

# Books and Written Culture of the Islamic World

*Studies Presented to Claude Gilliot on the  
Occasion of His 75th Birthday*

## Islamicae Litterae

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# More Light on Muḥammad's Pre-existence

## *Qur'ānic and post-Qur'ānic Perspectives*

Uri Rubin

### 1 Introduction

One of the themes that distinguishes Muḥammad's post-Qur'ānic image from his Qur'ānic one is his pre-existence. Several modern scholars, including the present writer, have already studied the Islamic traditions about Muḥammad's pre-existence,<sup>1</sup> but never in the context of his post-Qur'ānic image as compared with his Qur'ānic one. Such a comparison is the subject of the present study. It will demonstrate how Islamic post-Qur'ānic *tafsīr* has read into the Qur'ān ideas that put Muḥammad in a magnified perspective that goes beyond the relatively modest dimensions of his Qur'ānic image.

The case investigated here will be Q 26:219, probably the only Qur'ānic verse which the exegetes managed to adapt to the idea of Muḥammad's pre-existence. We shall begin with an analysis of the internal Qur'ānic context of this passage, with a view to tracing the process in which post-Qur'ānic *tafsīr* has eventually brought the passage into line with ideas about Muḥammad's pre-existence that originally do not seem to have had any Qur'ānic 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 Qur'ānic Context*

The idea of pre-existence, which is prevalent in Jewish and Christian sources,<sup>2</sup> emerges in the Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān itself (Q 43:4). The Qur'ān 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).<sup>3</sup> The idea of pre-existence is applied to the Ka'ba 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 Ḥadīṭ, 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 Qur'ān 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,<sup>4</sup> is found in Q 61:6, 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-nabiyy 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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-aqrabīn*), 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-sājjidīn*).

4 For which see, e.g., Schimanowski, *Weisheit und Messias* 123–9; 210–5; 287–9.

5 MuḤammad: Q 2:101; 3:81. The Qurʾān: Q 2:41, 89, 91, 97; 3:3; 4:47; 5:48; 6:92; 35:31; 46:12, 30.

6 See Rubin, *The seal of the prophets*.

7 It appears 46th among the Meccan *sūras* listed by ʿAṭāʾ 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.

This passage refers to Muḥammad's prophetic tasks amongst his nearest blood relations. It contains two contrasting imperatives: "warn" (*wa-andhir*), and "lower your wing" (*wa-ḥfīd janāḥaka*). The pair of them correspond to other Qur'ānic passages in which the prophet is entrusted with the roles of *nadhīr*, "warner," and *bashīr*, "announcer [of glad tidings]" (e.g. Q 17:105; 34:28; 35:23–4, etc.). These are the two complementary aspects of Muḥammad's prophetic mission which, in the present paragraph, God tells him apply not only to people at large but also to his closest blood-relations. He is expected to warn the latter of the fate awaiting unbelievers (in the next world), as well as to encourage them to become believers by lowering his wing unto them. Here the wing metaphor expresses meekness and gentleness, which corresponds to the prophet's role as *bashīr*. In the present context it suits the intimate circle of persons alluded to in this verse, i.e. Muḥammad's closest *ʿashīra* ("kinspersons"). As for those who reject his mission from amongst his *ʿashīra*, the prophet is requested to tell them: "I am quit of what you do" (*innī barīʿun mim mā taʿmalūn*). Implicit here is the notion that religious duties override blood relationship.

The subsequent imperative is "rely" (*wa-tawakkal*). The prophet is instructed to trust the mighty and compassionate God who sees him while he stands up in prayer (*ḥīna taqūmu*).<sup>8</sup> This means that Muḥammad's prayer unto God renders him worthy of God's protection.

The next clause – *wa-taqallubaka fī l-sājidīn* – carries on the description of Muḥammad's prayer. He prays with his closest followers who prostrate themselves (*fī l-sājidīn*). The accusative mode – *taqallubaka* – indicates that God sees him in the state of *taqallub* among the *sājidīn*. The act of prostration, as dealt with in the Qur'ān, symbolizes submission, and distinguishes the believers who are not too proud to bow to God (e.g. Q 7:206) from the unbelievers whose arrogance hinders them from bowing (Q 84:21; 68:42–3). The prototype of the latter is Iblīs who, unlike the rest of the angels, disobeys God's instruction to bow to Adam (e.g. Q 15:30; 38:73, etc.).<sup>9</sup>

As for Muḥammad's state of *taqallub*, in other Qur'ānic passages, this verbal noun means continuous movement, or turning about in various directions, or journeying from one place to another (Q 16:46; 3:196; cf. 47:19).<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, one may conjecture that Muḥammad's *taqallub* among the *sājidīn* means his moving about among them. While doing so, Muḥammad is in perfect harmony with the *sājidīn* because prayer, too, is a movement. It consists of ever-changing

8 The verb *qāma* occurs quite often in connection with prayer. See Q 4:102, 142; 5:6; 9:84, 108; 18:14; 72:19; 73:2, 20.

9 On the Islamic idea of prostration see Roberto Tottoli, Muslim attitudes towards prostration, I: 5–34; II: 405–26.

10 See Lane, *Lexicon* s.v. *q.Lb.* (2553 col. 2).

postures which culminate in the *sujūd*. During this posture the believer lowers himself to minimum height. Elsewhere the Qurʾān compares the *sujūd* to the ever-changing length of a shadow throughout the different times of day, which indicates that every created object whose shadow changes in position and length carries out the *sujūd* unto God (Q 16:48–9. See also 13:15). Therefore, in the particular context of the communal prayer, MuḤammad's *taqallub* seems to stand mainly for his changing postures while praying with the believers from amongst his closest *ʿashīra*.

On the whole, the *taqallub* verse is part of God's address to the Qurʾānic prophet, which is designed to encourage him in his prophetic mission *vis-à-vis* members of his closest family who are liable to reject his warnings. God instructs him to rely on God's aid and find comfort in the *sājidūn* with whom he prays in perfect harmony. Their collaboration with him ought to be a sign that he is truly a prophet and not an imposter like the "wayward" (*al-ghāwūn*) poets who are rebuked in the passage that immediately follows the *taqallub* verse (Q 26:221–6).

