

Lecture 8: The Word Muhammad in the Bible

This brief study seeks to answer the simple question of whether or not the Hebrew Bible refers to the word Muhammad, or more specifically to one of its Hebrew cognates, as a proper name. The usefulness of such a task is clear. If such a usage can be attested, the many descriptive passages that some scholars have appealed to in reference either to the prophet or the Mahdi of that name (upon whom be peace) gain in validity.

The larger problem set forth behind this study is whether the Bible contains material in reference to the figures of the prophet or the Mahdi (as) in Islamic thought. Obviously the Bible has been interpreted in specific ways by Jewish, Christian and other scholars in reference to the Messiah, Elijah, or another awaited prophet, and these traditional ways of applying the Scriptures may conflict with Islamic interpretations related to the prophet or Mahdi (as).

This is especially likely to be the case, since many of the possible candidates are passages already understood in Messianic terms. Jewish and Christian understanding differs, sometimes applying a passage to the awaited Messiah on one hand and to Jesus (as) on the other. To attempt to bring a further figure into this complex adds to the confusion. It is therefore essential to approach the matter systematically.

The first step in approaching this problem ought not to be to propose such new interpretations of old and controversial texts. That task should be relegated to a later stage altogether. Rather, the first step is to note whether the names of the prophet and Mahdi are used in the Hebrew Scriptures in some cognate form, and whether these are associated with factors suggesting the Islamic figures as the terminus of such prophetic expressions.

The second step is to examine the functions of the Mahdi in comparison with the body of Biblical Scripture in order to identify parallels. Obviously such parallels will be more convincing to the skeptic once a clear reference to a specific name can be produced.

Among the many names of the Prophet (as) and the Mahdi (as) is of course Muhammad. This is the name most likely to be evident in the Bible, and must therefore be examined first. On the other hand, this

name is ambiguous, since it refers not only to the Mahdi (as), but to other Imams as well. It will thus be necessary in this study to find a Hebrew cognate, show that it is used as a specific name, and find factors that point directly to the prophet and the Mahdi (as).

Unless this can be achieved, further examination of the Bible will be largely fruitless in regard to this subject. Without a demonstration that this name has significance among the prophecies of prophets to come and the end-time, functional descriptions, the application of texts already applied to other messianic figures, will continue to have little force outside Islam.

The Hebrew cognate of the root from which the name Muhammad is derived is hmd, which means “to desire, pamper.” The Arabic connotation of “to praise” is not found in modern Hebrew. The noun form is a feminine with the common feminine suffix added. It is used twelve times in the Hebrew Scriptures, four of which appear in the construct. There is no problem with the use of this word as a masculine proper name, as there are many examples of seemingly feminine forms being included in a masculine name, and vice versa.

The first task is to establish whether or not this word is used as a proper name in the Hebrew Scriptures. We can immediately dispense with the occurrence of the word in the construct in Daniel 11:37, where it is translated “the desire” of women. It is clearly and unequivocally used as a proper name in Psalm 106:24. Yea, they despised the pleasant land, they believed not his word.

By leaving the word untranslated, we get the following rendering of the verse. Yea, they despised the land of Hamda, they believed not his word. The final half of the verse includes the possessive suffix “his,” which needs an antecedent.

The nearest possible antecedent is the enigmatic Hamda. Unless this word is conceived as a masculine proper name, there is no natural antecedent for the possessive. The fact that Hamda is the only possible antecedent for the masculine possessive that follows shows that it must be seen as a masculine proper noun rather than a feminine common noun.

It remains to understand to whom this verse refers. Seen in terms of the Islamic concept of the Mahdi (as), the verse makes little sense. On the other hand, seen in terms of the prophet of Islam, Muhammad (as), it makes a good deal of sense. It can easily be understood as referring to the fact that when the prophet Muhammad (as) came, many people did not believe his word, because they despised his origins in Arabia.

Of course the context of the verse is a reference to the Exodus, so the primary application of the name should normally be a person involved at that time. None can be found. Even if one could be found, the secondary application of the prophecy would clearly refer to the Prophet (as).

It is clear that the word Hamda is used at least once in the Hebrew Scriptures to refer to a human being, and that reference contains a significant parallel to the life of the prophet Muhammad (as). It remains to

be seen whether there are other references to the word Hamda that can or must be seen as a proper name, and whether any of these refer either to the prophet Muhammad (as) or to Muhammad al-Mahdi (as).

