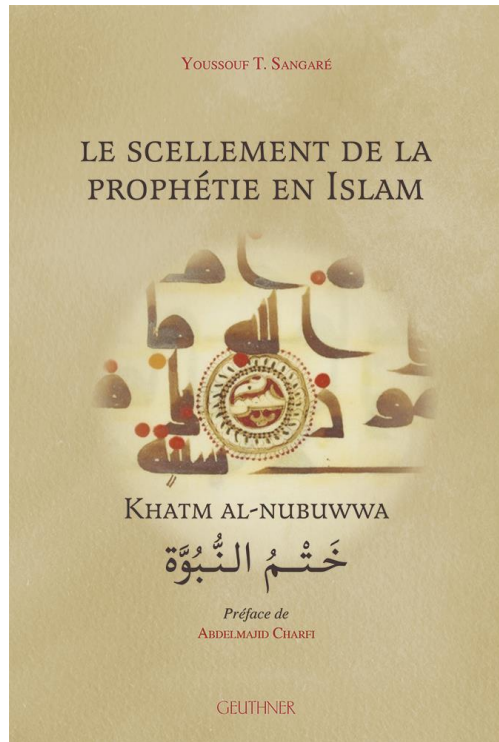


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Le scellement de la prophétie en Islam : Khatm al-nubuwwa

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Le scellement de la prophétie en Islam is a learned and well-argued study of the qur'ānic hapax legomenon *khātam al-nabiyyīn* (seal of the prophets; Q Aḥzāb 33:40) and more generally of the notion of the cessation of prophecy in Islam. An introductory section is dedicated to key vocabulary (*naba'*, *nabī*, *rasūl*, *risālah*, and the root *kh-t-m*) and to a study of Sūrat al-Aḥzāb where the expression *khātam al-nabiyyīn* appears. Chapter 1 addresses the question of whether this expression is rightly understood in light of reports in Islamic literature that Mani (d. 277) named himself “seal of the prophets.” The following chapters offer a chronological study of how Muslim scholars understood the notion of the sealing of prophecy (*khatm al-nubuwwah*) in the classical period (seventh to fourteenth centuries; chapter 2), in the writings of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Ibn 'Arabī (d. 628/1240), and Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328; chapter 3), and in the

modern period (chapter 4). Along the way Youssouf Sangaré illustrates the complications surrounding the notion of the sealing of prophecy and amplifies those voices in Islamic tradition which resist the idea that God went silent with the death of Muḥammad.

In his study of Mani and the “sealing of prophecy” (chapter 1), Sangaré addresses the arguments of earlier scholars that Mani’s teaching might have influenced the Qur’ān, or that Muḥammad might have met Manicheans, or at least heard of Manicheanism, in Mecca. Mani—according to most scholars—connected himself to the Paraclete predicted by Christ but also saw his message as consummating the teachings of a series of religions, including not only Judaism and Christianity but also Zoroastrianism and Buddhism. He also showed a particular concern for the preservation of his revelation, based on a conviction that earlier revelations had been corrupted (Mani developed his own script and personally wrote scriptures for his community). Noting some of these things, earlier scholars have accordingly shown particular interest in the report of Abū al-Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (d. 440/1048) in his *Kitāb al-Āthār* that Mani called himself *khātam al-nabiyyīn*. Sangaré, however (following in part Guy Stroumsa),¹ shows that Mani seems to have used this concept in a different fashion: Mani was a seal of those ‘prophets’—his disciples—whom he sent out on mission. In other words, in Mani’s own writings “seal” does not refer to the consummation of an earlier line of prophets but instead to his affirmation or bestowal of authority on a later line of ‘prophets.’ Muslim scholars, however, understood Mani in their own terms. Sangaré explains : “Les auteurs musulmans ont pu mettre dans la bouche des manichéens une ‘métaphore coranique’” (90).

¹ Guy Stroumsa, *Savoir et salut* (Paris: Cerf, 1992), 283.

The chapter on *khatm al-nubuwwah* in the classical period begins with a study of this notion in the *ḥadīth* literature. Sangaré comments on two versions of the *ḥadīth* regarding the station of 'Alī (*manzilat 'Alī*), both of which are included in the *ṣaḥīḥ* collection of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870). This *ḥadīth* has 'Alī complain of being left behind when the Prophet leaves on a raid, and Muḥammad comfort him by comparing himself to Moses and 'Alī to Aaron. However, in the longer version only the Prophet (aware that Aaron was more than an assistant/successor; he was a prophet himself) adds, “except that there is no prophet after me.” Sangaré rejects the argument that the short version of this *ḥadīth* reflects a period when the doctrine of the finality of Muḥammad’s prophethood was not yet established (noting that the earlier collection of Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) includes the long version of this *ḥadīth*). However, this is only one complication in the classical period surrounding the cessation of prophecy.

