

**Ibn ‘Asakir (1105–1176): Muslim Historian and Advocate of  
Jihad against Christian Crusaders and Shi‘ite Muslims**

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***Introduction***

On the authority of Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Abdullah, the son of ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab (may God be pleased with them both), who said: I heard the Messenger of God (may blessings and peace of God be upon him) say:

Islam has been built on five [pillars]: testifying that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God, performing the prayers, paying the *zakat*, making the pilgrimage to the House, and fasting in Ramadan (Ibrahim and Johnson-Davies 1976).

As the *hadith* cited above indicates, Muslim scholars have long described the basic ritual practices of Islam in architectural terms. They refer to them as the five pillars (*al-arkan al-khamsa*); the supports that define one’s submission (*islam*) to God. The five pillars upon which the entire edifice of Islam rests are statement of belief (*shahada*), ritual prayer (*salat*), almsgiving (*zakat*), the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca during the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar (Dhu l-Hijja) and fasting (*sawm*) during the daylight hours of the ninth month of the Islamic calendar (Ramadan). While some Muslim scholars argued that *jihad* should be included as the sixth pillar of Islam, most rejected such a designation and regarded it as merely obligatory on all able-bodied Muslims.

An Arabic noun that in its basic sense conveys the idea of struggle or striving, *jihad* is often used as part of the Qur’anic phrase, *jihad fi sabil Allah* (striving in the path of God). As such, *jihad* in its various forms is essential to understanding the medieval Islamic world, including the era of the Crusades in the Near East (1095–1291 A.D.).<sup>1</sup> The principal textual

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<sup>1</sup> On *jihad* in medieval Islamic history see Peters’ (1996) collection of primary texts in translation, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, especially chapters 1–5. See also Firestone (1999) and Cook (1996), 66–104.

authorities for the Islamic doctrine of *jihad* are of course the Qur'an and the *hadiths*, or statements attributed to Muhammad about the subject. As such, the doctrine of *jihad* is rooted in the life and practice of Muhammad and the early Islamic community in seventh-century Arabia. According to our sources, Muhammad established a society in Medina (622–32) that lived in accordance with God's commandments in part by persuasion, but also by coercion and even warfare.

While violence in the name of religion tends to make modern Westerners uncomfortable, the idea that brutality could be an expression of piety was neither new nor unique in the seventh-century Near East. The Bible is replete with stories in which the ancient Israelites slaughtered their enemies in the name of God. The prophetess Deborah eulogized Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, as “the most blessed of tent-dwelling women” because she gave refuge to and then drove a tent stake through the head of the Canaanite general Sisera as he slept in her tent (Judg. 5:24–27). Samson killed a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass, and even more as he pulled the Philistine temple down upon himself and his captors in his final act (Judg. 15:15–16, 16:30). It fell to the prophet Samuel to hew to pieces the Amelekite king Agag because the Israelite king Saul, in his disobedience to God, had spared him (1 Sam. 15:33). David's victory against Goliath and the Philistines was immortalized by the women of Israel “with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes. As they danced, they sang: ‘Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands’” (1 Sam. 18:6–7).

Not surprisingly, the Bible tells us that it galled King Saul to see such dancing in the streets in praise of the young David's military exploits. Nevertheless, it was David's military victories against Goliath, the Philistines, and others that ultimately led to the establishment of the

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Hillenbrand (1999) provides a nuanced treatment of *jihad* in the context of the Crusades in *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, 89–256. On modern reinterpretations of *jihad* see Sivan (1985) and Kepel (2002).

ancient kingdom of Israel under his kingship (ca. 1000 B.C.). In addition, these and other military victories (and defeats) of the ancient Israelites, so vividly depicted throughout the historical books of the Hebrew Bible, inspired many a Christian religious and political theorist and warrior during the Crusader period in the Near East some two thousand years later.

Suffice it to say that given the long and rich tradition of warfare as an expression of right religion in the history of ancient Israel as well as in the history of Christianity, it should come as no surprise that we find it among the founding generation and throughout the history of Islam as well. Therefore, we will begin with a brief discussion of the theological and ideological arguments for the Islamic concept of *jihad*, often incompletely translated as “holy war.” We will then turn our attention to Ibn ‘Asakir as an advocate of *jihad* against Christian Crusaders and Muslim Shi‘ites.

### ***Jihad***

The principal Qur’anic material on *jihad* is in the ninth chapter—the only chapter of the Qur’an’s 114 that does not begin with the phrase, “In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate.” Some scholars have argued that the reason for this solitary omission is the chapter’s rather grim content. Others have argued that the ninth chapter is really just the second part of the eighth chapter, and somehow became detached in the compilation process. Whatever the real reason for its unique opening sentence, it is the content of the chapter that concerns us. Since it is far too long to reproduce here, I have selected four passages that convey the basic principles of *jihad* and its rewards. There are, of course, relevant passages elsewhere in the chapter and throughout the Qur’an as well. The first two passages speak of *jihad* as offensive warfare against idolaters, polytheists, and infidels. Note that Jews and Christians are lumped in

this category despite many other passages in the Qur'an that speak favorably of those among the Jews and Christians who shall see paradise.<sup>2</sup>

When the sacred months are over slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them. If they repent and take to prayer and render the alms levy, allow them to go their way. God is forgiving and merciful (Qur'an 9:5).<sup>3</sup>

Fight against such of those to whom the Scriptures were given and believe neither in God nor the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His apostle have forbidden, and do not embrace the true Faith, until they pay tribute out of hand and are utterly subdued. The Jews say that Ezra is the son of God, while the Christians say the Messiah is the son of God. Such are their assertions, by which they imitate the infidels of old. God confound them! How perverse they are (Qur'an 9:29–30)!

*Jihad* is not only to be conducted offensively against the idolaters, polytheists, and infidels, but also defensively against those who fight against Muhammad, his followers, and right religion in general:

Will you not fight against those who have broken their oaths and conspired to banish the Apostle? They were the first to attack you. Do you fear them? Surely God is more deserving of your fear, if you are true believers. Make war on them: God will chastise them at your hands and humble them. He will grant you victory over them and heal the spirit of the faithful. He will take away all rancour from their hearts: God shows mercy to whom He pleases. God is all-knowing and wise (Qur'an 9:13–14).

The rewards awaiting those who strive in the path of God include gardens watered by running streams, in which they shall abide forever:

But the Apostle and the men who shared his faith fought [*jahadu*] with their goods and with their persons. These shall be rewarded with good things. These shall surely prosper. God has prepared for them gardens watered by running streams, in which they shall abide forever. That is the supreme triumph (Qur'an 9:87–88).

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<sup>2</sup> Donner examines the relevant Qur'anic passages on Jews and Christians in "From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community" (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> All Qur'anic citations are from Dawood, N.J. 1995. *The Koran*, 5<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. New York: Penguin Books.

