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The Glowing Quran. A View Of a Biblical Scholar

The Prophet And Prophecy

Muhammad — “The Seal Of The Prophets”

The statement that prophet Muhammad is “the seal of the prophets” is one of the main points of Islam (33, 40). Arabic word “khatam”, “seal” (as well as Hebrew “hotam” in the Bible) has two meanings: “certification”, i.e. a seal verifying the trustworthiness of the text, — and “completion”, “closing” (e.g. there existed a tradition of sealing the jars of chrism, so that they wouldn't be opened until the fixed time).

Which of these meaning belongs to the collocation “the seal of the prophets”? In order to find the answer, let us turn to similar biblical images. Thus, in the Book of Daniel it is said:

“...Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city: ...to put an end to sin, and... to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet...” (Daniel 9, 24)

Christians traditionally refer this prediction to the coming of Jesus, whose sacrifice on Calvary “sealed”, or atoned for the sins of those who believed in him. At the same time, the very mission of Jesus is “a seal”, i.e. verification and fulfillment of ancient predictions of the Torah and more recent books of the prophets.

One and the same Hebrew verb “hatam” (“to seal”) is used by Daniel in two grammatical forms indicating two different actions: firstly, “to put an end to sin”; secondly, “to seal both vision and prophet”. According to the sources of the New Testament, after the coming of Jesus prophecy as it is did not come to an end: it's enough to recall individual and group visions in the prophecy of Jesus' disciples (the vision of apostle Peter of purifying of pagans' hearts — Acts 10, 9–19; the prediction of Agabus the prophet of the upcoming events — Acts 11, 28; 21, 10–11).

Besides, prophecy, being one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, is upon Jesus' own word a constant feature of his true followers (John 16, 13). That is why early Christian communes included local prophets and prophetesses; also there existed wandering prophets, travelling from town to town (1 Corinthians 12, 10; 14, 1–5; Acts 21, 9). Lastly, one of the most famous prophetic books,

the Revelation of John, was created several decades after the ascension of Jesus.

In connection with all foresaid, Daniel's expression "to seal both vision and prophet" can by no means be interpreted in the sense of ending, closing the very gift of prophecy as an opportunity to behold the concealed and to predict the future. According to the Christian interpretation, the words of Daniel about "sealing both the vision and the prophet" may denote that the life and death of Jesus only prove the ancient predictions about the Messiah.

Such is the Christian point of view. What is the Judaic understanding of the words of Daniel? "Metzudat David" ("The Fortress of David"), an authoritative commentary, interprets "to seal both vision and prophet" as "to ratify prophetic vision, i.e. to fulfill the evidence and message that all prophets predicted". As we can see, the Jewish interpretation matches the Christian one, and says nothing of the termination of prophecy.

The same image of the sealed prophetic words is found in the Book of Isaiah:

"...Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching..." (Isaiah 8, 16)

He also compares prophecy, which is difficult for the uninitiated to understand, to "the words of a sealed document" (Isaiah 29, 11), and this in its turn resembles Jeremiah's "sealing" the deed of purchase of a field he had bought (Jeremiah 32, 9—10). In all the given examples the text is assumed to be sealed only for some time, and later to be opened and read. At the end of the Book of Daniel it is directly mentioned:

"...But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall read it, and knowledge shall be increased."(Daniel 12, 4)

This prediction is clear: the book shall be unsealed at "the end of days" and studied by many people. At the same time, the Book of Revelation of John — which has much common with the Book of Daniel and continues its themes in the context of the New Testament — describes the whole process of a similar unsealing of a book:

...See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.

<...>

Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals... (Revelation 5, 5—6, 1)

In the light of the above the true meaning of the Koranic image of our interest (“...Muḥammad... is the Messenger of Allah and the seal of the prophets...” — 33, 40) becomes clear: the prophecy of the Quran is to confirm and fulfill the predictions of the prophets of the Bible.

The Aim and the Sense Of the Prophecy

Thus, one of the goals of prophet Muhammad's mission is the reaffirmation of all the preceding prophets and realization of a whole range of their predictions. Along with this, neither the revocation of certain predictions, nor the termination of prophecy in general sense are implied on any account. In this context let us turn our attention to an interesting fact: it is in the Quran — as in no other holy book — that stories about preceding prophets and their sayings are retold with curious frequency, and moreover, many times. Quite often it is done in order to compare the circumstances in which the previous messengers of God preformed with the conditions, in which Muhammad's preaching took place. It is more than once emphasized that the hostility of the majority of Muhammad's own people towards his teaching, persecution against him and his supporters, attempts to mock at his words and even to assassinate him — all that is similar to what had happened in earlier times to other prophets, who became sufferers and martyrs for the Word of God handed down to them.

