare (Agostini and Thrope 2020; Kipfer 2023, 85). A defining feature of the historical stratum is that eschatological imagination becomes a fertile ground for political and religious thought, particularly in military and imperial contexts (for more examples, see Alexander 2022; Shoemaker 2018).

4 For example, see Cook (2002); Cereti (1995, 26)

On the other hand, the mythical stratum may be understood as an existential mode of relating to the world and the divine. Regarding famine and the sword, Sara Kipfer identifies two linguistic patterns in the Hebrew scriptures: lamentations and supplications, which emphasize human suffering, and penitential prayers—especially common in the post-exilic period—that frame famine and war as divine punishment for collective guilt (Kipfer 2023, 106). In this sense, sword and famine function as a bridge between human agency and divine will, endowing catastrophe with theological meaning, either as a consequence of sin or as stages toward a final historical transformation.

Islamic apocalypticism is closely associated with natural disasters, wars, and celestial phenomena—referred to by the Qur'anic term "Portents of the Hour" (*ashrāṭ al-sāʿa*). The messianic appearance of the Twelfth Imam, Mahdī (b. 869) is also foreshadowed by catastrophic events known as the signs (*ʿalāmāt*) of his advent (*ẓuhūr*) (Amir-Moezzi 2008). Famines in Iran, often occurring amidst political disorder, are thus portrayed through this religious lens. In a Shiʿite narrative (*hadith*), the five mysterious Qur'anic letters (*muqaṭṭaʿāt*) of *ḥā-mīm-ʿain-sīn-qāf* (حم عسق *in* Qur'an 42:1–2) interpret catastrophe as outlining the stages of the apocalypse: "*ḥā-mīm* means that it is determined; *ʿain* is punishment; *sīn* signifies years of famine akin to those of Joseph's time; and *qāf* indicates the final transformation of the world." The Imam continues, "[t]hey will suffer from a famine that will destroy them, and a sword that will shed their blood" (al-Nuʿmānī 1997, 296–97). Similarly, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the first Shiʿite Imam, identifies these dual forces: "Before the coming of the Qāʾim, there will be red death and white death. Red death is by the sword, and white death is by plague" (al-Mufīd 1882, 372). Despite their prominence, the motifs of sword and famine in Islamic eschatology remain understudied. Yet this dual structure has proven fruitful for political and national elaborations.

The Zoroastrian work in Middle Persian *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg* (*Memorial of Jāmāsp*) offers perhaps the fullest mythical elaboration of punishment and messianism. In a lengthy passage, it foretells the end of Zoroaster's millennium:

> Those men who are at that time will all become covenant-breakers. One with another they will be vengeful and envious and false. And for that reason, Eranšahr will be delivered up to the Tāčiks[.] [...] Men will turn to unrighteousness and falsehood[;] [...] And ultimately deaths will abound[;] [...] And the atmosphere will be confounded [...] And the earth will be corrupt and injurious and will cause much desolation[.] [...] Then *Spandārmad* will cry aloud to *Ohrmazd*, saying: I cannot melt

> away this evil and badness. I am turned upside down and I turn mankind here upside down [...] An evil spirit who is called *Vat-yavakān* ("causer of bad crops") was bound during the reign of Jam, but escaped from his bonds in the reign of Bēvarasp[,] [...] he diminishes the crop of corn[.] [...] Afterwards a man will arise from the Southern quarter[,] [...] and will seize lands by violence and cause much bloodshed[.] [...] Near the shore of the sea a man will see Mihr Yazd, who will reveal many hidden secrets[.] [...] He will slay so many of the enemies, that their number cannot be counted[.] [...] The time of the wolves will pass away, and the time of the sheep will enter in (Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg: 16 as cited in Bailey 1930; 1931)

