The Prophet in the Qur'ān

An Attempt at a Synthesis

Denis Gril

“Only the proclamation is incumbent upon the Messenger.” (Q 5:99)¹ This verse relieves the Prophet of all responsibility in the reception of the message. However, in this restrictive form it could lead one to imagine that his mission, above all, was to perform this transmission. But the Qur'ān assigned many other functions to the Prophet. He was the first to receive the divine Word, and was constantly called upon to recite it.² The presence of the Prophet in the Qur'ān also manifests itself in other ways; above all in the stories of prophets that are addressed to him personally, or in allusions to his own history and that of his people and his opponents, in Mecca or in Medina.

Muḥammad is merely a man, and at the same time he is God's elect: “Glory be to my Lord! Am I aught but a human being, a messenger?” (Q 17:94) Although his humanity is affirmed, and all possibility of confusing it with divinity is swept away, there is no shortage, in the Qur'ān, of allusions to the exceptional graces that God offers him. Along with the numerous missions that he is charged with, the praise of him in the Qur'ān explains the veneration accorded to the Prophet, both during his life and through subsequent centuries. The *sunna*, and particularly the hadiths in which the Prophet speaks of his own election, have also contributed to a nurturing of love and respect for his person; a study such as the present one should complement this. The Qur'ān's discourse explicitly concerning the Prophet is already very dense; in addition, we will have to examine and interrogate the parts that relate to him implicitly. This will allow us to provide a picture of the relationships between Muḥammad and the other prophets.

We will look at the Qur'ān as a whole, as it has been received by believers from the moment it took shape as a book, and we will sometimes take

1 This chapter is a condensed version of one that will appear in a forthcoming collection of articles, 'Ecrits sur le Prophète'. We have removed a number of citations and references to similar Quranic verses. The translations of these verses are taken from Hossein Nasr ed. *The Study Quran*.

2 334 verses or phrases begin with the imperative: 'Say!' (*qul*).

into account its division into Medinese or Meccan Suras or verses insofar as this makes sense for our purposes. Our approach is analytical and thematic, attempting to provide an account of all that the Qur'ān says about the Prophet. This study was undertaken in the framework of a collective project of research into the ways in which Muslims have seen the Prophet in his human and meta-historical reality, from the origins of Islam to the present day. The current contribution asks: how did the Qur'ān, the first witness of the prophetic presence and its representation, inform these ways of seeing?

In our thematic presentation we move from the explicit towards the implicit. We begin with the Qur'ān's insistence on the Prophet's humanity, in order to observe how the Revelation takes charge of his person, that it might assume diverse functions (going well beyond the transmission of the message): for his people, for his community and for all of humanity. The gift of election that God gives him, in his closeness to God and to his Word, then determines the forms of his presence in the community of prophets and in his own community.

1 An Ordinary Man?

1.1 *A Man Like Any Other*

In the Qur'ān it is said to the Prophet that "Surely thou wilt die, and surely they will die" (Q 39:30). Like all the other prophets, he must eat and go to market to obtain food (Q 25:7 and 20). The Qur'ān reminds him of his imperfections and limitations: before receiving the Revelation he was unaware of it, and he must fear God's punishment if he contravenes His commandments (Q 6:15). He has no understanding of the course of events, and cannot do either good or harm to himself (Q 7:188), or to anyone else (Q 73:21). Given the task of announcing the Final Hour, he doesn't know its timing any better than anyone else does, and would be unable to hasten its advent (Q 6:58). Sometimes he experiences doubts (Q 10:94); he is not immune to the criticism and challenges that are aimed at him. In fact, his humanity and the weaknesses inherent in it play an essential role in his prophetic mission.

1.2 *A Human Being and an Envoy*

The affirmation of his humanity goes with a parallel affirmation of his mission: "Say, 'I am only a human being like you. It is revealed unto me that your God is one God. So whosoever hopes for the meeting with his Lord, let him perform righteous deeds and make no one a Partner unto his Lord in worship.'" (Q 18:110). This verse simultaneously affirms the Prophet's humanity and reminds believers of what is required of them. In order to take on his function

and serve as an example to humanity, the Prophet must be part of humanity. The combined insistence on the fact that the Prophet and prophets in general were men like any others, and on their prophetic missions, also answers a possible objection: why did God chose such a man to exercise this supreme authority? When challenged to produce miracles, the Prophet is obliged to reply: "Glory be to my Lord! Am I aught but a human being, a Messenger? And nothing hindered men from believing when guidance went unto them, save that they said, 'Has God sent a human being as a Messenger?' Say, 'Were there angels walking about upon the earth in peace, We would have sent down upon them an angel from Heaven as a Messenger.' Say, 'God suffices as a Witness between you and me. Verily, of His servants He is Aware, Seeing.'" (Q 17:93–96). The prophetic mission springs from God's election and from divine science.

1.3 *Does the Prophet Sin?*

The Qur'ān does not affirm that the Prophet is without sin; in the Medinese context it only promises him protection for the accomplishment of his mission: "O Messenger! Convey that which has been sent down unto thee from thy Lord, and if thou dost not, thou wilt not have conveyed His message. And God will protect thee (*ya'ṣimuka*) from mankind ..." (Q 5:67). Weakness is part of the human condition, and the Prophet, like all men, must ask God's forgiveness for his weaknesses: "Know then that there is no god but God, and ask forgiveness for thy sin and for the believing men and the believing women ..." (Q 47:19). It is true that the Sura *al-Faṭḥ* (Victory) offers him absolution from all sin: "Truly We have granted thee a manifest victory. That God may forgive thee thy sins that went before and that which is to come, and complete His Blessing upon thee with a mighty help." (Q 48: 1–4). However, this promise does not contradict the mention of actions that the Prophet is reproached for – on the contrary. God warns him against those in Mecca who would seek to distract him from his strict fidelity to the Revelation (Q 17:74–75). In the Prophet's case, his failings are often providential; for example, bearing witness to his meekness and revealing the truth about the 'hypocrites' who did not take part in the Tabūk expedition: "God pardon thee! Why didst thou grant them leave before it became clear to thee who spoke the truth and who the liars were?" (Q 9: 43) If the Prophet was sheltered from Satan's suggestions, the Qur'ān would not request that he ask for protection: "And should a temptation from Satan provoke thee, seek refuge in God. Truly He is Hearing, Knowing." (Q 7:200). He is taught a prayer for protection, one that believers then appropriate for their own uses: "And say, 'My lord! I seek refuge in Thee from the incitements of the Satans. And I seek refuge in Thee, my Lord, lest they should be present with me.'" (Q 23:97–98).

2 The Training of a Prophet

The Prophet is exemplary because he is the elect, but also because of what he learns from the Qur'ān. Like a benevolent but intransigent teacher, the Qur'ān trains its disciple; it commands and forbids, exhorts and admonishes, counsels and consoles. One cannot train others without first having oneself been trained.

2.1 *Following the Revelation*

The Prophet will only be followed if he follows the Revelation himself: "... Say, 'I only follow that which is revealed unto me from my Lord ...'" (Q 7:203). He must adhere firmly to its tenets (Q 43:43) and keep himself from following the inclinations of his own soul, or any other opinion not founded upon the Revelation (*hawā*, pl. *ahwā'*). In the Meccan Suras the Qur'ān insists that he avoid all compromise with polytheists; in the Medinise Suras he is told not to follow the ideas of the People of the Book (Q 6:56–57 and 5:48).

2.2 *The Demands of the Revelation*

The Prophet, once trained by the Qur'ān, must observe a certain decorum towards the Revelation. Even if most of the stories recounted in the Qur'ān are familiar from earlier books and traditions, he must cleave to what has been revealed, without reference to the People of the Book, as, for example, he is told regarding the Companions of the Cave (Q 18:22–23). Despite his desire to receive the Revelation, he must not try to hasten it (Q 75:16–19). In order to receive and transmit it, he must be completely taken over by God and renounce all individual effort. The *ʿAbasa* (He Frowned) Sura reproaches him with having turned away from one of his companions, who was poor and blind, in order to speak with a rich Qurayshite whom he wanted to convince. The nobility of his motives is insufficient to justify such an attitude (Q 80:1–12). He is shown a path that always leads to poverty, the renunciation of his freedom of choice, and conformity to Divine command.

2.3 *The Prophet is Taken under His Lord's Wing*

Called to follow the Revelation, the Prophet receives instructions that can be general or specific, positive or negative. Each believer can also receive these, though they concern the Prophet primarily, and make of him a being whose entire life is directed and controlled by his Lord: "Say, 'I have only been commanded to worship God, and to not ascribe partners unto Him. Unto Him do I call and onto Him is my return.'" (Q 13:36). Outwardly and inwardly his orientation must follow Abraham's model as restorer of the primordial and immutable

religion: "Set thy face to religion, as a ḥanīf, in the primordial nature from God upon which He originated mankind – there is no altering the creation of God. That is the upright religion, but most of mankind know not." (Q 30:30). This is a request for the instigation of ritual prayer (for example, Q 17:78–82), and for a ritual re-orientation in the direction of the Ka'ba (Q 2:144), and comes from a discourse addressed first and specifically to the Prophet.

The night prayer (*qiyām al-layl*) is among the obligations imposed on the Prophet. The first verses of the *al-Muzzammil* (The Enwrapped One) Sura address him thus: "O thou enwrapped! Stand vigil at night, save a little, half of it, or add to it; and recite the Qur'ān at a measured pace. Truly We shall soon cast upon thee a weighty Word. Truly the vigil of the night is firmest in tread and most upright for speech. For truly by day you have lengthy affairs. So remember the Name of thy Lord and devote thyself to Him with complete devotion – Lord of the East and the West, there is no God but He, so take Him as a guardian (*wakīl*).'" (Q 73:1–10).

The final verse of this Sura, which was evidently inserted during the Medinese period, calls on the elite among believers to practice such a prayer in the way that the Prophet did. The Qur'ān teaches him to adore God, as he will himself teach his companions.

Often, and only in Meccan Suras, the call to adore and glorify God comes after an order to be patient and endure troubles. Patience (*ṣabr*), combined with confidence in God (*tawakkul*), is among the cardinal virtues of the prophets. The Qur'ān inculcates these in the Prophet in the form of imperatives – "Be patient!", "Trust in God" – the way a master addresses a disciple to shape his character and show him the path he must follow. In the same way, Muḥammad receives orders: "So be steadfast, as thou hast been commanded – and those who turn in repentance along with you – and be not rebellious." (Q 11:112). The fact of holding oneself upright, or of rectitude (*istiḳāma*), conforming perfectly to God's orders, brings together all of the virtues to which the Prophet, and the believers who follow him on this path of perfection, must lay claim.

2.4 *Amendments to the Prophet's Character*

Even though the Qur'ān praises the Prophet for the happy predispositions of his character (*khuluq*), he must nevertheless persevere in the acquisition of what Muslim tradition calls the "noble virtues" (*makārim al-akhlāq*). The necessary amendments to his character concern his relationships with God and with humankind, and relate particularly to his transmission of the message: "Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation. And dispute with them in the most virtuous manner ..." (Q 16:125). This divine training of the Prophet is even more evident when it applies to his relationship with his

Companions. Even when they unreservedly recognise his authority, he must, especially in difficult situations, still take into account their weakness. In this respect, the Prophet is simply modelling his own behaviour on that of God towards humanity; this is the absolute foundation of Qur'ānic ethics: "Then [it was] by a Mercy from God that you were gentle with them. Hadst thou been severe [and] hard-hearted they would have scattered from about thee. So pardon them, ask for forgiveness for them and consult them in affairs. And when thou art resolved, trust in God, truly God loves those who trust." (Q 3:159).

