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THE PROBLEMATIC OF PROPHECY

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Abstract

When did prophecy end? Or did it? Divine disclosure is received through the medium of the prophet, but who was the last prophet and what was the “last” scripture? Muslims, Christians, and Jews agree that there must be a termination to the prophetic experience, but while all may agree to the event of a prophetic finale, religious thinkers desperately dispute the details. Based on qur'anic discourse in relation to preceding and subsequent scriptures and tradition, this presentation offers a theory of religious emergence and the revolutionary challenge it represents to the authority of established religions.

When Muhammad began to gain followers in Mecca, the leaders of the town sent trusted emissaries to the Jews of Yathrib/Medina to ask their opinion about whether or not Muhammad was a true prophet. Al-Nadhr b. al-Ḥārith and ‘Uqbah b. Abī Mu‘ayṭ traveled the 200 or so miles to Medina. When they got there, they were instructed by the Jewish leadership, “Ask Muhammad three questions. If he can answer them he is a true prophet, but if not, then he is an imposter.”¹

The Medinan Jews soon became curious enough about the alleged prophet to send a learned and rather corpulent rabbi named Mālik to Mecca in order to find out what he could about him. When Mālik met Muhammad he was outwitted by a surprise question Muhammad posed to him about his chubbiness, for which he was totally unprepared. Outmaneuvered, Mālik returned to Medina, humiliated by his failure to interrogate the alleged prophet successfully.²

Shortly thereafter, when Muhammad made his hijrah to Medina, he stayed with the Banū ‘Amr b. ‘Awf in Qubā’. A learned Jew named ‘Abd Allāh b. Salām was up in a date palm, probably to pollinate it for harvest, when he heard that Muhammad had reached the outskirts of Medina. He immediately exclaimed, “*Allāhu akbar*” at the news of Muhammad’s arrival, to which his aunt Khālidah bt. al-Ḥārith, who was working below him on the ground, asked, “Is he the prophet whom we have been told will be sent at this very time?”³ According to ‘Abd Allāh he certainly was, for he said, “When I heard about the Messenger of God, I knew by his description, his name, and his time [i.e. when he appeared] that he was the one we were waiting for...”⁴ ‘Abd Allāh promptly sought out Muhammad and became a devoted follower. So did Mukhayrīq, another learned Jewish scholar (*wa-kāna ḥabran ‘āliman*), who not only followed him, but gladly gave his life during the battle of Uḥud.

Toward the end of Muhammad’s life, the companion Mu‘ādh b. Jabal served as the governor of Janad in central Yemen. At that time, most of the inhabitants of Janad were Jewish. When a group of Jews there questioned Mu‘ādh about the keys of Paradise, “He not only gave them the right answer, but also told them that Muhammad had anticipated their question...”⁵ Mu‘ādh, who had himself been a Jew before joining up with the Prophet, “...succeeded in leading a mass conversion of the area’s Jews at the mosque of Janad.”⁶

Most of the Jews of Medina, however, did not follow ‘Abd Allāh, Mukhayrīq or Mu‘ādh’s examples. Perhaps it is more accurate to put it this way: while several individual Jews—including

¹ See Hartwig Hirschfeld, “Historical and Legendary Controversies between Mohammed and the Rabbis,” *JQR* (First Series) 10 (1898): 100–116, 100.

² *Ibid.*, 102.

³ Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-nabawiyyah li-Ibn Hishām* (2 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Thiqāfah al-‘Arabiyyah, n.d.), 1:516–517; Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq’s [sic] Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 240–241.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Michael Lecker, “The Jewish Reaction to the Islamic Conquests,” in Volkhard Krech and Marion Steinicke (eds.), *Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 177–190, 177, note 2.

⁶ *Ibid.* Lecker, who identifies Mu‘ādh as a Jew, is the leading Western scholar of the intricate genealogies of the Meccan and Medinan communities. On the problem of the meaning of conversion, see Richard Bulliet, “Conversion Stories in Early Islam,” in Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (eds.), *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990), 123–133.

at least a few who were well-educated in Jewish tradition and practice—followed Muhammad, the Jewish community as a community did not. Ibn Ishāq provides the names of certain *aḥbār al-yahūd*—learned Jews—who consistently tried to annoy Muhammad with difficult questions.⁷ They aggravated the Prophet in other ways as well. Once, when Muhammad’s camel wandered off, a Jewish *ḥabr* named Zayd b. al-Luṣayt asked how he could be a true prophet when he doesn’t even know where his camel is.⁸ The continued questioning suggests that most of the Jews of Medina were not convinced of Muhammad’s prophethood. But it is interesting to note that despite their skepticism, they seem to have continued to ask the questions for some time before the differences between Muhammad and the Jews of Medina broke down into violence.