In addition to these and other Qur'anic passages, Muslim scholars also appealed to a host of *hadiths* that extolled the merits of *jihad* against the enemies of right religion (however defined) and the rewards that awaited those engaged in it. According to one such *hadith*, Muhammad said,

If anyone is pleased with God as Lord, with Islam as religion and with Muhammad as messenger, paradise will be assured to him.... There is also something else for which God will raise a servant in paradise a hundred degrees between each of two of which there is a distance like that between heaven and earth.... [That is,] “*Jihad* in God’s path; *jihad* in God’s path; *jihad* in God’s path” (al-Tibrizi 1972).

Since Muhammad found himself at war with the Meccans and others after his *hijra* to Medina in 622, it is easy to see the relevance of these and other statements to his immediate situation. After his death, his followers used these and many others like them to form the basis for the ideology of *jihad* in the medieval Islamic world. They inspired many of the faithful during the first century of conquest even as others were undoubtedly inspired merely by booty and glory in battle. Once the frontiers of the new Islamic empire were more or less stabilized, the caliphs maintained an expansionist *jihad* ideology by leading or ordering raids along the Syrian Byzantine frontier. Many a caliph strengthened his own religious and political *bone fides* by leading the raids himself. The Abbasid Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809) is one of the most famous to have done so.

As Islamic scholars honed their understanding of right religion, they divided the world into two broad spheres—the Abode of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) and the Abode of War (*dar al-harb*)—in an effort to clarify the role of *jihad* and warfare in Islam. The Abode of Islam was comprised of those territories under Islamic political domination. The Abode of War was comprised of everywhere else. In fact, most medieval and early modern legal treatises contain a chapter on *jihad* that incorporates the standard material from the Qur'an and *hadith*, and most of

these treatises argued that *jihad* was as obligatory on all able-bodied Muslims as were the obligations to perform the *salat*, the pilgrimage, and give alms. According to al-Shafi‘i (d. 820), an eminent jurist after whom a Sunni school of law (*madhhab*) was named, the Qur’anic statements on *jihad*

mean that the *jihad*, and rising up in arms in particular, is obligatory for all able-bodied [believers], exempting no one, just as prayer, pilgrimage and [payment of] alms are performed, and no person is permitted to perform the duty for another, since performance by one will not fulfill the duty for another (Khadduri 1987).<sup>4</sup>

This division of the world into two spheres did not mean that all Muslims were at all times engaged in a state of open warfare against the Abode of War. Formal truces did exist. Moreover, for purely practical reasons of inertia, military capability, and political calculation, expansion of the borders of Islam waxed and waned over time. As the central authority of the Abbasid caliphs waned in the late ninth century, petty states and principalities on the frontiers took up the ideology of expansionist *jihad* in India, Central Asia, Africa, and Europe.

At other times we find Muslim armies fighting against other Muslim armies within the Islamic world in order to restore a particular vision of proper Islamic religion and government. We see this in the civil wars that plagued the early Muslim community during the Rashidun (632–61) and the Umayyad caliphates (661–750). We see this also in the Abbasid Revolution in the late 740s that established the Abbasid caliphate, which endured until the Mongols sacked Baghdad in 1258. The Almoravids (1062–1147) and the Almohads (1130–1269) represent two major revivalist movements that employed the ideology of *jihad* against what they viewed as corrupt Muslim regimes in North Africa and Spain, and against the Christian kings and princes in Iberia as well.

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<sup>4</sup> On al-Shafi‘i’s discussion of *jihad* see Khadduri, 81–87.

Although the Ottoman period (ca. 1300–1923) began after the last Crusaders were driven from the Near East (1291), it is worth noting that the Ottomans enthusiastically employed the ideology of *jihad* in their wars against the Byzantines and Eastern Europe. They ultimately sacked Constantinople in 1453, and laid siege to Vienna in 1529 and again in 1683. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they used the ideology of *jihad* to legitimate their wars with the Shi‘ite Safavid dynasty (1501–1722) in Iran as well. The Ottoman sultans even had the chief religious official of the empire (*shaykh al-Islam*) issue religious opinions declaring the Shi‘ite Safavid shahs to be non-Muslims:

If the schismatics of Persia (May God abandon them) ... consider [the first three caliphs] as apostates and backbiters and openly curse and vilify them while considering themselves devout and believe that the killing of Muslims who are the people of the Sunnah is canonically lawful ... the place where these cursers and believers of such things live, is it the Abode of War?<sup>5</sup>

This question—rooted in standard Sunni–Shi‘ite vitriol—really had only one possible response. That is, since the Ottomans considered the Safavids to be apostates, their realm was indeed the Abode of War. According to this logic, *jihad* against the Safavids was not only legitimate, it was a religious duty.

Whether the motivation for the *jihads* fought throughout the medieval Islamic world met the standards for religious purity in every instance is beyond our ken. We do know, however, that some of those ostensibly engaged in *jihad* against the external enemies of Islam and internal schismatics and heretics (however defined) were little more than bandits, thugs, and soldiers of fortune—at least they are portrayed as such by many of the Muslim scholars and historians who wrote our sources.

During the 1060s, Muslim pastoral nomadic Turkomans legitimated their raiding and pillaging along the Byzantine frontier with the ideology of *jihad* as well. Like the Ottomans

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Itzkowitz (1972).

some two centuries later, they argued that they were merely striving in the path of God against the Byzantines—the preferred infidel enemy of Islam since the days of the early Islamic conquests. Not surprisingly, the Byzantines viewed these Turkomans as nothing more than bandits, thugs, and soldiers of fortune. Things came to a head in 1071 as the Byzantine emperor Romanus Diogenes led several Byzantine columns eastward to deal with this Turkish menace once and for all. Already on campaign in Syria, the Seljukid sultan, Alp Arslan, turned his forces north to come to the aid of his fellow Turkomans and fellow Muslims. A pitched battle between the two sides took place at Manzikert, near Lake Van, in the summer of 1071. Alp Arslan's forces were victorious and Romanus Diogenes was taken captive. He was ultimately ransomed and deposed. A disastrous defeat for the Byzantines, the Battle of Manzikert marks the beginnings of the process by which Anatolia became Turkey.

