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

I

The chapter about innovations in mosques in al-Ṭurṭūshī’s Kitāb al-hadādith wa-l-bida' 1 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: ‘Abū’l-Dardā and Ubayy b. Ka’b measured the mosque; they came afterwards to the Prophet with the rod of the cubit. The Prophet then said: “Nay, a booth like the booth of Moses: thūmām and wood, because the affair (will happen) sooner than that (bal ‘arīsh’ūna ka’-arīshi Mūsā thūmām’ūn wa-khashabūn fa-l-amr a’jal min dhālika 2 )” 3. The hadith is obscure and abstruse and the editor, Muhammad al-Ṭalibī, 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-Athīr; 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. 4

This tradition is, however, given in al-Suyūṭī’s al-Jāmi’ al-ṣaghīr 5 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-Ṭurṭūshī. The two versions of al-Suyūṭī were copied by al-Nabhānī in his book al-Fath al-ka'bīr. 6

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 7 in the Bāb qīṣār al-amal and by

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1 Professor R. B. Serjeant 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 Serjeant has shown and for his comments.


3 Professor Serjeant remarks that he has often seen roofs built in such a way in South Arabia. He writes (in a letter): ‘Khashab would be beams, perhaps palm-trunks. These would be covered with smaller branches, and then with thūmām. On top of this would be added some wet tin and tība, clay mixed with chopped straw, and this would form the roof. Khushaybāt is better than khashab because it would mean presumably little branches’.

4 P. 94, n. 6.

5 II, 58, ‘arīsh ka’-arīsh Mūsā; 59, ‘arīsh ka’-arīsh Mūsā thūmām wa-khashaybāt wa-l-amr a’jal min dhālika.

6 II, 226, 228.

7 IX, 204, ed. Cairo, a.H. 1353.
Ibn Mâja in the Bâb al-binâ' wa-’l-kharâb; Abû Dâ’ûd quotes the tradition in the Kûbâl ad-adâb, in Bâb mā jâ’a j’l-binâ’. The tradition, told on the authority of al-A’mash, runs, in the report of al-Tirmidhi, as follows: ‘‘Abdullah 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 Mâja and of Abû Dâ’ûd the tradition is also reported on the authority of al-A’mash, but there are some differences in the formulation of the statement of the Prophet: Mâ arâ al-amr illâ a’jal min dhâlika, and al-amr asra’ min dhâlika. 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-Ṭurtûshî and the same saying as reported by Ibn Mâja, Abû Dâ’ûd, and al-Tirmidhi. The keyword for the understanding of the two traditions is the word amr ‘affair’. This word must be interpreted in the tradition of al-Tirmidhi, Ibn Mâja, and Abû Dâ’ûd as meaning ‘death’. This is actually the interpretation given by Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Hâdî al-Ḥanafi al-Sindi in his commentary on Ibn Mâja. 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 asra’ min dhâlika. 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 Abû Dâ’ûd) even huts; death will outstrip your efforts. This saying is in harmony with other statements of the Prophet and his utterances in the Bâb qisâr 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 Bâb al-binâ’ wa-’l-kharâb (‘... Every expense of the believer will be rewarded except the expense of building...’).

The meaning ‘death’ can, however, hardly apply to the word amr in the tradition of al-Ṭurtûshî. The Prophet can hardly be assumed to have told Abu’l-Dardâ’ 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-Ṭurtûshî’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. II, 540, ed. Cairo, a.h. 1349.
2. II, 347, ed. Cairo, a.h. 1348.
3. ‘‘In a modern text from al-Shihr: idhâ jârâ amr Allâh ‘aldâ [futân] “if so and so dies”. I am translating this phrase as “God’s command”. The context is that if a fisherman dies, i.e. God’s command comes to him, yet his family will continue to receive his share in the fishing crew’s earnings till the end of the fishing season’ (R. B. Serjeant).
5. This tradition was emended; the clause added states, ‘except the expenses of building mosques’. These expenses will, of course, be rewarded. See al-Īltisâb, 79. Cf. Mumad al-Tayâliî, p. 341: ‘Ibn ‘Abbâs: the Prophet said: He who builds a mosque for Allah even like a hollow (dug by) a sand grouse (for laying eggs), Allah will build for him a house in Paradise’. 
context destruction, disaster, calamity in which everything will perish. In this tradition of al-Ṭurtūshī amr is identical in meaning with al-sāʿa, the time of total calamity which will be followed by the resurrection. The Prophet said to Abu’l-Dardā’: ‘The amr, the Day of Judgment, may be sooner than that’, for he believed that the sāʿa 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 ‘Abbās may be mentioned to strengthen this point. ‘The Prophet said: I have not been ordered to build the mosque sumptuously (mā umirtu bi-taṣḥīd al-masjid)’.¹ This meaning of amr as identical with al-sāʿa can already be detected in the Qur’ān, xvi, 1; this is also the explanation given there by the commentators.²

The fact that the Prophet was overpowered by the feeling of the approaching Day of Judgment, which was duly stressed by Buhl ³ and T. Andrae,⁴ may be illustrated by a tradition comprehensively explained by al-Sharif al-Raḍī.⁵

‘The Prophet said: I was sent at the breath of the Day of Judgment; the Day almost outstripped me’ (buʿīthtu fī nasam al-sāʿa, in kādat la-taṣbiqūnī [the in here is mukhaffafa min al-thaqila]). 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: ‘I was sent at the first blowing of the wind of the sāʿa’; 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 ⁶ and by Ibn Ḥībān.⁷

It is obvious why this tradition about the building of the mosque of the Prophet as quoted in the book of al-Ṭurtūshī 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 sāʿa would happen in his own lifetime.