Here, the distinction between human action and natural disorder collapses. On one hand, nature's disruption results from human sin; on the other, political catastrophes—like conquest—are depicted as divinely sanctioned. Climate disorder is expressed ambivalently—either passively (*vižandiheta*, 'the earth will be corrupt') or actively (*zamik vižandēnand*, 'they injure the earth'). The word *vināskār* (injury) alternatively implies moral corruption and utilizing fraud (Baily 1930, 75). *Spandārmad*, divinity of sacred devotion to the earth, cries to the creator deity Ohrmazd that she can no longer restrain the chaos, threatening to turn mankind upside down, metaphorically inverting the natural and moral order of human life and plunging society into confusion, suffering and ethical disorientation (74–75 as cited in Bailey 1931, 582). Even wind and fire harm humans, "because of the great grief and wrong they do." Finally, the imprisoned evil spirit *Vat-yavakān*, 'causer of bad crops,' is released and collaborates with the king to ruin the harvest, leaving people to face famine (78-80 in Bailey 1931, 583). The narrative reverses common assumptions: it locates the root of cosmic imbalance not in external enemies but in internal moral decay. Yet, it simultaneously presents the conquest by the foreigner Tāčiks as an external judgment. This tension, furthermore, reflects an enduring theme of national purity, in which ultimate blame lies with corrupting outsiders, echoing the roles of Gog and Magog in other Abrahamic traditions.[5] Amid this chaos, a moment of divine revelation gives rise to a messianic figure, who reclaims ancestral glory, defeats the enemies, and ushers in a new era of righteousness. Transitioning to the Qajar period, these apocalyptic symbols, taken literally by modern writers, serve as powerful tools for reconfiguring history. They offer hope and meaning in times of crisis. The central question is not how systematic theology has interpreted these signs, but how they have been understood by religious populations, and

5 The anthologies Gog and Magog (Tamer and Jandeisek 2023) deal with this story in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. According to Ezekiel 38–39, Gog and Magog embody evil and will be eschatologically destroyed by God. Some apocalyptic sources attribute them to specific groups and nations.

how such interpretations shaped collective responses to catastrophe in early modern Iran.

Method and Primary Sources

This research focuses on popular apocalyptic speculations that reflect the Qajar (1786–1925) social and religious milieu, even though they occupy no formal position within theological discourse. Since the time of Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī (1627–1699), numerous theological treatises by prominent religious authorities (*marāji'*) have addressed Shi'ite Islamic eschatology and messianism. However, in early modern Iran, apocalyptic sentiments were often more vividly expressed in writings by lesser-known figures appearing in short testimonies, laments, marginalia, memoirs, health protocols, and astrological commentaries. While these texts may lack coherent theological argumentation or methodological rigor by scholastic standards, they can be seen as popular responses to, or reinterpretations of, the prevailing political theology under the Safavid (1501–1736) and Qajar dynasties, both of which shaped official representations of Shi'ite Islamic messianism.

Several manuscripts warrant special attention for their relevance to this study.[6] *Risālah ʿIbrat al-Nāẓirīn wa Ḥīrat al-Ḥāḍirīn* (*A Lesson for the Observers and Amazement for the Present*), authored by a secretary in the court of Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh Qajar, offers detailed reflections on apocalyptic themes. Similarly, *Risālah Tanbīh al-Ghāfilīn wa ʿIbrat li al-Nāẓirīn dar Qaḥṭī Isfahān* (*An Admonition for the Inattentive and a Lesson for the Observers in the Drought of Isfahan*), composed by a prominent Isfahani cleric and poet, combines mysticism with reflections on famine. An untitled text by the relatively obscure cleric ʿAṭā-Ābādī of Isfahan interprets celestial phenomena as omens preceding the famine of 1871. *Mīrāt al-Īmān fī Aḥwāl Amnā' al-Raḥmān* (*The Mirror of Faith in the States of the Custodians of the Most Merciful*), which comprises the final chapter of a hagiographical work on the Mahdi, links the 1918 famine to signs of his advent. Another significant source is a series of three untitled manuscripts by Mu'min al-Mamālik Hamadānī, which juxtapose the famines of 1872, 1898, and 1918, exploring their apocalyptic implications.

Additional sources include *Maṭlaʿ al-Anwār min Mashāriq al-Aṭhār* (*The Rising of Lights from the Purest of the Easts*), *Muntaqal al-Maqāl* (*The Conclusion of the Discourse*), *Riyāḍ al-Arwāḥ* (*Gardens of Souls*), *Jāmiʿ al-Faḍā'il* (*The Collection of Virtues*), *Shikāyat az Qaḥṭī va Bīmārī be Imām Zamān* (*Complaint of Famine and Illness to Imam Zaman*), and *Vaqāyeʿ Sāl-e Qaḥṭī Qom* (*The Events of Qom's Famine Year*). Furthermore, two

6 The texts analysed in this article are drawn from 18 sources preserved in the archives of the Parliament Library, the Library of Ayatollah Marashi Najafi in Iran, and the Library of the Centre for the Revival of Islamic Heritage in Iraq. They were either accessed directly in handwritten form or transcribed and published publically by historians.

untitled texts by Sāvejī and Kūchak Beygī, along with three additional manuscripts transcribed by the historian Rasūl Jafarian on the famines of 1831 and 1872, provide valuable insights into the apocalyptic framing of famine.