## 2 Post-Qurʾānic *tafsīr*: MuḤammad's Contemporary Milieu

The *tafsīr* sources pertaining to the Qurʾānic *taqallub* passage contain traditions offering a variety of interpretations. In what follows these traditions will be sorted out according to the changing perception of MuḤammad's *taqallub* that is reflected in each. No relative chronology will be applied to them, which means that the changing approach that will be discerned in them does not necessarily stand for later ideas that have replaced earlier ones, but rather for different concepts that might have been coexistent with each other. The general criterion for the comparative analysis of these traditions will be the extent to which each tradition is related to the notion of MuḤammad's pre-existence.

Many of the post-Qurʾānic *tafsīr* traditions retain the direct link of the *taqallub* passage to MuḤammad's contemporary milieu. These traditions perceive the *sājidūn* as though representing MuḤammad's contemporary followers, and explain MuḤammad's *taqallub* as referring to his prayer. For example, a tradition of ʾIkrima (Medinan d. 105/723) says that MuḤammad's *taqallub* stands for his *qiyām* ("standing up"), *rukūʿ* ("bowing") *sujūd* ("prostrating") and *julūs* ("sitting").<sup>11</sup>

11 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Tafsīr* ii, 77. See also al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān* xix, 76; Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr*, ix, 2829 (no. 16032); al-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr* ii, 486; al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa-l-bayān* vii, 183; al-Qurtubī, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān* xiii, 144; Abū Ḥayyān, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīt* viii, 198.



The same interpretation is traced back to Ibn ‘Abbās,<sup>12</sup> and repeated by Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/777)<sup>13</sup> and al-Farrā’ (d. 207/823).<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, much as this interpretation is close to the internal Qur’ānic context, it seems to owe its dominance in the *tafsīr* sources to completely different considerations. It seems to have provided the believers of the first Islamic century with a Qur’ānic precedent for the technical aspects of prayer which the Qur’ān does not specify, i.e. the fixed series of the physical postures of the praying Muslim. Other interpretations read into the verses under discussion a precedent for the two basic sorts of prayer, the private and the communal ones. Accordingly, the words *hūna taqūmu* have been explained as meaning that God sees Muḥammad when he stands up in prayer alone, whereas the word *taqallubaka* has been explained as standing for Muḥammad’s participation in the communal prayer with the *sājidūn*. This differentiation is suggested in the commentaries of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767),<sup>15</sup> al-Huwwārī (d. 280/893),<sup>16</sup> Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 327/938),<sup>17</sup> and in several others.

But even within the context of Muḥammad’s prayer with his contemporary believers, the term *taqallub* has been loaded with other meanings which have taken it from the literal level to the metaphorical one. This comes out in the *tafsīr* of Mujāhid (d. 104/722). He explains that Muḥammad was able to see those who were behind him during prayer (*ya’ni fī l-muṣallīn, wa-kāna yuqālu: yarā man khalfahu fī l-ṣalāt*).<sup>18</sup> This interpretation is based on the perception of *taqallub* as though derived from *qalb*, i.e. “heart.” It implies that the unique potentials of Muḥammad’s heart enabled the prophet to see behind his back.<sup>19</sup> The didactic message for the believers is that they should always follow Muḥammad’s example, even in his absence, because he always watches them notwithstanding. This idea is stated explicitly in a tradition of the prophet found in the canonical *ḥadīth* compilations, to the effect that Muḥammad ordered the believers to keep their lines in order while praying, because he could see them even when they were behind his back.<sup>20</sup>

12 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* xix, 76.

13 Sufyān al-Thawrī, *Tafsīr* 230.

14 Al-Farrā’, *Ma‘ānī al-Qur’ān* ii, 285.

15 Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr* iii, 282.

16 Huwwārī, *Tafsīr* iii, 243.

17 Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr* ix, 2829 (no. 16037).

18 Mujāhid, *Tafsīr* ii, 466.

19 See al-Qurṭubī, *Aḥkām al-Qur’ān* xiii, 144: *innaka tarā bi-qalbika fī ṣalātika man khalfaka ka-mā tarā bi-‘aynika man quddāmaka*.

20 E.g. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, Adhān* [10], *Bāb iqbāl al-imām ‘alā l-nās* [71] (= i, 184).

Other interpretations of Q 26:219 depart from the context of prayer altogether, reading into it aspects of the evolving image of Muḥammad as the leader of the Islamic *umma*. Thus a tradition of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) as recorded by al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) says that the verse alludes to Muḥammad's *taqallub* among "the people" (*al-nās*).<sup>21</sup> A more expanded version of al-Ḥasan's interpretation says that Muḥammad's *taqallub* means his turning about (*taṣarrufaka*) and coming and going among his Companions and the believers.<sup>22</sup> Al-Ḥasan's interpretation implies that Muḥammad's *taqallub* takes place among the believers at large, *sājidūn* being their metaphorical description, in which case *taqallub* gains the meaning of overseeing and supervising the people among whom he moves.

Some traditions read into Muḥammad's *taqallub* specific functions of his leadership. According to an interpretation recorded by al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), the words *ḥīna taqūmu* mean that God sees Muḥammad when he rises to wage holy war on the idolaters. His *taqallub* are the religious laws (*aḥkām al-dīn*) which he lays down for the believers.<sup>23</sup> Another formulation of the same idea is offered in al-Samarqandī's (d. 375/985) *Tafsīr*, to the effect that the words *ḥīna taqūmu* mean that God sees Muḥammad when he rises to summon people to pronounce the Islamic *shahāda*.<sup>24</sup>

### 3 *Sājidūn* as Prophets

Other interpretations anchor the *taqallub* passage within the universal history of prophetic revelations. One of these traditions, as reported on the authority of Sa'īd b. Jubayr (Kūfan d. 95/713–4), explains Muḥammad's *taqallub* as follows:<sup>25</sup>

*Kamā kānati-l-anbiyā'u min qabluka.*

[your *taqallub* is] the same as (the one which) the prophets before you were (engaged in).

