A BOOTH LIKE THE BOOTH OF MOSES . . .
A STUDY OF AN EARLY HADITH

The chapter about innovations in mosques in al-Turtashi’s Kitāb al-hawādith wa-l-bida' contains a remarkable tradition about the building of the mosque of the Prophet in Medina which deserves special attention. This tradition, not included in the orthodox collections of hadith, is of considerable importance: it seems to belong to a large body of early traditions omitted by later collectors of hadith, and it may throw some light on an attitude of the Prophet which was later ignored by Muslim scholars. This tradition may help us to understand the views and opinions of the early Muslim scholars.

The hadith referred to is told anonymously and runs as follows: ‘Abu-l-Dardā’ and Ubayy b. Ka‘b measured the mosque; they came afterwards to the rod of the cubit. The Prophet then said: “Nay, a booth like the booth of Moses: thumām and wood, because the affair (will happen) sooner than that (bal ‘arīsh mu‘ācharīsh Mūsā thumām wa-khashāb fa-l-amr a’jāl min dhiḥālīka).” The hadith is obscure and abstruse and the editor, Muhammad al-Tālibī, remarks that he could not find this story in the collections of traditions about the building of the mosque in Medina, or about the building of the three mosques, nor in the Nihāya of Ibn al-Athir; he could not find anything which may elucidate the text in the collections of the biographies of the Companions of the Prophet, nor in the stories about the life of Moses.

This tradition is, however, given in al-Suyūtī’s al-Jāmi‘ al-saghir in two versions: (a) a version which contains only a part of the tradition, and (b) a version in which the tradition is reported in full; both versions contain some slight deviations from the text of al-Turtashi. The two versions of al-Suyūtī were copied by al-Nabhānī in his book al-Fath al-kabir.

The second part of the tradition is found in quite a different context, without being connected with the building of the mosque in Medina or with that of any mosque at all. It is reported by al-Tirmidhī in the Bāb qiwār al-amal and by Ibn Mājah.

Ibn Mājah in the Bāb al-bīnā‘ wa-l-kharāb; Abū Dā‘ūd quotes the tradition in the Kitāb al-a-dub, in Bāmā jā‘a fīl-bīnā‘. The tradition, told on the authority of al-Ma‘ām, runs, in the report of al-Tirmidhī, as follows: ‘Abdullāh b. Amr said: The Messenger of God passed by us when we were busy (repairing) a hut of ours and asked us: “What is this?” We answered: “It threatened to fall, therefore we repair it.” The Prophet said: “I think the affair will outstrip that.” In the collections of Ibn Mājah and of Abū Dā‘ūd the tradition is also reported on the authority of al-Ma‘ām, but there are some differences in the formulation of the statement of the Prophet: Mā ārāʾ al-amr ilā a’jāl min dhiḥālīka, and al-amr asrāʾ min dhiḥālīka. This saying of the Prophet is thus the same as that reported in the second part of our tradition. There is, however, a difference of meaning between the saying as quoted by al-Turtashi and the same saying as reported by Ibn Mājah, Abū Dā‘ūd, and al-Tirmidhī. The keyword for the understanding of the two traditions is the word amr ‘affair’.

This word must be interpreted in the tradition of al-Tirmidhī, Ibn Mājah, and Abū Dā‘ūd as meaning death. This is actually the interpretation given by Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Hādī al-Ḥasanī in his commentary on Ibn Mīja. In the same way we can also explain the saying of al-Ḥasan who, when asked why he did not wash his shirt, said: al-amr asrāʾ min dhiḥālīka. The meaning of the tradition would be: there is no need to repair (or to plaster) a wall with clay, as in one of the versions of Abū Dā‘ūd’s even huts; death will outstrip your efforts. This saying is in harmony with other statements of the Prophet and his utterances in the Bāb qiwār al-amal (e.g., . Be in this world like a wayfarer . Ibn Umar said: getting up do not hope for the evening . . .) and in the Bāb al-bīnā‘ wa-l-kharāb ( . . . Every expense of the believer will be rewarded except the expense of building . . .). The meaning of death can, however, hardly apply to the word amr in the tradition of al-Turtashi. The Prophet can hardly be assumed to have told Abū-l-Dardā’ and Ubayy not to build mosques because death (i.e. his or theirs) would outstrip the completion of the building; the Prophet’s death or that of the builders can hardly be a reason for an injunction to build the mosque in a provisional way, like the booth of Moses, for the mosque could well serve the believers even after their death. The meaning of al-Turtashi’s tradition seems thus to be quite different: amr denotes here an affair which will put an end to life in general; it will put an end to worship as well. It means in this

1 Professor R. B. Secjeant kindly agreed to read this article in typescript and has added a few valuable notes, the contents of which are given below. The author wishes to express sincere thanks for the interest Professor Secjeant has shown and for his comments.


