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## ESTRATTO

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## PROPHETIC CHARISMA IN THE QUR'AN

The Qur'an dedicates a considerable space to the theme of prophets and prophethood<sup>1</sup>. The Arabic term used in the Qur'an for a prophet is *nabi*. Much more prevalent, however, is the term *rasul* which denotes a «messenger» or «apostle» (of God).

As in the New Testament, in which apostles seem to rank higher than prophets (e.g. *1 Corinthians* 12, 28-31. Cf. *Ephesians* 3, 5; 4, 11), in the Qur'an too *rasul* seems to be somewhat more elevated than *nabi*. This is indicated, to begin with, in the fact that whenever both titles appear together, *rasul* comes first, which may suggest that a messenger is more important than a prophet. Thus Q 22, 52 describes Satan's attempts to lead astray any apostle (*rasul*) or prophet (*nabi*) who was sent before Muhammad. The Muslim commentators say that in this verse *rasul* stands for a prophet having a message [Book] that must be delivered, whereas *nabi* has no such message [book]. More specifically, al-Baydawi (d. 1389) says that *rasul* is a prophet who establishes a new *shari'a* («religious law»), whereas *nabi* is he who continues an old one. This means, Baydawi says, that *rasul* is more distinguished than *nabi*, and therefore there were more *anbiya'* («prophets») than *rusul* («messengers»). Or, he adds, *rasul* receives his revelation from an angel, whereas a prophet experiences revelation only in dreams<sup>2</sup>.

Most of the Qur'anic prophets/messengers are known from the Bible, but there are also some whose origin is somewhat obscure (for details about the individual prophets see R. Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*).

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<sup>1</sup> For general studies of the theme in Islam, see e.g. T. Andræ, *Die Person Muhammads in Lehre und Glauben seiner Gemeinde*, Uppsala 1917; A.J. Wensinck, *Muhammad und die Propheten*, trans. by Melanie Richter-Bernburg as *Muhammad and the Prophets*, in *The Life of Muhammad*, edited by U. Rubin, Ashgate 1998, pp. 319-43; F. Rosenthal, *The Influence of the biblical Tradition on Muslim Historiography*, in *Historians of the Middle East*, edited by Bernard Lewis et al, London 1962, pp. 35-45; Uri Rubin, *Pre-Existence and Light-Aspects of the Concept of Nur Muhammad*, in «Israel Oriental Studies» 5 (1975), pp. 62-119; Id., *Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shi'a Tradition*, in «Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam» 1 (1979), pp. 41-65; Id., «We Have Sent Down to Thee the Book with Truth...»: Spatial and Temporal Implications of the Qur'anic Concepts of *nuzul*, *tanzil* and *'inzal*, in *The Qur'an as Text*, edited by S. Wild, Leiden 1996, pp. 137-56; R. Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature*, Surrey, Richmond 2002; Brannon M. Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis*, London and New York 2002.

<sup>2</sup> al-Baydawi, *Anwar al-tanzil wa-asrar al-ta'wil*, vol. II, 92-93, Beirut 1988 (on Q 22, 52).

### *The Status of Prophets*

Prophets (including the messengers among them) belong to the highest rank among various virtuous groups of human beings. These groups are listed in Q 4, 69, in which their position in Paradise is described: «And whoever obeys God and the Messenger, these will be (in Paradise) with the prophets and the truthful (*siddiqun*) and the martyrs (*shuhada'*) and the righteous (*salihun*), upon whom God has bestowed favors».

As for the prophets, their presence among their respective peoples – for example, among the Children of Israel – is perceived as a sign of God's benefaction (*ni'ma*) unto these peoples (Q 5, 20).

God started sending prophets after humankind became separated, when the initial state of righteousness was replaced by moral corruption. This is, at least, how the exegetes explain Q 2, 213 in which it is stated: «The people were (united in) one nation (*umma wahida*), then (they became divided, and) God sent the prophets to bear good tidings and to warn».

The prophets emerge in succession. The Qur'an says that they were sent «one after another (*qaffayna*) (Q 2, 87), or «one by one» (*tatra*) (Q 23, 44). Moreover, the prophets belong to the same genealogical descent. Thus Q 19, 58 reads: «These are the prophets on whom God bestowed favors, of the seed (*dhurriyya*) of Adam, and of those whom We carried with Noah, and of the seed of Abraham and Israel...». The same idea is conveyed in Q 6, 84, in which it is stated about Abraham: «...And We gave to him Isaac and Jacob; each did We guide, and Noah We guided before, and of his descendants (*dhurriyyatihi*) David and Solomon and Job and Joseph and Aaron...».

The fact that the prophets are said to have been «guided» by God means that they represent a divinely chosen pedigree, as is indicated, for example, in Q 3, 33-34: «Surely God chose (*istafa*) Adam and Noah and the House (*al*) of Abraham and the House (*al*) of 'Imran above all beings. (They are) the offspring (*dhurriyyatan*) one of the other...». The chosen prophetic lineage begins here with Adam, which indicates that he too is considered a prophet. The House of 'Imran stands for Moses (the son of the biblical Amram), but can also refer to Jesus whose mother Mary is considered a member of that House.

