

‘A BOOTH LIKE THE BOOTH OF MOSES . . .’
A STUDY OF AN EARLY *HADĪTH* ¹

I

The chapter about innovations in mosques in al-Ṭurṭūshī's *Kitāb al-ḥawādīth wa-'l-bida'* ² 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 *ḥadīth*, is of considerable importance : it seems to belong to a large body of early traditions omitted by later collectors of *ḥadīth*, 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 *ḥadīth* 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 Prophet with 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^un ka-'arīsh^h Mūsā thumām^un wa-khashab^un fa-'l-amr^u a'jal^u min dhālika* ³) ” ’. The *ḥadīth* is obscure and abstruse and the editor, Muḥammad al-Ṭālibī, 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-ṣaḡhīr* 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-Faḥ al-kabīr*.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 qīṣar al-amal* and by

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.

² Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Walid al-Ṭurṭūshī, *Kitāb al-ḥawādīth wa-'l-bida'*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ṭālibī, Tunis, 1959, pp. 93-9.

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 *thumām*. On top of this would be added some wet *ṭin* and *tibn*, 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, ‘*arsh ka-'arsh Mūsā* ; 59, ‘*arish ka-'arish Mūsā thumām wa-khushaybāt wa-'l-amr a'jal min dhālika*.

⁶ II, 226, 228.

⁷ IX, 204, ed. Cairo, A.H. 1353.

Ibn Māja in the *Bāb al-binā' wa-'l-kharāb*¹; Abū Dā'ūd quotes the tradition in the *Kiṭāb al-adab*, in *Bāb mā jā'a fi'l-binā'*.² The tradition, told on the authority of al-A'mash, runs, in the report of al-Tirmidhī, 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 Māja and of Abū Dā'ūd 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: *Mā arā al-amr illā a'jal min dhālika*, and *al-amr asra' min dhālika*. 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-Ṭurṭūshī and the same saying as reported by Ibn Māja, Abū Dā'ūd, and al-Tirmidhī. The key-word for the understanding of the two traditions is the word *amr* 'affair'. This word must be interpreted in the tradition of al-Tirmidhī, Ibn Māja, and Abū Dā'ūd as meaning 'death'.³ This is actually the interpretation given by Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Hādī al-Ḥanafī al-Sindī in his commentary on Ibn Māja. 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 dhālika*.⁴ 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) even huts; death will outstrip your efforts. This saying is in harmony with other statements of the Prophet and his utterances in the *Bāb qīṣar 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-binā' wa-'l-kharāb* ('... Every expense of the believer will be rewarded except the expense of building...').⁵

The meaning 'death' can, however, hardly apply to the word *amr* in the tradition of al-Ṭurṭūshī. The Prophet can hardly be assumed to have told Abu'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-Ṭurṭūshī'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-Shiḥr: *idhā jarā amr Allāh 'alā [fulān]* "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).

⁴ Ibn al-'Arabi, *Muḥāḍarāt al-abrār*, I, 193.

⁵ This tradition was emended; the clause added states, 'except the expenses of building mosques'. These expenses will, of course, be rewarded. See *al-Ikhtisāb*, 79. Cf. *Musnad al-Tayālisi*, p. 341: 'Ibn 'Abbās: 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-sā'a*, 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 *sā'a* was at hand; there was no need, therefore, to erect sumptuous buildings, not even for mosques. A remarkable tradition quoted by al-Bayhaqī 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-tashyīd al-masjid*)'.¹ This meaning of *amr* as identical with *al-sā'a* 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 Buhl³ and T. Andrae,⁴ may be illustrated by a tradition comprehensively explained by al-Sharīf al-Raḍī.⁵ 'The Prophet said: I was sent at the breath of the Day of Judgment; the Day almost outstripped me' (*bu'ithru fī nasam al-sā'a, in kādat la-tasbiqunī* [the *in* here is *mukhaffafa min al-thaqīla*]). 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 *sā'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-Tirmidhī⁶ and by Ibn Ḥibbān.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 *sā'a* 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 *Kitāb al-sunan al-kubrā*, II, 439.

