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The Finality of Prophecy

David S. Powers

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

In Arabia a man named Muḥammad who was born ca. 570 CE is said to have received a series of communications from God over a period of twenty-three years between 610 and 632 CE. These communications were subsequently collected and preserved in the text known as the Qurʾān. On one occasion, in Q. 33:40, the Qurʾān refers to Muhammad as “the seal of Prophets,” a phrase that is understood by Muslims as signifying that prophecy came to an end with Muhammad’s death. I attempt to situate this theological claim in the context of (1) Jewish and Christian anticipation of the return of prophecy in late antiquity, and (2) the emergence of Islam in the Near East over the course of the seventh century CE.

Keywords: Prophecy, Finality of Prophecy, Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Qurʾān, Muhammad, Zayd b. Muḥammad, ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān

THE verb *to prophesy*, from the Greek *prophemi* (*pro* = ‘for’ or ‘forth’ + *phemi* = ‘to speak’, i.e. ‘to say beforehand’ or ‘to foretell’), refers to a wide range of activities that defy any single categorization but which include divination, visions, auditions, and oracles.¹ These activities are associated with men and women who possess distinctive personal characteristics, speak or write in a special idiom, and act in a specific social setting. The prophet straddles the boundary between humanity and the divine. Through inspiration or ecstasy, she or he experiences a call from beyond and, as a result, feels compelled to proclaim an instruction, exhortation, warning, or prediction to members of her or his community. Thus understood, prophecy may be said to include four components: a transcendental source, a message, a human transmitter, and an audience.

Evidence of prophecy in the Near East can be traced back to the beginnings of recorded history. An early reference to a prophet occurs in a ration list drawn up in Lagash in the twenty-first century BCE. Over the course of the next 2,500 years, prophecy flourished throughout the region. In Arabia a man named Muhammad who was born c.570 CE is said to have received a series of communications from God over a period of twenty-three years between 610 and 632 CE. These communications were subsequently recorded in writing, collected, and redacted in the text known as the Quran. On one occasion, the Quran refers to Muhammad as ‘the seal of the Prophets’, a phrase that is understood by most Muslims and many non-Muslims as signifying that prophecy came to an end upon the death of Muhammad in 632 CE. In this chapter, I shall attempt to situate this claim in the context of the understanding of biblical and post-biblical prophecy in the Near East in antiquity and late antiquity.

(p. 255) Prophets in the Hebrew Bible and in Post-biblical Texts

The Hebrew Bible suggests that the activity of prophets is similar to that of seers and soothsayers: ‘Formerly, in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, he would say, “Come, let us go to the seer”, for the prophet of today was formerly called a seer’ (1 Sam. 9: 9). A seer is an individual endowed with special knowledge who is subject to

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the influence of a supernatural entity. Through that entity, the seer receives a communication that is inaccessible to others and gives voice to that communication in a verbal utterance that is distinguished by its extraordinary content, complex style, rhyme, and/or cadence. The seer was sought out and received compensation for his or her oracles, which typically dealt with mundane issues such as the meaning of a dream, paternity of a child, or location of a lost animal.

The *navi* or prophet of the Hebrew Bible is a person who receives a call from God to transmit a divine message and who responds to that call by attempting to establish 'the ways of God'. A prophet serves as a source of guidance, receives visions, has dreams, preaches a word from God, and is often scorned or rejected by his or her immediate audience. The biblical prophet par excellence was Moses, who spoke with God face to face (Deut. 34: 10). Other biblical figures identified as prophets include Abraham (Gen. 20: 7), Miriam (Exod. 15: 20), Nathan (2 Sam. 7: 2), and Deborah (Judg. 4: 4). Indeed, one verse in Psalms may suggest that *all* of the patriarchs were prophets. Shortly after mentioning the 'offspring of Abraham' and 'descendants of Jacob' (Ps. 105: 11), the psalmist quotes the divinity as commanding: 'Do not touch my anointed ones, do not harm My prophets' (Ps. 105: 15). Subsequently, rabbis and church fathers expanded the ranks of prophets to include men (Adam, Noah, Jacob, and David) and women (Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda, and Esther) who are not identified as prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Although earlier prophets did not leave a record of their prophecies, later prophets are said to have received a divine instruction to record their respective messages (Jer. 30: 2, 36: 2, Hab. 2: 2; cf. Dan. 12: 4). The Hebrew Bible includes seven books attributed to Major Prophets (1 and 2 Joshua, 1 and 2 Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel), two books thought to have been written by figures acting under prophetic inspiration (Judges and Kings), and twelve books attributed to Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). The Book of Malachi ends with a prognostication of the future appearance of the prophet Elijah (Mal. 3: 23).

The closure and canonization of the Hebrew Bible raised questions about the subsequent status of prophecy. Several biblical verses suggest that at a certain point in time God ceased to communicate with humanity, whereupon prophets disappeared: 'No signs appear for us; there is no longer any prophet; no one among us knows for how long' (Ps. 74: 9; cf. Amos 8: 11, Mic. 3: 6–7, Isa. 63: 11, Lam. 2: 9, and Zech. 13: 2–4). This break in communication between God and humanity was expected to last until the (p. 256) End Time, when 'your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions' (Joel 3: 1). One encounters a similar idea in post-biblical texts. According to 1 Macc. 9: 27, following the death of Judas Maccabee, 'there was great distress in Israel, such as had not been seen since the time that prophets ceased to appear among them' (cf. 1 Macc. 4: 46, 14: 21). Similarly, the Qumran community believed that prophecy had ceased but would return at the end of time. A passage in the Community Rule scroll exhorts the sons of Aaron to follow the directives of the first men of the Community 'until the prophet comes, and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel' (*Community Rule* 9.9–11).