21 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān* xix, 76. See also Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr* ix, 2829 (no. 16034).

22 Al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf wa-l-bayān* vii, 184. See also al-Māwardī, *Nukat* iv, 189; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr* vi, 149.

23 Al-Māwardī, *Nukat* iv, 189.

24 Al-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr* ii, 486.

25 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān* xix, 76.

Al-Ṭabarī explains that according to this interpretation, the *sājidūn* are the prophets, and Muḥammad's *taqallub* is his turning about (*taṣarruf*), which is the same as that of the prophets before him.<sup>26</sup> This interpretation seems to have been inspired by Muḥammad's Qur'ānic status as the "Seal of the Prophets." Accordingly, Muḥammad's *taqallub* has been turned into a re-enactment of the model of the previous prophets who were his forerunners.

An interpretation recorded in a later *tafsīr* source elaborates on another Qur'ānic aspect of the symbiosis between Muḥammad and the previous prophets. It is found in al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058),<sup>27</sup> and runs as follows:

*Taqallubu dhikrika wa-ṣifatika 'alā alsinati l-anbiyā'i min qabluka.*

[*Taqallubaka* is] the recurrence of your remembrance and description in the pronouncements of the prophets before you.

This interpretation identifies the *sājidūn* with the prophets of previous generations who, much in accordance with the view about the pre-existent name of the Messiah (see above), pass on from one generation to the next Muḥammad's own abstract entity that is represented in his name and person as described in their recurrent prophecies.

Further traditions contain more explicit allusions to the transmigration of the abstract, pre-existent Muḥammad through generations of prophets, while identifying the latter with the *sājidūn* of the *taqallub* verse. Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845) has recorded a tradition of 'Ikrima as related on the authority of his master Ibn 'Abbās, which says:<sup>28</sup>

*Min nabīyyin ilā nabīyyin ḥattā akhrajaka nabīyyan.*

[Your *taqallub* is your transmigration] from one prophet to another until [God] has brought you forth as a prophet.

This tradition envisions Muḥammad's transmigration from one prophet to another, which seems to imply his hidden pre-existence in the souls of these prophets. The corporeal Muḥammad is assumed to have emerged in his own generation when his hidden pre-existent entity came out into the open.

26 See also Ibn Abī Hātim, *Tafsīr* ix, 2829 (no. 16036); al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf wa-l-bayān* vii, 184; Ibn 'Aṭīyya, *Tafsīr* xii, 84.

27 Al-Māwardī, *Nukat* iv, 189.

28 Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt* i, 25.

ʿIkrima's interpretation recurs as one of the exegetical options of the Qur'ānic *taqallub* in the commentaries of Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 327/938),<sup>29</sup> al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035),<sup>30</sup> and al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058).<sup>31</sup> It is found in some *ḥadīth* compilations as well.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.1 *Jesus and Muḥammad*

The idea of Muḥammad transmigrating through the prophets is reminiscent of some significant pre-Islamic texts. To begin with, Goldziher has pointed out some passages from the pseudo-Clementine writings, which speak about a pre-existent prophetic spirit that runs through the ages, incarnating itself anew in each generation.<sup>33</sup> In fact, this idea can be traced back to a Jewish apocalyptic text found in the *Wisdom of Solomon* (7:27). Here we read about a pre-existent unchanging spirit, which "in every generation she [Wisdom] passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets."<sup>34</sup> This structure of thought about generations of prophets bearing the same pre-existent Wisdom seems to be behind I Peter 1:10–2, where the spirit of Christ is said to have dwelt within the prophets, testifying in advance through them the events of his life.<sup>35</sup>

In view of this Jewish and Christian pattern of the idea of pre-existence, it may be assumed that the elevation of Muḥammad to the rank of a similar pre-existent entity wandering through the prophets has its origin in Islamic polemics with Christianity. It was triggered by the general urge to provide the Muslims with a prophet no less elevated than the major prophets of the Jews and the Christians.

The polemical tone is quite apparent in the following *ḥadīth* of the Prophet, transmitted by the Companion Abū Hurayra, which is recorded in Ibn Sa'd's *Ṭabaqāt*. It runs as follows.<sup>36</sup>

*Bu'ithtu min khayri qurūni banī Ādam qarman fa-qarman ḥattā bu'ithtu mina l-qarni lladhī kuntu fihī.*

29 Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr* ix, 2828 (no. 16028).

30 Al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa-l-bayān* vii, 184.

31 Al-Māwardī, *Nukat* iv, 189.

32 Al-Ṭabarānī, *Kabīr* xi, 362 (no. 12021).

33 Goldziher, *Neuplatonische*, 337. See also Stroumsa, *Seal of the prophets*, 72.

34 Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-existence*, 260, 270.

35 Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-existence*, 259.

36 Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt* i, 25. The *isnād*: 'Amr ibn Abī 'Amr [= Maysara, a *mawlā* of al-Muṭṭalib b. 'Abdallāh] Medinan d. 144/761)←Sa'īd al-Maqburī (Medinan d. 123/741)←Abū Hurayra←Prophet. Cf. Goldziher, *Neuplatonische*, 340; Rubin, *Pre-existence*, 71–2.

I have been sent forth from amongst the best generations of the sons of Adam, generation after generation, until I have been sent forth within the generation in which I live.

Abū Hurayra's tradition recurs in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/869),<sup>37</sup> as well as in other *ḥadīth* and *dalā'il al-nubuwwa* compilations.<sup>38</sup> It implies that the course of transmission of the pre-existent Muḥammad surpasses that of Jesus or, for that matter, of any other prophet.

#### 4 From Prophets to Progenitors

Further exegetical traditions pertaining to the *taqallub* passage reveal a significantly different perception of the identity of the bearers of the pre-existent Muḥammad, as well as of the nature of his pre-existent entity. In some of these traditions, the prophets – the *sājidūn* – appear as bearing Muḥammad's pre-existent essence in their loins (*aṣlāb*). For example, a tradition transmitted by 'Aṭā' b. Abī Rabāḥ (Meccan d. 114/732) on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās explains Muḥammad's *taqallub* as follows:<sup>39</sup>

*Mā zāla l-nabiyyu yataqallabu fī aṣlābi l-anbiyā' ḥattā waladathu ummuhu.*

The prophet never stopped wandering through the loins of the prophets till his mother gave birth to him.