Now it is well known that all of these stories are open to question and criticism according to careful historians of Late Antiquity and early Islam. Cautious scholars take great care when considering whether these episodes could have occurred as depicted, or whether something like them happened at all. But whether or not they can be relied upon as historically accurate, I think they reveal a great deal about what concerned the early actors and observers of the period. And they raise a number of important questions for students of early Islam, of the Qur’an, and of religion and scripture in general.

Why were the Jews of Medina depicted as instructing the Meccan pagans about how to test Muhammad’s prophetic status? Why did they send their own emissary? Why did they continue to ask him annoying questions?

Were the Jews of Arabia expecting a prophet?

This is actually an old question in modern scholarship, and it reflects an issue that turns up quite a bit in the polemical literatures of both Muslims and Jews. Medieval Muslim polemicists from Ibn Ḥazm in Spain to Ibn Kathīr in Syria argued that Jews had moved to Arabia expecting a prophet based on biblical testimony.⁹

But the *early* Muslim sources are *also* quite certain that the Jews of Arabia were expecting a prophet. Ibn Ishāq wrote about a pious elderly Jew named Ibn al-Hayyabān who had moved to Medina from Syria and was known for his ability to bring rain through his devoted prayers. When Ibn al-Hayyabān was about to die he said, “O Jews, what do you think caused me to leave a land of wine and bread to a land of suffering and hunger?... I came to this country expecting the appearance of a prophet whose time had come!”¹⁰ Ibn Ishāq also referred to a Medinan Jew from the Banū l-Ashhal who preached to the local polytheists about “*al-qiyāmah wa’l-ba’th wa’l-ḥisāb wa’l-mizān wa’l-jannah wa’l-nār* (the Resurrection, the Reckoning, the Scales of Judgment, Paradise, and Hell).” When asked by the locals for a sign to confirm his views, he said, “A prophet will be sent from the direction of this land,” and he pointed with his hand toward Mecca and the Yemen.¹¹

⁷ *Al-Sīrah al-nabawīyah*, 1:513–514.

⁸ *Al-Sīrah al-nabawīyah*, 1:527, 2:522–523.

⁹ The biblical texts referred to most frequently are Deut 33:1–2; Hab 3:1–3; and Isa 63:1.

¹⁰ *Al-Sīrah al-nabawīyah*, 1:213–214.

¹¹ *Al-Sīrah al-nabawīyah*, 1:112

Ibn Sa‘d records similar reports. When Yathrib/Medina was about to be attacked by Tubba‘, the king of Yemen, Sāmūl, the most learned Jew in the town, informed the king that that city was the place of hijrah of the future prophet from the children of Ishmael by the name of Aḥmad.¹² In another tradition cited by Ibn Sa‘d, the most learned of Medinan Jews was a man named Al-Zabīr b. Bāṭā. He knew from a book owned by his father that Muhammad (in the book the name is Aḥmad), was described as the awaited prophet who would be raised up in Mecca. But when he learned about the *actual* Muhammad, the flesh-and-blood Muhammad, he blotted out the prophecy about him that was in the book.¹³ That the Jews did not accept the prophethood of Muhammad was due, one would surmise from these stories, simply to their willful stubbornness and obstinate selfishness.

When we move to Jewish sources we also find some interesting material. Certain biblical texts were understood by some Jews to suggest the geographical direction from which a future redeemer or messianic figure would come. The most suggestive for our purposes are from the prophets Isaiah and Habakkuk, who hint at a future redemptive figure coming from Teman, Paran, and Edom. These three locations are associated with Arabian geography in pre-Islamic Jewish texts from both Bible and Talmud. That association was very enticing to later Muslims. The great geographer Yāqūt b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Rūmī, for example, wrote the following regarding Paran (*Fārān* in Arabic): “*Fārān*... An Arabized Hebrew word. It is one of the names of Mecca mentioned in the Torah (*Tawrāt*). It is said that it is a name for the mountains of Mecca...”¹⁴