The verb *istafa*, which signifies here divine election, recurs in more verses dealing with prophets, as well as with angels. Thus in Q 22, 75 it is stated that God chooses (*yastafi*) messengers (*rusul*) from among the angels and from among the people. The same verb is used to describe election of individual prophets, such as Abraham (Q 2, 130), Moses (Q 7, 144) and Mary (Q 3, 42), as well as of kings, namely Talut (Saul) (Q 2, 247).

The divine election of the prophets provides them with abilities not shared by ordinary humans. This pertains mainly to knowledge of the unseen (*ghayb*). Thus in Q 72, 26-27 it is stated that God knows the unseen, and He does not reveal His secrets to anyone, except to an apostle with whom He is well pleased (*irtada*). In Q 3, 179 we are told again that God does not make people acquainted with the unseen, but He «chooses (*yajtabi*) of His apostles whom He pleases».

The guided and divinely chosen prophets possess moral virtues that render them immune to misbehavior of any kind. Thus in Q 3, 161 it is stated that it is not attributable to a prophet that he should act unfaithfully (*yaghulla*). The election of the prophets has made them belong to the righteous (*min al-salihin*), a fact stated regarding several of them, e.g. Zechariah, John, Jesus, Elias (Q 6, 85), and others. John is described in Q 3, 39 as honorable (*sayyid*) and chaste and a prophet from among the righteous (*min al-salihin*). Some of them are also described as truthful (*siddiq*), as is Abraham (Q 19:41) and Idris (Q 19, 56). Ishmael is described in Q 19, 54 as «truthful in his promise» (*sadiq al-wa`d*).

Some prophets possess unique traits that mark their singular status among the rest of the prophets. Abraham is described in Q 4, 125 as one whom God took as a friend (*khalil*). Moses is described as pure (*mukhlas*) (Q 19, 51), and as one whom God brought near in communion (*najjiyyan*) (Q 19, 52), and with whom God spoke (*kallama*) (Q 4, 164). This is the origin of Moses' title, *kalimu llah*, by which he is known in Islamic tradition. Tradition also elaborates on Moses' communion (*munajat*) with God.

The existence of distinguished groups among the prophets is a fact which the Qur'an declares openly. Q 17, 55 states that God has made some of the prophets to excel others, and in Q 2, 253 the same statement is repeated, alongside names of some of the excelling prophets: «We have made some of these apostles to excel the others, among them are they to whom God spoke (*kallama*), and some of them He exalted by (many degrees of) rank; and We gave clear arguments (*bayyinat*) to Jesus son of Mary, and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit...». In Q 33, 7 some prophets are singled out as those with whom God made a special covenant (*mithaq*): «And when We made a covenant with the prophets and with you [= Muhammad], and with Noah and Abraham and Moses and Jesus son of Mary, and We made with them a firm covenant».

A special group of God's messengers is mentioned in Q 46, 35, being called «those endowed with constancy (*ulu l-`azm*)». The Qur'an says that they have borne patiently (the hardships of their mission), and Muslim exegetes are not unanimous as to who they were. Some say that they were those who established a law (*shari`a*) among their nations, like Noah,

Abraham, Moses, Jesus, as well as Muhammad. Others hold that they were those who suffered the hardest trials, or the deepest remorse. In the latter case, they include Jacob, Joseph, Job and David, in addition to the five prophets already mentioned.

But in spite of divine election, the prophets always remain God's servants (*'ibad*) (e.g. Q 37, 171), for which reason people are not servants to them but to God (Q 3, 79).

### *Modes of Prophetic Revelation*

Various verbs convey the idea of prophetic revelation, the most frequent being those derived from the root *n.z.l.*, namely, *nazzala* and *anzala*. They denote an act of bringing down, which means that the prophetic revelation is perceived as being sent down from heaven. Occasionally, the revelation itself is described as descending (*nazala*, *tanazzala*), without specifying the agent that causes it to come down. A common name of the Qur'anic revelation is *tanzil* (e.g. Q 20, 4; 26, 192; 32, 2, etc.), i.e. «bringing down». Less common name is *amr* («affair»), which in Q 65, 12 is said to have been descending (*yatanazzalu*) through the seven heavens. Muslim exegetes explain that the «affair» stands here for divine revelation that is being brought down from heaven to earth.