2.5 *The Prophet Reprimanded*

The Prophetic mission demands unfailing engagement. But the Prophet is not immune to doubt: "So if thou art in doubt concerning that which We have sent down unto thee, ask those who recite the Book before thee. The truth has certainly come unto thee from thy Lord. So be thou not among the doubters. And be not among those who deny the signs of God, lest thou shouldst be among the losers." (Q 10:94–95). This is a powerful warning, perhaps intended to purify the messenger's soul. If so, how do we understand this next admonition, which is even more radical, concerning, as it does, faith in the one God? "And let them not turn thee from the signs of God after they have been sent down unto thee. But call to thy Lord and not among those who ascribe partners unto God. And call not upon another god along with God. There is no god but He ..." (Q 28:87–88). One may, along with some commentators, read such verses as being addressed to the Prophet as the first recipient of a discourse ultimately intended for all of humanity. Or one may see in this a more personal teaching, a purification in the Prophet of all internal orientation towards anything other than God.

We can also ask why, in the sequence of orders and interdictions in *Sūrat al-Isrā'* (Q 17:23–39), some are addressed to the Prophet and others to a "thou" that designates all of humankind. The warnings addressed in the second person imply that the Prophet's own behaviour and character have already been perfected by Revelation: "And let not thine hand be shackled to thy neck; nor let it be entirely open, lest thou shouldst sit condemned, destitute. Truly thy Lord outspreads and straightens provision for whomsoever He will. Verily of His servants He is aware, seeing." (Q 17:29–30). The practice of virtues such as generosity must remain measured, without the vanity of attempting to rival divine qualities. In the search for science, as in the external attitude, humility always remains the primary quality for the servant: "And pursue not that whereof you have no knowledge. Truly hearing, and sight, and the heart – all of these will be called to account. And walk not exultantly upon the earth; surely

thou shalt not penetrate the earth, nor reach the mountains in height. The evil of all this is loathsome unto thy Lord." (Q 17:36–38).

2.6 *Renunciation*

Although the Qur'ān provides the Prophet with all sorts of virtues, it also takes away any hope for him of guiding humanity, despite the fact that this is the sum of the message that has been confided to him. Muḥammad experiences the painful and paradoxical proof of this when God refuses to send him the miraculous signs that his people challenge him to produce: that water should spring from the ground, the sky should fall, God and the angels appear, a palace should be decorated, that he should be elevated to the heavens and bring back a book (Q 17:90–93), and many more. The Qur'ān's response to this is invariably: what good are external signs (*āyāt*), if humanity does not believe in the signs/verses of the Book, and if they don't recognise that God has sent them a messenger? God alone can open the eyes of faith and bring belief in His signs, whether these consist of miracles or of the Revelation itself. The Prophet would nevertheless like to receive one or more miraculous signs, like those sent to the prophets whose stories are told in the Qur'ān, but he is told that this did not prevent those prophets, like him, from being called imposters. In the verse on the nocturnal journey (*isrā'*), nothing about the miraculous events is attributed to the Prophet: "Glory be to Him who carried His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Furthest Mosque, whose precincts We have blessed, that We might show him some of Our signs. Truly He is the Hearer, the Seer." (Q 17:1). The Prophet is not only stripped of all agency, but also of any initiative in the perception of the signs; it is really God who has heard and seen.

2.7 *The Prophet Must Avoid Standing between God and Humankind*

This paradox becomes more extreme when the Prophet is tasked with a mission that appears impossible: how can he call people to God if God has not opened their hearts to faith? In the Meccan Suras, the Qur'ān reproaches the Prophet with having so despaired that his life itself is endangered: "Yet perhaps thou wouldst destroy thyself with grief for their sake, should they believe not in this account." (Q 18:6). The Prophet must admit that God's command and his own wisdom do not necessarily agree: "Had God willed, He will have gathered them all to guidance – so be not among the ignorant." (Q 6:35). Here again the warning is a severe one, and even though the Prophet has been sent to guide humankind, it is made explicit to him: "Surely thou dost not guide whomsoever thou lovest, but God guides whomsoever He will ..." (Q 28:56). Any guidance comes only from God's grace – and the Prophet is again challenged: "And had

thy Lord willed, all those who are on earth would have believed all together. Wouldst thou compel men till they become believers?" (Q 10:99). Through the Revelation and the trials and accusations he must face, the Prophet is ordered, directed, corrected, exhorted, deprived, and even erased; there are no concessions, he is moulded and trained by an absolute exigency. This process is aiming to make him the inwardly perfect servant of God, as much as it is preparing him to take on the various functions relating to the mission of a Prophet (*nabī*) and a messenger (*rasūl*).

3 The Missions of the Prophet

3.1 *Warning, and Announcing the Good News (nadhīr, bashīr)*

According to tradition, one of the very first revelations directed the Prophet was thus: "O thou who art covered, arise and warn (*fa-andhir*)!" (Q 74:1–2). The earliest Suras revealed in Mecca often appear as warnings: the end of the world, the imminence of Judgement Day, short evocations of peoples who were punished for rebelling. It is said of the Prophet, as he faces his people's denial: "Thou art only a warner (*nadhīr*)."¹ (Q 11:12) In pre-Islamic Arabia, the *nadhīr* was the one who warned his tribe of imminent danger. This term is quickly paired with *bashīr*, the one who announces good news – in the tribal context, the person who announces a victory over another tribe, or the arrival of a caravan, or who goes to meet the caravan (Q 12:96, about Jacob). These two terms are often associated, in either order, and doubles such as *mundhir* and *mubashshir* occur frequently too. The very numerous occurrences in the Qur'ān of words derived from the roots *N-DH-R* and *B-SH-R*, in their respective meanings of warning and good news, would merit a study in themselves. They are almost always used about the Prophet, who, like other prophets, has the double function of warner and announcer of good news; God, the angels and the Qur'ān also perform these functions. The fact that these tasks have been delegated to the Prophet makes him the interpreter of divine justice and mercy.

3.2 *Prophet and Messenger (nabī, rasūl)*

What shades of meaning, what differences exist between these two terms designating the person whom God has chosen among men to receive and transmit his Word? The act of receiving is more closely related to prophecy (*nubuwwa*) and to the transmission of the prophetic mission (*risāla*), which is the transmission of a message (*risāla*). The Prophet is called *al-nabī*, or addressed by this term, in his relationships with his family members, his Companions, and with people in general, whereas *al-rasūl* often pre-supposes an interaction based on

an authority associated with that of God. One frequently finds it alongside the name of God in the expression “God and His messenger” (*Allāh wa rasūluhu*), which is not the case for *nabī*. In any case, the transmission of the message is the work of the *rasūl*: “O Messenger! Convey that which has been sent down unto thee from thy Lord.” (Q 5:67). In his mission to transmit, the Prophet passes on the entirety of the Word that has “descended” into his heart via Gabriel and according to a process described in the *al-Shu‘arā’* (The Poets) Sura: “And truly it is a revelation of the Lord of the worlds, brought down by the Trustworthy Spirit, upon thine heart – that thou mayest be among the warners – in a clear Arabic tongue. It is indeed in the scriptures of those of old.” (Q 26:192–196). The oral nature of the Prophet’s passing on of what he has received is underlined by the repetition of the imperatives: “Say!” (*qul*), “Recite!” (*iqra’*) in the first revelation (according to tradition) (Q 96:1 and 3), or of *utlu* “Recite!”, which mostly introduces the accounts of the holy story (Q 5:27 etc.).

The fact that the Messenger’s role is that of simple transmission does not mean that while playing it he does not perform, at least occasionally, some mediation between the Enunciator of the Word and those for whom it is destined. The questions that are asked of the Prophet, and the responses that are revealed to him, make this process a locus of interaction between the divine and the human. “They question thee about the Hour, when it will set in. Say, ‘Knowledge thereof lies only with my Lord. None save He shall manifest it at its proper time. Heavy shall it weigh upon the heavens and the earth. It shall not come upon but suddenly.’ They question thee as if you knew it well. Say, ‘Knowledge thereof lies only with God, but most of mankind knows not.’” (Q 7:187). In the Medinese Suras, especially *Baqara* (The Cow), the Prophet is interrogated on the subject of the Law,³ to such an extent that a verse occurs to put the brakes on this inclination towards questions about the details of the Law, with which the children of Israel are reproached: (Q 2:67–71 and 108): “O you who believe! Ask not about things which, if they were disclosed to you, would trouble you. And if you ask about them when the Qur’ān is being sent down, they will be disclosed to you. God has pardoned this and God is Forgiving, Clement.” (Q 5:101).

Although the Revelation defines itself as a clear (*bayān*) expression, the Book and the verses being qualified as “enlightening” (*mubīn*, *bayyināt*, *mubayyināt*), the Prophet is also given the task of making it more explicit: “... And We have sent down the Reminder (*al-dhikr*) unto thee that thou mightest clarify

3 Q 2:189, 215, 217, 219, 220, 222; 5:4; 8:1. The expression *yastaftūna-ka*, ‘they ask you your opinion on ...’ introduces responses to questions on the Law, on orphans, and on inheritance in the absence of direct heirs (*kalāla*); Q 4:127 and 176. From this we get the term *fatwā*.

(*li-tubayyina*) for mankind that which has been sent down unto them, that haply they may reflect.” (Q 16:44). This clarification can be understood as an explanation of a particular verse, or else as the exemplary nature of a life that conforms to the Revelation; the Prophetic *bayān* thus prolonging the transmission of the message.

3.3 *Calling on God*

“Say, ‘This is my way, I call unto God with clear sight – I, and those who follow me. Glory be to God! And I am not among those who ascribe partners unto God.’” (Q 12:108). Unlike prophecy and the prophetic mission, which come about only through divine election, the call unto God (*al-da‘wa ilā llāh*) is something that those who follow the Prophet’s path can take on. However, the phrase on transcendence that concludes this verse suggests that, even when given to humanity, this function remains in the power of God alone. This is why the Prophet is named “one who calls unto God by His Leave” (Q 33:46). This asking for leave (*idhn*) guarantees that the call will be made in the name, and the sight, of God. The Prophet is entrusted with a message and sent back to mankind.

3.4 *Reminding, Purifying, Teaching*

The Revelation is a call and a reminder. The Qur’ān calls itself *dhikr*: memory, mention, invocation, recall and reminder. In the *Maryam* Sura, the Prophet is told: “Mention (*udhkur*) in the Book Mary ...”, and similarly for Abraham, Moses, Ishmael and Enoch (Idrīs) (Q 19:16, 41, 51, 54 and 56). This could also be translated as: “Remember ...” because the *dhikr* is at once an interior act and an enunciation. In its factitive form the verb *dhakkara* takes the meaning “reminding”. While the Prophet is told of the limits of his humanity, he also receives an order to remind people who resist the Revelation of what they have forgotten – their ultimate fate: “We know best that which they say. Thine is not to compel them. So remind, by means of the Qur’ān, those who fear My Threat.” (Q 50: 45).

The Prophet’s role with regard to believers is not limited to transmitting the Word. The impact of his recitation transforms them inwardly, and they learn the letter of the text and its meaning at the same time, as well as how to put it into practice: what the Qur’ān calls “wisdom” (*al-ḥikma*): “Even as we have sent among you a Messenger from among you, who recites Our signs to you and purifies you, and teaches you the Book and Wisdom, and teaches you what you knew not.” (Q 2:151). In the case of compulsory charitable giving, purification on the material level, as well as the spiritual, is obtainable through the Prophet: “Take thou a charitable offering from their wealth, cleansing them

and purifying them thereby (*tutahhiru-hum wa tuzakkī-him bi-hā*), and bless them. Truly thy blessings are a comfort for them." (Q 9:103).