The status of prophecy was disputed in post-biblical times. Some rabbis held that prophecy continued to function, albeit without rabbinic authority. Other rabbis held that prophecy ended with Jeremiah, who was 'the last of the prophets' (*Pesiqta de-Rab Kahana* 13.14; cf. *Abot de-Rabbi Nathan A* 1; *Qohelet Rabbah* 12.7), or that 'the Holy Spirit came to an end in Israel' following the deaths of the last three Minor Prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (*b. Sot.* 48b; cf. *y. Sot.* 9.13, 24b). According to *Seder Olam Rabbah* 30, 'there were prophets prophesying by the Holy Spirit' until the time of Alexander the Macedonian. The assertion that prophecy had ceased—whenever that event may have occurred—bolstered the authority of the rabbis as interpreters of the now closed and canonical text of the Hebrew Bible.

In fact, prophet-like activity continued to manifest itself among Jews in late antiquity, now in the form of dreams and the so-called *bat qol* (lit. 'a small voice'), that is to say, a disembodied heavenly voice—identified with the Holy Spirit—that provides for ongoing revelation in the absence of true prophecy: '[Y]et they were still able to avail themselves of the *bat qol*' (*b. Sanh.* 11a; cf. *b. Sot.* 48b; *y. Yoma* 9b; *Canticles Rabbah* 8.9, no. 3). One also finds evidence of prophet-like activity at Qumran, where, as noted, members of the community were waiting for the return of prophecy at the eschaton. At the same time, however, they attached great importance to the so-called Teacher of Righteousness, an inspired figure who was empowered to interpret the words of the ancient prophets for the benefit of his community and to reveal 'the hidden things in which Israel had gone astray' (*Damascus Document* 3.12–15). In function—if not in form—the Teacher of Righteousness appears to have performed the task of prophecy. In addition, the fact that the Qumran community rejected the reputed prophets of their adversaries

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suggests that the followers of those 'prophets' regarded them as true prophets. Be that as it may, prophet-like activity continued in late Second Temple Judaism.

Prophecy in the New Testament

Christians interpret numerous passages in the Hebrew Bible as presaging the life and career of Jesus, e.g. Deut. 18: 15, in which Moses is reported to have said: 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet from among your own people, like myself; him you shall heed.' This prophecy is said to have been fulfilled by Jesus. In Acts 3: 18, Peter (p. 257) asserts: 'In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets that his Messiah would suffer.' Similarly, Christians interpret the closing reference in Mal. 3: 23 to the future appearance of the prophet Elijah as an allusion to John the Baptist who, in turn, will foretell the coming of Jesus.

The church fathers taught that the gift of prophecy was withdrawn from the Jews and conferred upon the Christians: '[T]he gifts that had previously resided among your people have now been transferred to us' (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 82.1; cf. *ibid.* 53.3–4; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 7.8; Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 39–40). The transference of prophecy to the Christians was regarded as a punishment of the Jews for their rejection of Christ.

Just as the rabbis taught that prophecy ended with either Jeremiah, Malachi, or Alexander the Great, some Christian scholars taught that prophecy ended with Jesus. One biblical witness for this teaching is found in Dan. 9: 24, where Daniel uses the verb *laḥtom* ('to seal' or 'to confirm') in connection with a 'prophetic vision' (*ḥazôn ve-nabî*). In context, *laḥtôm* refers to the 'confirmation' of a prophetic vision after a period of 'seventy weeks'. Subsequently, however, the church fathers reinterpreted this verse in such a manner as to suggest that it signifies the end of prophecy. Tertullian (d. 220 CE) glosses the verse as follows: 'In fact, when Christ was baptized...all the abundance of past spiritual gifts ended in Christ, who has sealed all visions and prophecies, which he has fulfilled by his coming.' Similarly, the Syriac-Christian author Aphrahat (d. c.345 CE) writes, '...the Messiah came and was killed in fulfillment of the vision and the prophets...Understand, my beloved, and perceive, that the [seventy] weeks were fulfilled; the visions and the prophets have ceased...'. In the eyes of Tertullian and Aphrahat, the fulfillment of the biblical prediction by Jesus signalled the end or cessation of all further prophetic activity.

Other church fathers taught that prophecy would resume at some point in the future in the form of the Holy Spirit. The return of the Holy Spirit was linked in turn to the appearance of a figure identified as the *paráklētos* (Gr. 'advocate' or 'comforter'). In John 14: 26, for example, Jesus is quoted as saying, 'But the *paráklētos*, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you' (cf. John 15: 26, 16: 7, 16: 16, 26).

Thus, many Jews and Christians appear to have shared the view that true prophecy had been suspended but would resume at some point in the future—albeit at a different time, in a different form, and for a different reason.

Prophetic Movements in Late Antiquity

In the second and third centuries CE, several religious movements took the name of a founder who claimed to be a true prophet. The Elkasaites were a Judaeo-Christian (p. 258) movement composed of the disciples and followers of Elkasai who lived in Parthia. *Circa* 100 CE, Elkasai claimed to have received new revelations delivered to him by a giant angel. These revelations were recorded in a book that subsequently was brought to Rome by Alcibiades of Apamea, a member of the movement. The Elkasaites were rejected by church theologians as heretics.

