Book Reviews


This book, rich in hypotheses and arguments, discusses a number of topics of interest to students of early Islam, and draws on various disciplines and methodologies. It focuses, though, on two rather distinct issues. Parts I and II are concerned with the material of Muslim tradition about the relationship between the Prophet Muḥammad and his former slave Zayd b. Ḥāritha. The stories narrated in that material are quite well known and include Zayd’s divorcing of his wife Zaynab so that Muḥammad might marry her himself, and the death of Zayd at the battle of Muʿta in 8/629. Sūra 33 of the Qurʾān is traditionally understood to contain some allusions to Zayd’s story. Part III is concerned with the development of the text of the Qurʾān and presents evidence that alterations were made to the text in the late 1/7th century. That evidence is only tangentially related to the Zayd material.

Regarding the material about Zayd, Powers argues that much of it was elaborated under the influence of the dogma that Muḥammad was the last prophet, and that there is very little real history in it. Since, in Powers’ understanding, it was commonly held in early Islam that prophethood was transmitted from father to son, when the idea that Muḥammad was the last prophet became established and widely accepted it also became necessary to show that he left no sons. That is the fundamental impulse behind the story of the Prophet’s denial that he had adopted Zayd as his son, indeed that adoption has no place in Islam. As I understand it, Powers sees the whole story of Zayd’s divorce and the Prophet’s marriage to Zayd’s former wife as generated by the need to provide a scenario to explain the disavowal of Zayd’s adoption. The disavowal was necessary, according to the traditional account, because if Zayd had indeed been Muḥammad’s adopted son, it would not have been legitimate for the Prophet to marry his former wife, there being a bar to a man marrying the former wife of his son. Furthermore, the story of Zayd’s martyrdom at Muʿta, and the dating of it to before the death of Muḥammad himself, is motivated by the same concern: if Zayd were allowed to survive the Prophet, he would have been a prophet himself, which was inconceivable once it had been accepted that prophecy came to a full stop with Muḥammad.

In this argument the interpretation of Qurʾān 33:40 has a central place. That verse is the last of a series in which traditional commentators find allusions to Zayd’s divorce of his wife so that the Prophet might marry her, and it proclaims that “Muḥammad
was not the father of any one of your men, but the Messenger of God and the seal of the prophets (khātam al-nabiyyīn).”. That last phrase became the classic proof text in support of the proposition that there could be no more prophets after Muḥammad, and Powers understands it to be directly connected with the preceding statement that Muḥammad was not the father of any of your men: because Muḥammad was the last prophet (and because any son would have inherited his father's prophetic office), he could not have been a father (at least of sons who survived him).

I am not naturally averse to the idea that many of the stories about the life of Muḥammad have been inspired by Qurʾānic verses or by beliefs that came to be widely held at some time later than that of the Prophet himself, but find some parts of the argument puzzling. Specifically regarding the idea that the material on Zayd reflects the doctrine that Muḥammad was the last prophet, two questions come to mind.

First, was it in fact widely held in the first century of Islam that prophecy passed from father to son? Of course, it is known that in the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean world prophecy often did, but the practice runs counter to the more dominant concept in the monotheistic religions that prophets are chosen by God for reasons known only to Him. “The Spirit bloweth where it listeth” (Jn 3:8). In the Qurʾān, although there are a few cases where a father and his son are both counted as prophets (Abraham, his sons and grandson; David and Solomon), there is little sense that that is the result of inheritance (in spite of references to the descendants of Adam, or the seed of Abraham), whereas the idea of God sending to various nations and communities prophets who are chosen from among them and speaking their tongue is primary.

Some Muslims of the early centuries do appear to have regarded prophethood as inheritable (just as the Shiʿa held that the imamate was transmitted from father to son). That view is implied in those reports to the effect that if Muḥammad's son Ibrāhīm had survived his father he too would have been a prophet. However, traditional biographies of Muḥammad, although they situate him as a descendant of Abraham through Ishmael, do not suggest that prophecy was possessed by any of the numerous ancestors in the line between Ishmael and Muḥammad, and, as Powers says, there is a strong (although not unanimous) tradition that there were no prophets between Jesus (a descendant of Abraham through Isaac) and Muḥammad.