3 Professor Secjeant remarks that he has often seen roofs built in such a way in South Arabia. He writes in a letter: “Khashāb would be beams, perhaps palm-trunks. These would be covered with smaller branches, and then with thumām. On top of this would be added some wet tīn and tīm, clay mixed with chopped straw, and this would form the roof. Khashābyāt is better than khashāb because it would mean presumably little branches”.

4 P. 94, n. 6.

5 11, 58, ‘arīsh ka‘-arīsh Mūsā; 59, ‘arīsh ka‘-arīsh Mūsā thumām wa-khashāb wa-l-amr a’jāl min dhiḥālīka.

6 1, 226, 228.

7 1, 294, ed. Cairo, a.H. 1353.
context destruction, disaster, calamity in which everything will perish. In this tradition of al-Turtashi is identical in meaning with al-sä'a, the time of total calamity which will be followed by the resurrection. The Prophet said to Abu'l-Dardâ': 4 'The amr, the Day of Judgment, may be sooner than that.' For he believed that the sä'a was at hand, there was no need, therefore, to erect sumptuous buildings, not, even for mosques. A remarkable tradition quoted by al-Bayhaqi on the authority of Ibn 'Abbâs may be mentioned to strengthen this point. 5 The Prophet said: I have not been ordered to build the mosque sumptuously (mâ umirtu bi-tashqid al-masjid). 6 This meaning of amr as identical with al-sä'a can already be detected in the Qur'an, xvi, 1: this is also the explanation given there by the commentators. 7

The fact that the Prophet was overpowered by the feeling of the approaching Day of Judgment, which was duly stressed by Buhl 8 and T. Andrae, 9 may be illustrated by a tradition comprehensively explained by al-Sharif al-Ra'fi. 10 The Prophet said: I was sent at the breadth of the Day of Judgment; the Day almost outstripped me 11 (bu'ittatu fi nasam al-sä'a, in kâdat lat-tashqiqâ [the in here is mukhaffafa min al-thaqâla]). Another version of this tradition is also mentioned by the author; it has nafas instead of nasam. The first version is explained as denoting beginning, and should therefore be literally translated: 12 I was sent at the first blowing of the wind of the sä'a; the meaning is derived from the idea of a breath of wind at the beginning of the day. The second version, nafas, is said to be derived from the idea of delay, pause. Thus the tradition can be interpreted in two different ways: (a) the Prophet was sent at a time when the Day of Judgment was just about to begin; (b) the Prophet was sent at a time when the Day of Judgment was almost at hand; Allah postponed it for a while, and during this pause the Prophet was sent. A similar tradition is quoted by al-Tirmidhi 13 and by Ibn Ílbân. 14

It is obvious why this tradition about the building of the mosque of the Prophet as quoted in the book of al-Turtashi was omitted by Muslim scholars. The Day of Judgment did not come in the days of the Prophet and there was no reason to quote a tradition which stated clearly that the Prophet believed that the sä'a would happen in his own lifetime. 15

We can, fortunately, trace the first part of the tradition in other sources: it served as an argument for scholars who claimed that mosques should be built in an austere and modest style, like the mosque of the Prophet. Thus we have: 16

The following tradition, told on the authority of Bâb al-Jâmi' of Clôcy: 17 The Prophet said: A booth like the booth of Moses'. The explanation given says: 'He did not like arches about the mosques' (yu'nî annahu kâna yu'âshku l-tâjî fî âhâshku l-masjid). A slightly different interpretation is given to this tradition in Kithâ al-wara' of Ahmad b. Hanbal. The circumstances in which this saying was uttered according to Ibn Hanbal are also different. People asked the Prophet to adorn the walls of the mosque (an yu'âshku al-masjid), and the Prophet said: No, a booth like the booth of Moses'. The compiler, Ahmad b. Hanbal, explains: It is a varnish like antimony (kabus); the Prophet did not allow it.

