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A RESPONSE TO REUVEN FIRESTONE'S 2015 IQSA  
PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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In his presidential keynote, Reuven Firestone has identified multiple features of the problem of prophecy in Islam. He informs us about the ways in which Muhammad's prophecy was first expected to occur according to reports from some Arabian Jews and how certain features of Muhammad's prophecy were even noted in Jewish sources. At the same time, he is also cautious and wonders out loud whether these episodes of Jewish notices of Muhammad's prophecy "could have occurred as depicted, or whether something like that happened at all." It is healthy to foster such skepticism. Skepticism allows the historian to explore other possibilities and explanations as to what happened in order to track how these predictions about Muhammad's prophecy played out, both at the time of their purported occurrence and when these reports were received among Muslim communities and other faith traditions over time.

While Firestone has shared many points of interest with us—and I hope many of you will engage him on some of the valuable points he raised—I will, in turn, only touch on a few issues.

One of the issues Firestone raises is this: Why did the Jews of Medina keep on asking Muhammad annoying questions? Why were they trying to trip him up, so to speak?

Well, it seems that at least in the eighth century, there was an expectation that someone who claimed to speak on behalf of the supernatural was supposed to know the answers to all questions. Omnipotence and omniscience were viewed as virtues for anyone claiming access to the supernatural, at least among some communities. Yet Muhammad repeatedly said that he did not know things related to the unseen. And then in a polemical gesture, he said, in the words of the Qur'an, "If I were to be informed of the unseen and the secrets of things, then I would have excelled in virtue" (*law kuntu a'lamu al-ghayb la-istakthartu min al-khayr*; Q A'rāf 7:188). At the same time, he also said, "Obey God and obey the messenger and those in authority among you" (*aṭī'u Allāha wa aṭī'u l-rasūla wa ūlī al-āmī minkum*; Q Nisā' 4:59).

I found the recently posthumously published work of Marilyn Robinson Waldman to be very helpful to me. It provides a framework for Muhammadan prophecy that I found

to be extremely productive.<sup>1</sup> Waldman argues that the Prophet Muhammad's contemporaries held varying criteria of identification and benchmarks for his prophecy. In other words, the problematic of prophecy, as Firestone calls it, did not have just one standard. So when skeptics direct a series of questions to the Prophet, one finds that on some occasions he provided answers and on other occasions he failed to respond or refused to answer their queries; on other occasions, he provided a reason as to why he was unable to respond.

Waldman argues that none of Muhammad's contemporaries could quite figure out how to classify him. And in the Qur'an, there are narratives that indicate the Prophet is repeatedly striving to overcome the skepticism directed at him. So how did the Prophet Muhammad survive this identification crisis, Waldman asks? How did he fuse gifted speech, opposition, and leadership—all these elements—into a seamless narrative? Her answer to this puzzle is that Muhammad went beyond the expectations of his immediate audience. He invited comparisons: comparisons of other prophets with that of his prophecy, or he himself used comparisons to shape his emergent role in a fluid situation. This was not done intentionally. Rather, he seemed to invite such comparisons in both a literal and figurative sense. In other words, he struck the right balance between similarity and difference.

In order to illustrate that Muhammad did not have unlimited access to knowledge of the unseen but that he only had access to a portion of divine knowledge taught to him, there is clearly a similarity with Moses and Khidr. Like Moses, he does not know all the realities of the unseen world. But a different kind of role-player, like Khidr, is gifted with a comprehensive understanding of the unseen. In other words, Muhammad was more like Moses. Biblical scholars are fond of prefiguration, such as those important persons who prefigured the arrival of Jesus. Modern Qur'an scholarship in the West has yet to configure a narrative register where, say, Moses prefigures Muhammad. Waldman does not talk about prefiguration, but it is clear she is asking us to think in this direction.

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<sup>1</sup> Marilyn Robinson Waldman, *Prophecy and Power: Muhammad and the Qur'an in the Light of Comparison*, edited by Bruce B. Lawrence, Lindsay Jones, and Robert M. Baum. Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2013.

The other element that Firestone introduces is an important one: the phenomenology of religious emergence. What does emergence here mean? Paul Humphreys usefully defines emergence:

Emergence is, broadly speaking, the fact that there are features of the world—objects, properties, laws, perhaps other things—that are manifested as a result of the existence of other, usually more basic, entities but that cannot be completely reduced to those other entities. Theories of emergence tend to fall into two basic types: ontological emergence and epistemological emergence—with conceptual emergence serving as a subcategory of the latter, namely, of epistemological emergence.<sup>2</sup>

Well, there are many philosophical accounts of emergence. Usually emergence presents itself in a cluster of features. Some of the features of emergence are that they are irreducible, novel, unpredictable on the basis of any theory, and unexplainable. Most importantly, they must emerge from something.

