

Transforming Prophethood: *Reading the Transfiguration Alongside Islamic Texts*

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It is often said that Islam and Christianity have prophets 'in common'. The Qur'an and the Bible certainly share some of the same characters, and both have important concepts of prophethood. However, Christians (and Jews) do not consider most of the Biblical characters listed as prophets in the Qur'an to be prophets. Neither do many important Biblical prophets even appear in the Qur'an.

Clearly, whatever the two Books may mean by 'prophet', prophets have different places in them. While the Qur'an depicts sacred history in terms of God's sending a series of prophets to different peoples, the Bible's sacred history is of God calling a particular people as the vehicle of His blessing for all the nations. It is into that history that the Biblical prophets fit.

The New Testament presents Jesus as the fulfilment of all that the people, Israel, was called to be. He is God's son, God's suffering servant, God's anointed king, the light to the nations, the holy priest, the acceptable sacrifice, the tabernacle, the temple, and even the very presence of God Himself. That all the individual prophets and their functions are also fulfilled and transformed through His coming is most graphically illustrated in the transfiguration, which is recorded in all three of the synoptic gospels (Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-13, Luke 9:28-36). In each case, it follows Peter's discernment that Jesus is the Messiah.

The transfiguration occurs on a mountain, echoing the experiences of Israel when Moses climbed Sinai to receive the law from God (Exodus 19 and following) and of the contrast between Elijah's zealous confrontation with the prophets of Baal at Carmel (1 Kings 18) and his depressed encounter with God on Horeb (probably also Sinai, 1 Kings 19). Jesus meets with these two paradigmatic prophets: the lawgiver who established Israel as a political entity and the zealous enforcer of monotheism. At first, despite the radiant appearance of Jesus, the three men seem similar: three glorious prophets for whom Peter wishes to build three shelters. But then the cloud, a symbol of the *shekinah*, the presence of God, appears and envelops them all. The voice of God affirms Jesus as the Beloved Son, the Chosen, and the one to whom the disciples

are to listen. Moses and Elijah disappear.

How does this compare with Islamic views of prophethood? It affirms what is often noted: that Islam might be post-Messiah in time, but it is pre-Messiah in much of its thought. Effectively, it reverses the transfiguration. First, it removes the Cross: even those Muslims who interpret the Qur'anic and historical evidence to allow for the crucifixion reject the New Testament's interpretation of its significance. Next, it puts all prophets on the same footing: despite the unique features of the Qur'anic account of Jesus, most Muslims interpret the Qur'an (*al-Baqarah* 2:136) as returning Jesus, Moses and Elijah to equal status. Even further, it presents a final prophet, and that prophet combines the law-giving and people-forming function of Moses with the zealous propagation of monotheism of Elijah. This puts Jesus into the background: Muslims listen to Muhammad rather than to Jesus or to the Biblical writers.

One possible Islamic analogue to the transfiguration might be the 'night journey' of Muhammad referred to in *al-Isrā'* 17:1. According to various hadiths, Muhammad was taken by the angel Gabriel through the levels of heaven where he met previous prophets and then up to the House of God. In the transfiguration, Jesus discusses His coming crucifixion with Moses and Elijah, and the voice from heaven affirms Him as God's beloved and tells the watching disciples to 'Listen to Him'; in the hadiths, the prophets welcome and affirm Muhammad who then receives instructions about prayers from God. The imagery suggests that Muhammad supersedes the other prophets, but in significantly different ways than the Gospels see Jesus as superseding Moses and Elijah.

There are many important differences between the transfiguration and the night journey. In particular, while the night journey prepares Muhammad for the *hijra* and establishment of the Muslim community in Medina, the transfiguration prepares Jesus and the disciples for the coming crucifixion. It is not only the presence of God in the person of Jesus but the specific event of the crucifixion and resurrection that is to fulfil all that came before. It is this of which Jesus has been



speaking before the event, it is this of which He speaks with Moses and Elijah during the event, and it is to this that He sets his face in all three of the synoptic Gospels. The transfiguration clearly indicates that the law, the people, and monotheistic prophetic zeal are all leading to the Cross. That the fulfilment is in this death rather than in any kind of socio-political power transformed the expectations of Jesus' disciples and determined the direction of New Testament thinking. The challenge for Christians is to continue to interpret not only the Bible but also Islamic law, *ummah*, and prophetic zeal through that lens.

All this suggests an agenda for continued reading of the Bible in Islamic contexts:

- It sets up conversations between the Bible and Islamic texts that can facilitate an understanding of similarities and differences in Christian and Muslim thinking, and that offer a basis for communication between Christians and Muslims.
- It challenges Christian readers to make the Cross and all that it stands for a priority not only in Biblical interpretation but also in relationships with Muslims.
- It points to ways of thinking about how the New Testament deals not only with the fulfilment of the law and of Israel but also with the fulfilment of prophetic zeal.
- It reminds Christians that Moses and Elijah find their place not in a line of prophetic history but in the covenantal history of Israel. It therefore sends us back to re-read the Biblical stories of Moses and Elijah with the Cross in mind.