In 1095, Pope Urban II preached a sermon in Clermont, France, in which he called on the interminably feuding nobility of Western Europe to turn their energies to the cause of Christ and his Church. Urban was by no means the first to call on them to use their military skills in aid of their Byzantine Christian brothers who, since the Battle of Manzikert, were increasingly threatened by Muslim Turkish marauders in eastern and central Anatolia. In fact, Pope Gregory VII had proposed that he himself lead a force of some 50,000 men to liberate their Eastern brethren in 1074. More importantly, however, Urban called on the Frankish nobility to take up the cross of Christ and make an armed pilgrimage to Jerusalem in order to redeem their Lord's patrimony which had been stolen by the infidel Saracens some four centuries earlier. By the summer of 1099, Jerusalem was in the hands of the Crusaders. Unfortunately for Pope Urban II, he died shortly after Jerusalem was taken, but before word reached Western Europe.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> On the Crusades in Europe and the Near East see Riley-Smith (1987, 1995) and Hillenbrand (1999).



### ***Ibn ‘Asakir as an Advocate of Jihad***

Six years later, in 1105, Ibn ‘Asakir was born in Damascus to a prestigious family of scholars which had long played an important role in the political and religious life of the city. The home that he grew up in was strongly Sunni Muslim and, as was customary by this time, quite hostile to the Isma‘ili Shi‘ite Fatimid caliphate in Egypt as well as the Isma‘ili Shi‘ites then active in Syria. He began his studies at age six under the care and direction of his father, and like his father pursued a lifetime quest for religious knowledge. During his twenties and thirties he undertook two exhaustive trips to the centers of Islamic learning of his day—Baghdad and Kufa in Iraq, the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in the Hijaz, as well as to several major centers in Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Throughout his extensive travels we are told that he studied with some 1,300 men and some eighty women scholars.

So far we have spoken of *jihad* as offensive and defensive warfare. It should be noted that some Muslims, especially followers of the mystical (Sufi) traditions and other more piety-minded scholars, argued that there were in fact two types of *jihad*. For them, the greater *jihad* was that internal struggle within oneself against temptation and evil. This greater *jihad* is also referred to as the *jihad* of the tongue or the *jihad* of the pen; that is, the *jihad* of piety and persuasion. According to this position, military *jihad* was the lesser *jihad*, also known as the *jihad* of the sword. As a scholar, it is fair to say that Ibn ‘Asakir very much embraced the *jihad* of the pen, though certainly not at the expense of the more common vision of the *jihad* of the sword.

Shortly after occupying Damascus in April 1154, Nur al-Din sought out Ibn ‘Asakir as an ally.<sup>7</sup> A key building block in Nur al-Din’s policy was his construction of a school specifically for the purpose of the study of *hadith* in Damascus, which under Ibn ‘Asakir’s direction became

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<sup>7</sup> On Nur al-Din, see Elisseéff (1967).

the institutional center for Nur al-Din's *jihad* against the enemies of Sunni Islam throughout his realm. Ibn 'Asakir composed two important works in direct support of Nur al-Din's *jihad* of the sword—*Arba'un fi l-ijihad fi iqamat al-jihad* (Forty in the Cause of *Jihad*) is a collection of forty *hadiths* exalting the merits of *jihad*; and *Fadl 'Asqalan* (The Virtues of Ashkelon) is an exhortation to Muslims to retake the town of Ashkelon which the Crusaders had captured in 1153. But most important for our purposes, it was under Nur al-Din's patronage and with his encouragement that Ibn 'Asakir completed his massive biographical dictionary, *Ta'rikh madinat Dimashq* (The history of Damascus).<sup>8</sup>

As a renowned scholar himself, Ibn 'Asakir understandably, in the bulk of his 10,226 biographies, treats his fellow religious scholars, most of whom were active from the late-ninth to the mid-twelfth centuries. However, he also devotes considerable attention to the pre-Islamic sacred figures of the Islamic prophet stories tradition. The importance which he gives to the first century of Islamic history is demonstrated by the fact that a full third of his biographies can be dated to this period, including very lengthy biographies of the four Rashidun caliphs, a great many of Muhammad's companions and contemporaries, and to all appearances nearly every member of the Umayyad household and their clients. Ibn 'Asakir also includes biographies for a number of Syrian poets as well as for a considerable number of government officials and religious scholars from the early Abbasid period (750–880).<sup>9</sup>

A theme that emerges quite clearly in Ibn 'Asakir's *History* is that his choice of subject, the content, and the narrative structure of his biographies—reaching from the first man, Adam, to his recently deceased contemporaries—reflect a chronological, thematic, and even moralistic continuity in his understanding of Syria's history. In addition, he was very much concerned with

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<sup>8</sup> On Ibn 'Asakir's *History*, see Lindsay (2001). See also Elisseéff (1959).

<sup>9</sup> On Ibn 'Asakir's usefulness for understanding 'Abbasid Syria, see Cobb (2001).

preserving what he considered the proper Sunni character of Islam, and he did so as an eager and effective advocate of Nur al-Din's *jihad* against Sunni Islam's internal and external enemies in Syria, whether Shi'ite or Crusader. In short, Ibn 'Asakir's intent is to demonstrate the pivotal role which Damascus specifically and Syria more broadly have played in his understanding of the past in which God has intervened and acted at times to reward the righteous and punish the wicked. Such a vision of the past is certainly not unique, and parallels that of his many contemporaries and myriad predecessors and successors—whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish.

A detailed analysis of Ibn 'Asakir's *History* is obviously well beyond the scope of this essay. However, a brief examination of his treatment of two pre-Islamic figures (David and Jesus) as well as one Umayyad caliph, Yazid ibn Mu'awiya (680–83), will allow us to see how Ibn 'Asakir was able to use his moral—even pietistic—vision of Syria's past in support of Nur al-Din's *jihad* of the pen and sword against Christian Crusaders and Muslim Shi'ites.

### *David*

Ibn 'Asakir's choice to include so many pre-Islamic Biblical and extra-Biblical sacred biographies in his *History* is rooted in the larger Islamic prophet stories tradition. This tradition vindicates the message and mission of Muhammad as the Messenger of God by demonstrating the continuity between the lives of the ancient prophets in Syria and Muhammad's prophetic career in seventh-century Arabia. Drawing on the well-established literary tradition of extolling the virtues of Syria (*fada'il al-sham*), Ibn 'Asakir also uses his biographies of these sacred figures to enhance the prestige of Syria and Damascus as well as advocate an intense piety—even asceticism—on the part of his readers.<sup>10</sup> We see this especially in his skillful moral

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<sup>10</sup> See especially Cobb (2002).

rehabilitation of the rather robust and unsavory Biblical David as well as his thorough recasting of Jesus as the model Muslim ascetic.