Revelation originates in God, as is indicated in verses in which God speaks in the first person: «I have sent down (the Qur'an)» (Q 2, 41), and more often: «We have sent down (the Qur'an)» (e.g. Q 44, 3; 76, 23; 97, 1). But revelation does not come down directly to the prophets. The intermediate agents are the angels. God sends them down with the revelations, as is implied in Q 16, 2: «He sends down (*yunazzilu*) the angels with the Spirit (*ruh*) by His commandment on whom He pleases of His servants...». Muslim exegetes hold, however, that only Gabriel is meant here, the angel who was commissioned to bring down prophetic revelations, or the «spirit», to Muhammad. In Q 16, 102 the agent bringing down (*nazzalahu*) the Qur'anic revelation is himself called «the Holy Spirit» (*ruhu l-qudus*), which is again interpreted as an epithet of Gabriel. The same applies to Q 26, 193, in which the revelation is brought down (*nazala bihi*) by the «Faithful Spirit» (*al-ruh al-amin*). Similarly, the exegetes say that it is Gabriel who says to the Prophet in Q 19, 64: «we do not descend (with revelations) but by the command of your Lord».

As far as Muhammad's own prophetic experience is concerned, the process of sending down revelations ends at the Prophet's heart (*'ala qal-bika*), and Gabriel is mentioned explicitly as the one who brings it down to him (Q 2, 97).

The Qur'an provides specific, though not entirely coherent, details of the time when the revelation began coming down to Muhammad. This

took place either on a «blessed night» (Q 44, 3), or on *Laylat al-Qadr* (Q 97, 1), or during the month of Ramadan (Q 2, 185). The exegetes explain that all passages refer to one and the same night, namely *Laylat al-Qadr* which falls in Ramadan.

There are various terms denoting the actual revelation that is being brought down. Most often it is called «signs» (*ayat*), which commentators of the Qur'an have identified with the Qur'anic verses (e.g. Q 57, 9, etc.). Elsewhere, what God sends down is called *sura* (Q 9, 86 etc.), which term came to be identified with the Qur'anic chapters, and most obviously, the term Qur'an, too, stands for something which God sends down (Q 76, 23). Another locution standing for a whole unit of revelations being sent down is *kitab*, a «book», or «scripture» (e.g. Q 7, 2). Specific scriptures, namely «the Torah and the Gospel», are also described as being sent down by God (Q 3, 3-4), which implies that all monotheistic scriptures represent the same divine revelation. Metaphorical terms are also used to describe a descending revelation, one of which being the somewhat obscure title *Furqan* (Q 3, 4). Some exegetes have explained it in the sense of a scripture distinguishing between truth and falsehood. Light (*nur*) is also a name for the guiding revelation that God has sent down (Q 64, 8).

Another widely current verb denoting the act of providing revelation is *awha*, with *wahy* as the noun denoting the revelation itself. The verb means to «prompt», «inspire», or «suggest», but it is not confined to prophetic revelations. Occasionally it simply means to «instruct», or «command», as in Q 8, 12 in which God instructs (*yuhi*) the angels to support the believers. In Q 99, 5 God instructs (*awha*) earth to tell its story on the Day of Resurrection, and in Q 16, 68 He instructs (*awha*) the bee to make hives in the mountains, etc. Even when prophets are addressed, the verb *awha* can be a request to act rather than imparting a text for recitation. Thus in Q 23, 27 God instructs (*awhayna*) Noah to make the Ark, and in Q 7, 117 God prompts (*awhayna*) Moses to cast his rod. An act designated as *awha* can also be performed by humans. In Q 19, 11, for example, Zechariah signals (*awha*) to his people that they should glorify God in the morning and the evening. In most cases, however, *awha* stands for an act performed by God Himself, as in Q 41, 12. Here God reveals (*awha*) the «affair» (*amr*) of the seven heavens, i.e. enjoins His commandment on the heavens. But what God reveals mostly as *wahy* is the prophetic inspiration itself. This is the case in Q 42, 52 in which God reveals (*awhayna*) a «spirit» (*ruhan*) to His prophet. The spirit is interpreted here as standing for the Qur'anic revelation. This accords with Q 53, 4-5 in which the Qur'an is explicitly described as a revelation (*wahy*) that is revealed (*yuha*). In Q 35, 31 it is the «Book» that has been revealed as *wahy*.

The revelation (*wahy*) of a given Qur'anic passage can be a prolonged process, as is the case with the revelation to Muhammad. He is advised not to make haste before the process is completed (Q 20, 114). When the reception of the *wahy* is completed the Prophet is supposed to recite it in public (Q 29, 45). The same process of *wahy* was experienced also by previous prophets, as is stated in Q 4, 163: «Surely We have revealed (*awhayna*) to you as We revealed to Noah, and the prophets after him, and We revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon...».

The *wahy* does not always come directly from God to the prophets. An angel acting as God's messenger may deliver the divine *wahy* to them. This comes out in Q 42, 51, in which it is stated: «It is not for any mortal that God should speak to them, except by inspiration (*wahyan*) or from behind a veil (*hijab*), or by sending a messenger (*rasul*), to reveal (*fa-yuhiya*) by His permission what he will». The exegetes say that the messenger delivering the *wahy* is Gabriel.