² Ibn Qutayba, *al-Qurṭayn*, I, 242, ed. Cairo, A.H. 1355; cf. P. Casanova, *Mohammed et la fin du monde*, 15.

³ *Das Leben Muhammeds*, 145, 157.

⁴ *Mohammed*, 43.

⁵ *al-Majāzāt al-nabawiyya*, p. 36; cf. Casanova, op. cit., 18 (1), 20, 57.

⁶ *Bāb al-fitan*, 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 arches¹ about the mosques' (*ya'nī annahu kāna yakrahu al-ṭāq fī ḥawālī al-masājīd*).² A slightly different interpretation is given to this tradition in *Kitāb 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 yukahhīl^a 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 Muḥammad b. Ḥasan al-Shaybānī (died A.H. 189), summarized by his pupil Muḥammad b. Samā'a (died A.H. 233), in his book *al-Iktisāb fī al-rizq al-mustatāb* : '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 Siffīn*.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 *Ṭabaqāt* of Ibn Sa'd (I, 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

¹ The word 'arch' is used here to translate Arabic *ṭāq*. According to Professor Serjeant (letter dated 20 August 1960), '*ṭāq* or *ṭāqa* 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 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz who was the first to build the *mīhrāb* 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 *ṭāq al-imām* in the traditions quoted by al-Ṭurtūshī seems thus to be identical with the *mīhrāb* (cf., eg., p. 94, *fa-min dhālīka al-mahārīb . . . fa-taqaddama al-Ḥasan wa-ta'ala al-ṭāq an yuṣalliya fihī . . . wa-kariha al-salāt fī ṭāq al-imām al-Nakha'ī . . .*). The fundamental sense of *mīhrāb*, as elucidated by Professor Serjeant, was in fact columns and a space between them. *Mīhrāb* 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. *Ṭāq* as *mīhrāb* was considered as *bid'a*.

² Al-Bayhaqī, *al-Sunan*, II, 439.

³ Ed. Cairo, A.H. 1340, p. 107 ; compiled by Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Marwazī.

⁴ P. 78

⁵ Ed. Beirut, p. 238. Also '*Umdat al-akhbār*, p. 81. Cf. Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyya, *Zād al-ma'ād*, II, 146.

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. Ḥaushab² and quoted in the *Sira 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. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-'Abbāsī in his '*Umdat al-akhbār fi madīnat al-mukhtār*'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 *Sira Ḥalabiyya*: 'When the Prophet wanted to build the mosque he was told [the *Sira 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 Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, xvi, 345.

² See his biography, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, iv, 369.

³ Ed. Cairo, A.H. 1320, II, 71; *Sirat Dahlān* (on margin of *Ḥalabiyya*), I, 357.

⁴ Ed. As'ad Ṭarābzūnī, p. 80. According to a tradition mentioned in the *Sirat al-Dimiyāfi*, quoted in the *Ḥalabiyya* (loc. cit.), the explanation of the booth of Moses is given by al-Ḥasan, who reported the tradition.

⁵ Razīn b. Mu'āwiya b. 'Ammār al-'Abdārī (d. 535/1140), cf. Brockelmann, *GAL*, *Suppl.*, I, 630.

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. dat.*, III, Leiden, 1942, 2611 [reference supplied by Professor Serjeant, who also refers to the terms *ājur* and *libn* in *RSO*, xxviii, 1953, 8, and *madra* and *lubna* in *Le Muséon*, 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 Mūsā al-Ash'arī: *wa-banā Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī al-masjid wa-dār al-imāra bi-libn wa-ḥin wa-saqqaḥā bi-l-'ushb* (al-Balādhurī, *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 '*ushb*' 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 *ḥadīth* of considerable importance.

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