Another prophetic movement emerged around the figure of Montanus who, in the second half of the second century CE, claimed to be a prophet of God through whom the Paraclete had spoken. Montanus was joined by two young women who left their husbands and also began to prophesy. Montanism was a Christian movement that originated in Asia Minor and later spread throughout much of the Roman Empire. Originally known as the New Prophecy, Montanism advocated reliance on the spontaneity of the Holy Spirit. The movement lasted until the sixth century CE.

A third prophetic movement emerged around the figure of Mani, whose father is said to have been an Elkasaites. Mani was born c.216 CE near Ctesiphon in southern Iraq. At the ages of 12 and 24 he had visionary experiences in

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which a heavenly twin instructed him to leave his father's religion and teach the true message of Christ. Like Montanus, Mani claimed to be the Paraclete promised in the New Testament; he also claimed to be an Apostle of Christ. He taught that Divine Wisdom is common to all of the great religions, but that this wisdom had been corrupted by the followers of earlier prophets—Adam, Zoroaster, Buddha, and Jesus. Mani claimed to possess a complete and truthful understanding of this wisdom. Later Muslim authors refer to him as 'the Seal of Prophets', possibly under the influence of Q. 33: 40 (see below). Following Mani's death in 276 CE, Manichaeism spread rapidly, reaching Rome and Egypt by the end of the third century and China by the end of the sixth.

A New Arabian Prophet

From the twenty-first century BCE down to the first quarter of the seventh century CE, prophecy flourished in various forms throughout the Near East, in Anatolia, Syria-Palestine, Iraq, and Iran. Although the rabbis and church fathers taught that true prophecy had either ceased or been suspended, many Jews, Christians, and other monotheists were living in anticipation of the return of prophecy. It is against the background of this anticipation that the rise of a new prophetic movement in Arabia is best understood.

In 610 CE, God resumed contact with humanity by sending a series of messages to an Arab tribesman who had been chosen as a new prophet. These messages were delivered and received over a period of twenty-three years, first in Mecca between 610 and 622 and then in Medina between 622 and 632.

(p. 259) The earliest revelations were short narrative units in rhymed prose. A typical example is sura 108 ('The Abundance'), which contains three verses, each ending in *-ar*:

1.	<i>Innā a'taynāka al-kawthar</i>	We have indeed given you abundance.
2.	<i>Fa-ṣalli li-rabbika wa'nḥar</i>	So pray to your Lord and sacrifice.
3.	<i>Inna shāni'aka al-abtar.</i>	The one who hates is the one cut off.

Like the Hebrew Bible, the new revelation posits a connection between prophecy and soothsaying. The form, content, and style of the early revelations reminded the prophet's immediate audience of the oracular utterances of a soothsayer (*kāhin*)—or the verses of a poet (*shā'ir*). In response to an implied accusation that the new prophet was nothing more than a soothsayer and/or poet, the Quran retorts: 'It is not the speech of a poet—little you believe. Nor is it the speech of a soothsayer—little you are reminded' (Q. 69: 41–2; cf. 52: 29, 81: 22). Rather, the communications received by the prophet had been conveyed to him by 'a noble messenger' (Q. 69: 40, 81: 19) or angel (2: 97–8). The source of these communications was not daemonic but divine.

The Quran identifies the human recipient of these divine messages as either a *rasūl* (pl. *rusul*), literally 'one sent with a message', or a *nabī* (pl. *nabiyyūn*, *anbiyā'*), literally 'prophet' (cf. Hebrew *navi*). The word *rasūl* or messenger occurs 236 times in the Quran in the singular and ninety-five times in the plural. In both forms, it signifies a human agent sent by God to deliver a message to his people—usually in the form of a book—in a language that they understand. The word *nabī* or prophet occurs seventy-five times in the Quran, generally referring to a man who continues an earlier religious law, albeit without bringing a new book. On occasion, the terms overlap and are applied to one and the same person. Thus Ishmael (Q. 19: 54–5), Moses (19: 51), Jesus (19: 30, 61: 6), and Muhammad (33: 40, 7: 157) are identified as both messengers and prophets.

The Quran may be said to contain a theory of prophecy: at more or less regular intervals in time, God intervenes in history by delivering a message to a prophet. Prophets emerge in succession in accordance with *sunnat allāh* or divine providence (see e.g. Q. 33: 38). The quranic understanding of prophecy is typological, that is to say, all of the prophets, including the new Arabian messenger-prophet, possess characteristics and undergo experiences that are uniform, coherent, and consistent. Like his predecessors, the Arabian prophet offers guidance, experiences unusual physical and psychological states, is the recipient of visions and dreams, preaches reward and punishment, is rejected by unbelievers, and, in his capacity as a messenger, brings a new revelation in the form of a book. The typological identity between the new Arabian prophet and his biblical predecessors confirms

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the authenticity of his mission and the truth of his message; conversely, the success of the new prophet's mission validated the missions of his predecessors.

The men who are identified as prophets in the Quran are not identical to those identified as prophets in the Hebrew Bible. On the one hand, the prophets in the Quran are all biblical figures—with the exception of the otherwise unattested Arabian (p. 260) prophets Hūd, Šālīḥ, and Shu'ayb. On the other hand, none of the Major or Minor Prophets—with the exception of Jonah—is identified as a prophet in the Quran.