As for the contents of what is being revealed as *wahy*, in some cases it consists of the sheer idea of monotheism. Thus in Q 21, 108 it is stated: «Say: It is only revealed (*yuha*) to me that your God is one God». In other cases the *wahy* revolves around specific legal obligations. God reveals (*awhayna*) to the previous prophets «the doing of good and the keeping up of prayer and the giving of alms» (Q 21, 73). The Qur'an repeats several times the injunction given to the prophet to follow (*ittabi`*) what has been revealed (*yuha*) to him (e.g. Q 10, 109; 33, 2, etc.).

In Q 17, 39 the content of the *wahy* is defined as «wisdom» (*hikma*), which seems to refer to moral lessons which must be derived from the history of past generations. This is confirmed by the fact that in Q 11, 49 the *wahy* consists of «accounts of the unseen» (*anba' al-ghayb*), i.e. stories of the history of past generations which are now being revealed to the prophet. The stories deal with sinful nations which God punished and destroyed because they had rejected their prophets.

There are also other, less frequent, terms of prophetic revelation, one of which being to «cast» (*alqa*), as in Q 40, 15. Here God is said to have cast «the inspiration (*ruh*) by His command upon whom He pleases of His servants». In Q 28, 86 it is the Book that has been cast unto the prophet, while in Q 77, 5 some unspecified persons are mentioned who are described as «casting the reminder» (*fa-l-mulqiyati dhikran*). The exegetes say that the «reminder» signifies the prophetic inspiration, and that those who cast it are the angels who deliver it to God's prophets and messengers.

«To give» (*ata*), may also signal prophetic revelation, as is the case in Q 2, 87, in which God «gives» Moses «the Book».

Dreams (*ru'ya*) may also function as prophetic visions. Abraham found out by such a dream that he had to sacrifice his son (Q 37, 105), and Muhammad knew from his own dream that he was about to enter Mecca safely (Q 48, 27). Another vision of the Prophet, which is mentioned in Q 17, 60, was interpreted as referring to his nocturnal journey and ascension (*isra'/mi'raj*).

The Qur'an is also aware of false revelations which seem prophetic but come from Satan, which means that only a thin line separates genuine divine inspiration from satanic temptation. This is demonstrated in the common vocabulary that the Qur'an uses for the Godly as well as the Satanic spheres. Thus satans (*shayatin*), like God, can deliver *wahy* (Q 6, 112, 121) which is deceiving in its varnished outward appearance. But the more common verb denoting satanic inspiration is *waswasa*, to «whisper» (e.g. Q 7, 20; 20, 120.). Satan also casts (*alqa*) his own verses into genuine revelations received by every prophet, «but God annuls that which Satan casts» (Q 22, 52). Moreover, the satans can be God's messengers, but He sends (*yursilu*) them against the unbelievers (Q 19, 83).

The distinction between a true prophet and other persons endowed with unique spiritual powers is also stated very clearly, in passages stressing that Muhammad's prophetic message is not the words of a *kahin* («soothsayer»), neither of a poet nor a *majnum*, i.e. a madman possessed by demons (Q 52, 29; 69, 41-42; 81, 22).

Imposters are severely denounced. Q 6, 93 states: «And who is more unjust than he who forges a lie against God, or says: It has been revealed (*uhiya*) to me; while nothing has been revealed to him, and he who says: I can bring down (*sa-unzilu*) the like of what God has brought down (*anzala*)?» The exegetes say that this passage refers to persons like Musaylima and others who pretended to receive revelations similar to those of Muhammad.

### *Signs and Miracles*

God not only provides His messengers with the prophetic inspiration but He also stays with them when they deliver His message. As is formulated in Q 72, 27-28: «...for surely He makes a guard to march before (His messenger) and after him, so that He may know that they have truly delivered the messages of their Lord...». The «guards» accompanying the prophets are said to be the angels, and elsewhere it is asserted that God is always aware of what His apostles are doing (Q 23, 51). God's presence renders His apostles immune to dangers (Q 27, 10), and His help (*nasr*) is always ensured for them (Q 12, 110; 40, 51).

God also provides His prophets with concrete means designed to increase their power of persuasion. These are called *bayyinat*, i.e. clear

«proofs» or «arguments». Occasionally the exegetes interpret this term as «miracles». For example, in Q 2, 87 (see also Q 2, 253), God provides Jesus with *bayyinat* and strengthens him with the Holy Spirit. The exegetes say that the latter stands for Gabriel, and that the *bayyinat* are miracles which Jesus performed. Such miracles are described in Q 3, 49, where Jesus says to the Children of Israel: «I have come to you with a sign (*aya*) from your Lord, that I create (*akhluqa*) for you out of dust like the form of a bird, then I breathe into it and it becomes a bird with God's permission, and I heal the blind and the leprous, and bring the dead to life with God's permission, and I shall inform you of what you eat and what you have stored in your houses...».

But miracles do not render the prophets divine, as is stressed especially with respect to Jesus. The Qur'an insists that he is «...only an apostle (*rasul*) of God and His Word (*kalimatuhu*) which He cast (*alqaha*) unto Mary, and a spirit (*ruh*) from Him. Believe therefore in God and His apostles, and say not: Three». (Q 4, 171).