4 Revelation and Authority

It is the reception and transmission of the divine message that confer upon the Prophet the authority to found a new religion and community. This authority is also affirmed in the Qur'ān's replies to the Prophet's adversaries who, in Mecca, had rejected belief in an afterlife, and accused him of being possessed by a djinn, of being a magician, poet or diviner; in Medina they contested his status as the Elect or refused the new order that he founded.

4.1 *Belief in God and in His Prophet; Obedience to God and His Envoy*

In the creed, the claim of divine unity takes the form of a negation, while the recognition of the Prophet's mission is completely affirmative: "There is no god but God, Muḥammad is the Messenger of God". In the Qur'ān, faith in God and in the Prophet is expressed positively: "So believe in God and His Messenger and the light We have sent down. God is aware of whatsoever you do." (Q 64:8). Faith in the Revelation and in the Prophet's mission must be expressed through obedience to the Qur'ān's commandments, in which the authority of God and that of the Prophet are sometimes united and sometimes distinguished from one another. In the verses on obedience (all Medinese), the Prophet is always designated by the term *rasūl*, that is, as a transmitter but also as a law-maker.

Obedience to God and His Messenger is a pledge that brings bliss to all people of God: "Whosoever obeys God and the Messenger, they are with those whom God has blessed, the prophets, the truthful ones, the witnesses, and the righteous. What beautiful companions they are." (Q 4:69). When the Prophet recites the Qur'ān or speaks in God's name, it is one single word that one must hear, and a single authority being exercised: "O you who believe! Obey God and His Messenger, and turn not away from him, even as you hear. And be not like those who say, "We hear", though they hear not." (Q 8:20–21). It is especially important for believers to recognise this unity of authority when the Prophet makes a judgement. The *al-Nūr* (Light) Sura emphasises this obligation at length, and questions the faith of any who do not submit to it. 'We believe in God and in the Messenger, and we obey. Then a group of them turn away thereafter, and believers they are not. And when they are called to God and His Messenger, that He/he may judge between them, behold, a group of them turn away. But if the right is theirs, they come unto Him submissively. Is there a disease in their hearts? Or do they doubt, or fear that God and His Messenger will

deal unjustly with them? Nay, but it is they who are the wrongdoers. The only words of the believers when they are called unto God and His Messenger, that he may judge between them, will be to say, 'We hear and we obey.' And it is they who shall prosper. Whosoever obeys God and His Messenger, and who fears God and reverences Him, it is they who shall triumph." (Q 24, 47–52). The repetition of the sequence: "... God and His Messenger, that He/he may judge ..." with the pronoun agreement in the singular, is particularly notable, underlining that the Prophet's authority is identical with that of God. Obedience to this authority must not proceed from external constraints, but from inner faith and a fear of God.

This way of affirming that the authority of the Prophet is none other than God's also amounts to a reminder that it confers no personal power on the Prophet, as would be the case with guidance. With one hand, God invests the Prophet with power, with the other he removes it and maintains him in a state of servitude: "Whosoever obeys the Messenger obeys God, and as for those who turn away, We have not sent thee as their keeper." (Q 4:80).

However, other passages confer upon the Prophet an authority of his own, held jointly with God. After a legal interdiction on wine and gambling, the following is said: "Obey God and obey the Messenger, and be wary. But if you turn away, then know that only the clear proclamation is incumbent upon Our Messenger." (Q 5:92). The distinction made between God's authority and that of the Prophet allows the transmission of these words to his followers, to "those in authority among you" (*ulū l-amr minkum*), scholars or community leaders: "O you who believe! Obey God and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you differ among yourselves concerning any matter, refer it to God and the Messenger, if you believe in God and the Last Day. That is a better, and fairer, *dénouement* (*aḥsanu ta'wīlan*)."⁴ (Q 4:59). Subsequently one observes that God's authority and that of the Prophet, having been separated, are re-united. Those who oppose the Envoy are warned as follows: "O you who believe! Obey God and obey the Messenger and let not your deeds be in vain." (Q 47: 33). The same distinction and relationship is established between the authority of the Revelation and that of the Prophet: "And when it is said unto them, 'Come unto that which God has sent down, and unto the Messenger', they say, 'Sufficient for us is that which we have found our fathers practising.' What! Even if their fathers knew naught and were not rightly guided ..." (Q 5: 104).

The Prophet's authority comes from the Revelation, and from divine inspiration when he is meting out justice: "Verily We have sent down unto thee

4 In the Quran, *Ta'wīl* means interpretation (Q 3:7), but its literal significance is "to make something reach its end", thus the translation as a "*dénouement*".

the Book in truth, that thou mightest judge between men according to what God has shown thee. So be not an advocate for those who betray their trust." (Q 4:105). If the Prophet's decision is based on divine inspiration, then to accept it without disputing it is an act of faith: "But no, by thy Lord, they will not believe until they have made thee the judge between them in their disputes, and find no resistance in their souls to what thou hast decreed, and surrender with full submission." (Q 4:65). The Revelation is the foundation of the Prophet's own authority, and makes him a source of the Law: "Whatsoever the Messenger [may] give you, take it; and whatsoever he forbids to you, forgo, and reverence God. Truly God is severe in retribution." (Q 59:7).

4.2 *Prophecy and Combat*

Even if the Prophet is not explicitly called God's lieutenant on earth, as was the warrior prophet David (cf. Q 38: 26 and 2:251), he nevertheless performs a comparable function. At a certain point, he must constrain those who do not recognise that it is his role to submit to the order that he is charged with establishing. In the Meccan context, the Prophet's fight is based on this discussion: "And had We willed, We have sent a warner to every town. So obey not the disbelievers, but strive against them by means of it with a great striving (*wa jāhid-hum bihi jihādan kabīran*)" (Q 25:51–52); "by means of it" refers to the Qur'ān.⁵ Up to the end of the Medinese period, the term *jihād* keeps its general sense of a conflict that is not necessarily armed. The Prophet is not involved in a physical battle with "hypocrites" when it is said of them: "O Prophet! Strive against (*jāhid*) the disbelievers and the hypocrites, and be harsh with them ..." (Q 9:73). And when the context is one of war, the Prophet is called to combat personally, an order that he must pass on to believers: "So fight (*qātil*) in the way of God. Thou art accountable only for thyself, and urge on the believers. It may be that God will restrain the might of the disbelievers ..." (Q 4:84).

4.3 *Authority Contested*

Before the time of battles, during the entire Meccan period, the Qur'ān constantly defends its own authority and that of the Prophet, responding to any attacks that call into question the divine nature of his inspiration. Members of the Prophet's tribe say he is a diviner or reader of oracles (*kāhin*), or that he is possessed by a djinn (*majnūn*). Because of the beauty of the Suras' rhythms they call him a poet (*shā'ir*), an ambiguous status more feared than respected. Even worse, people say he's a magician (*sāhir*), or has been bewitched. By challenging these accusations, the Qur'ān confirms that he is under divine inspiration, since God is undertaking his defence and that of the Revelation. This is

⁵ Tabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, XIX, 15.

also the case when the Prophet is accused of lying or forgery, or of drawing his inspiration from the myths of the Ancients (*asāṭīr al-awwālīn*). The Qur'ān's reply affirms its revealed nature as proceeding from divine mystery: "And the disbelievers say, 'They spoke fables of those of old, which he has written down, and they are recited to him morning and evening.' Say, 'He has sent it down Who knows the secret in the heavens and on the earth. Truly He is Forgiving, Merciful.'" (Q 25:4–6).

The Qur'ān also defends the Messenger's integrity, and that of its own complete transmission by affirming that if he were to attribute to God words that were not His Word, he would deserve immediate death (Q. 69:44–47). To those who ask him to produce a different Qur'ān, or to change what he has reported, he must reply: "Say, 'It is not for me to alter it of my own accord. I follow only that which is revealed unto me. Truly I fear, should I disobey my Lord, the punishment of a tremendous day.' Say, 'Had God willed, I would not have recited it unto you; nor would He have made it known to you. Indeed, I tarried among you for a lifetime before it. Do you not understand?'" (Q 10:15–16). The Qur'ān consistently argues in the Prophet's favour, affirming that neither he nor his people have knowledge of what is Written: "There are among the accounts of the Unseen that We reveal unto thee. Thou knewest not of them, neither thou nor thy people, beforehand." (Q 11:49). The Qur'ān affirms that the expression "the unlettered Prophet" means that he could neither read nor write, nor did he know of the Writings or of any other thing: "And thou didst not recite before this any Book; nor didst thou write it with thy right hand, for then those who make false claims would have doubted." (Q 29:48).

The Qur'ān's repeated allusions to the attacks on the Prophet, and its varied refutations of these, whether based on argument or on authority (affirming the reality of the Revelation), all aim to reinforce the truthfulness of the Prophet and the fidelity of his transmission.

In the Medinese Suras, it is not his inspiration that is contested, but his authority inside or outside of the Medina community, where "Hypocrites" (*al-munāfiqūn*) make up an internal opposition that weakens it. In most verses, this is portrayed as opposition to both God and His Messenger; sometimes it concerns only the Prophet. In either case, opposition to the Prophet is seen to lead to a bad end, and the divine authority vested in him is confirmed.

5 Model or Mediator

For believers, true faith does not merely mean obedience and recognition of an authority. The Qur'ān calls on them to follow a path towards God, in the

footsteps of the Messenger. By doing this, they are obeying God's will: "Truly this is a reminder; so let him who will, take a way unto his Lord. And you do not will but that God wills. Truly God is Knowing, Wise." (Q 76:29–30). To what extent does the Prophet intervene in the journey believers make towards God?

5.1 *Following the Prophet*

The Prophet is the first to be called to follow the Revelation: "Follow that which has been revealed unto thee from thy Lord ..." (Q 6:106), and believers must follow him to benefit from God's guidance: "So believe in God and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, who believes in God and His Words, and follow him, that haply you may be guided." (Q 7:158).

As the above-cited verse Q 12:108 enjoins him, the Prophet must call upon people to follow him. Conformity to the Prophetic path brings with it an internal discernment and prepares one to succeed the Prophet in the call to God. The Prophet transmits what he has received from his Lord to those who follow him, and this places him at the heart of the relationship between God and those who adore Him. Adoration begins as obedience, becoming gratitude (Q 2:172) and then love, in imitation of the Prophet. Indeed, the believer would not know how to lay claim to God's love unless he had first followed the Prophet along the path that leads to Him: "Say, 'If you love God, follow me', and God will love you and forgive you your sins" (Q 3:31).

5.2 *The Model*

Believing in the Messenger, obeying and following him, imitating him ... this means taking him as an interior and exterior model. Unlike the *sunna*, which teaches imitation of the Prophet in all things, the Qur'ān underlines interior emulation: "Indeed you have in the Messenger of God a beautiful example (*uswa ḥasana*) for those who hope for God and the Last Day, and remember God much." (Q 33:21). This beautiful example is based on the essential orientation towards God, and the pure adoration, of the *ḥanīfs*. The Qur'ān highlights the identity of the Abrahamic and Muḥammadan models: "There is indeed a beautiful example for you in Abraham and those with him, when they said to their people, 'Truly we are quit of you and all that you worship apart from God ...' " "You have a beautiful example in them for whosoever hopes for God and the Last Day ..." (Q 60:4, 6). After an account of Abraham's rejection of the astral lights in order to turn towards God alone, and a reference to the lineage of the prophets, the Prophet is told: "They are those whom God has guided, so follow their guidance (*fa-bi-hudā-humu 'qtadīh*)." (Q 6:90). By modelling himself on the Prophet, the believer follows a path that guides him towards the *tawḥīd*, an affirmation and realisation of divine unity at the deepest level of his

being. This explains the increasing importance of the Prophet's mediation in spiritual realisation. The prayers upon the Prophet composed by Sufi masters will become the interpretations of this interior model.