This analysis employs a phenomenological hermeneutics of famine and war, suspending questions of historical 'reality.' These texts are approached not as objective records but as religious and metaphorical discourses in which truth is communicated through expressive and symbolic language. The concepts of famine, war, and apocalypse are examined in their most immediate and spontaneous forms, gradually revealing their deeper scriptural and mythic frameworks through an iterative process. Even the lack of bread—the typical sign of material famine—is shown to carry existential and mythical meanings. This method enables an inner understanding of apocalyptic motifs and their roots in religious imagination. It also sheds light on how such concepts generate meaning in both individual and collective experiences of suffering.

Catastrophe as Apocalypse

Catastrophe does not present a single, unified image of the apocalypse. Instead, the texts present a fragmented tableau of famine and chaos: hunger, disorder, cannibalism, scattered corpses and celestial disturbances, as well as religious responses—prayer, protest and hope (see note 2). This section explores the symbolic significance of these motifs and their narrative function in apocalyptic discourse. In the sources examined, apocalyptic imagery operates on two interwoven exoteric and esoteric levels: The former, represented by *qiyāmah* (resurrection), denotes an external upheaval with socio-political and cosmic ramifications; the latter, *balā* (tribulation), refers to an internal process of testing and suffering. Together they articulate the possibility of both cosmic and personal apocalypse. The question of how this framework might have led to social and political implications is discussed in the final part.

1.1. *Balā* and Purification

Victims of famine cry out for bread—the most basic form of sustenance—which becomes the ultimate determinant between survival and death (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 139). A stark illustration of this is the assertion that "a hundred lives are worth a loaf of bread" (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 138). In famine, bread transcends its mundane role and becomes obtainable only through the most extreme currency: life itself

(Mullah Muhammad Ibrahim 1918). The boundary between bread and the human soul blurs. Sufferers are described as losing their soul in the desperate search for bread (Badaye Negar 1887, 33). Bread, in this sense, is more than bodily sustenance; it serves as spiritual nourishment. It is said to "traverse the levels" within the person, eventually elevating the individual to a full human being (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 136). The significance of bread is such that earning it precedes the purification of both heart and soul (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 137).

This interchangeability of bread, soul, and life gives rise to the mystification of bread. During famine, the usual order of things is reversed: the hungry find no bread, while those with bread lack the will to eat (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 137). Bread becomes an enigma, both sacred and elusive. Lamentations and prayers for bread fill the air, the word 'bread' rippling through the streets like waves (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 145; Kurdi 1829). Bread is sanctified and compared to the sun, "visible only in the sky" (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 138). Over time, this image becomes a religious vision; cries for bread reach the heavens. Its association with religious symbolism is such that some claim, "if you ever brought bread to the pulpit, it was as if you brought a prophet" (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 138). In famine, bread is transfigured into a sacred object, embodying both desperation and spiritual hope. This view transforms hunger into an element of spiritual trial and divine judgment.

Hunger has been described as "the tribulation of famine and drought" (*balā-ye qaḥṭ wa ghalā'*) by one author (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 135). This associates the tribulation (*balā*) with the will of God. In the Qur'an, *balā* is an ambivalent concept. According to a commentator, it can signify both favour and vengeance, with its root meaning tied to testing: "first scourge and then praise" (al-Ṭabarsī 1995, 226). The word *tublā*, derived from the same root (b-l-y), implies revelation in the apocalyptic verse: "the day when the secrets will be [tested and examined and] laid bare" (Qur'an 86:9).[7] Thus, tribulation as divine test becomes an interpretive lens for eschatological thinking.