The David of Samuel and Kings is the paradigmatic gentle shepherd, devoted friend, psalmist, and musician; but he is also a bloody-minded soldier, lousy father, adulterer, and murderer. He is an earthy man whose behavior does not appear to be any better or worse than his predecessor, Saul, whose kingdom God took from him, in part, because he had shown mercy to King Agag and was not bloody-minded enough. Ibn ‘Asakir’s rehabilitated “Islamic” David is a great warrior too, as seen in his miraculous defeat of Goliath and his armies (at a location near Damascus, not Gaza as in Samuel). He is a prophet of great virtue and piety who is the exemplar of supererogatory prayer and fasting; a just ruler and wise judge; a musician, singer, and psalmist; and the first to whom God revealed the techniques of iron working.<sup>11</sup> What is most striking is that while David’s encounter with Bathsheba and his orchestration of her husband Uriah’s murder is dealt with at length by others, Ibn ‘Asakir downplays this episode to the point of almost ignoring it completely. He merely states that Uriah’s wife was Bathsheba, from whom David took what he took. In short, Ibn ‘Asakir transformed the earthy and robustly flawed David of Samuel and Kings into an exemplary pious—even ascetic—Muslim.<sup>12</sup>

While Ibn ‘Asakir devotes the bulk of his attention to David as the exemplar of supererogatory prayer and fasting, the lengthiest narrative in Ibn ‘Asakir’s biography of David is the story of David and Goliath. As is often the case, the Qur’an provides very little narrative about the Biblical figures found in its pages. Unlike the Biblical account, the Qur’an’s terse account merely states, “David slew Goliath, and God bestowed on him sovereignty and wisdom

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<sup>11</sup> According to Qur’an 34:10–11, David was the first to whom God taught the skills of iron working: “On David We bestowed our bounty. We said: ‘Mountains, and you birds, echo his songs of praise.’ We made hard iron pliant to him. ‘Make coats of mail and measure their links with care. Do what is right: I am watching over all your actions.’”

<sup>12</sup> See Lindsay (1995).

and taught him what He pleased” (Qur’an 2:251).<sup>13</sup> By Ibn ‘Asakir’s day, the Islamic prophet stories tradition had transformed this brief Qur’anic statement into a beautiful tale whose origins may be found among the rabbis.

One day while David was herding his father’s sheep, a voice (presumably of an angel) told him to entrust his flocks to God’s protection and to join his brothers who were fighting the Philistines with King Saul. Being the obedient boy that he was, David did as he was told and returned home to tell his father about what had happened to him. Jesse loaded him down with provisions and sent him on his way to meet his brothers. Ibn ‘Asakir’s account continues as follows:

As David was on his way a stone cried out to him, saying, “O David! Take me, I will kill Goliath for you.” David asked, “Who are you?” The stone replied, “I am Abraham’s stone with which he killed such and such. I will kill Goliath, with the help of God.” So David picked up the stone and placed it in his satchel. As David continued on his way, another stone cried out to him, saying, “O David! Take me.” David asked, “Who are you?” The stone replied, “I am Isaac’s stone with which he killed such and such. I will kill Goliath, with the help of God.” So David picked up the stone and placed it in his satchel. As David continued on his way, yet another stone cried out to him, saying, “O David! Take me with you.” David asked, “Who are you?” The stone replied, “I am Jacob’s stone. I will kill Goliath, with the help of God Almighty.” David then asked the stone, “How will you kill him?” It replied, “I will seek help from the wind. It will knock off his helmet, I will hit his forehead, penetrate it completely and kill him.” So David picked up the stone and placed it in his satchel.

As David approached [the battlefield] he placed his hand into his satchel and the three stones became one. He removed it and placed it in his sling. When David drew nigh [unto Goliath] he shouted, “*Allahu Akbar!* —God is Great!” And the whole of creation save man and jinn (that is, the angels, the bearers of God’s Throne and many others) responded in kind. When Goliath and his army heard this chorus they feared that God Almighty had assembled the entire world’s inhabitants against them.

The wind began to howl. All grew dark about them and the wind knocked off Goliath’s helmet. Then David readied the stone in his sling and as he threw it, the single stone again became three. One struck Goliath’s forehead, pierced it and

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<sup>13</sup> See 1 Sam. 16–31; 2 Sam. 1–24; 1 Kings 1–2; and 1 Chron. 11–29 for the Biblical accounts of David’s life.

killed him. Another struck the right wing of Goliath's army and vanquished it; a third the left wing and vanquished it. Goliath's armies thought that the mountains had fallen down upon them. Their commanders fled in confusion, some even killing each other. [On that day] God Almighty delivered Goliath's armies unto the Children of Israel and they annihilated them. Saul departed with the Children of Israel in triumph, God Almighty having granted them the victory over their enemies. Saul married his daughter to David (peace be upon him) and shared with him half his wealth (Lindsay 1995).

One of the more fascinating aspects of this account is the role played by the three stones of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—with which they had killed such and such. Not only is it the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob whom David worships, it is with their stones that David miraculously kills Goliath, the enemy of God's people. We find a similar story in the post-Biblical Jewish legendary material in which five stones (representing God, Aaron, and the three patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) approached David of their own accord. They, too, became as one stone when David touched them, and ultimately felled Goliath.<sup>14</sup> The precise relationship between the Jewish and Muslim versions of this story (that is, who influenced whom) is unclear. Nevertheless, we see in Ibn 'Asakir's skillful use of this tale that, from the very moment David first heard the voice of the angel in the field until God Almighty granted the Israelites victory over Goliath and his armies, God's protective and victorious hand was upon David, His servant, His warrior, His prophet in Syria.

The remaining *hadiths* and narrative reports (*akhbar*) about David in Ibn 'Asakir's account are considerably more terse. Although few exceed even half a dozen lines, Ibn 'Asakir's underlying agenda throughout is to demonstrate the prophetic election, piety, and virtue of David; and by association, that of God's final messenger—Muhammad. Ibn 'Asakir illustrates

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<sup>14</sup> A synopsis of many of the legendary accounts about David can be found in Louis Ginzberg (1909–36). On the treatment of other Biblical figures in the Islamic prophet stories tradition, see Firestone, Reuven. 1990. *Journeys in Holy Lands: The evolution of the Abraham Ishmael legends in Islamic exegesis*. Albany: State University of New York Press; Lazarus-Yafeh (1992); Lassner (1993); Goldman (1995); and Wheeler (2002a, 2002b).

the idea of prophetic continuity most dramatically with a *hadith* which demonstrates that God, in His infinite wisdom, not only chose to reveal the Qur'an to His messenger Muhammad during the month of Ramadan, He also chose to reveal His revelations to Abraham, Moses, and David during the same sacred month:

The Messenger of God (May God bless him and grant him peace) said: The Scriptures [*al-suhuf*] were revealed to Abraham on the second night of Ramadan, the Psalms [*zabur*] were revealed to David on the sixth, the Torah to Moses on the eighteenth of Ramadan, and the Qur'an [*al-furqan*] to Muhammad (May God bless him and grant him peace) on the twenty fourth of Ramadan (Lindsay 1995).

On one level this *hadith* can be understood to indicate the sanctity of the holy month of Ramadan, but more importantly it links together in one sentence the prophetic message and ministries of Abraham, David, Moses, and God's final messenger—Muhammad.