The "loins" of the carriers reappear in another version of 'Ikrima as recorded in several *ḥadīth* sources. It says that Muḥammad's *taqallub* means:

*Min ṣulbi nabiyyin ilā ṣulbi nabiyyin ḥattā ṣirta nabiyyan.*

(You have transmigrated) from the loins of a prophet to the loins of (another) prophet, till you have become a (corporeal) prophet.<sup>40</sup>

37 Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Manāqib [61], Ṣifat al-nabiyy [23] (= iv, 229).

38 Abū Ya'lā, *Musnad* xi, 431 (no. 6553); al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il* i, 175.

39 Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr* ix, 2828 (no. 16029). See also al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf wa-l-bayān* vii, 184; al-Wāḥidī, *Wasīṭ* iii, 365; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr* vi, 148.

40 Al-Haythamī, *Majma' al-zawā'id* vii, 89; Shāmī, *Subul al-hudā wa-l-rashād* i, 275. See also Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr* iii, 352.

The allusion to the “loins” (*aṣlāb*) of the prophets implies that they function as MuḤammad’s genealogical ancestors. This notion marks a transition from prophets at large to prophets who are also MuḤammad’s progenitors. Thus the image of MuḤammad has been taken one step further away from the Qurʾān in which he still lacks any noble descent.

The same concept is discerned in another version of ʿIkrima’s tradition, which is found in al-Wāḥidī’s (d. 468/1075) *tafsīr*.<sup>41</sup> It says that MuḤammad’s *taqallub* means:

*Yurīdu fī aṣlābi l-muwaḥḥidīn min nabīyyin ilā nabīyyin ḥattā akhrajaka fī ḥādhihi l-umma.*

This means [that you, MuḤammad, transmigrated] through the loins of the monotheists, from one prophet to another, till he [i.e. God] brought you forth amongst this nation.

This tradition seems to distinguish between two groups among the carriers of the pre-existent MuḤammad in their loins, namely, prophets and “monotheists.” The latter probably stands for MuḤammad’s Arab ancestors, the progeny of Abraham and Ishmael; they have been transformed here from *jāhīlī* unbelievers to monotheists who have been the bearers of MuḤammad’s prophetic essence. To be sure, we have versions in which the carriers of the pre-existent MuḤammad are explicitly defined as his fathers. For example, in the *Tanwīr al-miqbās*,<sup>42</sup> which contains interpretations attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās, one of the suggested exegetical options is that MuḤammad’s *taqallub* means:

[Your *taqallub*] through the loins of your fathers of old (*fī aṣlāb ābāʾika l-awwalīn*).

More detailed is the statement of al-Samarqandī who points out that one of the suggested exegetical options for MuḤammad’s *taqallub* is this:

*Taqallubaka fī aṣlābi l-ābāʾi wa-arḥāmi l-ummaḥāti min Ādam ilā Nūḥ wa-ilā Ibrāhīm wa-ilā man baʿdahu . . .*

41 Al-Wāḥidī, *Wasīṭ* iii, 365.

42 Al-Firūzābādī, *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 399.

Your transmigration through the loins of the fathers and the wombs of the mothers, from Adam to Noah and to Abraham and to those after him . . .<sup>43</sup>

The reference to the mothers alongside of the fathers renders the course of transmigration all the more genetic. The names of Adam, Noah and Abraham are of prophets who belong to Muḥammad's genealogical tree. The fact that of all the biblical prophets, only these three are mentioned implies that from Abraham on, Muḥammad's pre-existent essence is assumed to have continued moving not through Isaac, Jacob, etc. – the forefathers of the Israelite prophets as well as of Jesus – but rather through Muḥammad's actual Arabian ancestors, beginning with Ishmael son of Abraham, all the way down through north-Arabian and Qurayshī progenitors, to Muḥammad himself.

In this genetic twist of the idea of pre-existence one may sense an effort to defend the status of Ishmael, which in Jewish and Christian sources is perceived as inferior to that of Isaac. A blunt demonstration of the Christian disregard for Ishmael is found in Galatians 4:21–31 where the son born to Abraham by a free woman (Isaac, son of Sarah) is praised as superior to the son of the slave woman (Ishmael, son of Hagar):

30 But what does the scripture say? 'Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.' 31 So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman.

Sure enough, in the Islamic exposition of the course through which the essence of the pre-existent Muḥammad is being transmitted, the children of the "slave woman" are those who inherit the divine legacy, not the children of the "free woman".

The conversion of prophets to progenitors has an interesting orthographic angle as well. The Arabic word for "prophets" is *أنبياء* whereas "fathers" is *آباء*. The obvious orthographic affinity of this pair of words could have facilitated the alternation which resulted in the idea that the prophets who carried the pre-existent essence of Muḥammad were also his biological fathers. Moreover, *أنبياء* could be easily read as *النساء*, which could bring the mothers into the genetic transmission of Muḥammad's essence.<sup>44</sup>

43 Al-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr* ii, 486. See also al-Qurṭubī, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* xiii, 144.

44 See Ibn Manẓūr, *MTD* ii, 27: *mā zāla rasūlu llāhi (s) yataqallabu fī aṣṣalabi l-nisā'i ḥattā walaḍathu ummuḥu*. Here "women" [النساء] is probably a scribal error for "prophets" [الأنبياء].