A common metaphor for this test is the sieve (*gharbāl*), symbolising the separation of the righteous Shiʿites. Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq describes this process as one of "distinguishing" (*tamyīz*), "scrutiny" (*tamḥīṣ*), and "transformation" (*tabdīl*), involving both "a famine that will devastate them and a sword that will spill their blood" (al-Nuʿmānī 1997, 291). The notion of redemption through suffering resonates with the Zoroastrian hope for the Final Body, which can only be attained by those who "bear the tribute, the harm, and the evil" (Zand ī Wahman Yašt 4:67 *in* Cereti 1995, 158). A mythical figure that exemplifies tribulation is Dajjāl, the false messiah,

7 All Qur'anic translations are taken from Nasr (2015).

who emerges in the end times alongside ecological catastrophes such as famine. He possesses the mysterious ability to grant tempting rains and sustenance (Algar 1993). However, the faithful are called to endure his false offerings; only after the true messiah, the *Qāʾim*, triumphs will divine rain return: "the sky will rain like in the time of Adam, and the earth will bring forth its blessings, and my community will live in his time a life that it had never lived before" (b. Ṭāwūs 1991, 165).

In the formula of famine and sword, fear sometimes replaces the latter. The Qur'an promises to "test [believers] with something of fear (*al-khawf*) and hunger (*al-jūʿ*)" (Qur'an 2:155). Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq interprets this fear as originating from "the rulers of a dynasty in the twilight of their reign" (al-Nuʿmānī 1997, 250). A writer during the famine of 1898 recounts suffering from deep depression and anxiety (Hamadani 1898). Another describes hunger transfiguring into an overwhelming fear of death, leaving people with nothing but "the fear of death and the torment of hunger," their minds "burdened in the bones," and their hearts "lost in the bush of tumult"—even lovers forget their love (Badaye Negar 1887, 33; Kurdi 1829). Faces wither, eyes are hollowed by despair, and people seek death (Badaye Negar 1887, 33).

The concept of apocalypse as *balā* introduces an existential imperative to act in the face of suffering. Yet, crises are not solely triggered by nature, human action also plays a role. Social inaction exacerbates catastrophe, exposing moral decay. Despite some charitable efforts—donations and hospices (*dar al-ʿajzah*)—compassion declines and "hearts have hardened" (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 140; Badaye Negar 1887). The result is an earthly hell, where the poor suffer while the rich remain indifferent, indulging in luxury and treating famine as their promised heaven (Anonymous 1872a). When the rich open shops, it is likened to doomsday; the baker becomes "the infernal owner of lives" (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 145). The famine is less a natural disaster than a reflection of human sin, which is also illustrated in the Zoroastrian *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg* (26–30 as cited in Baily 1930, 57–58).

Famine becomes the outer garment of sin and fear (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 135). The Qur'anic phrase "the garment of hunger and fear" (Qur'an 16:112) captures this embodiment. Seers believe that only God can deliver the victims from the wrath provoked by human actions (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 146; Hamadani 1898; Gilani 1837). Sin, especially *kufr* (unbelief) and *kufr-e niʿmat* (ingratitude for divine provision), is the root cause of the *balā* (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 135). As the Qur'an states, "[i]f you give thanks, I shall surely grant you increase; but if you are ungrateful, truly My Punishment is severe!" (Qur'an 14:7). In response to

guilt, God unleashes his wrath, leading sinners to endure hunger and ultimately perish in the abyss (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 135). Some writers blame the calamities directly on the greed and envy of ascetics and clerics (Anonymous 1831; Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 136).

Thus, famine and war are both divine judgement and revelations of sin. For seers, the true apocalypse is the loss of religion. The *sharīʿa* becomes illusory, and disbelief spreads (Gilānī 1995 [1916], 150). In *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg*, famine signals the end of the millennium of Pure Religion, (1-6 as cited in Bailey 1930, 55) while *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* blames the failure of rain on the rise of the "religion of wealth" (4:41 as cited in Cereti 1995, 156). People ridicule religious figures and mock divine law (Anonymous 1872b). As one author laments, "day by day, the intensity and abundance of sin has increased" (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 135). The concern is not only over famine as punishment, but sin's corrosive effect on faith.