Some rabbis, it will be recalled, taught that prophecy had been suspended following either the destruction of the First Temple, the closure of the Hebrew Bible, or the career of Alexander the Great, and that it would not resume until the arrival of the Messiah. Similarly, some church fathers taught that prophecy had been suspended following the death of Jesus and would not resume until the appearance of the Paraclete. At the turn of the seventh century CE, Jews had been waiting for the arrival of the Messiah for approximately 1,000 years, while Christians had been waiting for the Paraclete for over 500 years. The Quran understood that a significant period of time had passed since the death of the last biblical prophet and/or the death of Jesus, and that both Jews and Christians were waiting for a resumption of some form of prophetic activity. This temporary gap in divine communication with mankind is identified in the Quran as a *fatra* or 'interval of time between two events'. This interval ended when God chose Muhammad as his next messenger. The new message was addressed *inter alia* to Jews and Christians, as stated in Q. 5: 19: 'O People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*), Our messenger has come to you, making things clear to you after an interval (*fatra*) between messengers, so that you cannot say, "No bearer of good tidings or warner has come to us." A bearer of good tidings and warner has come to you. God has power over everything.' The appearance of the new Arabian prophet ('a Messenger from among yourselves', Q. 9: 128) was understood as a fulfilment of Deut. 18: 15 and John 14: 26: The suspension of revelation had been lifted, true prophecy had returned, God had resumed communication with humanity, and another messenger had arrived.

As the most recent link in the succession of prophets, the new Arabian prophet brought a message to his community that was essentially identical to that of the earlier biblical prophets. The Quran insists that its message is the same as that of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. The relationship between these three texts is embodied in the terms *confirmation*, *correction*, and *completion*.

The Quran repeatedly asserts that it *confirms* the message of the earlier scriptures, using the verbal noun *taṣḍīq* ('confirmation') and the active participle *muṣaddiq* ('one who confirms'). In Q. 61: 6, the Divinity instructs his prophet to recall the following statement attributed to Jesus: 'O Children of Israel, I am God's messenger to you, confirming (*muṣaddiq^{an}*) the Torah that was before me, and giving you good tidings of a messenger who will come after me, whose name will be *aḥmad* (literally, "more worthy of praise").' Here Jesus not only confirms the message of the Torah, but also anticipates the future appearance of a more praiseworthy (*aḥmad*) messenger—universally understood by Muslims as a reference to Muhammad. Just as Jesus previously confirmed the Torah, Muhammad now confirms both the Torah and the New Testament. Several verses announce that the new Arabic revelation confirms 'what was before it' (e.g. Q. 2: 97, 6: 92, 10: 37, 12: 111, and 35: 31), 'the Book of Moses' (Q. 46: 12) or 'all the Scriptures before it' (Q. 5: 48). Other verses specify that the new revelation confirms the scriptures sent previously to the Jews and the Christians: 'He has sent (p. 261) down to you the Scripture in truth, confirming what came before it. And He sent down the Torah and the Gospel' (Q. 3: 3). Jews and Christians are commanded to believe in the new revelation because it confirms their respective scriptures: 'O you who have been given the Scripture, believe in what We have sent down, confirming what is with you...' (Q. 4: 47; cf. 2: 41, 3: 81). Conversely, members of the new community of believers are instructed to believe in the new revelation because it confirms the revelations sent previously to the Jews and Christians: '[I]t is the truth, confirming what is with them [namely the People of the Book]...' (Q. 2: 91). The Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Quran are thus successive links in a chain of divine revelations that all bear the same message.

The essential identity of these three scriptures is qualified, however, by the contention that the Hebrew Bible and New Testament were subjected to 'tampering' (*taḥrīf*) or 'alteration' (*tabdīl*). The Quran charges Jews and Christians with failing to understand the original meaning of their scriptures, forgetting what was revealed, and altering the text of their scriptures. Q. 2: 79 warns: 'Woe to those who write the Scripture with their own hands and then say, "This is from God", so that they may sell it for a paltry price...' (cf. 3: 75). According to Q. 5: 13, the Israelites '...change words from their places and they have forgotten a part of that by which they were reminded...' (cf. 4: 46; 5: 41). These misunderstandings or manipulations of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament by Jews and

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Christians are *corrected* by the Quran, which thereby restores the original form and/or meaning of the earlier scriptures. And by restoring the original meaning of the earlier revelations, the Quran *completes* the cycle of divine communication to humanity.

Thus, the Quran *confirms* the truth of the earlier scriptures while at the same time *correcting* certain misunderstandings of their contents, thereby *completing* the cycle of divine communication with mankind that began with the first biblical prophet.

Islamic sources teach that the divine communications received by Muhammad were recorded in writing during his lifetime and subsequently compiled, redacted, and edited on two occasions, first during the caliphate of Abū Bakr (r. 632–4 CE) and again during that of ‘Uthmān (r. 644–56). These two projects are said to have resulted in the production of a uniform consonantal skeleton that accurately represented the content of the revelations received by Muhammad. Once this standard canonical text had been established, all non-conforming codices are said to have been burned, shredded, or immersed in water. It now became the responsibility of the Muslim community to ensure that the Quran would not be forgotten, manipulated, or misunderstood, as happened earlier with the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. If the Muslims succeeded in this task, there would be no need for God to send another prophet to mankind.

In theory, of course, prophecy might continue. What was to prevent God from intervening in history at some point in the future by choosing yet another prophet and sending him to a community that had not yet been exposed to the Quran? It was to block this possibility, in my view, that the doctrine of the finality of prophecy was introduced.

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The Quran contains a single reference to Muhammad’s status as ‘the seal of Prophets’. In this revelation, Muhammad is mentioned by name and characterized as ‘the messenger of God and the seal of Prophets (*khātam al-nabiyyīn*)’. The expression ‘the seal of Prophets’ is widely understood by Muslims as signifying that Muhammad was the last prophet. The historical circumstances in which this verse is said to have been revealed are documented in Islamic sources with remarkable precision and in vivid detail.