6 The Sacredness of the Prophet

Those who received the Qur'ān from the Prophet's own mouth, as the Word of God descended on his heart, could not but feel that they were in the presence of a being who was charged with the divine presence. Reminders of his ordinary humanity have, as we have seen, coexisted with affirmations of his function; further signs of his election could only increase his companions' conviction that he was a sacred being. The Qur'ān sometimes praises them for respecting his person, and sometimes warns them against treating him in too familiar a fashion. Thus, it sets in place an attitude of veneration that has not lessened over the centuries.

In the Qur'ān this respect is a pre-condition for faith. It is their behaviour towards the Prophet that distinguishes true believers from the 'hypocrites': "Only there are believers who believe in God and His Messenger and who, when they are with him in a collective affair, go not forth until asking his leave. Truly those who ask thy leave, it is they who believe in God and His Messenger (...) Do not deem the Messenger's calling among you to be like your calling to one another. Indeed, God knows among you who steals away under shelter. So let those who contradict his command be wary, lest a trial befall them or a painful punishment befall them." (Q 24:62–63).

None of the believers, not even his wives, ever calls the Prophet by his name; instead, they refer to his function: "O Prophet of God!"; "O Messenger of God!" The *al-Ḥujurāt* (The Chambers) Sura, which refers to the chambers of his wives, with whom he passes successive nights, mentions several rules of decorum whose observation, or otherwise, makes a difference to one's posthumous existence. These verses place the Prophet at the heart of the relationship between God and humanity, and, as a criterion of faith, people's attitude to him is a determinant: "O you who believe! Advance not before God and His Messenger, and fear God. Truly God is Hearing, Knowing. O you who believe! Do not raise your voice above the voice of the Prophet, nor address him in the manner that you address one another, lest your deeds come to naught, while you are unaware. Truly those who lower their voices before the Messenger of God, they are the ones whose hearts God has tested for reverence (*taqwā*). Theirs shall be forgiveness and a great reward. Truly those who call thee from behind the

apartments, most of them understand not. Had they been patient until thou camest out unto them, it would have been better for them.” (Q 49:1–5).

Believers must never give way to the least familiarity in the Prophet's presence, nor seek to become intimate with him, even just to observe what he eats. The simplicity of his way of life must not blind his followers to the sacredness of his person. This also applies to attitudes to the Prophet's wives. They are the “Mothers of believers” (Q 33:6) because of the respect that is due them, and because it is forbidden to marry them. The *al-Aḥzāb* (The Parties) Sura speaks in a single verse of the lack of discretion shown by several Companions when the Prophet married Zaynab and of the obligation for believers to speak to the Prophet's wives from behind a veil, in order to preserve them from any indiscretion. The Qur'ān emphasises the importance of this rule ‘in the sight of God’, because this is not about social convention, but about faith: “... And when you ask anything of his wives, ask them from behind a veil. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts. And you should never affront the Messenger, nor marry his wives after him. Truly that would be an enormity in the sight of God.” (Q 33:53).

Verses from this Sura stress the exceptional character of the Prophet's person. He is human, but must not be treated like other men. In Medina these marks of respect (and therefore of faith) consolidate the community around the Prophet: “Truly We have sent thee as witness, as a bearer of glad tidings, and as a Warner, that you may believe in God and His Messenger, and support him and honour him, and that you may glorify Him morning and evening.” (Q 48:8–9). We shall come back to the question of the ambiguity of the final pronoun, even if it does unequivocally refer to God.

7 The Intercessor: The Eschatological Figure of the Prophet

7.1 *Asking for Forgiveness*

The Prophet is commanded to ask forgiveness for believers; this is a very clear manifestation of his function as mediator. Not only does he transmit God's message to humanity and help people to receive and apply it, he also prepares them for their future lives and their encounters with God. As a human being, he must – as we have seen – ask forgiveness for himself and his brothers and sisters in faith (Q 47:19). His intercession is particularly important for those who repent: “... If, when they had wronged themselves, they had but come to thee and sought forgiveness of God, and the Messenger had sought forgiveness for them, they would surely have found God Relenting, Merciful.” (Q 4:64). In

the same way, he asks forgiveness for believers who request permission to leave him (cf. Q 24:62), for believers who make a pact with him (cf. Q 60:12) and for some Bedouins who, of their own accord, bring him the obligatory alms: "And among the Bedouin are those who believe in God and the Last Day, and regard that which they spend as nearness unto God and the blessings of the Messenger (*qurubāt 'inda llāh wa ṣalawāt al-rasūl*). Behold! It shall surely be nearness for them. God will cause them to enter into His Mercy. Truly God is Forgiving, Merciful." (Q 9:99). Through his words of peace and salvation the Prophet is a sort of guarantor of God's mercy and reconciliation with His servants: "When those who believe in Our signs come to thee, say, 'Peace upon you! Your Lord has prescribed Mercy for Himself, that whosoever among you does evil in ignorance and thereafter repents and make amends, He is truly Forgiving, Merciful.'" (Q 6:54).

And hypocrites, on the contrary, turn away when they are called for the Prophet to ask forgiveness on their behalf (Q 63:5–6). The Prophet's presence in itself protects from punishment in this world, while his requests for forgiveness do so in the next, as it is said of his people: "But God will not punish them while thou art among them. And God will not punish them while they seek forgiveness." (Q 8:33).

Do these verses relate only to the Prophet's time on earth? Undoubtedly some have understood them in this way, but for others the Prophet is still as present among believers as the Revelation itself. Visiting his tomb in Medina has come to be considered, on the basis of traditions and anecdotes, a guarantee of his intercession.

7.2 *The Witness*

The prolongation of the Prophet's presence within his community and in the afterlife is also expressed in his function as a witness in this world and the next. He is called "witness" (*shāhid*) in Q 48:8, and more often described as *shahīd*, a term that brings together the active and passive participles, because he is a witness who is also being witnessed by God. In addition, he bears witness, and this draws the witnessing of those for whom he does so. After him, his community becomes the bearer of a responsibility towards humanity: "... That the Messenger may be a witness for you, and that you may be witnesses for mankind ..." (Q 22:78).

In the *al-Baqara* Sura the community's witnessing precedes or accompanies that of the Prophet: "Thus did We make you a middle community (*wasāṭan*), that you may be witnesses for mankind and that the Messenger may be a witness for you." (Q 2:143). This verse and the one before it underline the mirroring effect that exists in this double witnessing.

All prophets perform this witnessing function for their communities, and its principle is divine, since “God is witness over all things.” (Q 4, 33). The Prophet also does so in the beyond, for all prophets and for all of humanity: “How will it be when We bring forth a witness from every community, and We bring thee as a witness against these? On that Day those who disbelieved and disobeyed the Messenger will wish that they were level with the earth, and they will conceal no account from God.” (Q 4:41–42). The Prophet may bear witness in favour or against, but mercy embraces everything.

7.3 *The Merciful Prophet*

In response to the hypocrites' accusations that he listens to any and all of those who address him, the Qur'ān praises the Prophet's solicitude for his community, and warns them of the eschatological consequences of attacking his honour: “And among them are those who torment the Prophet and say, “He is an ear.” Say, ‘An ear that is good for you. He believes in God and has faith in his believers, and he is a Mercy to those among you who believe.’ And those who torment the Messenger of God, theirs shall be a painful punishment.” (Q 9:61).

In the same Sura, the Prophet is described as having two divine qualities: mercy and compassion: “A Messenger has indeed come unto you from among your own. Troubled is he by what you suffer, solicitous of you, kind (*ra'ūf*) and merciful (*rahīm*) unto the believers.” (Q 9:128).

The mercy that is incarnate in the Prophet is not reserved exclusively for believers. In the Sura *al-Anbiyā'* (The Prophets), after the mention of the graces or qualities of each prophet, it is said to the Prophet: “And We sent thee not, save as a Mercy unto the worlds (*al-'ālamīn*).” (Q 21:107). Commentators differ as to how universal *al-'ālamīn* is meant to be; it can also signify “all of humanity”. However, reading other verses leaves no doubt as to the universality of the Prophetic mission.

7.4 *Sent to All of Humanity*

The universality of the Prophetic mission is affirmed in the Meccan Suras: “Blessed is He Who sent down the Criterion (*al-furqān*) upon His servant that he may be a Warner unto the worlds.” (Q 25:1); or, “And We sent thee not, save as a bearer of glad tidings and a Warner to mankind entire (*illā kāffatan li-l-nās*). But most of mankind know not.” (Q 34:28). Although this second phrase suggests that humanity will not recognise his mission, the Prophet must nevertheless address it in its entirety: “Say, ‘O mankind! Truly I am the Messenger of God unto you all – Him to Whom belongs Sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. There is no god but He. He gives life and causes death. So believe in God and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, who believes in God and His

Words; and follow him, that haply you may be guided.” (Q 7:158). To believe in the Prophet and follow him means encompassing within a single faith all of the Revelation and all those who have received it and who are identified with God’s words.

Because not every person on earth will recognise the Prophet’s mission, God makes himself its witness: “He is Who sent His Messenger with guidance and the Religion of Truth to make it prevail over all [of the] religion. And God suffices as a Witness.” (Q 48:28).

8 God’s Elect

8.1 *His Servant* (‘*abduhu*)

An ordinary human being and God’s messenger: the Qur’ān constantly recalls the Prophet’s status as God’s elect alongside his complete dependence on his Lord. This is especially true when he is termed “servant” (‘*abd*) – as well as referring to a slave, this can mean one who adores, or one who has nothing (not even liberty), and who acts only on his master’s orders. It is because he is stripped of all individuality and is a servant that the Prophet is worthy to receive the graces of God, and becomes a model. What is ordinary joins with what is exceptional, and vice versa. The reason he is God’s elect is because he is God’s servant, and the inverse is also true. The first of the consecutive Suras *al-Isrā’* (The Nocturnal Voyage) and *al-Kahf* (The Cavern) begins with supreme elevation, and the second with the descent of the Book: “Glory be to Him Who carried His servant by night.” (Q 17:1). This verse begins by affirming divine transcendence, for God is above all human elevation, no matter how high it may reach; the following Sura begins with praise, listing the qualities that proclaim the Revelation, as incarnated by Muḥammad, who is “ceaselessly praised”: “Praise be to Him Who sent down the Book unto His servant ...” (Q 18:1). Although the Prophet is once referred to as “the servant of God” (Q 72–19), this is an annexation of the servant to the divine self (‘*abdu-hu*: His servant) and it marks his elect status. In relation to his people he is called “your companion”: “Your companion has neither strayed nor erred.” (Q 53:2), and when he is alone with God he is called “His servant”: “Then He revealed to His servant what He revealed.” (Q 53:10).

8.2 *The Markers of Elect Status*

Before even receiving the gift of Revelation, Muḥammad possessed a “magnificent character” (*khuluq ‘aẓīm*) that predisposed him to receive it as a gracious gift: “*Nūn*. By the pen and that which they inscribe, thou art not, by the blessing

of thy Lord, possessed. Truly thine shall be a reward unceasing. And truly thou art of an exalted character." (Q 68:1–4). By assimilating the divine word, the Prophet never stops magnifying his initial gift; this work shapes his character to the extent that his wife, ʿĀisha, witness of his private life, replies to those who ask her about the Prophet's character, "His character was the Qur'ān."⁶ The epithet "magnificent", a divine name and a qualifier of the Qur'ān, makes the Prophet the mirror of divine attributes.

The *al-Aḥzāb* (The Parties) Sura contains a few allusions to the specific excellence of the Prophet. Within his community he maintains a superlative closeness to believers: "The Prophet is closer to the believers than they are to themselves, and his wives are their mothers ..." (Q 33:6). Legally, this proximity makes him the heir of anyone who dies with none, and the guarantor of those who cannot pay their debts; his wives cannot remarry when he is gone, for their marriage to the Prophet has given them a sacred status. However, the verse is also referring to a proximity on a much more intimate, inner level.