In a *ḥadīth* preserved in the collection of Abū Bakr b. Muḥammad b. Abī Shayba (d. 235/849) 'Ā'isha is said to have declared, or rather commanded: “Say '*khātam al-nabiyyīn*' and do not say 'there is no prophet after him.’” According to Sangaré this statement should be seen as 'Ā'isha’s concern for the letter of the qur'ānic text (Q 33:40 does not include the latter phrase). A skeptic, however, might doubt the attribution to 'Ā'isha and wonder if a later Muslim put his belief that prophecy had *not* ended in the mouth of the Prophet’s beloved wife. Some Muslims in the classical period thought that a new prophet could arise. Sangaré tells the story of a woman named Fāṭimah who was personally interrogated by the caliph al-Ma'mūn (d. 218/833) for having claimed to be a prophetess (*nabiyyah*); on the basis of Q Yūsuf 12:109 and Q Naḥl 16:43—which speak of “men” being sent—most interpreters held that a woman could not be a “messenger”—but the possibility of a *nabiyyah* (prophetess) was sometimes entertained (for example, by Ibn Ḥazm [d. 456/1064]). When interrogated, she craftily explained that

Muḥammad said only “no prophet (*nabī*) after me” and never said “no prophetess (*nabiyyah*) after me.” The caliph was left dumbfounded. The fate of Muḥammad b. Saʿīd al-Shāmī (second/eighth century), however, was less happy. He was crucified for the crime of claiming that Muḥammad said “except as God wills” after the statement “there is no prophet after me.”

Yet the biggest problem for those who held that there was no prophet after Muḥammad was not any prophet roaming around Baghdad but the teaching (suggested but not clearly taught by the Qurʾān) that Jesus was to return in the end days. In light of this teaching, how can one say that there is no prophet after Muḥammad, or even refer to Muḥammad as the last prophet? Muslim scholars were of course aware of the problem and, as Sangaré details, dealt with it in different ways. Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) insisted that when Christ (*al-masīḥ*) returns he will not abrogate anything that has been taught by Muḥammad (although the traditions surrounding Jesus insist that he will refuse to accept the *jizyah* [poll tax] and offer the People of the Book only Islam or death, something which seems to belie this idea). Other scholars pointed to those eschatological *ḥadīths* which make Muḥammad an intercessor for his community on the Day of Judgment and therefore the ‘last’ prophet, or argued that since Jesus’ prophethood *began* before that of Muḥammad that he is not a ‘later’ prophet.

As Sangaré shows, Muslim exegetes were particularly interested in the context of the Qurʾānic expression *khātam al-nabiyyīn*. The verse in which this expression appears begins with the declaration “Muḥammad is not the father of any of your men (*rijālikum*)” (Q 33:40). In explaining this declaration exegetes note that Muḥammad’s four natural sons all died in childhood and that Zayd b. Ḥārithah (mentioned by name in Q 33:37 and recently studied by David Powers) was only Muḥammad’s *adopted* son. Still a curious tradition surrounds one of

Muḥammad's four natural sons, Ibrāhīm (whose mother was Maryam the Copt). Upon Ibrāhīm's death Muḥammad (according to a *ḥadīth* on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās and preserved by Ibn Mājah [d. 273/887]) is said to have explained that Ibrāhīm would have been a prophet, if only he had lived. Another *ḥadīth* put things exactly the other way around: Ibrāhīm died precisely *because* there could be no prophet after Muḥammad (134). Sangaré, summarizing the views of the exegetes, notes also that the *tafsīr* attributed to Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) includes the view that Zayd *would* have been a prophet if only he had been a natural born son. In these places one wishes that Sangaré engaged more robustly the views of David Powers in his two recent books: *Muḥammad is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*, and *Zayd*.²