## 5 The Shī'ī idea of Pre-existence

The idea of pre-existence appears not only in the Sunnī *tafsīr* of the *taqallub* verse, but in the Twelver Shī'ī *tafsīr* as well. Generally speaking, the Shī'ī version of the idea of pre-existence is applied to the successive line of the twelve imams.<sup>45</sup> The Shī'ī traditions delineate a universal line of divine light that forms part of the spiritual legacy of each carrier which he forwards at the end of his life to his successor. The line begins with Adam and is continued through Noah and Abraham, who is followed by Ishmael, from whom the light is passed on to Isaac, and from him to Jacob and the Israelite prophets, then to Jesus, and finally it reaches MuḤammad through Jesus' legatees. After MuḤammad's death, the journey of the light is continued through 'Alī and the rest of the imams. The idea of pre-existence is represented here in the perception of the light as a primordial divine entity that is revealed upon earth through each of its human carriers. As with the Sunnī traditions to the same effect, the Shī'ī ones elaborate the Qur'ānic status of MuḤammad as the "Seal of the Prophets," providing him with a position no less elevated than that of Jesus, one which the imams share with him.

But as in Sunnī commentaries, the Shī'ī sources contain no less prevalent traditions about a purely biological line of transmission in which the divine luminous legacy reaches MuḤammad and the imams through their Arabian progenitors. The course of the divine legacy is essentially different here, because it moves on in a genetic process of procreation. According to these traditions, 'Alī has received his light not directly from MuḤammad, who was not his father, but rather from his own father, Abū Ṭālib. The latter received it from 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the common grandfather of 'Alī and MuḤammad.<sup>46</sup>

It follows that the transition of prophets into progenitors is represented in the Shī'ī sphere as well. In fact, the Shī'īs seem to have been the first Muslims to put forward the concept of the Arabian course of MuḤammad's pre-existent essence. In so doing they employed the *tafsīr* of the Qur'ānic *taqallub* verse. This is indicated, to begin with, in the words of al-Rāzī (d. 607/1210), who observes that the Rāfiḍa (i.e. the Shī'īs) have relied on the verse about MuḤammad's *taqallub*, as well as on traditions, to uphold their tenet that MuḤammad's Arab forefathers were believers. They have maintained that the *taqallub* verse means that God transferred MuḤammad's spirit from one *sājid* to another. Al-Rāzī adds that the tradition that the Shī'īs have adduced is the

45 See Amir-Moezzi, *The spirituality of Shī'ī Islam*, 133–68.

46 For the differences between the two courses of transmission, see Rubin, Pre-existence, 109–10; *idem*, Prophets and progenitors, 44–5. A detailed list of carriers in the two lines is provided in Amir-Moezzi, *The spirituality of Shī'ī Islam*, 163.



one containing Muḥammad's statement to the effect that God has "advanced me only from the loins of pure men into the wombs of pure women" (*lam azal unqalu min aṣṣalabi l-tāhirīna ilā arḥāmi l-tāhirāti*).<sup>47</sup>

The Shī'ī concern for the nobility of Muḥammad's descent is an offshoot of their preoccupation with the nobility of the imams, Muḥammad's offspring through 'Alī and Fāṭima. This concern is well represented in the fact that the Shī'ī *tafsīr* of the *taqallub* passage focus on the genetic line of the course of Muḥammad's pre-existent essence. For instance, Furāt (third century AH) quotes a tradition of the fifth imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir [Abū Ja'far] (d. 114/743) saying that Q 26:219 means:<sup>48</sup>

*Wa-taqallubaka fī aṣṣalabi l-anbiyā'i, nabiyyin ba'da nabiyyin.*

[God sees] your transmigration through the loins of the prophets, one prophet after the other.

Furāt suggests no other exegetical possibilities for Muḥammad's *taqallub* among the *sājidūn*. The same applies to al-Sayyārī (end of third century AH), whose only interpretation is the one saying that Muḥammad's *taqallub* stands for his transmigration through "the loins of the prophets and the believers (*fī aṣṣalab al-anbiyā' wa-l-mu'minīn*)."<sup>49</sup> Likewise, in al-Qummī's (d. 307/919) comments on Muḥammad's *taqallub*, the only exegetical option is that of the transmigration through previous generations. The tradition that illustrates this is the one of al-Bāqir about Muḥammad's transmigration through "the loins of the prophets" (*aṣṣalab al-nabiyyīn*).<sup>50</sup> The comments of al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067) are more composite.<sup>51</sup> He begins with the interpretation that keeps Muḥammad's *taqallub* within the context of his ritual movements during prayer, and he then proceeds to point out Ibn 'Abbās' explanation of the *taqallub*, in the sense of Muḥammad's cyclical incarnation "from one prophet to another" (*min nabiyyin ilā nabiyyin*). We have first met this interpretation in Ibn Sa'd's *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt*, where it is related by 'Ikrima on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās (see above). This is followed by another interpretation of the *taqallub* in

47 Rāzī, *Tafsīr* xxiv, 173. Cf. Goldziher, Neuplatonische 332–33; Rubin, Pre-existence, 76 n. 47; Amir-Moezzi, *The spirituality of Shī'ī Islam*, 160 n. 54.

48 Furāt, *Tafsīr* i, 304 (no. 409).

49 Al-Sayyārī, *Qirā'āt*, 101 (no. 394).

50 Al-Qummī, *Tafsīr* ii, 100.

51 Al-Ṭūsī, *Tafsīr* viii, 68.

the context of Muḥammad's prayer, which is immediately followed by this comment:

*Wā-qāla qawm<sup>un</sup> min aṣḥābinā innahu arāda taqallubahu min Ādama ilā abīhi 'Abdillāhi fī zuhūri l-muwahḥidīna, lam yakun fihim man yasjudu li-ghayri llāhi*

Some of our comrades have explained that he (i.e. God) means his (i.e. Muḥammad's) transmigration from Adam till his father 'Abdallāh, through the loins (*zuhūr*) of the monotheists; there was not even one among them who worshipped a god other than Allāh.<sup>52</sup>

In the same manner, al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1153) states:

Some said that the verse means your *taqallub* through the loins (*aṣlāb*) of the *muwahḥidūn*, from a prophet to (another) prophet, till he (i.e. God) drew you out as a prophet.