II

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

¹ Kiāb al-sunan al-kubrā, ii, 439.
³ Das Leben Muhammeds, 145, 157.
⁴ Mohammed, 43.
⁶ Bāb al-fī坦, ix, 60.
⁷ i, 9.
the following tradition, told on the authority of Sālim b. 'Aṭiyya : 'The Prophet said : A booth like the booth of Moses'. The explanation given says : 'He did not like arches 1 about the mosques' (ya'ni annahu kāna yuqrahlu al-tāq fi ḥawālī al-masājid). 2 A slightly different interpretation is given to this tradition in Kūṭāb al-wara of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal. 3 The circumstances in which this saying was uttered according to Ibn Ḥanbal are also different. People asked the Prophet to adorn the walls of the mosque (an yuḥāṭtu al-masjīd), and the Prophet said : 'No, a booth like the booth of Moses'. The compiler, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, explains : 'It is a varnish like antimony (kuhl); the Prophet did not allow it'.

Quite a different version of this tradition is given in an early treatise compiled by Muhammad b. Ḥasan al-Shaybānī (died A.H. 189), summarized by his pupil Muhammad b. Samā'a (died A.H. 233), in his book al-Iktisāb fī 'l-rizq al-mustaṭāb : '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'. 4

The tradition is also quoted in the book of Naṣr b. Muzāḥim, Waq'at Șīfīn. 5 It is quoted there on the authority of al-Ḥasan, '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 thumām is missing; the second part of the tradition, about the amr which will outstrip the effort of the builders, has been cut off.

III

The whole tradition of al-Ṭurtūshī is found in the Tabaqāt of Ibn Sa'd (1, 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

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1 The word 'arch' is used here to translate Arabic tāq. According to Professor Serjeant (letter dated 20 August 1960), 'tāq or fāqa' 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'. These 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 'Umār b. 'Abd al-'Azīz who was the first to build the mibrāb in the form of a niche when he rebuilt the mosque in Medina by order of al-Walīd (details about this innovation, Creswell, A short account of early Muslim architecture, 44). The tāq al-imām in the traditions quoted by al-Ṭurtūshī seems thus to be identical with the mibrāb (cf., eg., p. 94, fa-min dhālika al-mahārīb . . . fa-taqaddama al-Ḥasan wa-tasala al-tāq an yuqalīya fihi . . . wa-karha al-ṣalāt fi tāq al-imām al-Nakha'i . . . ). The fundamental sense of mibrāb, as elucidated by Professor Serjeant, was in fact columns and a space between them. Mibrāb 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. Tāq as mibrāb was considered as bid'a.

2 Al-Bayhaqi, al-Sunan, II, 439.


4 P. 78

like the booth of Moses, wood pieces and thumām; the affair (will happen) sooner than that.¹

The same tradition, told on the authority of Shahr b. Ḥaushab ² and quoted in the Sīra Ḥalabiyya,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 Aḥmad b. Ḥamīd al-ʿAbbāsī in his ‘Umdat al-akhbār fi madīnát al-mukhtar §; 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 Ḥalabiyya: ‘When the Prophet wanted to build the mosque he was told [the Sīra Ḥalabiyya 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’. The mosque was left in this state until the death of the Prophet.⁷

In conclusion we may assume that the tradition quoted by al-Ṭurṭūshī 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.

¹ Quoted from Ibn Sa’d in Nuwayri, Niḥayat al-arab, xvi, 345.
² See his biography, Tahkīb al-tahkīb, iv, 369.
³ Ed. Cairo, A.H. 1320, ii, 71; Sīrat Dālān (on margin of Ḥalabiyya), i, 357.
⁴ Ed. Asʿad Ṭarābzānī, p. 80. According to a tradition mentioned in the Sīrat al-Dimyātī, quoted in the Ḥalabiyya (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 Ḥalabiyya. Libn, here translated ‘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, Gloss. dol., iii, Leiden, 1942, 2611 [reference supplied by Professor Serjeant, who also refers to the terms ājur and libn in RSO, xxviii, 1953, 8, and madara and lubn in Le Muséeon, lxii, 1–2, 1949, 160]. 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 libn to mean unbaked clay bricks in this tradition may be adduced from the following tradition about the mosque built in Baṣra by Abū ʿUṣākh al-ASḥārī: wa-banā Abū ʿUṣākh al-ASḥārī al-masjid wa-dār al-imāra bi-libn wa-fīn wa-saqqaṣafāh bi-l-ʿuṣhūb (al-Baladhuri, 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 ʿuṣhūb at Professor Serjeant’s suggestion].
⁷ ‘Umdat al-akhbār, 81; al-Ḥalabiyya, loc. cit.
That is evident from the quotation in the Ṭabaqāt 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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