Most of the commentators do not explain the connection between “Muḥammad is not the father of any one of your men” and the following “but (he is) the messenger of God and the seal of the prophets” (33:40). In understanding the first part to depend on the latter, Powers is influenced by Muqāṭīl b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), who seems to be unusual in linking the two parts. Muqāṭīl says specifically that if Zayd had been Muḥammad's son he would have been a prophet, an idea more commonly connected with the Prophet's son Ibrāhīm, to whom there is no possible Qurʾānic allusion. The idea that prophetic status passed from father to son does not, to me, seem as widely held as Powers' arguments require, and there may be specific reasons why it does sometimes appear.
The second question concerns the date when the doctrine that Muḥammad had been the last prophet became widely accepted. As Powers acknowledges, the phrase “the seal of the prophets,” which appears only once in the Qurʾān, is ambiguous and does not necessarily mean “the last of the prophets.” Commentators provide various interpretations of it. Powers suggests the late 1st/7th century as the time when the doctrine became accepted and when the interpretation of “seal” as “last” became dominant. He understands the doctrine as a response to the appearance of various false prophets during that century. If that is right, Muqāṭīl’s statement about Zayd being a potential prophet, and the tradition about Ibrāhīm hypothetically inheriting his father’s prophetic status, are rather problematic. Although they deny that Muḥammad was succeeded as a prophet by any son, in theory they accept that prophecy is inheritable. In the Muslim view, however, it was not simply fortuitous that Muḥammad was the last prophet—it was not simply because he had no sons who survived him. Rather, God made him the last prophet because, as the recipient of the final version of God’s law, there was no need for any prophet after him. Once the doctrine that prophecy had now ended was established, why would there be any concern with the possibility of Muḥammad’s prophecy being inherited by a son?

Something more seems needed to account for the establishment of the doctrine as one of the touchstones of Islamic “orthodoxy.” In the case of Rabbinical Judaism and Christianity it was not merely the appearance of “false” prophets but the development of a strong structure of authority (the rabbis and the Church) that marginalized prophecy as the expression of God’s will (naturally, it could not be completely suppressed). If we postulate a similar development in Islam, then we would expect it to be the 3rd/9th century that was decisive, when the authority of the ʿulamāʾ, allied to that of political powers, became dominant in both Sunnī and Twelver Shi‘ī Islam. Prophetic movements did not end in the 1st/7th century. The development of the doctrine that Muḥammad was the last prophet, and its acceptance as a core Islamic belief, would naturally have been a gradual process, and to have it already finished by the end of the first century, as Powers’ thesis seems to demand, is perhaps premature.

In his discussion of the Zayd material Powers makes plausible, if ultimately not provable, suggestions about how the development of the idea that Muḥammad was the final prophet might have led to changes in the text of the Qurʾān. In the third part of the book, his investigations focus on the two verses (Q 4:12 and 4:176) that refer to the word kalāla, which both traditional and academic scholars have found puzzling and difficult to interpret, and about which Powers himself has written in some detail.

Luckily, a Paris ms. of the Qurʾān (BNF 328a), published in a facsimile edition in 1998 by François Déroche and Sergio Noja Noseda, contains both of the relevant verses. The ms. has been dated to the second half of the 1st/7th century, and Powers has discovered that in both kalāla verses the text shows signs of having been tampered with. That is to say, there is evidence that the ms., which now has the standard reading as found in modern printings of the Qurʾān, previously contained earlier readings that have subsequently been changed. Powers’ description of his detective work on the relevant parts of the ms., and the visual evidence that he provides, is both compelling
and convincing. How far the specific reasons he suggests for those changes are correct seems more debatable.

His explanations become rather complex as he attempts to link them with other details of his arguments, and they involve postulating an archaic form of the Arabic word for daughter-in-law for which there is no evidence. He associates the alterations with reports in Muslim tradition about improvements to the text of the scripture made during the caliphate of ʿAbd al-Malik (65-86/685-705), and proposes that these two particular changes were partly to do with the fact that details of the Qurʾānic regulations regarding bequests did not conform with the practice of ʿAbd al-Malik's time, and partly with interest in the question of why Muḥammad left no instructions about who was to succeed him. Powers is not willing to accept possibly more innocent explanations, such as the need to correct scribal error.

If Powers is right in his interpretation of the nature of the alterations made to BNF 328a, then that text must be extraordinarily important. Since no other text is known that contains the readings that he argues predate the changes to the Paris ms., the implication is that BNF 328a is the source of all later Qurʾāns. If that is so, it is an amazing piece of luck that it has survived.

This is a book which will surely stimulate discussion and debate among all of those concerned with the study of early Islam and the history of the Qurʾān. In addition to the topics discussed in this review, there is much in it concerning, among other things, the practice of adoption in the pre-Islamic world and the ways in which Islamic materials relate to the Bible and to Jewish and Christian ideas and literature. It is an important contribution to scholarship.

G. R. Hawting
School of Oriental and African Studies