In these conditions, cannibalism becomes the most transgressive symbol of famine. One report describes a youth killed for two loaves of barley bread (Safari 2014, 141); others describe the year 1288 AH [1872] as "the time when cannibalism became common" (Hamadani 1872). Reports include people eating carrion, dogs, human flesh, and even their own children (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 142; Badaye Negar 1887, 32; Ata'abadi 1871; Gilani 1837; Mullah Muhammad Ibrahim 1918). Such horror recalls the biblical famine curses in Ezekiel 5, where cannibalism and divine judgment are parallel motifs: "Parents will eat their children, and children will eat their parents" (5:10); followed by "a third shall die of famine [...] a third shall fall by the sword" (5:12). These verses are taken to reflect Ezekiel's horror during the siege of Samaria (Block 1997, 204). What these apocalyptic images reflect is a deep historical connection between political crisis, sin, and famine that still shapes our experience of trauma.

Famine thus becomes both the prelude to and the condition of messianic intervention. Some describe it as a necessary cleansing: a *purging* (*tanqiya*) for a world saturated with sin. One writer calls it "a purging for the corrupt blood that had accumulated in the veins of the world," ([Anonymous] 1831) requiring the sword of the *qāʾim* (messiah) to redeem it (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 136). This parallels Zoroastrian hopes for *Hōshēdar*, who will "cleanse the whole country" (Modi 1903, 122). This notion of purification becomes even clearer when we consider that famine does not refer to the sword of the foreign enemy, nor does it comfort the nation after it has been defeated in great wars, but the sword is possessed by the messiah and the whole world is expected to be relieved. The famine apocalypse becomes not merely a sign of destruction, but a

medium of purification, an unveiling that redeems the community, the cosmos, and even the reader.

In conclusion, the apocalyptic lens reframes famine not as a mere ecological event but as a theological and moral crisis. It reveals a structure of divine testing that implicates both the soul and society. Here, famine is not simply suffered—it is interpreted, moralized, and mythologized. The apocalyptic seer does not just witness the end; they discern its meaning. And that meaning demands transformation. The apocalyptic framing of famine reveals deeper anxieties about human morality, social collapse, and divine judgement: Famine punishes, purifies, and unveils. For the apocalyptic seer, the collapse of nature is the externalisation of the inward moral disintegration.

1.2. *Qiyāmah* in the Flesh

Authors frequently liken famine to the Day of Resurrection (*yawm al-qiyāmah*) (Badaye Negar 1887, 22), a Qur'anic term denoting the Last Day.[8] Victims' bodies are said to litter the streets (Mullah Muhammad Ibrahim 1918), with the dead piled upon one another, transforming once-fertile lands into vast cemeteries (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 138). One author describes people standing "naked like on Doomsday," while a poet prays amidst the devastation, lamenting: "O Lord, what an apocalypse (*qiyāmah*) at this end of time" (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 138; Gilānī 1995 [1916], 149). While the Arabic term's etymology is sometimes traced back to the Christian concept of resurrection (*ἀνάστασις*), Muslim commentators link it to the Arabic root *q-a-m* (to rise), evoking the image of the dead emerging from their graves (al-Ṭabarsī 1995, 352). The authors, however, envision the surface-level accumulation of corpses itself as a form of resurrection.

The integration of religious prophecy with contemporary calamities deepens the apocalyptic interpretation of famine and political collapse. One account reports that "one-third" of the population perished due to hunger, leaving the country devastated (Ahrabi Tabrizi 1872). Frequently cited *hadith* from the Sixth Imam, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, states that "[the end of time] will not occur until nine-tenths of the people are destroyed," providing a religious framework to comprehend the staggering mortality rate (Ahrabi Tabrizi 1872; al-Nuʿmānī 1997, 393).

The living are also cast in apocalyptic imagery: Their breath is "caught in their throats," and only "one out of ten" of the poor survives (Badaye Negar 1887, 33). Poverty isolates the afflicted as if they were lepers, and fathers turn away from sons (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 140; Anonymous 1872b). These depictions echo Qur'anic eschatology, in which "a man will

8 "When the Event befalls, none shall deny its befalling, abasing, exalting. When the earth is violently shaken, and the mountains are pulverized into powder, becoming scattered dust" (Qur'an 56: 1–6).

flee from his brother" and each person will be absorbed in his own concerns (Qur'an 80:34, 37), and resemble Zoroastrian *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg*, where familial bonds dissolve and sons rise against fathers (15–18 as cited in Bailey 1930, 56). Such motifs signal moral and social disintegration within a world suffused by eschatological fear.