Ṭabrisī goes on to adduce a further version, to the effect that Muḥammad's *taqallub* among the *sājidūn* means his transmigration through the loins of the prophets, one prophet after another, till He (i.e. God) brought him forth out of the loins of his father, always from a legal marital bond (*nikāḥ*), not from an illicit one (*sifāḥ*), since Adam.<sup>53</sup>

### 5.1 *The Hāshimīs: al-Kumayt*

The earliest manifestation of the Shī'ī interest in the genetic transmigration of Muḥammad's pre-existent essence is to be found outside of the direct *tafsīr* of the Qur'ānic *taqallub* verse. The poet al-Kumayt b. Zayd al-Asadī (d. 125/743) who composed his *Hāshimīyyāt* in praise of the house of Hāshim, addresses Muḥammad in the third Hāshimīyya, saying:<sup>54</sup>

(3:39) *Mā bayna Ḥawwā'a in nusibta ilā/  
Āminata (i) 'tamma nabtuka l-hadabu*  
(3:40) *Qarnan fa-qarnan tanāsakhūka laka al-/  
Fiḍḍatu minhā bayḍā'u wa-l-dhahabu*

52 *Loc. cit.*

53 Al-Ṭabrisī, *Majma' al-bayān* xxvi, 189.

54 Al-Qaysī, *Sharḥ Hāshimīyyāt al-Kumayt*, 112 (3:39–41). See also Goldziher, *Neuplatonische*, 335–6; Rubin, *Pre-existence*, 90–1; Amir-Moezzi, *The spirituality of Shī'ī Islam*, 165–6.

(3:41) *Ḥattā ‘alā baytuka l-muhadhdhabu min/  
Khindifa ‘alyā’a taḥtahā l-‘arabu*

(3:39) Between Eve and Āmina – when your lineage is delineated –  
Blooms your long-branched tree.

(3:40) They (i.e. your various mothers) passed you on, generation after  
generation, and you have possessed

The silver that you received from them, shining, and the Gold,

(3:41) Till your refined house occupied a lofty place among  
The (people of) Khindif, ranking higher than the (other) Arabs.

In these verses Kumayt praises Muḥammad for his glorious descent which is represented in his pre-existent essence that passes on in an organic process through the bodies of women who have carried this *qarnan fa-qarnan*, “from generation to generation.” As the pre-existent Muḥammad wanders through their bodies, he elicits from them shining silver and gold which symbolize the light of his prophethood.

The allusion to Khindif is significant. According to the traditional Arabian genealogy, Khindif was the wife of al-Ya’s b. Muḍar and the mother of Mudrika, to whom the Kināna and the Quraysh belonged. She was also the mother of Ṭabikha whose progeny included the Tamīm. Khindif’s third son was Qama’a, father of ‘Amr b. Luḥayy of the Khuzā’a.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, Kumayt’s assertion that Muḥammad’s house occupies a lofty place among Khindif’s progeny implies the superiority of Muḥammad’s house – namely, that of Hāshim – to the rest of the Khindif tribes, especially to the rest of the Kināna and the Quraysh.

By describing Muḥammad’s transmigration through generations of noble mothers, al-Kumayt seems to be using a literary pattern known from Arabic texts reflecting ideas prevalent among the pre-Islamic Arabs.<sup>56</sup> A good example is provided in some poetic verses included in a widely-current *lāmiyya* usually ascribed to the Jewish pre-Islamic poet al-Samaw’al b. ‘Ādiyā’:<sup>57</sup>

*Ṣafawnā fa-lam nakdur wa-akhlaṣa sirranā/  
ināth<sup>un</sup> aṭabat ḥamlanā wa-fuḥūlū  
Alawnā ilā khayri l-zuhūri wa-ḥaṭṭanā/  
li-waqṭin ilā khayri l-buṭūni nuzūlū*

55 On Khindif’s sons see e.g. al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb* i, 39.

56 Goldziher, *Muslim studies* i, 46; Rubin, *Prophets and progenitors*, 44.

57 E.g. al-Marzūqī, *Sharḥ Dīwān al-ḥamāsa* i, 119. See also Rubin, *Pre-existence*, 72–3.

We are pure not turbid; our hidden essence was purely preserved/  
 by women who carried us well and by men;  
 We ascended the best backs and descended/  
 for a while into the best wombs.

In the same manner, al-Kumayt delineates the genealogical course of the substance of the pre-existent Muḥammad on its female side, i.e. beginning with Eve down to Āmina through Khindif.

The political background to Kumayt's verses seems to be the conviction of the members of the Hāshim that their close blood relationship to Muḥammad provided them – to the exclusion of the rest of the Quraysh, and particularly the Umayyads – with first priority to succeed Muḥammad as leaders of the Muslims. Kumayt's verses indicate that one of the arguments by which the Hāshimīs hoped to assert their rights, which were never duly fulfilled in spite of the short period of 'Alī's caliphate (36–41/656–61), was the wandering of Muḥammad's pre-existent essence through the loins of the prophet's ancestors down to his mother. This idea implied that Muḥammad's prophecy was inherent in his inborn genes, and therefore his closest relatives could claim the right to succeed him as his *khulafā'*, i.e. caliphs. Blood relationship to Muḥammad and authority went hand in hand from the very outset, or – as observed by Madelung in an article about Kumayt's *Hāshimīyyāt* – the Hāshimīs “were thus widely recognized as natural candidates for leadership in the Muslim community and for the caliphate.”<sup>58</sup> Therefore it seems that Kumayt's verses should indeed be read in the same context of the Hāshimī claim to political authority in the Umayyad period.

## 6 The Sunnī Sphere

Despite the intensive Shī'ī elaboration of the notion that Muḥammad's *taqallub* means his transmigration through his Arabian biological forefathers, Sunnīs too found the idea no less suitable to their own devotion to the prophet. Therefore, as we have seen, in several Sunnī *tafsīr* sources the traditions explain the *taqallub* verse in a similar manner.

Outside of the specific commentary on the Qur'ānic *taqallub*, a significant aspect of the Sunnī interest in the transmigration of the pre-existent Muḥammad through his progenitors is reflected in poetic verses attributed to

<sup>58</sup> Madelung, *The Hāshimīyyāt of al-Kumayt*, 24; see also the response to Madelung in Sharon, *The Umayyads as Ahl al-Bayt*, 151–2.

