CHAPTER SIX

THE LEGEND OUTSIDE THE LEGEND

Baḥīrā the Source

We know indeed that they say: ‘It is a man who teaches him.’ The tongue of him they wickedly point to is notably foreign, while this is Arabic, pure and clear

Q 16:103

They say, ‘Tales of the ancients that he has had written down; they are recited to him at dawn and in the evening’

Q 25:5

Many of the Islamic tales about Baḥīrā have been reviewed in Chapter Two. For obvious reasons, none of these traditions describe Baḥīrā as having had extensive conversations with Muḥammad about religion. The monk is only an instrument used to confirm Muhammad’s prophethood; the encounter is the enactment of Christian recognition of the truth of Islam. The suggestion that Baḥīrā was in fact Muḥammad’s teacher, who taught him about God, about His prophets and about the destiny of humankind, runs counter to Islam’s self-image as the faith founded on the unmediated revelation of God’s Word to the ‘Seal of all Prophets’. The possibility that Muḥammad became Baḥīrā’s pupil after this miraculous encounter is precluded by the traditions themselves, because it is stated that the young prophet-to-be fled back home from Syria.¹

This does not alter the fact that Muslim scholars wanted to defend themselves against the allegation that the monk had secretly been the Prophet’s teacher. A defensive voice is found, for example, in Ibn Taymiyya’s all-encompassing refutation of Christianity entitled al-Jawāb

¹ See above: Ch. 2, pp. 38–40.
al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Masīḥ. A fierce defender of Sunnī Islam, Ibn Taymiyya draws attention to Baḥīrā’s confirmation of Muḥammad’s prophethood, but also stresses that Muḥammad was not capable of speaking with non-Arabs and that during his two trips to Syria his company never left him alone.2 An example of a less argumentative defense against the accusation can be found in hadīth. In Bukhārī’s ṣaḥīḥ there is the following tradition:

Abū Maʿmar—ʿAbd al-Wārith—ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz—Anas:

There was a Christian man who embraced Islam and read [sūrat] al-Baqara and Āl-ʿImrān and he used to write for the Prophet. Later he reverted to Christianity and he used to say, ‘Muḥammad knows nothing except what I have written for him’. Then God caused him to die and the people buried him but in the morning they found that the earth had thrown out his body. They said: ‘This is the deed of Muḥammad and his Companions. They have opened the grave of our companion and took his body out because he ran away from them’. They dug a deeper grave for him, but in the morning they again found that the earth had thrown the body out. They said ‘This is a deed of Muḥammad and his Companions. They dug the grave of our companion and threw his body out because he ran away from them’. So they dug a grave for him as deep as they could, but in the morning they found that the earth had thrown the body out. Then they believed that what had befallen him, had not been done by a human, and they threw him away.3

The accusation that Muḥammad received his teachings from a source other than God is in all likelihood as old as Islam itself, since the Qurʾan already alludes to it. The most crucial verses in this respect are Q 16:103 and Q 25:5, quoted above. The former is not only reflecting the accusation but also a defense against it. But that defense affirms the existence of a person to whom Muḥammad’s opponents apparently referred; someone with ‘a foreign tongue’. According to Muslim tradition, the occasion of revelation of this verse was indeed the actual occurrence of this accusation. The explanation most often given was that the person alluded to had been a slave in Mecca or a simple craftsman, sometimes also said to be a Christian or a Jew. Gilliot has shown that a long list of can be drawn up of the names of this per-

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3 Al-Bukhārī, al-Ṣaḥīḥ, vol 4, pp. 523–524. This ḥadīth bears a curious resemblance to a story in John Moschos’ Spiritual Meadow about a certain monk Thomas from Apamea. When people tried to bury a woman on top of him, the earth rejected his corpse three times; J. Wortley, The Spiritual Meadow, p. 71 (tr).