Some Jewish sources, perhaps produced during or shortly after the Muslim (or Arab) conquests, clearly wondered whether the military victories of the early caliphs were the beginnings of redemption according to Jewish tradition. Here is an example of an apocalyptic Hebrew poem that raises the question (Israel is a designation for the Jewish people in Jewish texts):

On that day when the Messiah, son of David, will come to a downtrodden people,
 These signs will be seen in the world and will be brought forth:
 Earth and heaven will wither...
 The king of the West and the king of the East
 Will be ground one against the other,
 And the armies of the king of the West will hold firm in the land.
 And a king will go forth from the land of Yoqtan¹⁵
 And his armies will seize the Land,
 And dwellers of the world will be judged
 And the heavens will rain dust on the earth,
 And winds will spread in the Land.
 Gog and Magog will incite one another

¹² Muḥammad Ibn Sa‘d, *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* (9 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1418/1997), 1:126.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Shihāb al-Dīn Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-buldān*, ed. Farīd ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Janūdī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1410/1990), 4:255.

¹⁵ Considered in some Arab genealogies to be Qaḥṭān.

And kindle fear in the heart of the gentiles.
 And Israel will be freed of all their sins
 And will no more be kept far from their house of prayer...
 The kings from the land of Edom will be no more,
 And the people of Antioch will rebel and make peace...
 Edomites and Ishmael [code for Christians and Muslims] will fight in the valley of Acco
 'Til the horses sink in blood and panic.
 Gaza and her daughters will be stoned
 And Ascalon and Ashdod will be terror-stricken.
 Israel will go forth from the City and turn eastwards,
 And taste no bread for five and four days.
 And their Messiah will be revealed and they will be consoled...¹⁶

This and a few other Jewish texts are extremely enticing, but it must be kept in mind that in the Jewish sources, which certainly expected a redemptive figure, that person is always a *messianic* redeemer and not a new *prophet*. As the Talmud Bavli notes, prophethood ceased with the end of the last biblical prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.¹⁷ And Ibn Ishāq notes that five Jews confronted 'Abd Allāh b. Salām, the man who left the Jewish community, when he joined Muhammad. Ḥuyayy, Ka'b b. Asad, Abū Rāfi', Ashya', and Shamwīl b. Zayd said to Abdullah: ما تكون النبوة في العرب, ولكن صاحبك ملك ("there will be no prophecy among the Arabs. Your master is [only] a king").¹⁸

We are not informed by the sources that any Christian communities lived with Muhammad and his followers as did the Jews of Medina. In fact, it would be interesting to consider how the Qur'an's generally more positive perspective toward Christians might have been different had the hijrah of the Prophet been to the town of Najrān, in which a substantial Christian community lived, rather than Medina, a town with a large Jewish population. The real conflict between Muslims and Christians historically would emerge only later, after the death of Muhammad and the end of revelation, when the sting of Christian rejection of Muhammad's prophethood could not enter into the qur'anic record of divine disclosure.

The early post-qur'anic Islamic sources, however, are a different matter. They refer to the story of a Christian monk sometimes named Baḥīrah ("chosen one" in Christian Aramaic), who through various signs (including in some versions a "mark of prophecy" on the young Muhammad's back) confirm that the boy would become a great prophet expected also by

¹⁶ Bernard Lewis, "An Apocalyptic Vision of Islamic History," *BSOAS* 13 (1950): 308–338.

¹⁷ b. *Sotah* 48a; b. *Sanh.* 11a. A number of cutoff dates are provided by rabbinic literature, and Urbach and Weinfeld have provided data that can be understood to demonstrate how the endpoint of prophecy may have correlated with the long process of canonization of the Hebrew Bible. See Ephraim Urbach and Moshe Weinfeld, "When did Prophecy End?" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 18 (1947–8), 1–27.

¹⁸ *Al-Sīrah al-nabawiyyah*, 1:571.

Christians.¹⁹ Some sources go even further in their clarity about the expectation of a prophet. According to Ibn Ishāq, virtually all the learned and informed inhabitants of the peninsula knew that a new and uniquely Arabian prophet was at hand before the appearance of Muhammad. As he put it:

وكانت الأحبار من اليهود والرهبان من النصارى والكهان من العرب قد تحدثوا بأمر رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم قبل مبعثه.