Muḥammad's paternal uncle, al-ʿAbbās b. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib. They deserve attention thanks to their similarity to Kumayt's verses, which means that poetic patterns kept floating around in several compositions of different poets. Al-ʿAbbās' verses, including the one about Khindif, are recorded in Ibn Qutayba's (d. 276/890) *al-Maʿānī al-kabīr*; they run as follows:<sup>59</sup>

*Min qablihā ṭibta fī l-ẓilālī wa-ft/  
 mustawda<sup>in</sup> ḥaythu yukḥṣafu l-waraqū  
 Thumma habaṭta l-bilāda lā bashar<sup>un</sup>/  
 anta wa-lā muḍghat<sup>un</sup> wa-lā ʿalaqu  
 Bal nutfat<sup>un</sup> tarkabu l-safīna wa-qad/  
 aljama Nasr<sup>an</sup> wa-ahlahu l-gharaqū  
 Tunqalu min ṣālib<sup>in</sup> ilā raḥimin/  
 idhā maḍā ʿālam<sup>un</sup> badā ṭabaqu  
 Ḥattā ʿalā baytuka l-muḥaymanu min/  
 Khindifa ʿalyāʾa taḥtahā l-nuṭuqu*

Before that you dwelt well among shadows,  
 deposited where leaves were stitched.  
 Then you descended to earth, not as a human being  
 nor as a morsel or congealed blood –  
 But as a sperm drop. You sailed in the Ark while  
 the Flood had reached the mouth of Nasr<sup>60</sup> and his followers;  
 You were advanced from loins to loins,  
 when a generation passed away, there came another.  
 Till your well-kept house gained a lofty place among  
 the people of Khindif, which is higher than the belts.

Ibn Qutayba has recorded the same verses – but without the verse about Khindif – in his *Taʾwīl mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*, together with a detailed interpretation.<sup>61</sup> These verses describe the course of Muḥammad's prophetic substance from the loins of Adam down to Muḥammad's immediate parents. The various stations are described in Qurʾānic terminology. Thus the first verse states that Muḥammad dwelt among shadows, which, according to Ibn Qutayba's explanation, were the shadows of Paradise. The leaves that were stitched were those covering Adam's loins (see Q 7:22; 20:121) within which

59 Ibn Qutayba, *al-Maʿānī al-kabīr* i, 557–8.

60 One of the idols of Noah's people. See Q 71:23.

61 Ibn Qutayba, *Mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*, 87–9.

Muḥammad's essence was deposited, and as a part of which he descended with Adam and Eve from heaven to earth. Later on, Muḥammad boarded Noah's Ark, this time within the latter's loins, and so he continued to be passed on from generation to generation within the loins of each of his progenitors.

As for Khindif, al-'Abbās' verses state that Muḥammad's house occupies an elevated place ('alyā') among her progeny that surpasses the belts (*al-nuṭuq*). This means, according to Ibn Qutayba, that the rest of the Khindif ranked no higher than belts around the waist.<sup>62</sup>

The verse about Khindif appears in other sources as well, together with the other verses of al-'Abbās.<sup>63</sup> It may be noted that some of the verses (not the one about Khindif) are already said to have been composed by Muḥammad's poet Ḥassān b. Thābit.<sup>64</sup>

In the realm of *tafsīr*, al-'Abbās' verses recur in some commentaries on Q 69:11 in which God states: "We bore you up (*ḥamalnākum*) in the ship when the water rose high." The exegetes hold that the idea here is that when Noah embarked the Ark, God caused him to bear within his loins all his future offspring, i.e. humankind at large. Some exegetes have adduced the verses of al-'Abbās, and especially the part about Noah, to illustrate the idea.<sup>65</sup>

### 6.1 Quraysh

Somewhat later Sunnī traditions apply the idea of Muḥammad's pre-existent prophetic essence to the Quraysh at large. Such traditions belong to the genre of *faḍā'il Quraysh* which is designed to assert the right of the Quraysh to lead the Muslims as caliphs.<sup>66</sup> Some of these traditions highlight the genealogical relationship between the Quraysh and Muḥammad, delineating the course of his pre-existent entity through the loins of his progenitors. In the following tradition, this genetic pre-existent entity is referred to as "Quraysh." The tradition is recorded in the *Musnad* of Ibn Abī 'Umar al-'Adanī (d. 243/857), as related again on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās, this time through a certain 'Uthmān b. al-Ḍaḥḥāk.<sup>67</sup> It says that already two thousand years before the creation of Adam, Quraysh existed as light in front of God. When God created Adam he

62 On the significance of the "belts" (*nuṭuq*) see further, al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Fā'iḳ* iii, 123–4, s.v. *f.d.d. Tāj al-'arūs*, s.v. *n.ṭ.q.*; *Lisān al-'arab*, s.v. *h.m.n.*

63 Al-Ḥākim, *Mustadrak* iii, 369; al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj* ii, 130; Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Istī'āb* ii, 447; Ibn Manzūr, *MTD* ii, 30–1; al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il* v, 268; al-Suyūṭī, *Khaṣā'iṣ* i, 97.

64 Ḥassān b. Thābit, *Dīwān* i, 498–9 (no. 335). See also Ibn Manzūr, *MTD* ii, 30.

65 E.g. al-Māwardī, *Nukat* vi, 79–80.

66 E.g. M.J. Kister, *Quraysh*, *EL2*; Varisco, *Metaphors and sacred history*, 148.

67 For him see Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt* v, 422; Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb* vii, 114 (no. 266).

deposited the light within his loins, and Muḥammad descended to earth in this form, then he dwelt like this in Noah's loins, then in Abraham's, and so on – always through pure marital bonds – till God brought him out through his parents.<sup>68</sup>

## 6.2 *Al-Ājurrī*

Several Sunnī theologians expressed a similar interest in the role of Muḥammad's ancestors as bearers of his pre-existent essence. These theologians, too, have connected the idea with the Qur'ānic *taqallub* verse. For example, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Ājurrī (d. 360/970)<sup>69</sup> says that even before the creation of Adam, Muḥammad was already a prophet, and he did not stop wandering (*yataqallabu*) through the loins of the prophets (*aṣṣalab al-anbiyā'*) and of the sons of the prophets (*wa-abnā'i l-anbiyā'*), in immaculate marriage bonds, till God drew him out of his mother's belly. All along, God was keeping and protecting him till he came of age. God made him hate the idols of the Quraysh, and he never let him know anything of the morals of the *jāhiliyya* but inspired him instead with the worship of God alone, and Satan had no access to him, until his first prophetic revelation, when he was forty years old.