Other prophets also brought such *bayyinat* to their own nations, alongside of revealed scriptures, but they were rejected (Q 3, 184; 35, 25).

Muhammad too has brought (unspecified) *bayyinat* to his people, but they have discarded them as sheer magic (Q 61, 6). The term *burhan* («proof») is also used to signal what Muhammad has brought to his audience (Q 4, 174).

The listeners, however, not only reject the *bayyinat* but demand to receive a «sign» (*aya*) of their own choice (Q 2, 118; 21, 5, etc.). Often they request to see an angel being sent down with Muhammad (Q 23, 24; 25, 7, etc.), or a treasure descending upon him (Q 11, 12), or a fountain being made to gush forth from the earth for them (Q 17, 90), etc. The Qur'an responds to such demands by asserting that God's messengers can only produce signs with God's permission (Q 40, 78), and that they are just mortals (Q 14, 11). They may even have wives and children (Q 13, 38). Elsewhere it is stressed that they are merely humans (*rijal*) receiving revelation (e.g. 12, 109; 16, 43, etc.), and that they eat food and go about in the markets (Q 25, 20).

But God may at times send a sign (*aya*) in response to a specific request. This was the case with the prophet Salih who was sent as warner to the people of Thamud. They asked him for a sign, and he produced a she-camel (*naqa*). They were ordered to share their water with her on appointed intervals (Q 26, 154-5), or according to another version (Q 11, 64), to leave her to pasture on God's earth and not harm her. But Thamud killed the she-camel (Q 11, 65), for which reason, God no longer sends signs on demand (Q 17, 59).

Nevertheless, Moses too brought a sign (*aya*) in response to the demand of the Pharaoh (Q 7, 106; 26, 31). The sign was that the rod of Moses was turned into a serpent, and his hand became «white to the beholders». The audience denied the double sign as evident magic (Q 7, 107-109; 26, 31-4). But these two signs were given to Moses in advance, upon his first encounter with God (Q 20, 17-23; 27, 10-12; 28, 31-32). They formed part of nine (not ten, as in the Old Testament) signs which God gave to Moses, and they are therefore not just *ayat* but rather *ayat bayyinat* (Q 17, 101; 28, 36), as well as *burhan* («proof») (Q 28, 32). Elsewhere a list of all the signs, *i.e.* the calamities, is provided (Q 7, 130-35).

### *Prophets and Scriptures*

The core of the prophetic revelation consists in revealed scriptures which are sometimes (*e.g.* Q 3, 184) referred to as *zukur* (sing. *zukur*), or *suhuf* (sing. *sahifa*). The latter term signifies «scrolls», as, for example, in Q 87, 19, in which the scrolls (*suhuf*) of Abraham and Moses are mentioned.

The most frequent name for a revealed scripture is *kitab*, namely, something which has been written down, or simply a «Book»<sup>3</sup>. A *kitab* is always of high solemnity. It may stand for the written list of deeds which determines the destiny of all people on the Day of Resurrection (*e.g.* Q 39, 69), or the pre-existent divine Book in which the pre-ordained Law of God has been recorded. This is, at least, how Muslim exegetes explain the locution «Book of God» in Q 33, 6 (also Q 30, 56), which, so they hold, is identical with the «Guarded Tablet» (*lawh mahfuz*) mentioned in Q 85, 22. The Qur'an is said to have formed part of this Tablet (Q 85, 21), so that this revealed book is actually a reflection of a celestial text. Another locution which is taken to refer to the original celestial version of the universal Book is *umm al-kitab* mentioned in Q 43, 4. Here it is stated that the Qur'an is in the *umm al-kitab* «with Us, truly elevated, full of wisdom». The exegetes maintain that it is another name for the Tablet, the origin of all revealed books.

The divine origin of the Qur'anic revelation comes out in the idea that no one can alter God's words as revealed to Muhammad: «Recite (*utlu*) what has been revealed (*uhiya*) to you of the Book of your Lord; there is none who can alter His words...» (Q 18, 27). God sent down the Book to Muhammad without any «crookedness» (*'iwaj*) (Q 18, 1), so that the revealed Qur'an has remained faithful to the original message of the divine Book. In other words, the Book was sent down to Muhammad «with the truth (*bi-l-haqqi*)» (*e.g.* Q 39, 2, etc.). It has also been sent down as a

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture*, Princeton 2001.

«blessed» (*mubarak*) Book (e.g. Q 6, 155; 38, 29), and as a Book «conformable» (*mutashabih*) in its various parts (Q 39, 23).

Not just the Qur'an but any other revealed book is of the same divine origin, for which reason the Qur'an recognizes the authenticity of previous revelations, saying that previous messengers (*rusul*), too, brought their peoples «clear arguments (*bayyinah*), scriptures (*zabur*), and the illuminating book (*al-kitab al-munir*)» (Q 35, 25. see also Q 3, 184; 57, 25).