“The Jewish rabbis, Christian monks, and pagan Arab soothsayers [all] spoke of the circumstances of the Messenger of God before his arrival.”²⁰

The Qur’an notes, like the Bible before it, that God sent many messengers and prophets. Q Āl ‘Imrān 3:81: “[Remember when] God made a covenant with the prophets: ‘Whatever indeed I have given you of the Book and wisdom and then a messenger comes to you confirming what is with you, you are to believe in him and help him.’”

This is similar to a famous verse in the Torah, Deuteronomy 18:15: “The Lord your God will raise up for you prophets from among your own people, like myself; you shall heed them.”²¹

The Qur’an provides many lists of pre-qur’anic prophets and offers many edifying stories about them. But it also cautions that not all prophetic-like persons are actually prophets. There are *kuhhān* and *shu‘arā’*, *sāhirūn* and *majānīn*—soothsayers and poets, sorcerers and people possessed. These must all be rejected, for they do not speak in the name of God (Q 52:29; 69:41–42, 81:22, etc.).²² Any of these who claim to speak in God’s name are frauds and imposters:

وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ افْتَرَىٰ عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا أَوْ قَالَ أُوحِيَ إِلَيَّ وَلَمْ يُوحَ إِلَيْهِ شَيْءٌ وَمَنْ قَالَ سَأُنزِلُ مِثْلَ مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ

“And who is more evil than he who forges a lie against God, or says: ‘It was revealed to me’ when nothing was revealed to him; and he who says: ‘I will bring down the like of what God has brought down?’” (Q 6:93). The *mufassirūn*, I should add, understood this verse to be referring to the false prophet of Muhammad’s own generation named Musaylimah, who challenged the authority of Muhammad as the sole and final prophet of God.

¹⁹ *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 1:121–124; *Al-Sīrah al-nabawīyyah*, 1:180–182; Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahīra: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2008). Cf. Isa 9:5.

²⁰ *Al-Sīrah al-nabawīyyah*, 1:204.

²¹ The actual reference to prophets here is articulated in the singular (*nabi*) but the meaning is plural. The Israelites will experience the arrival of more prophets, as Bernard Levinsohn puts it: “A prophet, while grammatically singular, is distributive in its meaning: ‘I will repeatedly raise up for you a prophet.’ More than one prophet is clearly intended.” See Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 395. Note how the reference is repeated three verses later: “I will raise up prophets for them from among their own people, like yourself; I will put My words in their mouths and they will speak to them all that I command them.”

²² The Qur’an notes how Muhammad himself was accused of being all of these rather than a true prophet (Q 25:8; 36:69; 52:29; 69:41–42; 81:22).

It seems clear that the Qur'an is infused with the problematics of prophecy. It claims repeatedly through exclamation, attestation, narrative, and citation of scriptural prognostication that Muhammad was God's true prophet. But it also notes that other individuals who were not true prophets claimed the same or similar title or function. And Jews and Christians (not to mention practitioners of traditional Arabian religions) either questioned or outright rejected Muhammad's prophetic status, and they denied that he was foretold in their own scriptures.

That the Qur'an is rife with material on the problematic of prophecy parallels similar concerns among Jews and Christians and concerns expressed in their scriptures. The difficulty of proving the truth of Muhammad's prophetic status lies at the heart of Qur'anic authority and the legitimacy of the new movement that emerged along with it and was legitimized by it. The core of the problem can be summarized simply with the following question: how can one determine whether a person who *claims* to be a prophet is *really* a prophet?

Here, the Torah is perhaps instructive. Deuteronomy 18 proclaims: "And should you ask yourselves, "How can we know that the [prophetic] word was not spoken by the Lord?" It answers, **אָשֶׁר יְדַבֵּר הַנְּבִיא בְּשֵׁם יְיָ וְלֹא יְהִי הַדְּבָר וְלֹא יָבוֹא, הוּא הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא דִבְרוּ יְיָ** "If the prophet speaks something in the name of the Lord that does not come true, that message was not spoken by the Lord." The verse continues: "The prophet has uttered it presumptuously. Do not stand in dread of him" (Deut. 18: 21–22).²³

I should add here that if you look at the profoundly beautiful and familiar prophecies found in the Hebrew Bible, the poetic and inspiring utterances of Isaiah and Jeremiah and the other biblical prophets, and if you examine the prophetic utterances of the New Testament from the Gospels to Revelation, and if you read the announcements of the approaching End Times with all its cosmic signs found in the Qur'an, you will find no concrete markers, no indicators that can be used to invalidate them. The prophetic utterances found in all our scriptures are couched in language vague enough so that it is virtually impossible to claim they are wrong, that the time has lapsed and they did not come to pass. But when you observe the description of prophets outside of scripture, in the writings of Flavius Josephus or other historians of late antiquity, you will find that those so-called prophets who were destroyed and their movements crushed by the Romans made the fatal flaw of prophesying when the end would come.²⁴ Here is some helpful advice for aspiring prophets: Never give a cut-off date. Remain subtle and mysterious (it may save your life).