In the Prophet the absence of a male heir, which for Arabs in particular was seen as a failing, is turned into a supreme privilege: "Muḥammad is not the father of any man among you; rather, he is the Messenger of God and the Seal of the prophets. And God is Knower of all things." (Q 33:40). This is a double election, because the seal (*khātam*) authenticates and concludes (*khātim*) prophecy.⁷ We will not examine here the many meanings of this expression; it suffices to say that it confers upon the Prophet and his community an important and unique place in the economy of prophecy and salvation.

The verse that establishes the prayer upon the Prophet confirms this election by inscribing it in ritual practice and the devotional relationship: "Truly God and His angels invoke blessings upon the Prophet. O you who believe! Invoke blessings upon him, and greetings of peace!" (Q 33:56). "Truly God and His angels invoke blessings ..." The verbal form situates this prayer, and its object the Prophet, in an intemporal present. By responding to this divine injunction, the believer himself enters into the presence of God, the angels and the Prophet in a ritual timeframe that is beyond mundane time.

The first verses of the *al-Faṭḥ* (Opening, Victory, Conquest) Sura proclaim the divine grace and support of God, as much in the context of His Revelation⁸ as in the spiritual and eschatological fields: "Truly We have granted thee a

6 Among the different versions of this tradition, see Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad*, VI, 54, 91, 111. For other versions, see Wensinck, *Concordance*, II, 74.

7 For more on the origins of this expression, and the developments that sprang from it, refer to Sangaré, *Le scellement de la prophétie*.

8 The Ḥudaybiyya episode and subsequent events.

manifest victory, that God may forgive thee thy sins that went before and that which are to come, and complete His Blessing upon thee, and guide thee upon a straight path; and that God may help thee with a mighty help." (Q 48:1–3).

These markers of his elect status are signified or announced to the Prophet, but it may also happen that he is called upon to proclaim them himself, in order to affirm a quality, or his function, or his place in the prophetic cycle, especially in the Abrahamic lineage: "Say, 'Truly my Lord has guided me unto a straight path, an upright religion, the creed of Abraham, a *ḥanīf*, and he was not of the idolaters.' Say, 'Truly my prayer and my sacrifice, my living and my dying are for God, Lord of the worlds. He has no Partner. This I am commanded, and I am the first of those who submit.'" (Q 6, 161–163) What primacy is this? Are we dealing with a mere expression of excellence?

8.3 *Beyond Election, the Prophet's Reality*

To avoid all possible confusion between the divine and the human, the Qur'ān emphasises the Prophet's humanity and that of the other prophets, while also evoking their elect status and the specific graces with which they are blessed. But what about their human nature, and the Prophet's in particular? Jesus calls himself the "servant of God" (Q 19:30), but, because of the nature of his conception, is also the Word and the Spirit of God (Q 4:171). In the Prophet's case, it is his luminous nature that is explicitly or allusively at stake. "Light" (*nūr*) has become one of his names. After having been designated Seal of the Prophets, he is called upon as follows: "O Prophet! Truly We have sent thee as a witness, as bearer of glad tidings, and as a Warner, as one who calls unto God by His Leave, and as a luminous lamp (*sirājan munīran*)." (Q 33:45–46).

This last qualifier brings together two types of light: self-generated solar light (symbolised by the lamp), and the reflected light of the moon, called "light" (Q 25:61; 71:16). Whether the lamp symbolises divine light or that of the Revelation (the Qur'ān is also called a light), the Prophet is identified with this light and also projects it upon others. This similarity between the Revelation and the luminous nature of the Prophet appears in another context, too: the call to the People of the Book to recognise his mission.

O People of the Book! Our Messenger has come unto you, making clear to you much of what you once hid of the Book, and pardoning much. There has come unto you, from God, a light and a clear Book, whereby God guides whosoever seeks His Contentment unto the way of peace, and brings them out of darkness into light, by His Leave, and guides them unto a straight path.

Q 5:15–16

The first verse brings together the Book and the light, while keeping them distinct from one another, because here the light clearly designates the Prophet. In the second verse, the light is associated with guidance – first that of God, and then that of the Prophet, since one could not say of God that he “brings them out of darkness into light, by His Leave”. The second guidance is the Prophet’s, and his illuminating function is clearly affirmed here.

What was to become the doctrine of “Muḥammadan Light”, along with its later developments, surfaces here in the Verse of Light, and in the commentaries of the first exegetes: “God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is a niche, wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as a shining star kindled from a blessed olive tree, neither of the East nor the West. Its oil would well-nigh shine forth, even if no fire has touched it. Light upon light. God guides unto His Light whomsoever He will, and God sets forth parables for mankind, and God is Knower of all things.” (Q 24:35).

According to Tabarī, Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, upon being questioned by Ibn ʿAbbās on the beginning of this verse, replied: “The symbol of his light is that of Muḥammad; he is like a niche ... the lamp is his heart, and the glass his chest ... “Its oil would well-nigh shine forth”: not much more would be required for Muḥammad to appear as a prophet, even if he had not yet spoken.”⁹

The explanation of this verse given by Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) is at once physical and symbolic. The symbol is that of the light of Muḥammad. The niche represents the loins of his father, ʿAbdallāh, where this light was deposited, and the glass is Muḥammad’s body. The blessed olive tree is Abraham, from which Muḥammad has been “lit”, for he is one of Abraham’s descendants. Like Abraham, he is neither oriental (praying to the east, like Christians), nor occidental like the Jews [sic], but oriented towards the Kaʿba. Muḥammad might well have prophesied before receiving the Revelation, “even if no fire would have touched him” if he hadn’t received the Revelation: this is a Prophet born among a prophet’s descendants.¹⁰

Although another Companion, Ubayy b. Kaʿb, interprets this symbol in a more general sense, as representing the heart of the believer, its identification with the luminous interior reality of the Prophet attests to the ancient nature of this concept. The interpretation of “even if no fire has touched it” as a reference to a predisposition to prophecy even before the Revelation supports what we have already revealed on the subject of the Prophet’s “magnificent character”.

The luminous reality of the Prophet, whether clearly expressed or deduced through interpretation, can be linked to another aspect of his person that is

9 Tabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, XVIII, 105–6.

10 *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, III, 199–200.

either suggested or deduced from context. The Prophet is not only announced in the Writings (Q 7:157), his coming is requested by Abraham: “Our Lord, raise up in their midst a messenger from among them, who will recite Thy signs to them, and will teach them the Book and Wisdom, and purify them. Truly Thou art the Mighty, the Wise” (Q 2:129). It is also predicted by Jesus: “And when Jesus son of Mary said, ‘O Children of Israel! Truly I am the Messenger of God unto you, confirming that which came before me in the Torah and bearing glad tidings of a Messenger to come after me whose name is Aḥmad.’” (Q 61:6). Prediction does not in itself imply a preceding existence, except, perhaps, in God’s science. But in one ḥadīth, the Prophet refers to the two above-cited verses in order to affirm his luminous reality as a principle:

I was God’s servant, and indeed the Seal of the prophets, when Adam was still lying in the clay.¹¹ I will tell you of the announcement of this: the invocation of my father, Abraham, the good news announced by Jesus to his people, and the vision of my mother, who saw a light shining from her and illuminating Syria, for the mothers of prophets have such visions.¹²

The Prophet is mentioned before his predecessors in more than one Qur’ānic passage, as in: “Verily, We have revealed unto thee, as We revealed unto Noah and the prophets after him, and as We revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the Tribes, and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon, and unto David We gave the Psalms; and messengers We have recounted unto thee before, and messengers We have not recounted unto thee; and unto Moses God spoke directly.” (Q 4:163–164). The place of the Prophet seems even more significant when it is located just after the above-cited verse on the proximity of believers: “And when We made with the prophets their covenant, and with thee, and with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus the son of Mary; We made with them a solemn covenant.” (Q 33:7). Regarding this verse, Ṭabarī reports the commentary by Qatāda: “It has been mentioned to us that the Prophet of God – grace and peace be upon him – said: ‘I am the first of the prophets to have been created and the last to have been sent.’”¹³ Mujaḥid said simply: “In the loins of Adam (*fī ṣaḥr Ādam*)”,¹⁴ which seems

11 This sentence’s two propositions are simple noun phrases, which accentuates their intemporal character.

12 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, IV, 127, after (according to) al-ʿIrḩād b. Sāriya. Another version of the ḥadīth follows, in which the Prophet’s mother sees this light as she is in labour.

13 Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, XXI, 79. Qatāda (d. around 77/735) was a disciple of Ḥasan al-Baṣṣī and Ibn Sīrīn in Baṣra.

14 *Ibid.* Mujaḥid, disciple of Ibn ʿAbbās in Mecca, died during the early years of the second century of the hijra (between 100 and 104/718).

to allude to the primordial pact (Q 7: 172). Muqātil comments along the same lines: "The first in the pact, and the last in the sending," and continues with an explicit mention of this pact.¹⁵ There is also a similar interpretation of these verses of the *al-Shu'arā'* (The Poets) Sura: "And trust in the Mighty, the Merciful, Who sees thee when thou standest, and thy movement within those who prostrate." (Q 26:217–220). The translation follows an interpretation attributed to Ibn 'Abbās: "... that is to say within the loins of thy fathers: Adam, Noah and Abraham, until God brought him out as a prophet."¹⁶

The first generations of Muslims thus drew on the Qur'ān to ask themselves about the nature and reality of the Prophet. Is not the Prophet called "true", or "truth" (*ḥaqq*), a polysemic term sometimes used to refer to God, but more often indicating the Revelation, as in this verse: "How shall God guide a people who have disbelieved, having borne witness that the Messenger is truth, and the clear proofs having come to them? And God guides no wrongdoing people." (Q 3:86).

In more than one verse the pronouns can apply grammatically to either God or the Prophet. This voluntary ambiguity may have several meanings, according to context. It can be a way of saying that what is vested in the Prophet is none other than God's authority: "O you who believe! Obey God and His Messenger, and turn not away from him, even as you hear. And be not like those who say, 'We hear', though they hear not." (Q 8:20–21). To turn away from the Prophet is to turn away from God; to hear his words as those of an ordinary man is to fail to understand that God's will is expressed through him.

A little further on we find: "O you who believe! Respond to God and the Messenger when he calls you unto that which will give you life. And know that God comes between a man and his heart, and that unto Him shall you be gathered." (Q 8:24). Responding to the Prophet's call as one that comes from God will give new life to one's heart. To be separated from one's heart brings about a loss of awareness of God and of the afterlife, where ultimate human destiny is decided. The presence of the Prophet revives the heart. He is the vector of divine mercy and light: "O you who believe! Reverence God and believe in His Messenger; He will give you a twofold portion of His Mercy, make a light for you by which you may walk, and forgive you – and God is Forgiving, Merciful." (Q 57:28).

8.4 *The Locus of Divine Presence*

In another case of grammatical ambiguity, this discourse is addressed first to the Prophet, and then to believers. When the solemn pact was made at

¹⁵ Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, III 475.

¹⁶ Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi'*, XIII 144.

Ḥudaybiyya, the support and veneration due to the Prophet became adoration of God. The description of the sealing of the pact, during which the Prophet, holding his hand uppermost, takes the hand of the person who is engaging him, confirms the theophanic dimension of this moment:

Truly those who pledge allegiance unto thee pledge allegiance only unto God. The Hand of God is over their hands. And whosoever reneges, reneges only to his detriment. And whosoever fulfils what he has pledged unto God, He will grant him a great reward.