And on the Judgement Day Muhammad himself will accuse his opponents before God, and the prophets of other nations will be allowed to be witnesses — each against their own persecutor:

...We bring a witness from every faith-community and bring you 'O Prophet' as a witness against yours?.. (4, 41)

Muhammad permanently bears in mind his inextricable connection with earlier messengers, whereas the revelation granted to him from Heaven is considered by him in no other way than another element of the world prophetic chain, than the continuation of the testimony of all preceding messengers. The unity of the teachings and aims of all true prophets is emphasized in the Quran, and the book itself is destined to foster the solution of their main task — turning the whole human kind back to God:

He has revealed to you 'O Prophet' the Book in truth, confirming what came before it, as He revealed the Torah and the Gospel previously, as a guide for people, and 'also' revealed the Standard 'to distinguish between right and wrong'. (3, 3–4)

Along with this, the means, by which the revelation is transmitted, remains the same when God communicates with each following prophet; and in this context Muhammad appears to be not only a spiritual heir of the previous messengers, but also some kind of their fellow before the face of the Creator:

Verily, We have inspired you (O Muhammad) as We inspired Nuh (Noah)... Ibrahim (Abraham), Isma'il (Ishmael), Ishaque (Isaac), Ya'qub

(Jacob), and Al-Asbat [the twelve sons of Ya'qub (Jacob)], 'Iesa (Jesus), Ayub (Job), Yunus (Jonah), Harun (Aaron), and Sulaiman (Solomon)... (4, 163)

But what, according to the Quran, is the aim of prophecy as it is, and why is the teaching of God in its wholeness given to the humanity only gradually, throughout millennia, by means of a long range of specially chosen and gifted messengers?

The answer to these questions is given by the koranic teaching of “the Straight Way” of a man and of mankind — the way of spiritual ascension, fulfillment of the main purpose of a rational creature created by God on Earth for sustaining the harmony between the heavenly and earthly worlds.

Man is supposed to be guided in his “straight way” by revelation. Its ultimate wholeness was manifested in due time in the Law of Moses:

And (remember) when We gave Musa (Moses) the Scripture [the Taurat (Torah)] and the criterion (of right and wrong) so that you may be guided aright (2, 53)

If “the Scripture” is meant to give man a true picture of the whole being as a reality created and guided by God, then “the criterion” is to provide a constant orientation for the believers in their choice between right and wrong, allowed and prohibited, approved and denounced. That is why each revelation consists of two parts — theoretical (“the Scripture”) and practical (“the criterion”), which — being used together — embrace all the levels of human perception and action, leading people to “the straight way” of serving God. A figurative opposition of “the straight” way to “the crooked” one is often given in the Bible:

It will save you from the way of evil...

...who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness...

<...>

those whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways...(Proverbs 2, 12–15)

The Biblical symbolism of “the two ways” has found a direct continuation in the texts of the Qumran community of the Essenes (the 2nd century BC — the 1st century AD):

And in the hand of the prince of lights is the rule over all the sons of righteousness, and in the ways of Light they walk. In the hand of the angel of Darkness is all the rule over the sons of deceit, and in the ways of Darkness they walk... (The Manual Of Discipline, 3, 20–21)

The notification of a believer of “the two ways” starts also the ancient biblical text of early Christianity — “The Lord's Teaching Through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations” (“Didache”):

There are two ways, one of life and one of death; but a great difference between the two ways. (1, 1)

Thus, the postulate of the Quran of the guidance for the humanity towards “the straight way” by means of prophetic revelation is a kind of a summary of all preceding teachings on “the straight way” as the aim of the human life.

Since this “straight way” of constant ascension and spiritual enhancement lies open before the people, and evasion is solely the fault of man, it is necessary to send new prophets from time to time, especially in crucial moments of the history, who remind of this way, renewing and strengthening the interactive relationship of man with his Creator.