Being an essential component of the prophetic message, the term *kitab* often appears side by side with the term *nubuwwa* («prophethood»), and both are perceived as components of a divine legacy that runs in a genealogical line of a chosen pedigree. Thus in Q 29, 27, the prophethood (*nubuwwa*) and the Book are said to have remained in the seed (*dhurriyya*) of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The same is said of the offspring of Noah and Abraham (Q 57, 26). The book is therefore a divine legacy which God has bequeathed (*awrathna*) to whom he chose of his servants (Q 35, 32).

Of the previous prophets, Moses in particular is mentioned as one whom God gave the Book (Q 2, 87). His Book is described as «a light and a guidance to the people» (Q 6, 91).

Apart from the term *kitab*, previous scriptures are also mentioned by their individual titles, such as the Torah (*tawrat*) of the Israelite prophets (Q 5, 44), David's *Zabur* (*Psalms*) (Q 4, 163; 17, 55) and Jesus' Gospel (*Injil*). About the latter it is stated that it was full of guidance and light (Q 5, 46).

### *The Prophets and Muhammad*

The revelation of the Book was a new experience to Muhammad (Q 42, 52), and the Arabs, too, never had messengers sent to them before him, nor had they any revealed books (Q 34, 44). This means that being an Arab, Muhammad did not have any genealogical relationship to the previous prophets. The gap between him and them was also a chronological one, as is indicated in Q 5, 19, in which it is stated that the Qur'anic prophet emerged «after a cessation (*fatra*) of the (mission of the) apostles (*rusul*)».

Nevertheless, the Qur'an quite easily joins Muhammad to the honorable group of prophets. The most straightforward way to achieve this is simply to declare Muhammad to be «one of the apostles (*min al-mursalin*)» (e.g. 2, 252). This universalized perception of Muhammad's mission leads to the conclusion that he is actually not the first of the messengers (*rusul*) on earth (Q 46, 9), and that apostles already passed away before him (Q 3, 144). This means that Muhammad is a link in the same chain of prophets to which prophets like Jesus also belong. Before the latter other messengers already passed away (Q 5, 75).

As for Muhammad's own revealed Book (= the Qur'an), it is indeed an Arabic scripture (Q 12, 2; 13, 37), but is nevertheless perceived as closely related to previous scriptures. Time and again the Qur'an stresses that Muhammad's Book confirms, or verifies (*musaddiq*), what was revealed before it. For example, in Q 3, 3-4 we read: «He has sent down to you the Book with truth, verifying that which is before it, and He brought down the Torah and the Gospel aforetime...». This means that all scriptures represent identical links in the same successive chain of revelations. This idea recurs in the Qur'anic description of Jesus who is said to have verified the Torah that was revealed before him (Q 5, 46). Since the Qur'an itself verifies the Torah as well as the Gospels, the Jews and the Christians alike, whom the Qur'an addresses as «the People of the Book», are demanded on their part to believe in the Qur'an (Q 4, 47. See also Q 2, 41).

The equality of all scriptures as links in the same successive chain of revelations entails that true believers are only those who believe in all the revealed books, without exception. This idea, which is encountered already in the New Testament (in *Acts* 24, 14 Paul believes in all things which are written in the Torah and in the prophets), is stated explicitly several times. For example, Q 2, 136 says: «Say: We believe in God and (in) that which had been sent down to us, and (in) that which was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and (in) that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and (in) that which was given to the prophets from their Lord, we do not make any distinction between any of them, and to Him do we submit». The same is repeated in several other places in which it is stressed that true righteousness is based on belief in the previous prophets and in their books, as well as in the angels and in the Last Day (e.g. Q 2, 177, 285; 4, 136, etc.). On the Last Judgement people will be inquired about their belief in the messengers which had come to them (Q 28, 65; 39, 71).

The previous revelations have remained relevant to the Muslims, as is implied in Q 3, 194. Here an Islamic prayer is addressed to God, imploring Him to «grant us what You have promised us by Your apostles».

The conviction that one should believe in all revealed books means that one should also believe in Muhammad's Qur'an. Therefore those who only believe in some books, like the Jews who denied the Qur'an, are not true believers, and they are denounced in Q 2, 85. Moreover, the duty to believe in Muhammad's own revelation has become the core of the religion of all prophets. This comes out in the notion that God already commanded all the previous prophets to believe in Muhammad. In Q 3, 81 we read: «And when God made a covenant (*mithaq*) with the prophets: Surely, the Book and the wisdom that I have given you – then an apostle

comes to you verifying that which is with you, you must believe in him, and you must aid him. (God) said: Do you affirm and accept My compact in this (matter)? The (prophets) said: We do affirm. (God) said: Then bear witness, and I (too) am of the bearers of witness with you». The exegetes explain that the apostle in whom the prophets are demanded to believe is Muhammad. The Arabian messenger of God has thus become the peak of the prophetic chain of revelations, and this is also demonstrated in his title: «Seal (*khatam*) of the Prophets» (Q 33, 40).