Q 48:10

The inward effect of this pact is described: “God was content with the believers when they pledged allegiance unto thee beneath the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and sent down Inner Peace (*sakīna*) upon them and rewarded them with a victory nigh and abundant spoils ...” (Q 48:18–19). Through the divine presence that is then vested in him, the Prophet communicates a beatific state to his adepts, along with divine satisfaction and a victory that recalls the one announced to the Prophet at the beginning of the Sura, which, as we have seen, may have an interior or an exterior meaning. The same is true of this promise to believers.

During the battle of Badr, the Prophet threw a handful of gravel towards his enemies; this brought about their defeat. In the Qurʾān, it is the intervention of God, rather than the thaumaturgical nature of the gesture, that is emphasised:

You did not slay them, but God slew them, and thou threwest not when thou threwest, but God threw, that He might try the believers with a beautiful trial from Him. Truly God is Hearing, Knowing.

Q 8:17

The believers fought; the Prophet made a symbolic gesture that could properly be qualified as theurgical. “When thou threwest” attributes the gesture to the Prophet; “but God threw” reveals that his being was erased, and he became the locus of a divine act. This is the interpretation of this verse made by spiritual masters.

9 The Prophet and the Revelation

Everything about the Prophet that seems to go beyond the ordinary human condition is due to his status and function as God's envoy. On one occasion

he is called: "A Messenger from God (*rasūlun min Allāh*) reciting scriptures purified wherein are books upright." (98, 2–3) How to understand this phrase, *rasūlun min Allāh*? Elsewhere, the Prophet is said to come "from you" or "from yourselves"; this signifies his fully human nature and exact equivalence to those to whom he has been sent. Does the exceptional nature of this expression have to do with the recitation of the Revelation in its superior phase?¹⁷ Only God and his angels could bear witness to such a recitation: "But God Himself bears witness to what He has sent down unto thee – He sent it down with His Knowledge – and the angels bear witness. And God suffices as a witness." (Q 4:166).

9.1 *The Reception of the Word*

Several verses evoke the trying nature of the Revelation, as though the Prophet's inner being was obliged to get used to receiving "a weighty word" (Q 73:5) which is hard for him. "Tā-Hā We did not send down the Qur'ān unto thee that thou shouldst be distressed." (Q 20:2). It is because the Qur'ān is a heavy Word that its memorisation and recitation are said to have been facilitated by God (Q 54:17, 22, 32, 40; 73:20). The Prophet's tongue, in the sense of the organ and of the language, was the instrument of this facilitation: "We have only made this easy upon thy tongue that thou mayest give glad tidings unto the reverent thereby, and that thereby thou mayest warn a contentious people." (Q 19:97).

9.2 *Between the Qur'ān and the Prophet*

God has vested in both the Prophet and the Qur'ān the same function, one of announcement and of warning. This is expressed in these verses underlining the close linguistic relationship between the Qur'ān and the Prophet: "A Book whose signs have been expounded as an Arabic Qur'ān for a people who know, as a bringer of glad tidings, and as a Warner. But most of them have turned away, such that they hear not." (Q 41:3–4). Both are reminders (*dhikr*), and the ambiguity of the pronouns in the following verses suggests a certain shared identity between the messenger and the message:

And We have not taught him poetry; nor would it benefit him. It [or "he"] is but a reminder and a clear Qur'ān, to warn Whomsoever is Alive, and so that the Word may come for the disbelievers.

Q 36:69–70

17 Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi'*, xx, 142–3.

God has certainly sent down unto you a reminder: a Messenger reciting unto you the clear signs of God to bring those who believe and perform righteous deeds out of darkness into light.

Q 65:10–11

The Qurʾān and the Prophet both bring Truth (*ḥaqq*), and both are called by that name. The ambiguity is all the more significant here because it occurs in one of only four verses where the name of Muḥammad is used:

And those who believe and perform righteous deeds, and believe in what has been sent down unto Muḥammad – and it/he is the truth from their Lord – he has absolved them of their evil deeds and set their state aright.

Q 47:2

9.3 *The One Who is Intimate with God*

While the Qurʾān is presented as the word of God, spoken to his Prophet, this prophet does not, like some, find himself in a dialogue with God. However, the word is addressed to him most directly in what is traditionally accepted as the first revelation: “Recite in the name of thy Lord!” (Q 96:1). The way he is addressed and exhorted to complete his mission: “O thou who art covered!” (Q 74:1), or to rise and pray at night: “O thou enwrapped!” (Q 73:1), is understood as divine familiarity towards him.¹⁸ In the context of the difficult beginnings of his predication, the *al-duḥā* (Morning Brightness) Sura appears as consoling words addressed to a sorely tried friend whom one attempts to comfort:

By the morning brightness, and by the night when still, thy Lord has not forsaken thee; nor does He despise [thee]. And the hereafter shall be better for thee than this life. And surely thy Lord shall give unto thee, and thou shall be content. Did He not find thee an orphan and shelter, find thee astray and guide, and find thee in need and enrich? So as for the orphan, maltreat not. And for the one who requests, repel not. And as for the blessing of the Lord, proclaim!

Q 93:1–11

In the Meccan Suras, we have already noted the numerous occurrences of the imperative “be patient!”, often used in a conclusion and followed by a call to give oneself over to adoration. The interrogative “and what has made thee aware of what ... is?”, used on the subject of the realities of the next world, and

¹⁸ Qurtubī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, XIX, 33.

a single time to refer to a spiritual event, the so-called Night of Destiny (*laylat al-qadr*, Q 97:3), can be read as a reminder of an experience whose secret is shared by the locutor and the interlocutor: “Hast thou seen...?” or “Hast thou not seen...?” In any case these interpellations give the text a familiar and personal tone, like the questions that introduce accounts of the Prophet:¹⁹ “Hast thou heard tell of...?” While the *ḥadīth* and the *sīra* often cite the role of Gabriel in the transmission of the Revelation, this is mentioned infrequently in the Qur’ān, which gives the opposite impression – that the Prophet immediately retransmits the divine Word as soon as he receives the order, “Say!” This imperative gives one an impression of proximity between the Envoy and his Lord. This oath on the Prophet’s life, inserted into the story of Lot, is even more surprising: “By thy life, they wandered confused in their drunkenness.” (Q 15:72). To swear by the life of the Prophet implies that the story of Sodom is to some extent a warning for his tribe, the Qurayshites. Commentators underline the fact that the Prophet is the only human being in whose name the Almighty has sworn.²⁰ In the Medinese Suras, he is mostly referred to by his function as Prophet (*yā ayyuhā l-nabī*), in contexts that are often linked to combat or to his conjugal life, rather than to his function as Messenger (*yā ayyuhā l-rasūl*). Such solemn vocative forms as the call to obey the Prophet consecrate him in his functions as legislator and leader of the community. At the same time and in the same Suras, especially *al-Aḥzāb*, the Prophet’s soul is stripped bare, and in the reproachful tone of the verse on the delicate question of Zaynab’s repudiation by Zayd, and her subsequent remarriage to the Prophet, one can also see the intimate bond that unites him and his Lord:

When thou saidst unto him whom God has blessed and whom thou hast blessed, “Retain your wife for yourself and reverence God” thou wast hiding in thyself that which God was to disclose; and thou didst fear from people, though God has more right to be feared by thee ...

Q 33:37

In the *al-Taḥrīm* Sura (The Forbidding, 66) the Prophet is reproached for being too kind to his wives, and then receives the grandiose support of God, Gabriel, the believers, and all the angels. From this emerges an image of a person whose private life²¹ is part of a universal and sacred story. Contradictory models of

¹⁹ And, once, an eschatological tone, Q 88:1.

²⁰ Tabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, XIV, 30.

²¹ For more on the conjugal events that tradition relates to the revelation of this Sura, see Gril, “Le Prophète en famille” 41–3.

women, unworthy (the wives of Noah and of Lot) and perfect (Pharaoh's wife, Mary), appear at the end of the Sura, presented for all of humanity as paradigms of either impiety or faith.

9.4 *Revelation and Sacred Story*

By referring to such intimate aspects of the Prophet's life as his emotions and his relationships with his wives, the Qur'ān presents a man whose entire self is identified with the Revelation. When, throughout the Suras, it alludes to different episodes in his life, it is putting in place the first reference points of a sacred history that will be completed by the ḥadīth, amplified and coordinated by the *sīra*, and repeated in the big universal histories of Tabarī and those who followed him. These references are just evoking events allusively, in ways that would often be difficult to grasp without exegesis. To examine them all would take too much space, although in the context of this study it would have been interesting to have done so, in order to observe how these diverse elements contribute successive details that cast light on aspects of the Prophetic figure.

Whereas the *Sīra* gives details of the important episodes and military campaigns of the Medinese period, the Qur'ān uses these events to speak of significant moments in the relationship between God and His Prophet. The account of the hijra is a single verse reminding believers of the divine aid associated with the Prophet's function. References to the Prophet taking refuge in the cavern show him with full confidence in the Lord and reassuring his Companion, thanks to the divine presence (*sakīna*) and the angels that have descended upon him, and to the promise that God's Word will triumph (Q 9:40). Here, as elsewhere, one discovers the image of a being whose will and destiny invariably follow God's design.

Whether it is referring to major events or apparently minor facts, by touching on these specific details the Qur'ān actualises the presence of the Prophet, inscribing recollection of him alongside that of the other prophets whose sacred history he founds anew and brings to a perfect end.

10 The Prophet and the Prophets

To what extent does the Qur'ān's discourse on the other prophets cast light on the way in which it, and Muslims, picture the Prophet? We know how important accounts of the prophets are in the Qur'ān, especially in the Meccan Suras. They are often related to the Prophet as examples, encouragements or consolations, as reminders of the trials that confronted his predecessors and of the promise of divine salvation. Is the Prophet just one among many prophets, or do these numerous prophets meld together into a single unique model that

the Prophet represents *par excellence*, as could be understood from the insistent repetitions in certain accounts? Couldn't we also postulate that the relationships (often more implicit than explicit) between what is said of some of the prophets and what is said of the Prophet himself contribute to an enriched image of him without, for all that, erasing the specific characteristics of his predecessors as put forward in the Qur'ān? Let us above all remember what the Qur'ānic prophets teach us about the Prophet.

10.1 *The Community of Prophets*

The Qur'ān demands faith from all messengers and prophets. On the one hand it announces: "We make no distinction among any of them." (cf. Q 2:136), and on the other: "Those are the messengers. We have favoured some above others" (Q 2:253). To be a prophet is to belong to the same single class in the hierarchy of beings, but this does not exclude the possibility of specific gifts of grace. On the subject of the battle of Uḥud, during which the Prophet's life was endangered, the Qur'ān recalls that he, like all prophets, is mortal: "Muḥammad is naught but a Messenger; messengers have passed before him. So if he dies or is slain, will you turn back on your heels?" (Q 3:144). Faced with those who deny him, the Prophet owes it to himself simply to remember that he is but one envoy in the lineage of those who preceded him, and no more: "Say, 'I am not an innovation among the messengers (*bid'an min al-rusul*), and I know not what will be done with me or with you. I only follow that which has been revealed unto me, and I am naught but a clear Warner'" (Q 46:9).

Unlike other people, whom God did not want to see constituting a single community,²² God's envoys belong to a unique community united by one mission and a common election (cf. Q 23:51–52). The Prophet starts with himself when he proclaims his membership of this prophetic community, on whose principles his own community is founded:

Say, "We believe in God and what has been sent down upon us, and in what was sent down upon Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes (*al-asbāt*), and in what Moses, Jesus, and the prophets were given from their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them, and unto Him we submit (*wa nahnu lahu muslimūn*)."²³ Whosoever seeks a religion other than submission (*al-islām*), it shall not be accepted of him, and in the Hereafter he shall be among the losers.

Q 3:84–85

22 Q 5:48; 11:118; 16:93; 42:8; 43:33. On the division of what had originally been a single human community, Q 2:213; 10:19.

