More Light on Muḥammad’s Pre-existence

Qurʾānic and post-Qurʾānic Perspectives

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1 Introduction

One of the themes that distinguishes Muḥammad’s post-Qurʾānic image from his Qurʾānic one is his pre-existence. Several modern scholars, including the present writer, have already studied the Islamic traditions about Muḥammad’s pre-existence, but never in the context of his post-Qurʾānic image as compared with his Qurʾānic one. Such a comparison is the subject of the present study. It will demonstrate how Islamic post-Qurʾānic tafsīr has read into the Qurʾān ideas that put Muḥammad in a magnified perspective that goes beyond the relatively modest dimensions of his Qurʾānic image.

The case investigated here will be Q 26:219, probably the only Qurʾānic verse which the exegetes managed to adapt to the idea of Muḥammad’s pre-existence. We shall begin with an analysis of the internal Qurʾānic context of this passage, with a view to tracing the process in which post-Qurʾānic tafsīr has eventually brought the passage into line with ideas about Muḥammad’s pre-existence that originally do not seem to have had any Qurʾānic basis. The dogmatic and political aspects of the notion of Muḥammad’s pre-existence will also be touched upon.

1.1 Muḥammad’s Taqallub: The Qurʾānic Context

The idea of pre-existence, which is prevalent in Jewish and Christian sources, emerges in the Qurʾān as well. Here it is applied first and foremost to the kitāb. This source of divine knowledge is pre-existent, being defined as umm al-kitāb (Q 13:39), and is said to have contained the Qurʾān itself (Q 43:4). The Qurʾān is also said to have been contained in a “hidden book” (kitāb maknūn) (Q 56:78), or in a “well-guarded tablet” (Q 85:21–22). The idea of pre-existence is applied to the Kaʿba as well, which is defined as the “first house” (awwal bayt) (Q 3:96). Another aspect of the idea of pre-existence emerges in verses referring to a

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1 Rubin, Pre-existence and light, 62–119. For a previous study, see Goldziher, Neuplatonische und gnostische Elemente im Ḥadīṯ, 317–44; for a recent study, see Katz, The birth of the prophet Muḥammad, 12–29.
2 See Hamerton-Kelly, Pre-existence; Schimanowski, Weisheit und Messias.
3 On these passages see Jeffery, The Qurʾān as scripture, 13–7.
primordial contract God made with the prophets, as well as with humankind at large (Q 3:81; 7:172; 33:7).

As for Muḥammad, however, his pre-existence – as perceived in the Qurʾān – is no more than an abstract idea condensed into his name as known to previous prophets who have announced his advent in advance. The most explicit manifestation of the idea, which echoes Jewish and Christian notions about the pre-existent names of the Messiah,⁴ is found in Q 6:6, in which Jesus foretells the appearance of Aḥmad. The name Muḥammad also seems to be considered as if recorded in the Old and the New Testament (Q 48:29). His title, al-nabīyy al-ummī, the “gentile prophet,” is also said to have been written in the same scriptures (Q 7:156–8). Accordingly, several Qurʾānic verses assert that Muḥammad, as well as the Qurʾān, confirm (muṣaddiq) the message of the previous prophets.⁵ The relationship of Muḥammad to the prophetic legacy of the previous prophets is best demonstrated by his title “Seal of the Prophets” (Q 33:40) which indicates his position as the final and most glorious manifestation of the recurrent prophetic revelation that has been carried through the universal line of successive prophets.⁶

But a material pre-existence of Muḥammad, which forms part of a predestined plan, beginning with his primordial creation and materializing in his birth as a son to a noble ancestry – this is something which can only be found in post-Qurʾānic traditions. These traditions have read the notion back into the Qurʾān, mainly into one single passage found in Sūrat al-Shuʿarāʾ (Q 26). According to the traditional Islamic chronology of revelation, this sūra was revealed in Mecca.⁷ Verse 219 of this sūra – our case study – belongs to a paragraph that begins in verse 214. This paragraph (Q 26:214–9) reads:

214: Warn your nearest kinspersons (ʿashīrataka-l-aqrābīn), 215: And lower your wing to him who follows you of the believers. 216: But if they disobey you, say: Surely I am quit of what you do. 217: And rely on the mighty, the merciful, 218: Who sees you when you stand up [in prayer], 219: And [sees] your taqallub among those who prostrate themselves (fī l-sājidīn).

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⁴ For which see, e.g., Schimanowski, Weisheit und Messias 123–9; 210–5; 287–9.
⁶ See Rubin, The seal of the prophets.
⁷ It appears 46th among the Meccan sūras listed by ‘Aṭāʾ al-Khurāsānī (d. 135/753). For his list see Ibn al-Ḍurays, Faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān, 33–4. The list recurs in later sources; see Robinson, Discovering the Qurʾān, 69–70.