The prophets were not only requested to believe in Muhammad, but some of them were familiar with his titles, which were included in their own revealed scriptures. Thus in Q 7, 157 it is stated that Muhammad was mentioned as a «Gentile» (*ummi*) in the Torah and the Gospel. Jesus, it is said in Q 61, 6, announced the appearance of an apostle who will come after him, his name being Ahmad. This quest for universal legitimacy is found already in the New Testament (*Matthew* 2, 23), where prophets predict that Jesus will be called the Nazarene.

Since belief in Muhammad has always been the core of the religion of the previous prophets, it comes as no surprise that the Israelite prophets to whom the Torah was revealed are described as «those who were Muslims» (*alladhina aslamau*) (Q 5, 44). Furthermore, the religion that was enjoined upon the prophets was the same as the one given to the Muslims, a fact stated in Q 42, 13: «He has enjoined upon you (*shara`a*) for religion what He prescribed to Noah and that which We have revealed to you and that which We enjoined upon Abraham and Moses and Jesus...».

However, the uniformity of the religion of the prophets is abandoned in several passages in which Abraham's religion is set apart from the rest of the prophets, and a direct line is drawn between him and Muhammad. Such passages seem to have been designed to highlight the Arabian identity of the Qur'anic revelation, and to dissociate its message from that of the Jewish and the Christian scriptures. The dissociation is achieved by insisting that Abraham was neither Jew nor Christian but rather a *hanif*. As a *hanif* he has become a model for Muhammad, whom God commands to follow Abraham's religion (Q 2, 135; 4, 125; 16, 123, etc.).

### *The Scope of the Prophetic Mission*

The prophets are sent each to his own nation (*umma*) or people (*qawm*). This comes out in verses asserting that each nation has its own prophets sent to it (Q 10, 47; 16, 36), and that every apostle was only sent «with the language (*lisan*) of his people (*qawmihi*)» (Q 14, 4). Thus Moses, for example, says to his people (*li-qawmihi*) that he is God's messenger to them (Q 61, 5). Moreover, some prophets are described as the

«brothers» of the peoples to whom they were sent (Q 26, 106, 161, etc.). This is again an appropriate precedent for Muhammad, the Arabian prophet who has brought to his nation an Arabic Qur'an (e.g. Q 12, 2). His Arabic Qur'an was revealed to him that he may warn «the mother of cities» (*umm al-qura*) (Q 42, 7. See also Q 6, 92), which is Mecca, according to the exegetes.

But unlike the previous prophets, Muhammad appears in some other passages as a universal prophet whose mission goes beyond ethnic boundaries. In Q 4, 79 he is said to have been sent «to mankind (*li-l-nas*) as an apostle», and in Q 21, 107 he is sent with mercy «to the worlds (*li-l`alam-in*)». His audience includes the *jinn* (Q 46, 30), to whom messengers of their own kind were also sent (Q 6, 130).

### *The Aims of the Prophetic Mission*

The purpose for which the Qur'anic prophet has been sent is to make God's religion, *i.e.* Islam, prevail over all religions (Q 9, 33; 48, 28; 61, 9). This may involve waging war on the infidels, as is stated about the preceding prophets in Q 3, 146: «And how many a prophet has fought (*qatala*), and with them were many worshippers of the Lord; so the (prophets) did not become weak-hearted on account of what befell them in God's way, nor did they weaken, nor did they abase themselves; and God loves the patient».

But in other Qur'anic passages the religious campaign is based on preaching and is focused on the mere idea of monotheism and on the refutation of polytheism (*shirk*). Several times the previous prophets are described as imploring their respective peoples to «serve nothing (*alla ta`budu*) but God...». (e.g. Q 41, 14). God also tells Muhammad himself that this was the main mission of the prophets who were sent before him (Q 21, 25, etc.), and he himself says to his audience: «I am only a mortal like you; it is revealed to me that your God is one God, therefore follow the right way to Him and ask His forgiveness; and woe to the polytheists (*mushrikun*)» (Q 41, 6. See also Q18, 110).

On the other hand, the mission of the prophets has also a grimmer aspect, namely, to warn stubborn unbelievers of their fate in Hell, in case they do not repent. But the warning usually goes hand in hand with good tidings for those who believe (who will be rewarded in Paradise). Thus Q 6, 48, for example, asserts that God's messengers were sent as «announcers of good news and givers of warning (*mubashshirina wa-mundhirina*), then whoever believes and acts aright, they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve» (see also Q 4, 165; 18, 56, etc.). The same twofold message was entrusted with Muhammad (Q 33, 45; 48, 8).

The messengers are responsible neither for the success nor failure of their message, and the Qur'an repeatedly asserts that nothing is incumbent upon the apostles except a plain delivery (*al-balagh al-mubin*) (e.g. Q 16, 35, etc.). Furthermore, the apostles are not even capable of changing the fate awaiting the unbelievers: «It is not (fit) for the Prophet and those who believe that they should ask forgiveness for the polytheists, even though they should be near relatives, after it has become clear to them that they are inmates of the flaming fire» (Q 9, 113. cf. Q 9, 80, 84).