In this community of those whom God has chosen to receive his Word, the last of the prophets occupies the first place in an order that has already been seen in the account of the pact between God and the Prophets (cf. Q 33:7), although there it is in the context of a comparison. In the *al-Nisā'* (Women) Sura the list of prophets begins with Noah and goes on at length to include even all those of whom the Qur'ān doesn't explicitly speak: "Verily We have revealed unto thee, as We revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the Tribes, and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon, and unto David We gave the Psalms, and messengers We have recounted unto thee before, and messengers We have not recounted unto thee; and unto Moses God spoke directly." (Q 4:163–164). Beyond these enumerations of prophets in the Qur'ān there are those used to punish the people when they had rebelled against God and the Messenger; here the Meccan Suras frequently rehearse their history: Noah; Hūd, prophet of 'Ād; Šāliḥ, prophet of Thamūd; Lot, and Shu'ayb, prophet of Madyan. The confrontation between Pharaoh and Moses is sometimes included along with these five. It appears evident that these accounts are used in direct support of the Prophet, who was faced with Qurashī opposition. The advent of the Arab Prophet inserts the prophets of the Arabian Peninsula into universal sacred history.

10.2 *A Common Destiny*

Should we read these frequent lists of prophets as an account of the assimilation of these biblical and Arab figures with the Prophet himself, or see the earlier prophets rather as auxiliaries to his prophecy, or as phases in the completion of the prophetic cycle? What is certain is that the Qur'ān multiplies the similarities between the Prophet and the other prophets in the accomplishment of their missions. The parallel is very clearly highlighted in the same Sura: "Is aught incumbent upon the Messenger save the clear proclamation?" (Q 16:35), and, on the subject of the Prophet: "Then if they turn away – only the clear proclamation is incumbent upon thee" (Q 16:82). The same formulations are often employed about the five prophets cited above, in order to accentuate the archetypal and repetitive nature of their histories. For example, they utter the same affirmation in defence of the disinterested nature of their missions: "And I ask not of any of you any reward for it; my reward lies only with the Lord of the worlds." (Q 26, 109, 127, 145, 164, 180). For his part, the Prophet receives an order to follow the model of his predecessors, especially that of their disinterest: "They are those whom God has guided, so follow their guidance. Say, 'I ask not of you any reward for it. It is naught but a reminder for the worlds.'" (Q 6:90).

All of the prophets undergo the same trials at the hands of their opponents, who accuse them of lying. If we set to one side the poetry that is characteristic of the Prophet's milieu, elsewhere we find the same attacks, though they are less systematic (except in the case of accusation that Moses, too, is a magician). All of them have been victims of their peoples' derision: "Messengers have surely been mocked before thee. Then those who scoffed at them were beset by that which they used to mock." (Q 6:10).

If opposition to the prophets is expressed among their adversaries in the same ways, believers, too, adhere to prophetic messages in ways that resemble each other. Their faith must make them follow the messengers without fail (*ittaba'ā*). Unquestionably, the Qur'ān aims to unify a certain conception of prophecy, involving critics and trials and the rapid teaching of its content to the Prophet: "And We sent no Messenger before thee, save that We revealed unto him, 'Verily, there is no god but I; so worship Me!'" (Q 21:25). On the one hand, the Qur'ān shapes earlier prophecies to its own mould, and on the other it calls on the Prophet to model himself on his predecessors, especially as concerns a fundamental and constantly recalled virtue: "So be patient, as the resolute among the messengers were patient." (Q 46:35). The relationship between the Prophet and the other prophets creates a mirror effect, at least as regards their functions in this world – for in the next world, as we have seen, the Prophet is distinguished from his peers by his function as a witness.

10.3 *Muḥammad in the Mirror of the Prophets*

The fact that a model (of prophecy repeating itself through history and realising itself in the Prophet's mission) was set up is not enough to explain the growth and development of prophetic accounts during the Meccan period, and the relative reduction in their numbers during the Medinese period, when new challenges appeared and new responses thus became necessary. The repetition and pregnant nature of these accounts are the results of the need for them to pass from one person's memory to another's. Often the Suras that are made up in part of the history of one or several other prophets begin and end with an address to the Prophet, as in the case of the *Yūsuf* (Joseph) Sura. In the *ṬāHā* Sura, devoted mostly to Moses, the account ends with this address to the Prophet: "Thus do We narrate unto thee some of the accounts of those who have come before. And We have given thee a Reminder from Our Presence. Whosoever turns away from it, verily he shall bear it as a burden on the Day of Resurrection." (Q 20:99–100).

The verb translated as "to narrate", *qaṣṣa*, also has the concrete meaning of cutting or of cutting again, and of following someone's footsteps (cf. Q 18:64).

From this verb the term *qaṣaṣ*, account/narration, is derived; this is also the name of a Sura whose first section is devoted to the story of Moses (Q 28:25). Also derived from *qaṣṣa* is *qiṣṣa*, pl. *qiṣaṣ*, meaning story or history, especially that of a prophet. In the Qur'ān, *Anbā'*, the plural of *naba'* – the fact of announcing – designates the announcement of events from the past as well as those that belong to the future (Q 78:2). Thus the account aims to recall, to restore a memory that is conserved by those whom the Qur'ān calls the "People of Memory" (*ahl al-dhikr*); these are generally identified with the People of the Book (Q 16:43 and 21:7), but they are received by the Prophet, who is underlining the direct nature of the reception, with the words: "on Our behalf" (*min ladun-nā*). In the second verse of this Sura, this reminder and the memories it evokes are the path of salvation, and to refuse it leads to the opposite path. Thus the Prophet receives a memory of the past, one that primarily concerns him as a prophet. Every account first finds its echo in the Prophet, before becoming the concern his entire community, to whom he transmits it. Once the message is passed on, the fate of each person, and of humanity, hinges upon it.

Adopting this perspective on the foundation of memories to explore all of the Qur'ān's histories of prophets is beyond the scope of the present chapter. The few examples that follow may reveal one or other of the bonds constructed, explicitly or not, between a prophet and the Prophet, thus casting light on one of the facets of his reality. But this does not imply some sort of absorption of all previous prophetic models, erasing their individual traits. Instead, one should understand these histories as an invitation to follow the path of "those who were before thee", addressed to the Prophet and to all believers.

The command made to the Prophet to ask forgiveness for his sins (Q 4:106; 40:55; 47:19) puts him in a similar situation to that in which his ancestor Adam, the first sinner, found himself. In another verse, Noah is reproached by his people because he is followed only by the humble (Q. 11:27), which recalls the beginning of the *ʿAbasa* (He Frowned) Sura, mentioned above (Q 10:1–10), or else the order to the Prophet to be patient in the fellowship of his poor companions rather than turning to the conceited rich in the hope of winning them over to Islam (Q 18, 28). In the Qur'ān, Abraham is represented as the one who freed himself and those close to him from all forms of idolatry with no concession. He and the Prophet are both called a "fine model" (*uswa ḥasana*) "... for those who hope for God and the Last Day" (Q 33:21). The repetition of this expression aims to demonstrate the extent to which the Prophet is part of the Abrahamic heritage, especially in the restoration of the pure cult of the sole God, and the tradition of the *ḥanīf*. Abraham himself also presages the hijra when he says: "Truly I am fleeing unto my Lord" (Q29:26). Facing the Qurayshites in Mecca, Abraham incarnates the restoration of a forgotten tradition; facing the People

of the Book in Medina he justifies the foundation of something new, based on new principles – something that the Prophet will claim for himself: “Abraham was neither Jew nor Christian, but rather was a *ḥanīf*, a submitter, and he was not one of the idolaters” (Q 3:67–68). We could also cite the passage from the *al-Baqara* (The Cow) Sura, in which the purification of the House of God, the foundation of the sacred territory, the building of the Ka‘ba, and the institution of the pilgrimage with the participation of Ishmael, are all Abrahamic traditions (Q 2:124–141). In this long extract, which precedes and justifies the reorientation of ritual towards the sacred Temple, Abraham is not confused with the Prophet, but comforts him in his [the Prophet’s] position as founder and renewer of a tradition, in opposition to Jews and Christians, from whom he distances himself, while maintaining their integration within a certain vision of monotheism. From this point of view, Abraham plays an essential role in the image that the Qur’ān presents of the Prophet. Equally fundamental in a different way is the figure of Moses, appearing at the two critical moments of his mission: facing Pharaoh and with the Children of Israel. The relationship between Moses and Muḥammad needs to be developed in detail and over a long period, for Moses is by far the most frequently cited person in the Qur’ān, followed by Pharaoh. The similarities between oppression by the Qurayshites and that exercised by Pharaoh is clearly suggested in a single Meccan Sura. First it is said of the people of the Prophet: “And they were about to incite thee from the land, in order to expel thee therefrom, whereupon they would not have tarried after thee.” (Q 17:76), and then, about the Children of Israel faced with Pharaoh: “And he desired to incite them from the land; so We drowned him and those with him all together” (Q 17:103). The difficulties that Moses had with his own People act as a warning to believers to avoid behaving in the same way towards the Prophet; for example, by asking him endless questions: “Or do you wish to question your messenger as Moses was questioned aforetime? Whosoever exchanges belief for disbelief has gone astray from the right way.” (Q 2:108). These examples make Moses a model and precursor for the Prophet, demonstrating resistance to oppression and showing how difficult the conduct of a community can be.

In this way, a prophet’s history can present a model of actions to avoid imitating; it still communicates to the Prophet an experience of the prophetic mission that to a certain extent reflects his own experience. The repeated reminders to be patient and endure the denial and opposition of his own people relate to his task and mission among all peoples. From this point of view, the story of Jonas appears at the same time as a counter-model and a sort of illustration of God’s divine solicitude for, and election of, those he chooses to send to humankind:

So be patient with thy Lord's Judgment and be not like the companion of the fish, who cried out while choking with anguish. Had he not had the blessing from his Lord he would surely have been cast upon the barren shore still blameworthy. But his Lord chose him and made him among the righteous.

Q 68:48–50

The Jesus of the *Maryam* Sura, written during the Meccan period, presents himself from birth as the precursor of the Prophet: "He said, 'Truly I am the servant of God. He has given me the Book and made me a prophet. He has blessed me wheresoever I may be, and has enjoined upon me prayer and almsgiving so long as I live.'" (Q 19:30–31). It is also announced that he represents mercy (Q 19:21), while the Medinese Suras emphasise the specificity of the Speech and Word of God (Q 3:45; 4:171). Seen in this light, only a sort of identification of the Prophet's reality with the Qur'ān itself, or with the Spirit – in that it proceeds from God's order – could allow the Qur'ānic Jesus to appear as the hidden face of the Prophet. However, the parallel between the Disciples of Jesus and the Prophet's companions is clearly affirmed:

O you who believe! Be helpers of God, just as Jesus son of Mary said to the apostles, 'Who are my helpers unto God?' The apostles replied, 'We are thy helpers unto God (anṣār Allāh)'.

Q 61:14

11 The Prophet and His Community

As a member and witness of the community of prophets, Muḥammad appears in the Qur'ān surrounded by this, his own community. As we have seen regarding the other prophets, here we can also discover the ways in which the people around the Prophet participate in and prolong his presence in the world.