For the afflicted, the crisis soon becomes cosmic. Survival hinges on rainfall, which now "withholds" its blessings (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 138). Heaven appears estranged from the Earth yet mirrors its turmoil. The sky and earth, often symbolically transcendent, are personified as agents of divine justice or wrath. Famine is attributed to the sky's "stinginess," and though the Earth expresses remorse, it offers no relief (Damghani 1872). A poem portrays this celestial rupture, with the Earth flinging dust at the sky in a warlike gesture (Safari 2020, 247). The celestial sphere (*falak*) gains religious significance, as death becomes metaphorically framed: heaven is imagined as fitting shoes for the dead and hurling stones of sedition from above (Safari 2020, 244; Hamadani 1898).

Such cosmic combat is interpreted as part of the eschatological timeline. *Hadiths* that speak of the "change of time" and the emergence of "signs of the Day of Resurrection" are occasionally referenced (Ahrabi Tabrizi 1872; Damghani 1872). These signs are sometimes described with ambiguity, as in the phrase: "God knows about it before and after" ([Anonymous] 1831). A notable temporal sign is the alignment of the Jalālī and Hijrī calendars, symbolising the synchronisation of lunar and solar cycles. Shi'ite traditions identify the alignment of Nowruz and the Day of Ashura as an apocalyptic marker. One 1872 text links catastrophe to Nowruz falling on a Wednesday that coincided with Ashura (Ahrabi Tabrizi 1872), while another finds hope in their future alignment at the fourth hour of Ashura day (Hamadani 1872; Ata'abadi 1871). In this vision, historical turning points emerge from a dialectic of despair and hope.

Celestial phenomena—including the "astronomical events of that year" (Hamadani 1872)—are recounted as divine portents. Descriptions of thunder and lightning so intense that a pregnant woman gives birth, hailstones falling within half an hour, and extended thunderous sounds that prompt the recitation of Surah Ya-Sin (Qur'an 36) blend meteorology with eschatology ([Anonymous] 1831). One account describes an extraordinary meteor shower:

> Almost two hours before dawn, suddenly all the stars in the sky were in turmoil [...] meteors appeared from all directions [...] darkness turned to light, resembling daylight. A star then rose in the east, bright red, covering half the sky... the air turned yellow... just before sunrise, an

> intense whiteness appeared… Six months later, red salty soil rained down, rotting the crops and trees (Ata'abadi 1871).

The apocalyptic tone of these descriptions evokes prophetic hadiths and reinforce a cosmological reading of crisis. Visions by Muḥammad al-Bāqir of "a large yellow and red fire" in the East (al-Nuʿmānī 1997, 366–67) and by ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib of a red mass as the "tears of the bearers of the throne" (al-Nuʿmānī 1997, 212) mirror such symbolism. The appearance of a bright star, followed by famine and drought, further accentuates the association between celestial events and apocalypse ([Anonymous] 1831). The prophecy culminates in the foretelling of mass death—"Drought in the east, drought in the west, a reddish tinge in the air, and sudden death towards the Kaaba" ([Anonymous] 1831)—referring specifically to the "death of Hajj pilgrims" as an eschatological marker (b. Ṭāwūs 1991, 43). Another *hadith* predicts "a pillar of fire rising from the east," instructing believers to prepare provisions for a year (b. Ṭāwūs 1991, 45).

This worldview found fertile ground in the rise of nineteenth-century popular apocalypticism, marked by eschatological calculations and prophetic revival. In particular, the fourteenth-century mystic Shāh Niʿmatullāh Walī's prophecies experienced a renaissance, anticipating wars, famine, and economic disorder in Iran (Jafarian 2012, 133–35). The alignment of global conflicts, plagues, and famine suggested an apocalyptic convergence on a 'universal' scale. Typhoid, cholera, and dysentery decimated populations (Gilani 1837; Hamadani 1918), while one writer described "the entire world" engulfed by crime and insecurity (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 141). Telegraphic reports confirmed the global dimensions of the crisis, indicating famine stretching from India to Rome (Safari 2014, 141; Ata'abadi 1871). In these texts, the apocalypse was no longer a narrow, national fear but the dawning of a broader cosmic consciousness. In refusing to contain catastrophe within national or sectarian frames, these visions urged a break from sanctioned political theologies. What emerged on the horizon of *qiyāmah* was an interrogation of the world as it was.