It is underlined in the Quran that the greatest stage of the continuing progressing revelation after Moses was the mission of Jesus:

And indeed, We gave Musa (Moses) the Book and followed him up with a succession of Messengers. And We gave 'Iesa (Jesus), the son of Maryam (Mary), clear signs and supported him with Ruh-ul-Qudus... (2, 87)

The Spirit Of God — The Master Of Prophets

The Holy Spirit as an essential mediator of handing down the prophecy from God to His messenger is viewed in the Old Testament as a personalized power of God, leading the prophet at the time of his ecstatic spiritual rise:

*Then they remembered the days of old, of Moses his servant. Where is the One Who... put within them His Holy Spirit,
Who caused His glorious arm to march at the right hand of Moses...?
(Isaiah 63, 11–12)*

In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is described as a constant presence of God in the spiritual mind of a believer, as a higher Master:

To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit (1 Corinthians 12, 8)

The koranic view of the essence and features of the Holy Spirit are similar to the Biblical one. Thus, the words of the given ayat (verse): "...and supported him with Ruh-ul-Qudus" (2, 87) meet the teaching of the New Testament:

...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power... (Acts 10, 38)

The statement of a direct effect of the Holy Spirit on the heart of the prophet is an integral part of the teaching of Quran. Since the Holy Spirit conveys pure truth, it is called "the Trustworthy Spirit":

*And indeed, it [i.e., the Qur'ān] is the revelation of the Lord of the worlds.
The Trustworthy Spirit has brought it down
Upon your heart ... (26, 192–194)*

Some exegetes see in this verse an indication of angel Gabriel as a messenger handing down the Quran. However, here the case in point concerns the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, so to say, "the breath" (the Arabic word "rukḥ" means both, "spirit" and "breath", and "wind") of the Almighty, directly penetrating into the heart of the prophet and inscribing on it the words of the Quran (which cannot be done by an angel, who is a separate creature); compare with the verse from the New Testament:

... You show that you are a letter of Christ... written... with the Spirit of the living God... on tablets of human hearts. (2 Corinthians 3, 3)

It is exactly the active involvement of the heart of the prophet in the reception of the revelation coming down to him (by means of the Holy Spirit) which is an integral part of the success of God's plan. In the koranic world view, as well as in the biblical one, heart is a spiritual organ of emotional as well as intellectual life — heart may not only feel, but also “reason”:

Have they not travelled throughout the land so their hearts may reason ...? Indeed, it is not the eyes that are blind, but it is the hearts in the chests that grow blind. (22, 46)

The Eternal Word and the Human Heart

Unlike the sinners with “the hearts that are blind”, a prophet is granted with a heart which is surprisingly acquisitive of spiritual truth, and it not just strives for God in every possible way, but also deeply considers His commands.

The moment angel Gabriel directly communicated the text of the Quran to Muhammad, the Holy Spirit printed this text on his heart. That is why, Gabriel is said to have

...Revealed this ‘Quran’ to your [Muhammad’s] heart... confirming what came [through prophets] before it — a guide and good news for the believers. (2, 97)

Note that in this ayat angel Gabriel is named “the one who revealed” the text of the Quran to the heart of the prophet; the angel himself, unlike the Spirit of God did not “descend” to the heart (compare with chapter 26, 192–194).

This ayat makes us contemplate about the correlation of the eternal word sent down by God and “the transformation” of is word through the heart of the prophet, so that later it could be heard by the whole humanity. Not without reason do the greatest Muslim theologians emphasize that the Quran could be sent down from Heaven only and solely by Muhammad — the prophet possessed a unique heart that could receive such a revelation and put it in a human language.

Ibn Hisham, the author of the earliest biography of the prophet, speaks of it in the following way:

When Muhammad was forty years old Allah sent him as a prophet of mercy to the people of the visible and of the invisible worlds, and to all mankind. (See “The Life of Muhammad, Ibn Hisham”)

It is worth mentioning that it is exactly this person, prophet Muhammad, who was capable of becoming “mercy to the people of the ... worlds” (compare with ayat 21, 107). As we can see, the Quran states the reason for why it was Muhammad who was the messenger: the revelation was cast on the heart which was the best match for the highest mission.

The stated ayat (2, 97) underlines the dual purpose for the koranic revelation: it is given as “a guide and good news”, i.e. it combines the characteristics of the two greatest revelations and teachings of the past — the Torah (“a guide”, i.e. statutory Law, comprising a variety of commandments and regulations),

and the Gospel (“the good news”, containing the teaching of salvation and eternal life). Similarly to the teaching of Moses, the Quran is a book of religious laws; similarly to the teaching of Jesus, the Quran contains the descriptions of the coming heavenly bliss for believers, serving as “the good news”.

Prophet Muhammad does not consider his mission as isolated from the missions of all preceding prophets, seeing it only as a direct continuation of their activity.

It is pointed out in the Quran that “the degrees” of the preceding messengers are not equal; among others there were the ones who were “preferred” in order to deliver the will of God more completely, who founded new — “summerizing” — directions of faith, and those who interpreted the teaching, which had been proclaimed by others:

Those Messengers! We preferred some to others; to some of them Allah spoke (directly); others He raised to degrees (of honour)... (2, 253)

At first glance, the meaning of these words only implies that among prophets there are both, messengers who bring new revelations, recorded in holy books (Moses, who brought the Torah; David, who wrote the Book of Psalms; Jesus, who proclaimed the Gospel), and messengers, who remind us of the revelations, which have been given to us, and calling upon us to follow them.