11.1 "Those Who Are with Thee"

Among the Prophet's companions, only Zayd is named: his freed slave and beloved adopted son, whose filiation was abrogated – this meant that the remarriage of Zayd's first wife to the Prophet became legal (Q 33:4–5 and 37). Still in the *al-Aḥzāb* Sura, after the mention of the Prophet's wives, the purification of the people of the Prophet's house (*ahl al-bayt*) is announced (Q 33:33). The angels who announced to Abraham's wife that their posterity would be blessed used the same term (Q 11: 73). The Prophet's family circle is thus sacralised by the Revelation and by his Abrahamic antecedents. Earlier, in

a Meccan Sura, the Prophet feels entitled to expect that his community should love his relations: "Say, 'I ask not of you any reward for it, save affection among kinsfolk.'" (Q 42:23).²³ However, none of those who were close to the Prophet are, in the Qur'ān, described as sharing greater intimacy with him and with God than his companion during the hijra, Abū Bakr: "If you help him not, yet God has already helped him. Remember when those who disbelieve expelled him, the second of two. Yea, the two were in the cave, when he said to his companion, 'Grieve not; truly God is with us.' Then God sent down His Presence (*sakīna*) upon him, and supported him with hosts you see not. And He made the word of those who disbelieve to be the lowliest, and the Word of God is the highest. And God is Mighty, Wise." (Q 9:40). This verse places the Prophet at the central point in an axis that elevates those who are high and sends down those who are low, and God's salvation flows along this axis. In these circumstances the proximity of the Prophet's second-in-command, Abū Bakr, makes him the first witness. The hijra, or journey from Mecca to Medina, is in preparation for combat along God's path, "so that the word of God might be the most high", as defined by the Prophet.²⁴ During this combat the first community is forged, both witnessing and acting as a vector for divine salvation: "He it is Who supports thee with His Help, and with the believers" (Q 8:62). These are the people who are prepared to follow the Prophet whatever the circumstances, on whom he can count absolutely: "O Prophet! God suffices for thee and those believers who follow thee". (Q 8:64). The Prophet has followed the Revelation and the example of earlier prophets; his Companions, in their turn, have followed him, and they are called the "Followers" (*al-tābi'ūn*) and then the "Followers of the Followers". This expression echoes a Prophetic tradition relating to the excellence of the first three generations, due to the fact that they followed, which guarantees their conformity and the truth of their transmission.

In this context, the Companions are described in the same way and compared – to their advantage – with the lukewarm rear-guard: "But the Messenger and those who believe with him strive with their wealth and with their selves. And it is they who shall have good things, and it is they who shall prosper." (Q 9:88). To believe with the Prophet is to be part of a community whose final realisation will take place in the next world.

Those who seek to follow the Prophet's spiritual path towards his Lord are also mentioned, specifically as regards the prayer of vigil, which indicates

23 Ibn 'Abbās understands this relationship as that which ties the Prophet to different Qurayshi clans. Later, 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn (Zayn al-'ābidīn) identifies the relationship with the *Ahl al-bayt*; Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, xxv, 15–17.

24 Bukhārī, *Saḥīḥ*, 'ilm 45 n° 123, *jihād* 15 n° 2810.

a deep spiritual engagement: “Truly thy Lord knoweth that thou dost stand vigil well-nigh two-thirds of the night, or a half of it, or a third of it, as do a group of those who are with thee ...” (Q 73:20). The final verse of the *al-Faṭḥ* (The Opening, or Victory) Sura describes those who, following the Prophet’s example, have fully embodied the models of Moses and Christ, as included in the Muḥammadan mission. In this respect, it is not only the privileged Companions who can be with the Prophet, since their models precede them and are universal:

Muḥammad is the Messenger of God. Those who are with him are harsh against the disbelievers, merciful to one another. You see them bowing, prostrating, seeking bounty from God and contentment; the mark upon their faces is from the effect of prostration. That is their likeness in the Torah. And their likeness in the Gospel is a sapling that puts forth its shoot and strengthens it, such that it grows stout and rises firmly upon its stalk, impressing the sowers, that through them He may enrage the disbelievers. God has promised forgiveness and a great reward to those among them who believe and perform righteous deeds.

Q 48:29

This path to holiness demands a rectitude resembling that of the Prophet and his close Companions in Mecca:

So be steadfast, as thou hast been commanded and [as are] those who turn in repentance along with you ...

Q 11:112

11.2 *Being with God and the Envoy*

Being with the Prophet; believing with him; returning to God with him: these are all so many ways of being with God. The requisite combat and sacrifice demand a total engagement. Those who, for various reasons, find themselves incapable of undertaking this are exempted “If they are sincere toward God and his Messenger” (Q 9:91), for this requires an act of faith, of fidelity to an inner promise or deposit that the believer must protect scrupulously in order not to betray it, as the general meaning of this verse makes clear: “O you who believe! Betray not God and the Messenger, and betray not your trusts knowingly”. (Q 8:27).²⁵ In the context of the Medinese foundation, the slightest

25 For more on the various interpretations of this verse, see Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, IX, 145–7 and Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’*, VII, 394–5.

weakness or preference for this life over the next could be an act of betrayal both of self and of community, as, for example, occurred with the scattering of the Muslims at the battle of Uhud: "When you were climbing, casting a glance to no one, while the Messenger was calling you from your rear" (Q 3:153). In this difficult context, the believers found themselves called upon to choose: "Say, 'If your fathers, your children, your brothers, your spouses, your tribe, the wealth you have acquired, the commerce whose stagnation you fear, and dwellings you find pleasing, are more beloved to you than God, and His Messenger, and striving in His way, then wait till God comes with His command'" (Q 9:24).

From this perspective, combat is merely a trial of the sincerity of the engagement that ties each believer to God and to he whose love is inseparable from God's. The Ḥudaybiyya episode, recounted in the *al-Fath* Sura, subjected the Companions to another test – this time obliging them, despite themselves, to refrain from battle. Those who are totally engaged with the Prophet obtain God's satisfaction, and inner peace (*sakīna*) descends upon them (cf. 48, 18). Then this inner peace, which was divine presence and power in the Arch of Alliance, descended anew on the Prophet and the believers (Q 48:26), and refreshed them during the battle of Ḥunayn, when the Muslims had previously vacillated for a moment (Q 9:26).

Thus the Qur'ān presents the formation of the Muslim community as the descent of divine support upon the Prophet and the Companions at the intense and privileged moments that establish an exemplary history. These Companions will constitute the foundation and the model for a spiritual elite whose bonds of love and inner engagement attach them to the Prophet. Whereas Jesus is followed by disciples who take a path of monasticism, "to seek God's Contentment" (Q 57:27), and their successors cannot themselves follow the same path, Muslim believers are called to seek this divine gift through faith in their Prophet (Q 57:28).

11.3 "And Know That the Messenger of God Is among You ..."

Although the Prophet consolidated the earliest foundation of Islam alongside a privileged core of totally engaged followers, his community, as we have seen, extends in principle, and in the next world, to all of humanity. As God's envoy he is situated between He who sent him and those to whom he is sent. As a human being, he is also himself a member of this community: "God certainly favoured the believers when He sent them a Messenger from among themselves ..." (Q 3:164). The insistence in several verses on the fact that the Prophet is one of them ("from yourselves or from your own souls" in Q 9:128) and is sent among them, allows one to believe that his presence in the heart of his community is not necessarily limited to the duration of his earthly life. When

the believer hears this: “And know that the Messenger of God is among you ...” (Q 49:7), how will he react? The Qur’ān also addresses believers thus: “How can you disbelieve, while God’s signs are recited unto you and His Messenger is among you?” (Q 3:101). It is likely that some members of the community are not open to perceiving the Prophet’s presence inside themselves. Yet the prayer “upon” the Prophet, a prolonging of an act of grace by God and the angels, aims to permanently reproduce this act, and to hail him as one would a living being, with no temporal limits: “Truly God and His angels invoke blessings upon the Prophet. O you who believe! Invoke blessing upon him, and greetings of peace!” (Q 33:56). The ritualisation of this practice, especially in the last phase of the ritual prayer, but also in many other circumstances, cannot but be understood as a desire to interiorise the presence of the Prophet.

Existing between God and his own community, by his presence the Prophet actualises the effects of the divine Attributes, particularly mercy. As he is the ideal mediator, even his mere presence brings one closer to God: “When My servants ask thee about Me, truly I am near. I answer the call of the caller when he calls Me. So let them respond to Me and believe in Me, that they may be led aright”. (Q 2:186).

United as they were by shared battles and trials, the Medina community was also brought together by the institution of rites, as is expressed after the order is given to the Prophet to exact obligatory and purifying alms. God’s gaze upon the believers who perform rites or good works for Him also passes through the Prophet’s eyes and those of the community: “Say, ‘Perform your deeds. God will see your deeds, as will the Messenger and the believers ...’” (Q 9:105). God is essentially the only Protector (*walī*) of believers, but once this protection (*walāya*) returns to God it is diffused via the Prophet over all the community of believers, and ensures its cohesion: “Your protector is only God, and His Messenger, and those who believe, who perform the prayer and give alms while bowing down. And whosoever takes as his protector God, and His Messenger, and those who believe – the party of God, they are the victorious ones!” (Q 5:55–56).

12 Conclusion

We have attempted, in this brief overview, to discern the person of the Prophet by examining and re-ordering material that is dispersed throughout the text of the Qur’ān, but still it escapes us. His person escapes us in his interiority, even if, for the sake of exemplarity, some of his soul’s movements are revealed to us; his exteriority is just as remote from us. We learn nothing of his physical

appearance, his style of clothing, those who surround him (friends or enemies, family and wives), apart from a few barely sketched glimpses. He is described to us mostly through a network of relationships that reflect back upon his person: his relationships with his Lord, his Companions, his community, mankind, and the community of prophets. Our investigation has been constrained by our initial choice to restrict ourselves to Qur'ānic verses in which the Prophet is mentioned or addressed. We have strayed from these constraints only where similarities and comparisons with other prophets seemed likely to cast light on the figure of the Prophet himself. By passing from the explicit to the implicit we could have extended and deepened our research. Our examination of the Prophet's relationship with his community, for example, could have considered such verses as: "You are the best community brought forth unto mankind, enjoining right, forbidding wrong, and believing in God ..." (Q 3:110), and thus established an underlying link with the excellence of the Prophet, which is here also suggested without being made explicit. Doubtless it was preferable to avoid setting out in this way, in order to preserve the clear and explicit (*bayān*) nature of the Qur'ān's text. Here and there we have used *ḥadīth* to indicate how a meaning that was virtually present was to be developed by the *sunna*. The Qur'ān remains silent about many of the characteristics and actions of the Prophet that have been transmitted by tradition and celebrated by pious Muslims, such as the miracles attributed to him by the *sīra*, which the Qur'ān refuses to recognise as signs of his mission. One would be obliged to delve to an equal extent into the *ḥadīth* and the *sīra* to grasp how believers perceive and experience the reality of the Prophet. But how can one define the limits of the corpus in question? Such research should permit one to compare two types of texts whose style and perspective are different, although they resonate with each other. Quite apart from any questions of faith, the Qur'ān's discourse presents the Prophet in a manner that is familiar but distant, as if seen from above – whereas the *sunna* offers a more horizontal discourse, that of a human being speaking to other human beings, even when the Prophet evokes aspects of himself that surpass ordinary humanity.

To conclude, we could ask ourselves what the results of this preliminary enquiry have been: do we have a better understanding of what a prophet is, and of who the Prophet is? Perhaps the Qur'ān leaves the question open for the Prophet himself to answer when it says to him: "Truly the One who ordained the Qur'ān for thee shall surely bring thee back to the place of return. Say, 'My lord knows best those who bring guidance, and those who are in manifest error.'" (Q 28:85). What is this "place of return" that the Qur'ān announces? Will it be the place in which the mystery of human destiny is unveiled – since, as the Qur'ān demonstrates, for the Prophet it was always a mystery that was

there to be questioned? Prophecy is a bridge between divine transcendence and human immanence. How does one grasp it? The manifold ways in which believers experience the presence of the Prophet are more accessible for us. How and to what extent do they anchor these in the Qur'ānic text? This is what the present study has sought to demonstrate and sometimes to suggest.

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