1.3. Apocalypticism and the Crisis of Shiʿi Authority

The fact that the crisis extends even to 'foreigners' undermines nationalistic interpretations of famine commonly found in historical apocalyptic narratives. *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* (4:3), for instance, demonizes foreigners as descendants of the demon of wrath (*Xēšm*). Yet in the accounts of early modern Iranian victims, 'enemy' is no longer the agent of punishment. Instead, suffering appears as a universal affliction that transcends borders

and human covenants. The catastrophe reaches such proportions that it seems as if the entire planet is engulfed in famine and drought, with the cosmos itself transformed into a famine-stricken entity (Mullah Muhammad Ibrahim 1918).

This is no longer a localized crisis but a "universal state of affairs" (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 138). The calamity envelops the entire horizon, as the world is scorched by disaster and the cosmos immersed in suffering (Badaye Negar 1887, 22; Gilānī 1995 [1916], 149). A poet captures this cosmic despair by describing the year of the famine as a "dark era" (Mullah Muhammad Ibrahim 1918). Tragedy is manifested in the disruption of cosmic order. Famine and war are not only signs of the end times; they are the *ashrāṭ*, the conditions of the end. Although some texts attempt to offer theodicies, the sheer magnitude of suffering resists religious justification. The crisis appears devoid of divine purpose, marked instead by widespread injustice and the apparent triumph of evil (Mullah Muhammad Ibrahim 1918).

The death of spiritual leaders is framed as a further sign of cosmic disorder. Seven of the "learned scholars" from Iraq and other regions are reported dead, alongside several "descendants of the Imams" (*sādāts*) (Ahrabi Tabrizi 1872; Hamadani 1898). The injustice of famine is represented through the economy of bodily and terrestrial exchange: humans are nourished by the earth for a few days, yet must nourish it in return until the Day of Judgment (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 144). This absurd imbalance becomes part of a demonic vision of existence:

> Eternity is nothing but life after life, and life is nothing but waste and illusion. There is no good in this world, where what is lawful (*ḥalāl*) results in reckoning, and what is forbidden (*ḥarām*) results in punishment[.] [...] And thus, time draws its sword and unleashes its injustice and cruelty upon us, leaving us nothing but sorrow and remorse (Damghani 1872).

The injustice of famines reflects a cosmic disorder where the earth itself becomes hostile to the body, no longer reciprocal or nourishing. The world is imagined not only as broken but as fundamentally alienated from the victims. In this way, famine is a theological and ontological problem—a sign of a universe infused with evil or futility. This outlook resonates with a gnostic vision, where the material world is understood as ruled by evil forces.

Such visions challenged the theological foundations of both Safavid and Qajar political ideologies. These regimes sought legitimacy by posi-

tioning themselves within Shi'ite eschatology: the Safavids promoted the notion of "a divinely guided state at the end of time" (*dawlatunā fī ākhir al-zamān*), where the ruler's function was both political and spiritual, preparing the world for the return of the Twelfth Imam (Jafarian 2012, 125–36). The theologian Majlisī played a pivotal role in aligning Twelver Shi'ite theology with the Safavid state (Majlisī 1983, 243). Under the Qajars (1794–1925), the *ulama*, particularly those of the mainstream clerical Usuli tradition, whose authority was a direct legacy of the Safavid period, became a dominant religious force, prioritizing doctrinal orthodoxy and jurisprudential authority (Amir-Moezzi 2007).

Yet, this clerical establishment faced growing disillusionment during the famines of the nineteenth century (Chirol 1903, 97). According to Eastwick, mobs in Tehran once attempted to "throng to death" the *imam jom'e* in protest against soaring bread prices (Abrahamian 1982, 42). Disenfranchised masses turned instead to symbolic protests such as *bast nishīnī* (seeking refuge in shrines), signalling a breakdown in the authority of the religious elite (Calmard 1998). These crises catalysed a theological rupture: apocalyptic hope no longer resided safely in the future but erupted into the present through heterodox visions, messianic uprisings, and public unrest (Abrahamian 1982, 69–81). While the institutional framework of Qajar Iran sought to contain such forces, their very failure to address urgent crises inadvertently fostered revolutionary energies that would draw on the same eschatological narratives for legitimacy.