Which leads us to the matter of David's piety and devotion to God. According to Ibn 'Asakir, "when the Messenger of God (May God bless him and grant him peace) used to mention David's name or transmit *hadith* about him he would say, 'David was the most devout of all mankind'" (Lindsay 1995). According to this *hadith*, Muhammad simply asserted that David was the most devout of people, but how was his great devotion made manifest?

The most frequent and visible duty required of every Muslim is ritual prayer (*salat*), which is to be performed at five designated times each day. However, we learn from Ibn 'Asakir that although God is well-pleased with the minimum number of prayers, there is yet an even higher standard to be attained—that of His servant David and the members of his household who followed his example:

David the prophet (May God bless him and grant him peace) used to [pray] in turn throughout the night with the members of his household. An hour did not pass in his house without someone praying or mentioning the name of God. When it was David's appointed time, he rose to pray. It was as though his heart contained his and his household's worshipfulness. God looked upon his heart and

was pleased with that which he saw of (David's) worshipfulness and that of his household (Lindsay 1995).

Of equal importance is the duty to refrain from eating, drinking, and other prohibited activities during the daylight hours of Ramadan—the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. As is the case with prayer, we learn from Ibn 'Asakir that while God is well-pleased with the minimum fast (*sawm*) during the month of Ramadan, there is yet an even higher standard to be attained. Not only is His servant David the model of pious prayer, he is the model of fasting as well:

The Messenger of God (May God bless him and grant him peace) said, “The best fast is the fast of David, who used to fast one day and eat the next. The best prayer is the prayer of David, who used to sleep during the first half of the night, pray until the sixth hour, then go to sleep” (Lindsay 1995).

Clearly, Ibn 'Asakir's David has been transformed into an Islamic prophet of great virtue and ascetic piety who behaves as a Muslim. When David goes into battle, he invokes the name of God, shouting *Allahu Akbar!*—God is Great! When David prays, he not only prays as a Muslim, he prays all day and all night. Not only does David fast as a Muslim, he fasts far more often than the required minimum—he fasts one day and eats the next.

### *Jesus*

As Suleiman Mourad has demonstrated, Ibn 'Asakir's biography of Jesus speaks even more directly to the religious issues of his day, especially the twelfth-century context of the Crusader threat to Syria.<sup>15</sup> As with his treatment of David, Ibn 'Asakir emphasizes the ascetic side of Jesus as well as his special relation to Muhammad which ranked him above all other prophets. Ibn 'Asakir does not need to undertake any sort of moral rehabilitation of Jesus, of course, because unlike the Biblical David, the Biblical Jesus and the legendary Jesus of Christian

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<sup>15</sup> See Mourad (2001). See also Robinson (1995) and Khalidi (2001).



and Islamic lore was already without sin. According to Ibn ‘Asakir, Jesus’ asceticism is not that of someone who merely abstained from some of the pleasures of the world. Rather, as the following report indicates, Jesus was the model of asceticism in the extreme:

Jesus son of Mary used to eat barley, walk on foot and did not ride donkeys. He did not live in a house, nor did he use lamps for light. He neither dressed in cotton, nor touched women, nor used perfume. He never mixed his drink with anything, nor cooled it. He never greased or washed his hair or his beard. [When he slept,] he never had anything between his skin and the ground [on which he lay], except his garment. He had no concern for lunch or dinner, and coveted nothing of the desires of this world. He used to consort with the weak, the chronically sick and the poor. Whenever food was offered him on [a platter], he would place it on the ground, and he never ate meat. Of food, he ate little, saying: “[Even] this is too much for one who has to die and answer for his deeds” (Mourad 2001).

As we have seen, David’s asceticism was exemplified by his devotion to prayer and fasting—two of the five pillars of Islam. The first of the five pillars, the *shahada*, is a simple two-part statement that is at the center of Islamic belief, ritual, and worship—“There is no god but God; Muhammad is the messenger of God.” While the *shahada* is the simplest of the five pillars to perform because of its brevity, it is arguably the most important of all. For to recite the *shahada* with proper intent is to accept one’s obligation to perform the remaining four as well. Moreover, (to extend our metaphors) the *shahada* is the very wellspring from which the remaining four flow. That is, without belief in the one God and that Muhammad is His messenger, the remaining four pillars are without meaning.

Of particular importance for our purposes is Ibn ‘Asakir’s use of a fascinating (and obscure) *hadith* which recasts the *shahada* to underline the Muslim concept of Jesus as the prophet whose spiritual relationship to Muhammad was the closest and most intimate:

Muhammad said: Whoever testifies that there is no god but God, alone with no partner, and that Muhammad is His servant and messenger, *and that Jesus is His servant and messenger and the son of His servant and His word which He gave to*

*Mary, and a spirit from Him*, God will admit him to Heaven for what he has said [emphasis added] (Mourad 2001).

Lest anyone be confused as to the intimate prophetic connection between Jesus and Muhammad, Ibn ‘Asakir also includes a *hadith* in which Muhammad asserts that he and Jesus are brothers and fellow prophets:

Muhammad said: The prophets are brothers of the same male lineage, and I and Jesus are brothers because he prophesied my [coming], and there were no prophets between me and him (Mourad 2001).

Of course, Muhammad was really only a distant cousin of Jesus for according to the Islamic tradition, Muhammad was a descendant of Ishmael whereas Jesus and most of the other Biblical prophets were descendants of Ishmael’s brother, Isaac. Nevertheless, the *hadith* identifies their brotherly relation on the basis of one prophet (Jesus) prophesying the future prophethood of the other (Muhammad).

Just as Ibn ‘Asakir linked David to Damascus with tendentious reports that he defeated Goliath on the outskirts of the city (not in Gaza as in Samuel), he links Jesus to Damascus with tendentious reports that Jesus and Mary took refuge from Herod in Damascus (not in Egypt as in the Gospels) (Mourad 2001).<sup>16</sup> But most importantly for our purposes, he includes reports that indicate that Damascus (not Jerusalem) would be the place of Jesus’ second coming. Ibn ‘Asakir’s ascetic Jesus was not only a one-time resident of Damascus; as the messiah and as the expected *mahdi*, Jesus would be a future resident as well—one who would return before the end of days to bring final victory to Islam over all other religions and achieve ultimate peace on earth (Mourad 2001).