The revelation in which Muhammad is identified as ‘the seal of Prophets’ would become verse 40 of *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb* (‘The Confederates’), which is composed of seventy-three verses. This sura is said to have been revealed to the prophet in 5/626–7, the year in which a coalition of pagan and Jewish ‘confederates’ attacked Medina but were repelled—with divine assistance—at the Battle of the Trench. For the next six years, Muhammad continued to receive communications from God. Upon his death in 11/632, however, prophecy is said to have come to an end.

Q. 33: 40 is the fifth verse in a five-verse pericope located in the middle of *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*. These five verses read as follows:

36 When God and His messenger have decided a matter, it is not for any believing man or woman to have any choice in the affair. Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger has gone astray in manifest error.

37 [Recall] when you said to the one on whom God and you yourself have bestowed favor, ‘Keep your wife to yourself and fear God’, and you hid within yourself what God would reveal, and you feared the people when God had better right to be feared by you. When Zayd had finished with her, We gave her to you in marriage, so that there should be no difficulty (*ḥaraj*) for the believers concerning the wives of their adopted sons, when they have finished with them. God’s command was fulfilled.

38 There is no difficulty for the prophet in that which God has ordained for him: God’s practice (*sunnat allāh*) concerning those who passed away previously—God’s command is a fixed decree.

39 Who conveyed God’s messages and feared Him and no one else apart from God. God is sufficient as a reckoner.

40 Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but the messenger of God and the seal of the Prophets. God is aware of everything.

The termination of the office of prophecy was surely a matter of great historical import—indeed, one might say that it was a matter of cosmic significance. It is therefore curious that v. 40 is said to have been revealed in connection with—in fact, as a direct consequence of—an amorous episode involving the prophet Muhammad, his adopted son, and the latter’s wife. Let us attend to the relationship between v. 40 and the other four verses in the pericope and to the ‘logic of revelation’. For the moment, we ignore v. 36 and proceed directly to v. 37.

(p. 263) In v. 37, the authorial voice (‘We’)—presumably God—orders a male addressee (‘you’)—presumably Muhammad—to recall a conversation between Muhammad and a third party (‘the one on whom...’). This verbal exchange took place at an unspecified time in the recent past between Muhammad and the third party, who is characterized as ‘the one on whom God and you yourself have bestowed favor’. In the continuation of the verse, this doubly favoured man is identified as ‘Zayd’. The mere mention of Zayd’s name is noteworthy: apart from Muhammad, Zayd is the only Muslim who is identified by name in the Quran. The continuation of the verse suggests that Zayd was Muhammad’s adopted son, as confirmed by Islamic tradition. At the time of the verbal exchange, Zayd wanted to divorce his unnamed wife and Muhammad wanted to marry the woman. God reminds Muhammad that he had been hiding something within himself and—remarkably—rebukes the prophet for putting his fear of men above his fear of him. God then grants his prophet permission to marry the woman (‘We gave her to you in marriage’), but only on the condition that Zayd no longer had any sexual desire for his wife (he was ‘finished with her’). Previously, one surmises, a sexual union with the former wife of one’s adopted son was regarded as a sin or act of disobedience. Verse 37 modifies the sexual taboo by introducing a distinction between the wife of an adopted son and that of a natural son: henceforth, no sin would be associated with a marriage between a man and the former wife of his adopted son. Verses 38–9 then compare Muhammad’s experience to that of earlier prophets. Finally, v. 40 announces that Muhammad is sonless—or, to be precise, that he has no adult sons—after which it characterizes him as ‘the messenger of God and the seal of Prophets’.

Islamic tradition teaches that v. 40 was revealed about a man named Zayd. Who was this man who is said to have been the *sabab* or cause of the revelation of this unique quranic witness to the finality of prophecy? According to Islamic sources, Zayd’s birth name was Zayd b. Ḥāritha b. Sharāḥīl al-Kalbī. As a youth he was captured and, c.605 CE, acquired as a slave by Muhammad. Zayd’s family tracked him down in Mecca, where his father Ḥāritha attempted to ransom his son. Of his own free will, Zayd chose continued slavery with Muhammad over freedom and reunification with his birth family. Following this demonstration of absolute loyalty, Muhammad adopted Zayd as his son in a formal ceremony attested by witnesses in the sacred precinct in Mecca. The adoption entailed two important legal consequences: Zayd b. Ḥāritha al-Kalbī became Zayd b. Muhammad al-Ḥāshimī; and mutual rights of inheritance were created between father and son. At the time of the adoption Zayd would have been between 25 and 30 years old, that is to say, he was a man. He was now Muhammad’s son and heir—indeed, his sole heir.

When Muhammad received his first revelation in 610 CE, Zayd was either the first person or the first adult male to join the community of believers. He was known as the Beloved of the Messenger of God. In Mecca, Zayd married Umm Ayman, an Abyssinian woman who bore him a son, Usāma b. Zayd b. Muhammad, known as the Beloved Son of the Beloved of the Messenger of God.