So how does religion emerge from something, such as an environment or a substrate? How does a religion become known in the world? From what does religion emerge? One element of religion is clearly that which we call prophecy. So in part, prophecy is an ontological phenomenon. It is about becoming, emergence, proceeding in time. And over time, the same religion can take different forms. It becomes historical. Heidegger writes:

To this aim, we must inspect more carefully in which sense the characterization “historical,” which we have just performed, is to be understood. Historical, here means becoming, emergence, proceeding in time, a characterization that befits a reality. Insofar as one remains within the cognitive consideration of the connections among objects, each characterization or use of the sense of “historical” is always determined through this fore-conception of the object. The object is historical; it has the particularity of proceeding in time, of changing.<sup>3</sup>

Epistemological accounts of emergence normally emphasize the unpredictability of phenomena. Taking emergence seriously, one can say following Firestone's conclusion that every scriptural religious tradition has created its own theological language. One novel

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Humphreys, “Emergence.” *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <http://www.encyclopedia.com/article-1G2-3446800558/emergence.html>

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Studies in Continental Thought: Phenomenology of Religious Life*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010.

aspect of religion is that it closes off successor prophecy and deems the previous prophecy to be heresy. However, Islamic prophecy does affirm previous prophecies, but not those prophecies that came after it, that is going forward. Hence, the challenges to post-Muhammadan prophecy are legend in Islamic thought.

I was wondering if we could not think of prophecy as a kind of *enframing* in the philosophical sense. (Enframing has nothing to do with frames, or technology for that matter. Enframing is not a tool or an apparatus; this is the crucial point in Heidegger's argument—the very condition of possibility for the truth of the real to be revealed—*poetically*, to humans.) I use the term enframing, drawing on Heidegger's idea of *Gestell* in the context of his exploration of technology. Enframing here means 'where things gather together in order to reveal.' So in this context, I would argue that prophecy is a challenge to human beings to open up, to gather together; it is a challenge to human beings to disclose the real to their own selves, how to reveal the truth. How people engage with prophecy can be infinitely varied.

The reception of prophecy is also very interesting. Muslim philosophers like Muhammad Iqbal, the pre-partition poet-philosopher of the Indian subcontinent, for instance, thought that in the long march of history, Islam abrogates all subsequent prophecy. For Iqbal, with the advent of Islam, humanity has reached a certain unspecified maturity and therefore is no longer in need of heavenly instruction.

Modern Muslims hold on to a doctrine of *khātam al-nubuwwah*, the end of prophecy, in the sense that no new leader (and hence no new moral code) can further be expected. But *ilham*, a form of inspiration, continues. The possibility of a Mahdi, a messianic herald, is still active in certain Muslim religious imaginaries; also a *muhaddath* (reviver), one in whose being God makes divine truths manifest by way of inspiration, is also well attested in the literature. The presence of this idea that one could be inspired finds expression in the writings of the Indian poet Mirza Asadullah Ghalib (d. 1869). Ghalib wrote:

*From the unseen (ghayb) these themes reach the mind/imagination  
These scratches you hear, O Ghalib, are the sounds made by the pen of the archangel.*

آتے ہیں غیب سے یہ مضامین خیال میں

غالب صریرِ خامہ نوائے سروش ہے

For a long time, there has been tension within Islam between poetry and prophecy, because they both were viewed as tapping into the same source. Ghalib, just more courageously, others would claim brazenly, acknowledges his inspiration as coming from the mystically unseen realm. Yet, we also know that prophecy is always framed within a theology. It is theology that invests speech as to how the word of God functions in the world, which is a byproduct of prophecy. The word of God—or scripture as we call it— would not be so valorized were it not for the direct role of prophecy in the making of revealed or divine speech that humans know today as scripture.

The question is more acute for modern scriptural traditions: How do they affirm each other when they each have exclusive prophecies, where each is sealed off from the other? Will theology find ways to tie bridge different prophecies and help us make sense of prophetic traditions? Are we done with the age of prophecy, or are we at the very beginning of this age? These are some of the discursive questions occur to me and I am delighted to share them with you. But I want to mostly thank Reuven Firestone for making us think about prophecy again and for sharing his insights on this topic in an engaging and productive manner.

### Works Cited

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