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<sup>16</sup> This is a common assertion in the *fada’il al-sham* (virtues of Syria) tradition. The tenth-century geographer, al-Muqaddasi (d. ca. 1000), places it in Syria in his description of Syria and in Egypt in his description of Egypt. See al-Muqaddasi. 2001. *The best divisions for knowledge of the regions: Ahsan al-taqasim fi ma’rifat al-aqalim*. Translated by Basil Collins. 128; 163. Reading: Garnet Publishing. Al-Raba’i (d. 1052) and Ibn Jubayr (d. 1217) place it in Syria as well. See also Cobb, *Virtual sacrality*, 47–48; and R.J.C. Broadhurst, trans. 1952. *The travels of Ibn Jubayr*. 271–72 London: J. Cape.

In Ibn ‘Asakir’s mind Jesus’ second coming was imminent and the sooner Jesus returned, the sooner he could conclude the *jihad* on behalf of his true followers, the Muslims, who were being persecuted and killed by his infidel followers, the historical Christians; that is, the Crusaders. To this end, Ibn ‘Asakir relates a prophecy that anticipates Jesus’ triumphant return, but also serves as a gloss on the well-known *hadith* in which Muhammad reportedly prophesied that God will send a revivifier to renew the faith of the Muslims at the beginning of every century. The prophecy takes the form of a conversation between one of Muhammad’s companions, ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Amr ibn al-‘As, and an anonymous Iraqi interlocutor.

The Iraqi asked ‘Abd Allah if he was in fact the one who claims that “the Hour” comes at the end of the current century, to which ‘Abd Allah replied that no one knows the Hour except God Himself. He then proceeded to prophesy that a certain Byzantine named Ibn Haml al-Da’n (Son of the Sheep-Bearing) who is also the son of a devil (*shaytan*) is about to move against the Muslims with 500,000 soldiers by land and another 500,000 by sea. Once they have disembarked between Acre and Tyre, Ibn Haml al-Da’n will burn the ships and fight the Muslims for a month. Defenseless against Rome and Constantinople, the Muslims will hear that the Antichrist (*al-Dajjal*) has taken over and they will be afflicted with famine. At this point, they will hear a voice from Heaven saying: “Rejoice, help is coming to you.” ‘Abd Allah’s prophecy continues as follows:

They will say: “Jesus son of Mary descended.” They will rejoice in him, and he will rejoice in them, and they will say to him: “Pray, O Spirit of God.”

He will respond: “Since God has honored this [Muslim] community, no one should lead their prayers except one of them.”

So, the commander of the faithful, Mu‘awiya ibn Abi Sufyan, will lead the people in prayer, and Jesus will pray behind him. After Jesus finishes his prayer, he will take his lance, go toward the Antichrist and kill him. Then Jesus will die and the Muslims will wash him and bury him (Mourad 2001).

Apocalyptic prophecies by nature resist definitive interpretation, and I remain mystified as to how this and similar accounts should be understood in their entirety. But Ibn ‘Asakir’s inclusion of it in his treatment of Jesus has obvious implications for his understanding of *jihad* in the twelfth century. As noted above, the Crusaders had first arrived in Syria towards the end of the eleventh century, and had conquered Jerusalem in the summer of 1099, six years before Ibn ‘Asakir was born. Apparently, Ibn ‘Asakir expected the Muslims to achieve their final victory against the Crusaders before the end of the century. It should be noted that the Islamic lunar calendar used by Ibn ‘Asakir differed from the Christian solar calendar used by the Crusaders. The summer of 1099, in which Jerusalem fell to the Crusades, was in the year 492 of the Islamic calendar. Ibn ‘Asakir was born in the year 499, on the eve of the sixth Islamic century—the end of which corresponded to early September 1203 A.D.

This prophecy about Jesus’ victory against the Antichrist (attributed to a companion of Muhammad) may well have been part of the Muslim lore that developed in Syria in reaction to the Crusades—lore designed to restore the Muslims’ confidence and to assure them that the Crusaders were infidels and certainly not the true followers of Jesus as they claimed. According to this prophecy, since Jesus was on the side of the Muslims, he would soon return to avenge the Crusaders’ current (and temporary) victories. The role of Mu‘awiya ibn Abi Sufyan in leading the prayers of the Muslims upon Jesus’ second coming is of great significance as well. After all, Mu‘awiya was none other than the most important and significant person to rule the Islamic empire from Damascus (r. 661–680) as well as the father of Yazid whom we shall meet below.

According to this prophecy, after Jesus defeats the Antichrist, he will die and the Muslims will wash him and bury him. But where will he be buried? Given Jesus’ closeness to Muhammad, it should come as no surprise that Ibn ‘Asakir incorporates several *hadiths* in which

we learn that Jesus will be buried alongside Muhammad in Medina. According to the most detailed of these *hadiths*,

Muhammad, when asked by his wife ‘A’isha whether she could be buried next to him, said: “In the place [of my burial], there is [only] room for my grave, for Abu Bakr’s grave, for ‘Umar’s grave, and for the grave of Jesus son of Mary, God’s blessing and peace be upon him (Mourad 2001).”

That Jesus is featured in this and other *hadiths* as worthy of being buried next to Muhammad illustrates how exceptional he was in Islamic thought, and the extent to which Muslims were eager to Islamize him (Mourad 2001).

### *Yazid*

One learns in introductory Islamic history courses that the third Umayyad caliph, Yazid the son of Mu‘awiya (r. 680–83), is viewed as the most treacherous figure of the Umayyad house—that in Islamic history and lore his detractors have vilified him for his peculiar moral corruption. Consequently, of all the Umayyad caliphs, Yazid would appear to present the most difficult rehabilitation project.<sup>17</sup> Even Yazid’s most ardent supporters could not very well hope to deny that he was given to wine, women, and song. Nor could they pretend there was no controversy about his succession to the caliphate. And they certainly could not avoid the reality that Muhammad’s grandson, al-Husayn, was killed by Yazid’s representatives at Karbala’ in Iraq on 10 October 680. Ibn ‘Asakir attempts to deny none of these.

Throughout his biography of Yazid, however, Ibn ‘Asakir is principally concerned with preserving narrative reports about Yazid which might convey some sort of moral message. In doing so, he does not ignore those reports which clearly illustrate Yazid’s fondness for wine and the dissipations of youth. But at the same time, Ibn ‘Asakir skillfully weaves several *hadiths* and

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<sup>17</sup> See Lindsay (1997) pages 250–78. On Ibn ‘Asakir’s treatment of the first Umayyad caliph, ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affan (644–56), see Donner (2001) pages 44–61.

narrative reports into his account which enable him to counter Yazid's youthful indiscretions on several levels and positively accentuate Yazid's position as the future caliph and leader of the community of Muhammad. He begins his account by stating that Yazid was the first to be designated heir apparent. He then goes on to establish Yazid's worthiness as a transmitter of *hadiths* by including one *hadith* and one narrative report, each of which is concerned with issues of piety and prayer.