(p. 264) Shortly after the hijra to Medina in 1/622, Zayd asked his father for permission to take as his second wife Zaynab bt. Jaḥsh, the beautiful granddaughter of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib and the prophet’s paternal cross-cousin. Initially Muhammad was opposed to the marriage but Zayd stubbornly pressed his case. Eventually, Muhammad agreed and sent an agent to convey the marriage proposal to Zaynab. Upon hearing the proposal, Zaynab protested that she did not want to marry Zayd for she was, by her own estimation, ‘the most perfect woman of Quraysh’. God now intervened in history to settle the matter by revealing the first verse of the pericope that ends with verse 40: ‘When God and His messenger have decided a matter, it is not for any believing man or woman to have any choice in the affair. Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger has gone astray in manifest error’ (Q. 33: 36). Zayd did marry Zaynab, although it was not long before he began to complain to his father about his wife’s behaviour and to ask him for permission to divorce the woman. Muhammad had a better idea. One day, the prophet went to the couple’s residence with the intention of admonishing his daughter-in-law. Upon his arrival, only Zaynab was at home, wearing a light dress. As she was in the act of rising to her feet, Muhammad caught a glimpse of Zaynab’s body and was sexually attracted to her. When Zayd returned home later that day, Zaynab regaled him with the story of the strange encounter with her father-in-law. Zayd was now more determined than ever to divorce his wife. He reportedly ceased having sexual relations with her, thereby satisfying the quranic stipulation that he must be ‘finished’ with his wife before she might remarry. Curiously, Muhammad instructed his son *not* to divorce Zaynab

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(‘Keep your wife to yourself and fear God’), despite the fact that he was in love with the woman. The prophet understood that his attraction to his daughter-in-law had brought him to the brink of committing a sin. Fearing public outcry, Muhammad kept his desire for Zaynab a secret.

God now made a second intervention in this episode by sending down the revelation that would become v. 37 of *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*. As noted, this revelation legitimized the union between Muhammad and Zaynab by drawing a distinction between marriage with the former wife of a natural son (which continued to be forbidden—see Q. 4: 23), and marriage with the former wife of an adopted son (which was henceforth legitimate). Following the revelation of v. 37, Zayd divorced Zaynab, who then observed the *‘idda* or waiting-period; when it was determined that she was not pregnant, Muhammad married her. It must have been in the interval between the divorce and the marriage that Muhammad informed Zayd that he was no longer his father (*‘Iastu bi-abīka’*), whereupon Zayd b. Muhammad, the Beloved of the Messenger of God, the first adult male to become a Muslim, the one upon whom both God and his prophet had bestowed favour, and the only Muslim apart from Muhammad to be identified by name in the Quran, lost his status as the prophet’s son and heir.

Lest there be any question about Zayd’s status, God now made a third intervention in this episode by sending down the revelation that would become v. 40 of *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*: ‘Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but the messenger of God and the seal of Prophets. God is aware of everything.’ The opening clause of this verse establishes that neither Zayd nor any other adult male within the community of (p. 265) believers could claim to be Muhammad’s son. In this manner, God ensured that when the prophet died five years later, in 11/632, he would not have a son who might succeed him as either a prophet or as the leader of the community. (Zayd’s status as a potential successor was mooted by his untimely death as a martyr at Mu’tah in southern Jordan in 8/629.)

The prophet’s repudiation of Zayd raises several questions: Was it in fact necessary for Muhammad to disown Zayd as his son? Is it not the case that v. 37 legitimized the prophet’s marriage to Zaynab by introducing a distinction between the former wife of a biological son and that of an adopted son? Suppose for the sake of argument that Zayd had continued to be Muhammad’s adopted son. Would Muhammad have committed a sin or act of disobedience by marrying Zaynab after Zayd had divorced her? In fact, there is nothing in the language of v. 37 to suggest that there would have been any problem with the prophet’s marriage to Zaynab. If so, then why did Muhammad repudiate Zayd? It was this question, in my view, that necessitated God’s fourth and final intervention in this episode. Shortly after the divinity had introduced the distinction between biological and adopted sons in v. 37, he abolished the institution of adoption—thereby transforming the distinction into the proverbial distinction without a difference. The abolition of adoption is found in what would become vv. 4–5 of *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*:

- 4 God has not put two hearts inside any man...nor has He made your adopted sons your [real] sons. That is what you say with your mouths, but God speaks the truth and guides to the [right] way.
- 5 Call them after their fathers. That is fairer with God...

Lest there be any doubt about the status of the institution, the prophet himself is reported to have said: ‘There is no adoption in Islam; the custom of the Age of Ignorance (*jāhiliyya*) has been abolished.’

The Quran indicates that the designation of Muhammad as ‘the seal of Prophets’ was a direct consequence of an amorous episode involving the prophet and the wife of his adopted son Zayd. This episode produced not only a reform of marriage law and the abolition of adoption but also the theological doctrine of the finality of prophecy. One wonders about the direction of historical causation. Is there any other way to explain the emergence of the key theological doctrine? And what is the connection between this doctrine and Muhammad’s sonlessness? In an attempt to answer these questions, let us take a closer look at the quranic understanding of prophecy.

Prophetology in the Quran

The Quran teaches that the biblical prophets were chosen by God from a single, divinely privileged lineage. The first two prophets were Adam and Noah. Subsequently (p. 266) the pool from which prophets were chosen was narrowed to Abraham and his descendants (‘the seed of Abraham’). Beginning with Abraham, all of the biblical prophets identified in the Quran are members of this family. Remarkably, the Quran suggests—without explicitly saying so—that prophecy is the exclusive possession of a single, divinely privileged lineage. Thus, Q. 57: 26 states

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that God assigned prophecy and the Book to the progeny (*dhurriyya*) of Noah and Abraham. Q. 4: 163 identifies successive generations of prophets within a single family: 'We have made revelations to you, as We made them to Noah and the prophets after him, and as We made them to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes...' According to Q. 29: 27, the office of prophecy is limited exclusively to Abraham and his lineal descendants. In fact, all of the biblical prophets mentioned in the Quran are members of this family: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Job, Jonah, Elijah, Elisha, Zechariah, John the Baptist, and Jesus.