This brings us to a very serious problem. What happens when you discover a false prophet? An answer to this question is provided in Deuteronomy: "But any prophet who presumes to speak something in My name that I did not command him to utter, or who speaks in the name of other gods – **וַיִּמָּת הַנְּבִיא הַהוּא** – that prophet shall die" (18:20).

²³ The full citation in 18: 21–22 is

(כא) וְכִי תֹאמַר בְּלִבְכֶם אֵיכָה נִדְעֵ אֵת הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא דִבְרוּ יְיָ: אֲשֶׁר יְדַבֵּר הַנְּבִיא בְּשֵׁם יְיָ וְלֹא יְהִי הַדְּבָר וְלֹא יָבוֹא הוּא הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא דִבְרוּ יְיָ בְּיָדוֹן דִּבְרוּ הַנְּבִיא לֹא תִגּוֹר מִמֶּנּוּ:

Elsewhere in Deuteronomy it stipulates that even if the prophecy or oracle comes true, if the prophet calls for the worship of other gods s/he must be rejected (Deut 13:2–5).

²⁴ *Antiquities*, Book 20, 8:6; *Wars*, Book 6, 5:2, in *Josephus: Complete Works* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1981), 422, 582.

This is the very policy carried out by Abū Bakr with the killing of the Arabian false prophet Musaylimah at the Battle of Yamāmah. Musaylimah was a prophetic contender with Muhammad and actually outlived him. But according to the received interpretation of Q Aḥzāb 33:40, Muhammad is the last prophet:

مَا كَانَ مُحَمَّدٌ أَبَا أَحَدٍ مِنْ رِجَالِكُمْ وَلَكِنْ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ وَخَاتَمَ النَّبِيِّينَ

There can be no prophet after Muhammad, though David Powers has challenged the assumed meaning of this verse in his recent book, whose title is the very verse I just read in Arabic, *Muhammad is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*.²⁵ The verse continues: “Rather, he is the Messenger of God and the Seal of the Prophets.”

Here we observe a very close correspondence between the act of Abū Bakr in ordering the killing the false prophet and the biblical pronouncement regarding prophetic pretenders. I am not suggesting influence here, but rather a shared worldview that results from the problematic of prophecy. Abū Bakr and the Torah arrive at the same conclusion because they are confronted with the same problem and the resultant anxieties to which the problem gives birth.

Prophecy is powerful. Prophecy represents a conduit to the divine will. Nothing is more authoritative than the will and word of God. It is the source of authority for monotheistic religions, and it is also their source of legitimacy. God reveals. That is how the scriptural religions learn what they must do and how they must function. All monotheist religions agree on this God-centered core of their being. And all scriptural monotheisms also agree that the core of divine revelation can be recorded and has been recorded—written down, or “scribed”—into scripture.

The scriptural religions all follow the same rules regarding prophets and revelation, and scripturalization and canonization, and I include Christianity in this model. God reveals the divine disclosure through prophets, though in the case of Christianity, the revelation can also be even more direct than prophecy in the appearance of Jesus as God incarnate.²⁶ But the rules or expectations of divine revelation are virtually the same for all:

1. God reveals in a variety of ways but the record is conveyed in words
2. Those words are collected and recorded
3. The collection becomes scripture when it is formulated into an official text
4. It is authenticated through a process of canonization
5. All aberrant versions are destroyed
6. Henceforth, any new claims for prophecy are rejected as patently false

The act of scriptural canonization is a declarative act. It declares that while God can and does continue to reveal the divine glory in multiple ways, once scripture is fixed in its canonical form there can be no new prophets and no new scripture.

²⁵ *Muhammad is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

²⁶ But see Matt. 21:11; Acts 3:22, 7:37.

And now we can observe the problem more clearly. The very core authority of monotheist religion is the authority of God as revealed to the believers and recorded in a timeless scripture that needs no revised edition. To those who revere their scripture, there can be no upgrade, no Bible 2.0, no updates to the Qur'an.