In chapter 3 Sangaré details the teaching of al-Ghazālī that the doctrine of the end of prophecy is based only on consensus (*ijmā'*) and is not clearly taught by the Qur'ān (for this al-Ghazālī would be violently criticized, and even declared a heretic by Ibn 'Aṭīyyah al-Andalusī [d. 543/1147]). As al-Ghazālī points out, there are different ways of understanding the description of Muḥammad as *khātam al-nabiyyīn*. He could be the seal of the *great* (*ūlū al-'aẓm*) prophets only or simply possess a high station among the prophets. Sangaré also notes how both Ibn 'Arabī and Ibn Taymiyyah (scholars who are generally not grouped together) sought to qualify the “end of prophecy” by noting that sanctity (*walāyah*) continues even if prophecy (*nubuwwah*) ends. Ibn 'Arabī even held that there is a certain primacy for *walāya* because it is for this world (*al-dunyā*) and the next world (*al-ākhirah*) whereas *nubuwwah* “n'aura pas d'existence dans l'au-delà” (229). For his part, Ibn Taymiyyah admitted (239) that believers

² David Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); *ibid. Zayd* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

might have some private inspiration (*ilhām*), although he also held that such inspiration should not be trusted if it contradicts the revealed law.

Finally, in chapter 4 Sangaré turns to a group of nine scholars from the modern period: Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, Muḥammad ‘Abduh, Muḥammad Iqbāl, Fazlur Rahman, Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafallāh, Ḥasan Ḥanafī, Abdelmajid Charfi, Muḥammad Shaḥrūr and Abdolkarim Soroush. Although Sangaré notes the importance in the Indian subcontinent of Shāh Walī-Allāh al-Dihlawī (d. 1762) this chapter does mark a jump from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century. But then, as Sangaré explains in long excursus (251–269), he means to capture a distinct development that takes place among these modern Muslim thinkers in regard to the notion of *khatm al-nubuwwah*. In different ways these thinkers were interested in awakening independent religious thought (*ijtihād*). Unlike Mīrzā Ghulām Aḥmad (d. 1908), Sangaré’s nine intellectuals did not claim that a new prophet had arisen (let alone claim prophethood themselves) but as a rule they did not want to reduce Islam to strict legalism. Aḥmad Khān in some ways went the furthest by accepting the possibility that the notion of Muḥammad as a seal does not preclude the possibility that the gift of prophecy could be given to someone else after him. Indeed the heart of the issue related to *khatm al-nubuwwah* for many modern thinkers was wrestling with the idea of a God who has gone silent. Iqbāl addressed this problem by suggesting that, even if there were to be no prophets after Muḥammad, there continues to be *waḥy* (after all, if God offers *waḥy* to bees [Q Naḥl 16:68–69] why would He no longer offer it to humans?). Iqbāl held that all humans are also capable of mystical and rational insights through divine inspiration. Sangaré summarizes: “*Khatm al-nubuwwa n’est donc pas synonyme d’une fin du dialogue entre ciel et terre*” (284).

Ḥasan Ḥanafī argues alternatively that reason—as expressed through free human choice and in light of one’s conscience—allows humans to find guidance similar to *wahy*. Or, as Ḥanafī puts it: “reason is the heir of revelation” (*al-‘aql huwa yarith al-wahy*) (315). Fazlur Rahman had a vision of humans achieving a sort of moral maturity which allows them to break free from a narrow adherence to *taqlīd* (imitation of legal precedents). Together these thinkers, by arguing that humans are able to progress in their ethics and spirituality, challenge the notion so central to Salafi Islam that the ‘best’ generations were in the past. Sangaré makes this contrast by quoting the famous *ḥadīth* about the first three generations of Muslims, the best being the companions of the Prophet (who is said to have declared: *khayr ummatī qarṇī*) (354).

Sangaré does engage with the thought of two modern Shi‘ite thinkers: Soroush and (in a separate section near the conclusion) Seyyed Hossein Nasr. This is felicitous, since in some ways the Shi‘ite notion of the continuation of guidance through the Imams offers an elegant solution to the problem of a God who has gone silent (although Soroush is careful in his writing to emphasize the finality of the prophetic age).

In his conclusion Sangaré argues that for the modern thinkers in his study the point about *khatm al-nubuwwah* is not that humans are meant to follow revelation blindly but rather that humans are now in a stage of salvation history in which they must play an active role in their intellectual and spiritual lives. He writes: “la fin de la prophétie devient synonyme de l’abolition de toute tutelle sacrée, de tout dogmatisme” (373). This portrays the doctrine of *khatm al-nubuwwah* in a positive light, although we should remember as well that this doctrine (or dogma) has been, and still is, used to justify the persecution of Aḥmadīs and Bahā’īs and to delegitimize Sikhism, questions in part passed over in this book. Nevertheless, none of this

reduces the immense service that Sangaré has done the academic community with *Le scellement de la prophétie en Islam*, a lucid work which does justice to the remarkable diversity of Islamic thought on prophecy through the ages.

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