

**January 11, 2009**

The Sunday After Theophany

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

Those impressed by the similarities between Islam and the Christian faith often mention the reverence for the prophets shared in these two religions. This is a striking similarity, I suppose. Many of the biblical prophets are also named in the Qu'ran, and with no diminished sense of their dignity.

That resemblance holds true, however, only by way of a material comparison. If the Bible and the Qu'ran are examined in their formal and theological understandings of the prophets, one discerns a very deep divide between the two sources. I propose here simply to outline the shape of that division.

In this attempt, I hope to say nothing disparaging of Islam. Indeed, I am resolved to claim nothing about Islam that Islam does not claim for itself. This expression of an elementary sympathy, I believe, must normally mark the just and proper approach to someone else's religion.

In Islamic theology the biblical prophets are largely separated from their context in biblical history. I do not mean that the Qu'ran denies the historicity of their revelation. It is more the case that the historical settings of the prophets are largely ignored; they do not serve as the context for understanding prophetic teaching.

According to Qu'ranic thought, each of the prophets was given to grasp some segment or aspect of the total and unified message of Islam. Those prophets--- a group that includes several non-biblical religious men known to the Arabs--- were charged with speaking limited parts of the fullness of revelation given finally in the Qu'ran itself. The prophetic message is unified, not by reference to the unity of Israel's history---and certainly not by reference to its fulfillment in Christ---but through the plenary revelation granted through Muhammad.

Understood in this way, each of the prophets represents some aspect of man's approach to God. They were religious "types," as it were. Indeed, certain scholars of the Qu'ran, some of them taking their lead from Plato, elaborated typologies of the prophetic thought and experience.

Arguably the best of these efforts was that of Ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240), who elaborated his theory of the prophets his *The Bezels of Wisdom*. This author, whom his contemporaries surnamed *Ibn Aflatun* ("Son of Plato"), wrote on the theme of Wisdom in twenty-seven of the prophets mentioned in the Qu'ran,

most of them biblical. In these *beze/s*, or "seals," he discovered some special aspect of Wisdom manifested in each of these prophets. Thus, he meditated on the Wisdom of destiny in Ezra, the Wisdom of intimacy in Elijah, the Wisdom of holiness in Enoch, and so forth. According to Ibn al-Arabi, the one Wisdom was revealed to each of these prophets according to his particular ability to receive it.

The merits of this engaging theory are obvious. When Ibn al-Arabi wrote the *Beze/s* toward the end of his life, it was arguably the best and most attractive Platonic reading of the biblical material since Philo, more than a millennium earlier. Should I ever get to Damascus, I must visit the tomb of this great thinker and express appreciation for his work.

I cannot help but wonder, nonetheless, what Isaiah might say on finding his message wrenched from its historical context and subsumed into a large panorama of eternal and universal religious truth. In fact, Isaiah need not worry, because he is not found in the *Beze/s*; Ibn al-Arabi mentioned neither him nor most of Israel's other "literary" prophets. The reason for this omission is simple: Ibn al-Arabi was not really interested in the teaching of the prophets. He used them, rather, only as symbols of his own religious teaching.

This work of Ibn al-Arabi is justly revered among proponents of the Perennial Philosophy---those persuaded that man's ongoing search for God is essentially identical at all times, though manifest differently in different historical and cultural settings.

This Islamic approach to the prophets, however, is almost infinitely distant from that of the Bible. In our Holy Scriptures, the prophets are neither religious theorists nor partial symbols of eternal truth. They are essentially men who addressed the circumstances of their own times, convinced that God was revealing Himself in the fabric of those times. The unity among the prophets is founded on the unity of that history.

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