Quite a different version of this tradition is given in an early treatise compiled by Muhammad b. Íasan al-Shaybâni (died A.H. 189), summarized by his pupil Muhammad b. Íâmâa (died A.H. 233), in his book al-Idskââ fî al-risâq al-mustahâb: 18 People offered the Prophet to pull down his mosque and to build it anew. The Prophet answered: No, a booth like the booth of Moses'. 19

The tradition is also quoted in the book of Nasr b. Muzâhim, Waqât Siffin. 20 It is quoted there on the authority of al-Íasan: When the Prophet intended to build his mosque he said: Build for me a booth like the booth of Moses.

In the sources quoted above the expression about the dry branches and mihrib is missing; the second part of the tradition, about the amr which will outstrip the effort of the builders, has been cut off.

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The whole tradition of al-Turtashi is found in the Tabaqât of Ibn Sa'd, 2, p. 2; in the edition of Cairo, A.H. 1358, vol. ii, p. 5. The Prophet, says the tradition of Ibn Sa'd, covered the mosque with palm branches. He was asked: Why not cover with a ceiling? The Prophet answered: 'A booth like that of Moses.'

1 The word 'arch' is used here to translate Arabic tâj. According to Professor Serjeant letter dated 20 August 1900), tâj or tâqa is in South Arabian usage a window, an aperture especially in a technical sense, to a tomb); a niche in a wall for holding a lamp or something of the kind. Such a niche in my experience is usually made in a clay wall and may be topped by a round arch or pointed arch (in clay); or it could simply have a wooden top on the post and lintel principle. Theses features of building, mentioned by Professor Serjeant, did not exist in the mosque of the Prophet, and orthodox circles were opposed to them. It was 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azîz who was the first to build the mihrib in the form of a niche when he rebuilt the mosque in Medina by order of al-Walid (details about this innovation, Crewe, A short account of early Muslim architecture, 44). The tâj al-'inâm quoted in the traditions quoted by al-Turtashi seems thus identical with the mihrib (cf., e.g., p. 24, fa-min dha'âtha al-makârib, fa-tâqadama il-lisanin wa-tasâlaâl l-tâj awrayyâlî il-fish... wa-kâriha al-mihrîb fi tâq al-'inâm al-Nâkî n) 18. The fundamental sense of mihrib, as elucidated by Professor Serjeant, was in fact columns and a space between them. Mihrib in the form of an arched niche was an innovation: it was introduced at the end of the seventh century and was fiercely opposed by the orthodox. Tâj as mihrib was considered as dâda

2 Al-Bayhaqi, al-Sunan, 11, 439.
4 P. 78
like the booth of Moses, wood pieces and thumām; the affair (will happen) sooner than that.  

The same tradition, told on the authority of Shahrb. Haushab 2 and quoted in the Sīra Ḥalabīyya, 3 contains a few interesting additions: 'When the Prophet wanted to build the mosque he said: "Build for me a booth like the booth of Moses, thumāmāt and dry branches and a covering like the covering of Moses, and the affair (will happen) sooner than that." He was asked: "What is a covering of Moses?" and he answered: "When he stood up his head touched the ceiling." This very tradition is quoted by 'Abd al-Ḥamid al-‘Abbāsī in his 'Umdat al-akhbār fī madīnata al-mukhātir; 4 the source given is the collection of Razīn. 5

Another version of this tradition, in a slightly different form, is given by the 'Umdat al-akhbār and the Sīra Ḥalabīyya: 6 'When the Prophet wanted to build the mosque he was told [by the Sīra Ḥalabīyya comments: Gabriel] told him]: "A booth like the booth of Moses, thy brother." Anas said: Thus the Prophet built it the first time from palm-branches; four years after the hijra he built the mosque from bricks. 6

A tradition quoted in both books mentions a different situation upon which the saying was uttered. Rain used to drip into the mosque. Since the covering contained little clay, the mosque was filled with muddy water. The believers then came to the Prophet and asked him to give an order that the ceiling be plastered with clay, in order to prevent the rain from dripping into the mosque. The Prophet answered: "No, a booth like the booth of Moses. 7 The mosque was left in this state until the death of the Prophet."

In conclusion we may assume that the tradition quoted by al-Ṭūrāfī was already widely spread in the circles of Muslim scholars at the beginning of the third century of the hijra, or even at the end of the second century.