On the Last Judgement, believers and unbelievers will realize that the apostles had spoken the truth about their respective fate in Paradise or Hell (Q 7, 43, 53; 36, 52). The prophets themselves will be present on the scene of Judgement and will act as witnesses (*shahid*) as to who is righteous and who is a sinner (e.g. Q 4, 41; 7, 6; 16; 84, 89). But according to Q 5, 109, the messengers will not dare testify, and God Himself will know what the people were doing.

But mercy (*rahma*) is also a significant component of the prophetic message, and emanates mainly from the guidance that is inherent in the revealed Book. This is stated in Q 16, 89: «...We have revealed the Book to you explaining clearly everything, and a guidance (*hudan*) and mercy and good news for those who are Muslims».

Being the ultimate source of guidance, some prophets are occasionally described as *imams* who guide the people by God's command (Q 21, 73), and their revealed book, too, is called «*imam* and mercy» (Q 11, 17; 46, 12).

Guidance is achieved by the actual teaching of the Book, and therefore Muhammad is often described as a messenger teaching «the Book and the wisdom» (Q 2, 129, 151; 3, 164, etc.).

A prophet is not only a spiritual guide but a judge too, whose adjudication is based on the revealed Book. This was the case among the Jews for whom the prophets judged according to the revealed Torah (Q 5, 44; 2, 213), and the same is said about Muhammad to whom God revealed the Book «that you may judge between people by means of that which God has taught you» (Q 4, 105).

### *The Reception of the Prophets*

The nations to whom prophets have been sent are expected to receive them with consent and obedience. As Q 4, 64 puts it: «And We did not send any apostle but that he should be obeyed (*li-yuta`a*) by God's permission...». But the prophets were received with anything but obedience. They were mocked (Q 15, 11, etc.) and called liars (e.g. Q 3, 184; 22, 42; 23, 44; 35, 25, etc.), and their message was denied (Q 11, 59), and denoun-

ced as «medleys of dreams» (*adghathu ahlam*) (Q 21, 5). The prophets were rejected mainly on account of their being ordinary human beings (*bashar*), (e.g. Q 14, 10; 17, 94; 36, 15; 64, 6), and were accused of being mere poets, magicians (*sahir*) and madmen (*majnun*) (e.g. Q 21, 5; 51, 52). Some of them were received with skeptic questions (Q 2, 108), and above all, their audience expressed devotion to the pagan tradition of the ancestors (Q 43, 23).

The prophets have also suffered actual persecution, such as the threat of expulsion (e.g. Q 14, 13), and also death at the hand of their own peoples, as was the fate of the Israelite prophets (e.g. Q 2, 61, 91, etc.).

The sufferings of the previous prophets are recounted to comfort Muhammad in his own distress which resembles that of his precursors. As stated in Q 41, 43: «Nothing is said to you but what was said indeed to the apostles before you...».

Not only humankind but also the satans rose as enemies to the prophets. In Q 6, 112, God says: «And thus did We make for every prophet an enemy, the satans from among humans and *jinn*...». Satan's enmity is seen in this that he makes rebellion look attractive to nations to whom apostles were sent (Q 16, 63).

Rejection is met with retribution. Time and again the Qur'an describes how nations that disobeyed their prophets were punished by severe calamities, a motif recurrent mainly in the «Punishment Stories». Rejection of messengers renders retribution inevitable, as stated in Q 7, 94: «And We did not send a prophet in a town but We overtook its people with distress and affliction in order that they might humble themselves». The divine logic that comes out here is that God is enemy to anyone who is «the enemy of God and His angels and His apostles and Gabriel and Michael» (Q 2, 98). Retribution is the direct result of the fact that God has promised to protect the prophets (Q 14, 47), and is defined as God's *sunna* with respect to those who persecute the prophets (Q 17, 76-7). Destruction is never arbitrary or unjust, and is only inflicted on towns that have been warned in advance by their prophets (Q 17, 15; 28, 59).

The prophets and their close entourage are always saved from the collective disaster (Q 10, 103, etc.), which means that at the end of the day, God's grace never ceases to ensure the endurance of their prophetic charisma.

### Abstract

*This article surveys the various aspects of Qur'anic idea of prophethood, namely, the status of the prophets; the modes of the prophetic reve-*

*lation; signs and miracles; the prophets and the Scriptures; the prophets and Muhammad; the scope of the prophetic mission; the aims of the prophetic mission; and the reception of the prophets.*

Questo articolo analizza vari aspetti dell'idea coranica della profezia, e cioè lo status dei profeti, le modalità della rivelazione profetica; segni e miracoli; i profeti e le scritture; i profeti e Muhammad; la portata della missione profetica; gli scopi della missione profetica; la ricezione dei profeti.