However, the ayat has another meaning as well: a prophet’s meeting with God can only imply the man’s perceiving the voice from above (compare with “...His voice you shall obey...” — Deuteronomy 13, 4; “...you hear the sound of It ... So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” — John 3, 8); but more than that, such a meeting may initiate a constant spiritual ascension of the prophet himself towards his achieving of higher “degrees”.

According to the Jewish tradition, the words “A Song of Ascents” at the beginning of the psalms number 120 -134 inform us of the fact that these psalms give a figurative description of a transition to more and more elevated spiritual states. There exists a similar comprehension of the koranic concept of “degrees” in the mystic tradition of Sufism.

Such is the difference among prophets in the sense of their inner life pace, the degree of their perception of God’s revelation — i.e. the difference concerning the relationships of this or that prophet with God.

As regards the message itself, brought to the humanity by prophets, its essence has been single throughout all epochs, though delivered by each messenger concerning the time (the epoch), the place (the national and

cultural context of the preaching) and the circumstances (if the recipients are ready to accept the sermon and how obedient or opposing to the prophetic word they are). In this sense there is no difference among prophets because the messages that they bring should be perceived with an equal awe and obedience, as they come down directly from the mouth of the Creator. That is why prophet Muhammad teaches the Muslims to express their attitude towards the prophets of all times in the following way:

“We make no distinction between any of His messengers...” (2, 285)

Direct and Allegoric Regulations

Just as the teachings of preceding messengers, the Quran includes explicit regulations, which handle the inner and external life of the believers, as well as allegoric ones, which are filled with a deep spiritual meaning:

He is the One Who has revealed to you 'O Prophet' the Book, of which some verses are precise — they are the foundation of the Book — while others are elusive... (3, 7)

It is exactly the ayats of the legislative nature (“precise”), which are claimed to be “the foundation of the Book”, i.e. the framework determining the God-pleasing lifestyle for the believers. They are the foundation of sharia-law (the set of regulations, obligatory for a devout Muslim). Only in case one comprehends and follows the regulations of the precise ayats, it is possible to proceed and penetrate into higher levels of a revelation, where mysteries of the spiritual world become clear.

The ayats that interpret the sphere of spiritual reality are defined as “elusive”, since the things, which they focus on or just hint at, cannot be described by means of human logic or simple instruments of a language.

Further, the ayat that we have started quoting proceeds:

Those with deviant hearts follow the elusive verses seeking 'to spread' doubt through their... interpretations — but none grasps their 'full' meaning except Allah... But none will be mindful 'of this' except people of reason. (3, 7)

Shall we, thus, come to the conclusion that it is not recommended to study the figurative meaning of the Quran? Not at all. These words should be interpreted in an absolutely different way. For as the revelation contains a direct meaning as well as a figurative one, the latter should obviously be cleared out, otherwise, this part of the revelation would have been sent in vain. That is why, the meaning of the ayat in question is to be understood in the following way: there is no use studying the elusive and mystical side of the Quran without understanding and obeying “the foundation of the Book”, i.e. the regulatory commandments.

A soul which does not yield to direct commandments of God, which avoids the way of ethical self-perfection can never succeed in penetrating into spiritual mysteries. In the present time there have appeared a lot of people who are eager to acquire supernatural abilities by accepting different mystical teachings, but it is quite often that such people ignore the ethical side of religion, “seeking 'to spread' doubt through their... interpretations” of only

those parts of it, which they think will give them special power over the world around. But the aim of the spiritual growth is a life full of altruism, a life for the sake of God, one's neighbors — sacrificial existence. The pursuit of influence and benefit through the knowledge of things concealed has a totally egoistic nature, quite opposite to the aim of the revelation itself.

The ending of this ayat — “But none will be mindful ‘of this’ except people of reason” — reaffirms exactly this interpretation: “people of reason” following the explicit directions of God “are mindful” of the mysteries of the Scripture as well, for they learn to live a life of sacrifice, full of altruism, instead of egoism:

...Donate from what We have provided for them. (22, 35)

In so far as the all-blissful God has nothing to wish for Himself, but He constantly gives incalculable prizes of life for His creations, the man's road to blissfulness leads through their likening to God by means of pure altruism — or love; compare with the New Testament definition of the main aim of the religious life:

But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith... (1 Timothy 1, 5)