It is interesting to note that the single *hadith* transmitted on Yazid's authority in Ibn 'Asakir's account is transmitted through two of the most important Umayyad caliphs—his father Mu'awiya (r. 661–680) and his cousin 'Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705). It reads as follows:

'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, who informed him [Jarir ibn 'Uthman] of it on the authority of Abu Khalid [Yazid]—his father [Mu'awiya], who said:

The Messenger of God (May God bless him and grant him peace) said, "God will grant understanding in religion to whomever He wishes well" (Lindsay 1997).

This *hadith* is followed by a narrative report in which we learn that Yazid was an authority for the transmission of other *hadiths* as well—"Abd al-Malik transmitted *hadiths* about ablutions for prayer on (Yazid's) authority in the biography of Abu Humayla..." (Lindsay 1997). These brief statements—one a *hadith*, the other a narrative report—establish from the outset that, in Ibn 'Asakir's mind, Yazid was worthy of inclusion in his *History* by virtue of his having played a positive role in the transmission and preservation of religious knowledge in Syria.

Later in his account, Ibn 'Asakir offers additional evidence to counter Yazid's youthful indiscretions by means of three narrative reports which extol his intelligence and virtue as compared to his older brother, 'Abd Allah, who is described as a moron (*ahmaq al-nas*). In each account Mu'awiya summoned his son, 'Abd Allah, and told him that he would grant him anything he wanted, even the caliphate. In each account 'Abd Allah chose rather mundane

things. In the third account he only asked for a falcon, a dog, and a certain field. So Mu‘awiya gave him everything he asked for and summoned his younger brother Yazid.

Mu‘awiya made him the same offer in each account of the story, but in this version he had hardly spoken when Yazid got up and kissed his father’s head and hand. Yazid then said,

“We belong to God and to Him we shall return” (Qur’an 2:156). O, Commander of the Faithful, while it might lead me to something I am not prepared for, I have no choice but to answer your question and respond to what you have offered me. Understand that what I say is neither a provocation ... nor can it change something ordained by God. Therefore, I ask for the caliphate after you, though I hope to die before you do (Lindsay 1997).

Mu‘awiya was pleased with Yazid’s response and, after his son departed, Mu‘awiya turned to ‘Abd Allah’s mother and asked her what she thought of Yazid after such a reply. He then said, “Do you now realize that your son is a moron? If he had Yazid’s intelligence and his sense he would have been more deserving of the caliphate” (Lindsay 1997).

Ibn ‘Asakir includes three versions of this story for two reasons. First, each account is intended to enhance Yazid’s intellectual standing and denigrate that of his foolish older brother, ‘Abd Allah. But more importantly, Ibn ‘Asakir includes these narrative reports in order to enhance Yazid’s moral and spiritual standing through his authentic acceptance of Islam. Clearly, Yazid’s invocation of the Qur’anic verse, “We belong to God and to Him we shall return,” is a positive sign of his sincere adherence to Islam. In fact, it is Yazid’s authentic acceptance of Islam which gives him the right to rule over Muslims.

The middle third of Ibn ‘Asakir’s biography of Yazid is comprised of accounts which demonstrate Mu‘awiya’s devotion to his talented, but at times impetuous and wayward, son. It is here that we find a number of accounts in which Yazid is portrayed imbibing the fruit of the vine as well as enjoying the pleasures of singing girls while on campaign against the Byzantines. But lest his reader be discouraged by Yazid’s youthful indiscretions, Ibn ‘Asakir concludes his

biography with a series of reports in which Yazid's virtues and piety are extolled by several of the heroes of early Islamic history.

Ibn 'Asakir incorporates two reports in which none other than the nephew of Muhammad and the progenitor of the Abbasid house, 'Abd Allah ibn 'Abbas, proclaims the virtues of the Banu Harb ibn Umayya—that is, Yazid and the Umayyad house. The setting for one of these stories is the year 669 at the moment when Mu'awiya was informed of the death of Muhammad's grandson, al-Hasan ibn 'Ali (the older brother of al-Husayn). A brief conversation ensued between Mu'awiya and Ibn 'Abbas about the news, after which Mu'awiya told Ibn 'Abbas that he had now become the leader of his people. Ibn 'Abbas responded by invoking God's blessings on al-Hasan's brother, al-Husayn, and then left.

In the next scene Ibn 'Abbas is seated and, while the people were coming to console him, a group of horses came into view. Yazid was among the riders and, when he walked over, Ibn 'Abbas welcomed him. We then learn that out of respect for Ibn 'Abbas, Yazid sat humbly before him and said, "I sit as the consoler, not the well-wisher." Yazid then invoked God's blessing on al-Hasan: "May God bestow His deep and abundant mercies upon you; may He increase your reward and your portion; may He deliver you from your affliction and grant you your just rewards." Ibn 'Abbas was obviously moved by Yazid's words for when Yazid stood up to leave, Ibn 'Abbas held him in his gaze, and said, "If the people of Harb [ibn Umayya] depart, so will the prudent men [*hulum*] of Quraysh." He then recited the following verse:

They avert their eyes from scandals nor do they mention them.  
They are the principal heirs of forbearance and diplomacy (Lindsay 1997).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibn 'Asakir includes another version of this story in which Ibn 'Abbas states, "If the Banu Harb [ibn Umayya] depart, so will the learned men [*ulama*] of the people as well." That *hulum* is apparently used interchangeably with *ulama* may suggest an older connotation for *hulum* as "kenner" or "knowing person."



Clearly, Ibn ‘Asakir is attempting to moderate Yazid’s reputation as a wine bibber by incorporating these complimentary words of Muhammad’s nephew and progenitor of the Abbasid house. For according to Ibn ‘Abbas, if the Banu Harb were to depart, the Quraysh would be without its learned and prudent men—its *‘ulama* and its *hulum*. It would be anachronistic to equate the *‘ulama* of the first generations of Islam with the full-fledged religious scholars of twelfth-century Syria. However, I suspect that Ibn ‘Asakir knew well that these two narrative reports—attributed to Muhammad’s nephew and one of the greatest scholars of early Islam—may have evoked an image of Yazid’s religious learning (*‘ilm*) as somehow parallel to the immense learning and erudition of Ibn ‘Abbas. In addition, I suspect that Ibn ‘Asakir’s choice to vindicate the “most treacherous” of the Umayyads with the words of the progenitor of their ultimate foes—the Abbasids—is no accident.

Ibn ‘Abbas’ respectful praise of Yazid and the Umayyad house is strengthened even further by a *hadith* which Ibn ‘Asakir juxtaposes against a narrative report in order to create a direct and positive moral linkage between Muhammad and Yazid:

The Prophet (May God bless him and grant him peace) said, “The best community is that of the age in which I was sent; followed by those who come after them (God knows whether he actually mentioned the third or not). Then a people will come who love to gloat; they will speak before you ask them.”