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1 Quoted from Ibn Sa’d in Nuzūrī, Niḥāyat al-arab, xvi, 345.
2 See his biography, Tādabbūr al-akhbār, iv, 360.
3 Ed. Cairo, A.H. 1320, ii, 71: Sīrat Dkhn (on margin of Halabīyya), i, 357.
4 Ed. Cairo, Taḏkārāt al-‘Abbāsī, p. 80. According to a tradition mentioned in the Sīrat al-Dinabūtī quoted in the Halabīyya (loc. cit.), the explanation of the booth of Moses is given by al-Ḥasan Who reported the tradition.
6 The saying of Anas is not mentioned in the Halabīyya. Libn, here translated 4 bricks, means, as Professor Serjeant points out, fundamentally clay bricks, but one may assume fairly safely that in a hastily constructed building they would be of unbaked clay, cf. Landberg, Glasm. det., ii, Leiden, 1942, 2011 reference supplied by Professor Serjeant, who also refers to the terms ‘īwar and līban in Būs, xxviii, 1953, 8, and madwara and āwāra in Le Musul, lxxi, 1-2, 1949, 190.
7 In the sources relating to our tradition there is, however, a controversy over the question of these bricks and their form. Some support for taking līban to mean unbaked clay bricks in this tradition may be adduced from the following tradition about the mosque built in ʿArba by ‘Abd ʿAbd al-Ḥassān ʿAbd al-Qasim al-Āṣārī: wa-banā ‘Abd ʿAbd al-Ḥassān ʿAbbāsī al-muṣājja wa-dār al-ismār bi-līban wa-fin wa-soopyf bī-l-ʿuṣūb (al-Balāzūrī, Futūḥ, ed. Cairo, A.H. 1319, p. 355)—he built it from clay bricks and clay and covered it with brushwood (using this word for ʿuṣūb at Professor Serjeant’s suggestion).
8 'Umdat al-akhbār, 81: al-Halabīyya, loc. cit.

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That is evident from the quotation in the Tabāqat of Ibn Sa’d. The mosque of the Prophet was in fact built in a very simple, even primitive, way, 1 and resembled a booth. 2 The saying of the Prophet about the Day of Judgment seems to reflect truly his feeling in the first period of his stay in Medina. The comparison with the booth of Moses in this period is not surprising: his relations with the Jews in Medina were not yet hostile. This tradition seems thus to belong to an early layer of hadith of considerable importance.

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THE TURKISH VERSES OF QĀSIM AL-ANVĀR

(PLATE I)

In the preface to his edition of the Kulliyāt i Qāsim i Anvār 3 (printed at Tehran, 1337/1957-9, p. 112) Professor Sa’d Nafisi alludes to the difficulty he has encountered in establishing the text of four of the poems (pp. 406-8) which the Persian poet wrote, playfully as it seems, either completely or partly in Turkish. Although the editor had ten manuscripts at his disposal, he has to admit himself (in a footnote on p. 406) that the Turkish of the four poems in their present form is largely incomprehensible. He consoles his readers on this point with the promise of an improved edition of the Kulliyāt, proposed for some future date.

With the aid of the nine manuscripts available to me in this country, of which one is outstanding, the text can be considerably improved. These manuscripts are

British Museum

(A) Or. 3304

(B) Or. 11363

(C) Or. 2501

(D) Add. 18874

Ff. 157v; 210r–211r. Dated 857/1453-4 (Rieu, Supp., p. 183)

Ff. 155r–210r. A manuscript of 268 ff., dated 861/1456-7, which was acquired in 1933. The copies’ name is ‘Abdullàh al-Iṣfiḥānī (Rieu, Supplement, p. 184)

Ff. 138v; 190r. Dated 877/1472-3 (Rieu, Supplement, p. 184)

Ff. 149r; 204v–204v. Fifteenth century (Rieu, p. 636)

1 See Ibn Sa’d, loc. cit.: Yāqūt, Balāzūrī, s.v. Yāqūt; BI, s.v. Mashādī (Pedersen): Creswell, Early Muslim architecture, 2-11, 25.


3 On the poet (757–837/1356-1433-4) see Browne, L.H.P., iii, 473-86: F. Köprüö in his article Anfāt al-ʾAṣmā‘ (Dār al-Fǔrūn Edibiyātı, Mybā‘a al-ʾAṣmā‘, Istanbul, Year 2, No. 6, 1339/1923, 467-8) gives a valuable summary of the sources on Qāsim al-Anvār. His promise of a monograph on the life and works of the poet has so far remained unfulfilled.