Fine. But what happens when, after scriptural canonization, a new prophet nevertheless arises?

According to all the scriptural monotheisms, this is impossible. There can be no new prophets. And yet, the annoying truth of the matter is that to many people, it seems to occur nonetheless. New prophets continue to arise.

Established monotheisms reject them.

The rejection of new prophets can be understood in a variety of ways and from a variety of perspectives. From the perspective of established religions (meaning religions that already possess a canonized scripture), new prophets are by definition false prophets. To Judaism, Jesus cannot fulfil the role of prophet or vehicle of the divine word. To Christianity, Muhammad cannot be a true prophet. And according to Islam, Mīrẓā Ḥusayn 'Alī Nūrī or Bahā'u'llāh cannot speak in God's name.

But from the perspective of every emergent prophetic religion, from the viewpoint of every new faith, God sends a new messenger because of enduring and persistent problems that are not being addressed by the established religions.

Let's consider this from the perspective of systems theory and the academic study of religion. The emergence of new prophets destabilizes the authority of the establishment by claiming a higher authority. That higher authority is God. Keep in mind that divine authority is the ultimate trump card. It overrules all other authority. God prevails over everything, and that includes any religious establishment. A new divine revelation always corrects, fulfills, or supersedes the establishment religions, which are by definition old, flawed, and outmoded — that is... unless the new revelation is not *truly* a *divine* revelation.

Keep in mind that according to any established religion, whatever the new prophet claims to be the word of God is not the word of God. That is because, from the perspective of established religion, prophecy—*by definition*—has ceased.

This scenario with its resultant tension and conflict is part of what may be called a phenomenology of religious emergence. It is particularly interesting from the standpoint of scriptural studies because the tension and conflict of this phenomenology can be observed within scripture itself. That is because scripture represents the earliest record of religious emergence among scriptural religions. No record pre-exists scripture because scripture is the core around which religion forms itself.²⁷ All subsequent writings are informed in one way or another by scripture.

²⁷ Some works can be contemporary with scripture, however, but these would be recensions or versions of the scriptural corpus that were rejected from the canon.

We observe this scenario of tension and conflict in the Qur'an as well as the earlier revealed texts. Each scripture condemns members of established religions who refuse to accept the new prophecies. Each scripture also ensures that subsequent claims to prophecy must be considered false.

While a few individuals or groups from the scriptural monotheist communities joined up with Muhammad, the communities as a whole did not voluntarily accept the new prophet. Some tribal communities joined *en masse*, to be sure, including some Christian and Jewish tribes or clans. But the established, organized religions would not, nor could they, accept a new prophet. To do so would be to vote oneself out of business—and nobody votes *themselves* out of business.

When one observes the phenomenon in isolation, one easily arrives at a distorted picture. From the particularist perspective of the Qur'an and the religion of Islam that grew out of it, the Jews who rejected Muhammad's prophethood were simply subverting and sabotaging God's revelation. But from another particularist perspective, that of the Hebrew Bible and the religions of Judaism and Christianity that grew out of it, rejection of a new claimant for prophecy was a necessary religious act, one of valor and heroism.

I think that the theory of religious emergence I have outlined today provides a valuable perspective. What I'm describing could also be called a phenomenology of prophetic contention. Awareness of the natural tension between scriptural canonization and competing prophetic claims has value for the critical study of Qur'an, the very *raison d'être* of this new and wonderful learned society. It can help the Qur'an scholar to be in touch with our human tendency, even as critical scholars, to misread the data before us because of our own religious history and identity. Bias affects us all, even if we consider ourselves non-believers or neutral "children of the world." We all carry with us natural cultural biases, which are informed in part by the religions that permeate the cultures in which we live.

Awareness of this tension can offer perspective and tools to help us make sense of some of the puzzling verses, references, and constructions found in the Qur'an.

It can also help us detach critical study of the Qur'an from the low-level tensions that often lie behind cultural, political, and religious issues that infiltrate our daily lives. This mindfulness can help us free ourselves from the omnipresent obstacles, the interference from outside cultural and political distractions that get in the way of engaging in careful and critical study and analysis.

For the scholar, but also for the lay observer and religious believer, understanding the problematics of religious emergence can help us make sense of the often painful and bewildering tensions that have traditionally divided religious communities. Perhaps it can also help us to overcome them.

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