An age is 120 years. Yazid ibn Mu‘awiya died at the end of the age in which the Messenger of God (May God bless him and grant him peace) was sent (Lindsay 1997).

Simply living during Muhammad’s age is not sufficient to guarantee one’s virtue. There were, of course, many persons who met that requirement, but who were Muhammad’s steadfast opponents.

However, lest anyone be mistaken as to Yazid’s moral standing or his legitimate right to the caliphate, Ibn ‘Asakir continues his account with three versions of a very intriguing prophecy

which identifies twelve caliphs of incomparable virtue. Each list includes the first three Rashidun caliphs—Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthman—as well as Mu‘awiya and his son Yazid. The remaining characters differ in name and sequence in each report. Of all the versions, the last is the most intriguing, for therein ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Amr ibn al-‘As (the same person to whom the prophecy of Jesus’ second coming was attributed) claims that the identities of the twelve were written in the Book of God:

Indeed, I found them written in the Book of God—twelve commanders who will rule the people. Among them are Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (you know his name), ‘Umar al-Faruq (a horn of iron—you know his name), ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affan Dhu l-Nurayn (who is guaranteed mercy because he was treacherously murdered), the two sovereigns of Syria. When we asked who they are, he said: Mu‘awiya and his son, and mentioned neither good nor ill concerning either. [The remaining commanders are] Mansur, Jabir, al-Mahdi, Amir al-‘Usab, al-Saffah, Sayah, Salam, and so-and-so al-Qahtani—seven all told—each of whom is possessed of incomparable virtue (Lindsay 1997).<sup>19</sup>

Like his prophecy about Jesus’ second coming, ‘Abd Allah’s prophecy about the twelve virtuous caliphs resists definitive interpretation as well. But for the purposes of our discussion, I would argue that Ibn ‘Asakir’s principal reason for incorporating this and the other reports into his account is to vindicate Yazid’s role—as his father’s designated heir—in the preservation and propagation of God’s blessed community in Syria. It is in this context that ‘Abd Allah’s glaring omission of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib—the fourth Rashidun caliph and the most venerated figure of Shi‘ite Islam—facilitates Ibn ‘Asakir’s agenda. One suspects that this omission of ‘Ali appealed especially to Ibn ‘Asakir’s well known anti-Shi‘ite sentiments, rendering these reports particularly useful to his purpose of strengthening Yazid’s rightful position as caliph as well as the anti-Shi‘ite *jihād* of his patron, Nur al-Din.

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<sup>19</sup> Obviously, there are eight names in this list. It is not clear which should be put together as name and title, e.g., “Jabir al-Mahdi” or “al-Mahdi Amir al-‘Usab,” etc.

## ***Conclusion***

So how do Ibn ‘Asakir’s biographies of David, Jesus, Yazid, and others support Nur al-Din’s *jihad*? One of Ibn ‘Asakir’s principal criterion in crafting his biographies—whether scholarly, prophetic, or political—is the moral and religious model and/or example that each person represents. That is, in their lives we find guidance in how to live an authentic Muslim life. We see the *jihad* of the pen and the sword most clearly in his lives of David and Jesus, but also in his life of the problematical Yazid.

Ibn ‘Asakir’s portrayal of David as the paradigmatic exemplar of supererogatory prayer and fasting as well as his portrayal of Jesus as an austere ascetic serve as pious models for the faithful in the Crusader context of twelfth-century Syria. Each of these biographies illustrates Ibn ‘Asakir’s deep concern with the proper moral behavior of the Muslim community. Each can also be read as advocating a withdrawal from the conflicts and rebellions of the day in favor of a more pious and united community of Muhammad in the context of the very real and debilitating intra-Muslim strife as well as the Frankish threat to twelfth-century Syria.

Although Jesus had rejected the trappings of this world and lived the life of the model ascetic in the first century, Ibn ‘Asakir’s emphasis on Jesus’ imminent return to do battle with the Antichrist (as well as the Franks?) was intended to inspire the faithful in very trying times. In addition, David’s miraculous defeat of Goliath, the imposing enemy of God’s people, had long served as a model for outnumbered Muslim armies in Islamic history. It is a powerful example of someone who was willing to heed God’s command despite his obvious physical shortcomings. Since Ibn ‘Asakir could be confident that his readers knew the Qur’an by heart, he did not need to incorporate every relevant Qur’anic passage in his biography of David. Doubtless, Ibn ‘Asakir’s readers knew that the statement of the Israelite faithful on the day David slew Goliath

was especially relevant in the context of the twelfth century: “Many a small band has, by God’s grace, vanquished a mighty army. God is with those who endure with fortitude” (Qur’an 2:249).

Ibn ‘Asakir’s treatment of the problematical and controversial Yazid is perhaps one of the more overtly ironic of his many biographies. By his account Yazid is clearly a sinner; nevertheless, he is not a *kafir*—he is an authentic Muslim. Therefore, Yazid can be considered a legitimate leader of the community of Muhammad. He can rule properly and legitimately hope for God’s mercy. While Ibn ‘Asakir does not use the vocabulary of *jihad* in his biography of Yazid, he does point out that Yazid did participate in campaigns against the Byzantines—the favored infidel enemy of Muslim armies since the seventh century—at the behest of his father, the glorious Mu‘awiya. Taken as a whole, Ibn ‘Asakir’s biography of Yazid demonstrates the respect and obedience that is owed to temporal rulers (however flawed) as well as their positive contributions to the religious and political life of the Muslim community. In the context of the twelfth century, if the problematic Yazid is owed such obedience and respect, how much more then should the faithful in Damascus support Nur al-Din (the Light of the Religion) in his *jihad* against the Crusaders as well as the perfidious Shi‘ites?

Nur al-Din died in 1174, three years after his protégé Saladin brought an end to the Shi‘ite Fatimid caliphate in Egypt and restored Egypt to the Sunni Islamic world.<sup>20</sup> Saladin entered Damascus in October 1175 as the victorious *jihad* leader and uniter of Egypt and Syria. Three months later Ibn ‘Asakir went the way of all flesh (11 Rajab 571/25 January 1176), undoubtedly pleased that the *jihad* against the Fatimids had been successful. Ibn ‘Asakir’s prestige as a leading scholar of his day as well as the importance of his contributions to the religious and political life of Damascus is evidenced in part by Saladin’s presence at his funeral

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<sup>20</sup> On Saladin see Ehrenkreutz (1972); Gibb (1973); Lev (1999); Lyons and Jackson (1997); and Ibn Shaddad (2001).

ceremony during which he was laid to rest alongside his father and other members of his family in the Bab al-Saghir cemetery. One suspects that had Ibn 'Asakir lived longer he may well have expected to witness Jesus' second coming, as well as his victory over the Antichrist and the Crusaders sometime before the end of the sixth Islamic century.

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