In the quranic worldview, true prophecy is the exclusive possession of a single family and the office of prophecy is transmitted from father to son. One might say that the office of prophecy is hereditary (although the 'gene' for prophecy may remain dormant for one or more generations). In order to qualify as a prophet, one must be a member of this family. Nowhere in the Quran, however, is Muhammad identified as a lineal descendant of Abraham (or Noah or Adam). It is therefore no coincidence that the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767), as redacted by Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833), opens with a section entitled 'Muhammad's Pure Descent from Adam' in which Muhammad's genealogy is traced back to Abraham through twenty-nine intervening links, then from Abraham to Noah through ten links, and finally from Noah to Adam through eight links (cf. Gen. 5: 1–31, 10: 21, and 11: 10ff.; and Matt. 1: 1–17). The list is as follows:

Muhammad—'Abdallāh—'Abd al-Muṭṭalib (whose name was Shayba)—Hāshim (whose name was 'Amr)—'Abd Manāf (whose name was al-Mughīra)—Quṣayy (whose name was Zayd)—Kilāb—Murra—Ka'b—Lu'ayy—Ghālib—Fīhr—Mālik—al-Naḍr—Kināna—Khuzayma—Mudrika (whose name was 'Āmir)—Ilyās—Muḍar—Nizār—Ma'add—'Adnān—Udd (or Udad)—Muqawwam—Nāḥūr—Tayrah—Ya'rub—Yashjub—Nābit—Ismā'īl—**Ibrāhīm, the friend of the Compassionate**—Tāriḥ (who is Āzar)—Nāḥūr—Sārūgh—Rā'ū—Fālikh—'Aybar—Shālikh—Arfakhshadh—Sām—**Nūḥ**—Lamk—Mattūshalakh—Akhnūkh, who is the prophet Idrīs according to what they allege, but God knows best (he was the first of the sons of Adam to whom prophecy and writing with a pen were given)—Yard—Mahlīl—Qaynan—Yānish—Shīth—**Adam**. (Source: Ibn Hisham, *Sīra*, trans. Guillaume, p. 3)

By creating a genealogical connection between Muhammad, on the one hand, and Abraham, Noah, and Adam, on the other, Islamic tradition established that Muhammad was in fact a member of the family that holds exclusive rights to the office of prophecy. He was thus qualified to be a prophet.

Depending on one's vantage point, genealogy may be used to establish a connection not only with the past but also with the future: Looking backwards in time, it was (p. 267) important for the early community of believers to establish a direct genealogical connection between Muhammad and Abraham; looking forwards in time, it was essential for that community to establish that Muhammad had no adult sons. These Muslims understood that if Muhammad did have a son who not only attained physical maturity but also outlived his father, then the office of prophecy would have passed to that son and/or to his descendants. In that case, however, Muhammad would not have been the last prophet. Conversely, if Muhammad was to be the last prophet, he could not be remembered as having a son—biological or adopted—who attained physical maturity and outlived him. The theological doctrine of the finality of prophecy demanded that the man who brought the office of prophecy to an end must be sonless. One might say that Muhammad's sonlessness was a theological imperative.

The reciprocal relationship between the finality of prophecy and Muhammad's sonlessness brings us back to the question of historical cause-and-effect: Was the theological doctrine a seemingly unintended consequence of a love affair involving Muhammad, Zayd, and Zaynab, as Islamic tradition teaches? Or was this narrative formulated after the fact in order to establish that Muhammad was sonless and was therefore the last prophet? As noted, Islamic tradition teaches that *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb* was revealed in 5/626–7. Let us bracket the traditional chronology and posit, for the sake of argument, that the doctrine of the finality of prophecy was post-Muhammadan. As the doctrine developed, there would have been a need to formulate a 'revelation' in which the divinity predicted that Muhammad would be sonless when he died. Where, when, and by whom might such a 'revelation' have been formulated?

The Chronology of Revelation

Islamic tradition's identification of 5/626–7 as the year in which vv. 36–40 of *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb* were revealed to

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Muhammad may be questioned on several grounds.

First, the traditional chronology makes it appear as if the divine pronouncement of Muhammad's sonlessness was made six years before the prophet's death in 11/632. This is curious, as Muhammad reportedly had numerous wives and concubines, was sexually active, and was fertile.

Second, the designation of Muhammad as the last prophet is a hegemonic and supersessionist claim that would best have been made from a position of supreme power. Such a claim makes no sense in a Meccan context and little sense in a Medinan context. In Mecca, Muhammad was charged with persuading pagans and polytheists that there was only one God, that this God communicated with mankind through prophets, and that he was one of those prophets. In Medina, the audience for Muhammad's message expanded to include Jews who may have been waiting for the return of true prophecy but who—with only a few exceptions—rejected his claim to be a prophet. In this Hijazi context, there would have been little or no force to the claim that Muhammad was the *last* prophet.

(p. 268) Third, between the years 632 and 700 CE, Arab-Muslim armies defeated the Byzantines and Persians and conquered much of the Near East. In 661 the Umayyads took control of the rapidly expanding Islamic empire and moved its capital to Damascus, where 'God's Caliphs' ruled over a polity composed largely of Jews and Christians who were waiting for the return of true prophecy. The hegemonic claim to be the custodians of God's final message to mankind makes better sense in Umayyad Damascus between the years 661 and 700 than it does in Mecca or Medina between the years 610 and 632.