These observations indicate that the notion that Muḥammad got his prophetic genes from his Arab ancestors served the idea of his eternal immunity (*'iṣma*) from sin and disbelief which was the outcome of God's constant guidance under which Muḥammad existed since his primordial creation. This guidance protected all the previous generations of his forefathers against illicit marriage contacts, so that the Muḥammadan primordial substance that transmigrated through their bodies always retained its purity. The implied message of this view is that not only Muḥammad but his forefathers as well were immune from paganism, and hence righteous persons and good Muslims. As put by al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1853): "This verse [Q 26:219] has been adduced as a proof that (Muḥammad's) parents were believers, as maintained by many prominent Sunnīs."<sup>70</sup>

68 Al-Ājurrī, *Sharī'a*, 346 (no. 919); al-Shāmī, *Subul al-hudā* i, 278 (from *Musnad al-'Adanī*). See also al-Khargūshī, *Sharaf al-Muṣṭafā* i, 304 (no. 78). For further references see Rubin, Pre-existence, 102 n. 109.

69 Al-Ājurrī, *Sharī'a*, 351 (no. 925).

70 Al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī* xix, 138: *Wa-studilla bi-l-āyati 'alā imāni abawayhi (ṣ) ka-mā dha-haba ilayhi kathūr<sup>um</sup> min ajillati ahli l-sunnati . . .*

## 7 The Sūfī Approach

Notice should also be taken of the Ṣūfī approach to Q 26:219. The veneration for Muḥammad's image played a special role in Ṣūfī piety, and therefore the idea of the wandering of his pre-existent essence through the loins of his forefathers is well represented in the Ṣūfī *tafsīr* on the Qur'ānic *taqallub* verse. Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996) states in his *Qūt al-qulūb*<sup>71</sup> that Muḥammad's *taqallub* was interpreted as meaning,

*Taqallubaka fī l-aṣḷābi l-zākīya wa-l-arḥāmi l-tāhira, lam yattafiq laka awān<sup>un</sup> 'alā sifāḥ<sup>in</sup> qaṭṭu. Ka-dhālika ruwiya 'ani l-nabiyy. Wa-qīla fī aṣḷābi l-anbiyā'i: yuqallibuka bi-l-tanqīli fī ṣulbi nabiyy<sup>in</sup> ba'da nabiyy<sup>in</sup> ḥattā akhrajaka min dhurriyyati warathati Ismā'ila.*

Your transmigration through the refined loins and the pure wombs; you never happened to be advanced through an illicit marriage. Thus it was related. Some said: [the verse means your transmigration] through the loins of the prophets; (God) passed you on through loins of one prophet after another, till he brought you out from the offspring of Ishmael's heirs.

The Ṣūfī exegete Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) repeats the view that Muḥammad's *taqallub* means his transmigration through the loins of the prophets.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, the Ṣūfī exegete al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) mentions among other exegetical options the one according to which Muḥammad's *taqallub* means "your wandering through the loins of your Muslim forefathers who knew ('*arafū*) God and prostrated themselves to him, in contrast to those who did not know God.<sup>73</sup> Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) follows suit, stating in his *tafsīr* that Muḥammad's *taqallub* means his wandering through the loins of "your forefathers the prophets who have resigned from this world (*al-fānīn*) for the sake of God."<sup>74</sup>

## 8 Summary

This article has shown the main window through which the idea of Muḥammad's pre-existence found its way into the Qur'ān, namely, the *tafsīr*

71 Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb* ii, 174.

72 Al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* ii, 83.

73 Al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, on Q 26:219.

74 Ibn 'Arabī, *Tafsīr* (on Q 26:219): ... *fī aṣḷābi ābā'ika l-anbiyā'i l-fānīna fī llāhi 'anhā.*



of the *taqallub* verse (Q 26:219). When read within the internal Qur'ānic context, this verse seems to describe Muḥammad's prayer in communion with his contemporary believers who are called al-*sājidūn*. But when subjected to the notion of Muḥammad's pre-existence, the *sājidūn* have become prophets of past generations, who – in accordance with the Qur'ānic status of Muḥammad as the “Seal of the Prophets” – are perceived as having carried the same pre-existent prophetic spirit which Muḥammad has finally made manifest among his own generation. A similar outlook can be observed in the image of the Christian Jesus. Further Islamic interpretations of the *taqallub* verse carry Muḥammad's image further away from his Qur'ānic image, providing him with a noble Arabian descent. The prophets as the *sājidūn* have become links in the successive biological chain of forefathers who carried Muḥammad's pre-existent essence in their loins. This genetic course has served to uphold the status of Muḥammad's Arabian descent vis-à-vis the Israelite descent of the previous prophets. Within the internal Islamic context, the genetic course marks the core of the Shī'ī *tafsīr* of the Qur'ānic *taqallub* verse, which indicates their special concern for the nobility of Muḥammad's descent, as well as for that of the imams, his offspring. But the first glimpses of the Shī'ī preoccupation with Muḥammad's noble descent are noticed in a political context, in verses of the poet al-Kumayt praising the clan of Hāshim. Nevertheless, the genetic course of the journey of Muḥammad's pre-existent essence also emerges in the Sūfī interpretations of the *taqallub* verse, as well as in Sunnī writings at large. The Sunnīs, as well as the Shī'īs, supported the dogma of Muḥammad's *ʿiṣma* i.e. immunity from *jāhili* corruption, therefore all of them could subscribe to the *tafsīr* of the *taqallub* verse according to the idea of genetic pre-existence.

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