This atmosphere of religious uncertainty also enabled the rise of alternative religious currents. One response was the growth of esoteric movements such as Shaykhism, which emphasized the spiritual presence of the hidden Imam and anticipated his imminent return. Jafarian has characterized this trend as the "return of *ghuluw* (exaggeration) to Shi'ite thought" (Jafarian 2018). Violent clashes between Shaykhis and traditional clerics led to riots, deaths, and the destruction of property (Hamadani 1898). Famines intensified the unrest, as rebels accused the ruling elite of being powerless against the forces of disorder, "shaking the borders of the country" (Badaye Negar 1887, 8; 26).

Another powerful expression of apocalyptic imagination came through messianic claims. The most influential were the Bāb (ʿAlī Moḥammad), founder of Bābism, and Mahdi Soudani, who led anti-colonial revolts in Sudan in the 1880s. The Mahdi Movement's victory over British and Egyptian forces inspired admiration in Iran (Jafarian 2012, 205–08). The Bāb (literally Gateway [to the Hidden Imam]), initially a Shaykhi follower, claimed to herald the imminent return of the Promised Imam and declared that "in a certain month of Muharram[9] or Nowruz[10] is the time

9 The first month of the Islamic calendar when warfare is forbidden, but the Battle of Karbala, which led to the martyrdom of the Third Imam, took place during this month.
10 First day of the year according to the Persian calendar.

of emergence [of Qāʾim] and the rule of truth" (Boroujerdi 2020 [1852], 7–12; Jafarian 2012, 230–37). This prophetic declaration contributed to the popular interpretation of the 1872 famine as an apocalyptic event.

This theological rupture, sharpened by famine, loss, and cosmic disorder, eroded trust in both clerical authority and political legitimacy. Apocalyptic imagination thus becomes a medium for expressing both existential despair and eschatological yearning. Famine, in this context, is not merely a physical crisis but a theological indictment: a sign of a world out of joint, where divine justice, cosmic order, and historical agency are all thrown into question. As millenarian movements challenged established interpretations of Shi'ite eschatology, and messianic figures mobilized the masses, the religious imagination laid the groundwork for political revolt. These apocalyptic ideas, therefore, should not be seen as isolated theological reactions.

Conclusion

Humanity continues to rely on ancient mythical languages to navigate the disorder of existence. The earth, once conceived as a reflection of divine harmony and a source of providence, becomes resistant to human control. The image of a just and benevolent God grows increasingly difficult to reconcile with lived reality. Social hierarchies disintegrate, and humanity is confronted with a profound existential rupture: the perceived loss of mastery over nature and history. A crucial motif in this discourse is the transformation of the "sword": no longer a symbol of foreign conquest, it becomes the Messiah's instrument of cosmic justice. This reconfiguration undermines both imperial and nationalist eschatologies, shifting divine wrath from the realm of external invasion to the domain of internal moral decay. Ultimately, the apocalyptic experience—whether of famine, war, or systemic collapse—illuminates the fragility of human institutions and compels a confrontation with uncomfortable truths about collective complicity. Yet it also offers the possibility of transcendence through the very destruction that threatens to unravel the world. The apocalyptic horizon thus emerges as a liminal space in which the ultimate realities of existence are disclosed.

When the totality of order is ruptured and suffering intensifies to the point where "death may seem preferable to enduring anxiety," (Badaye Negar 1887, 33) the seer survives by transmuting catastrophe into redemptive knowledge. In such moments, apocalypse ceases to be merely a terminal event and becomes a revelation, a mode of epistemological confronta-

tion with truths obscured by normative structures. This transformation is exemplified in Figure 1 that opens this article, where the painter depicts himself as the sole standing figure amid scenes of ruin, perhaps the only survivor—not despite the devastation—but through the act of seeing. Similarly, a diarist's reflection that recording such bitter memories was only possible "by Divine grace" (Jafarian and Koushki 2008, 139) underscores witnessing as a sacred act, one in which testimony becomes a medium of survival and meaning-making.

Apocalyptic discourse, in this sense, functions as a counter-history—an insurgent hermeneutic—which disrupts dominant narratives and opens space for revolutionary imaginaries. It interrogates the sufficiency of traditional theodicies and fuels millenarian and gnostic reinterpretations of salvation history. Future research would benefit from a closer examination of how these esoteric paradigms of Shi'ite messianism shaped the ideological contours of Iran's Constitutional Revolution: a legacy that remains acutely resonant in contemporary debates on political theology.

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