The Redaction of the Quran

Recent scholarship has suggested that the consonantal skeleton of the Quran remained open and fluid for three-quarters of a century between the death of the prophet in 11/632 and that of the caliph 'Abd al-Malik in 86/705 (see Déroche 2009). As the text was being compiled, edited, and redacted, problems were identified and solved and mistakes were made and corrected. There is good reason to believe that verses were added, revised, and/or removed from the text. The five-verse pericope that stretches from v. 36 to v. 40 of *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb* may have been one such addition to the text of the Quran (Powers 2009: 71).

The early community of believers is reported to have experimented with the formulation and placement of the quranic reference to the finality of prophecy. In the standard version of Q. 61: 6, it will be recalled, Jesus confirms the message of the Torah and anticipates the appearance of a more praiseworthy messenger—understood by Muslim exegetes as a reference to Muhammad: 'I am God's messenger to you, confirming the Torah that was before me, and giving you good tidings of a messenger who will come after me, whose name will be more praiseworthy (*aḥmad*).' A substantially different version of this verse is said to have been preserved in the codex of the Companion Ubayy b. Ka'b (d. between 19/640 and 35/656): 'I am God's messenger to you, bringing you an announcement of a prophet whose community will be the last one among the communities (*ākhir al-umam*), and by means of whom God seals the messages and prophets (*yakhtum allāh bihi al-anbiyā' wa'l-rusul*)' (Jeffery 1937: 170). Here God seals or confirms the messages of earlier prophets by sending a new prophet whose community will be the last community to receive a divine revelation. One wonders about the relationship between Ubayy's version of Q. 61: 6—which is not found in the standard version of the Quran—and Q. 33: 40.

In addition to the first and second redaction projects sponsored by Abū Bakr and 'Uthmān, respectively, the Quran is said to have been redacted for a third time during the caliphate of 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 65–86/685–705), who reportedly took a personal interest in the text of the Quran and instructed his adviser al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf (d. 95/714) to revise it. Al-Ḥajjāj is said to have changed the consonantal skeleton of eleven words, established the canonical order of verses and chapters, and introduced for the first time vowels and diacritical marks. He is also reported to have resolved (p. 269) certain unidentified disagreements over the consonantal skeleton of the Quran by removing several verses. Copies of the newly revised text were sent to Egypt, Syria, Medina, Mecca, Kufa, and Basra. As happened following the redaction sponsored by 'Uthmān, all non-conforming codices are said to have been recalled and destroyed.

The redactional project undertaken by al-Ḥajjāj at the request of 'Abd al-Malik provides a reasonable historical context in which a five-verse pericope that provides a divine witness for the doctrine of the finality of prophecy might have been formulated. 'Abd al-Malik certainly had the motive and opportunity to insert five carefully

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formulated verses into *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*. Indeed, Islamic tradition remembers that massive editorial changes were made to this sura—albeit without providing any details about those changes. What is known—or reported—is that the chapter originally had 200 verses. One hundred and twenty-seven of these verses are said to have been removed, leaving seventy-three. One suspects that if 127 verses could be removed from the sura, five verses could have been added.

Two Options—In Lieu of a Conclusion

I have presented two different approaches to the religio-historical context in which the Islamic theological doctrine of the finality of prophecy was introduced.

The first approach is that of Islamic tradition, which teaches that the theological doctrine was introduced in 5/626–7 in connection with an episode involving the prophet Muhammad, his adopted son Zayd, and the latter's wife Zaynab bt. Jaḥsh. During the course of this episode, God is said to have intervened in history on four separate occasions: after Zaynab rejected a marriage proposal from Muhammad on behalf of his adopted son Zayd, God conveyed a revelation to his prophet in which he declared that Zaynab had no choice in the matter 'after it had been decided by God and His messenger'. This revelation would become v. 36 of *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*. Not long thereafter, Muhammad himself fell in love with his daughter-in-law, whereupon God sent down a revelation in which he introduced a distinction between the former wife of a natural son and that of an adopted son. The purpose of this revelation was to facilitate Muhammad's marriage to Zaynab. This revelation would become v. 37 of *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*. Shortly thereafter, God sent down a revelation in which he presumptively declared that Muhammad would die sonless and identified him as 'the seal of Prophets'. This revelation would become v. 40 of *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*—and the sole Quran witness to the doctrine of the finality of prophecy. Finally, God sent down instructions that effectively abolished the institution of adoption. These instructions would become vv. 4–5 of *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*.

Alternatively, we may view the doctrine of the finality of prophecy in the context of historical developments in the Near East in the second half of the first century AH: the Quran asserts that it confirms, corrects, and completes the divine revelations sent previously to the Jews and Christians. Following the death of the prophet and the (p. 270) conquest of the mountain arena, the new community of believers began to collect, edit, and compile the text that would become the Quran. This project was not finally completed until the reign of the fifth Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik, who ruled over a rapidly expanding empire composed largely of Jews and Christians, many of whom were waiting for the return of true prophecy. In an effort to quash this expectation, the caliph instructed al-Ḥajjāj to formulate the 'revelations' that would become vv. 36–40 of *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb* and to insert these new 'revelations' into the middle of the sura. By linking the doctrine of the finality of prophecy with Muhammad's sonlessness, the Muslim community transformed the earlier Jewish and Christian doctrine of the suspension of prophecy into the distinctive Islamic doctrine of the finality of prophecy.

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Notes:

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David S. Powers

David S. Powers, Professor of Islamic History, Cornell University