There is an ambiguous reference to the death of Jehoram in 2 Chronicles 21:20 that applies the word Hamda to the king. 2 Chronicles 21:20 'Thirty and two years old was he when he began to reign, and he reigned in Jerusalem eight years, and departed without being desired. Howbeit they buried him in the city of David, but not in the sepulchres of the kings.' The word Hamda is translated here as "desired."

This translation is slightly distorted, since the noun substantive is used without an adjectival positioning. However, the translation is certainly possible. If the word is meant to be a proper name, the relevance is great. The implication would be that at the time every king of Judah was evaluated as to whether he fitted the criteria of the awaited Hamda.

The name itself suggests this awaiting, that the people knew that Hamda was coming and longed for or desired him. The king is buried with the nostalgic remark that he did not turn out to be Hamda. In this case there is no contextual evidence pointing out whether the prophet (as) or the Mahdi (as) is meant.

An occurrence of the word in the construct in the same sense, in reference to the anointing of Saul as king, is found in 1 Samuel 9:20. Here the king is called the desire or Hamda of Israel. The expression is put to Saul in a future sense, thus showing it to be in the context of a messianic hope.

Another appearance of the word comes in 2 Chronicles 32:27 'And Hezekiah had exceeding much riches and honour: and he made himself treasuries for silver, and for gold, and for precious stones, and for spices, and for shields, and for all manner of pleasant jewels.'

The translation of "pleasant" is a little forced here, but possible despite its slightly enigmatic character. The translation of keley as "jewels" is rather interpretive, since the word has a broad range of meanings more clearly related to utensils and tools. Coming after "shields," another translation would appear in order.

It is possible that there was at the time an expression "instruments of Hamda" which had a meaning not now known, but referred to the awaited and desired one. That this is the case is suggested by the repetition of the expression in Jeremiah 25:34 Howl, ye shepherds, and cry, and wallow yourselves in the ashes, ye principal of the flock: for the days of your slaughter and of your dispersions are accomplished, and ye shall fall like a pleasant vessel.

The same expression appears, this time translated vessel instead of jewels. It could just as well be understood as "instruments of Hamda." That this is a technical term the meaning of which has been lost is clouded by the fact that it is arbitrarily translated with a different expression nearly every time it occurs. A similar usage for the word in the construct, and in reference to the vessels of the temple, is found in 2 Chronicles 36: 10.

Another example is Nahum 2:9 'Take ye the spoil of silver, take the spoil of gold: for there is none end of the store and glory out of all the pleasant furniture.' The exact word keley, which was "jewels" and "vessel" before, is arbitrarily 'furniture' here. There is finally a second verse in which the expression is translated 'pleasant vessels.'

Hosea 13:15 Thou he be fruitful among his brethren, an east wind shall come, the wind of the LORD shall come up from the wilderness, and his spring shall become dry, and his fountain shall be dried up: he shall spoil the treasure of all pleasant vessels.

The fact that fully half of the passages containing the term Hamda pair it with keley goes far toward confirming the theory that this is a lexicalized expression. Whatever 'instruments of Hamda' are, they make it clear that Hamda was a figure that was desired and awaited and had captured the minds of the populace to such an extent that the name appeared as an expression referring to some kind of instruments, whether the unlikely jewels or vessels or furniture of some kind, or something else, is meant.

Another idiom, less relevant to the present question, uses the plural of the word, hamdoth. It is translated several ways, but generally means 'desired, precious, beloved.' It appears in 2 Chronicles 20:25 with keley, referring perhaps to precious stones. Perhaps the use of the plural distinguishes it from the idiomatic expression in the singular examined above. It occurs with other words in Daniel 10:10,11,19; 11:43.

We have seen that one passage (Psalm 106:24) demands the interpretation of Hamda as a proper name. 2 Chronicles 21:20 permits the interpretation of Hamda as a proper name, but does not require it grammatically. It may require it semantically.

If so, it and like references intimate a prophetic expectation attached to kings. The other passages suggest a technical term inspired by the hold this awaited one had on the popular imagination. The remaining two passages are in the same category as 2 Chronicles 21:20, which could be translated as a proper name or as a common noun, although their semantic weight falls on the side of a proper name as well.

The following text using the word Hamda is Jeremiah 3:19 'But I said, How shall I put thee among the children, and give thee the land of Hamda, a goodly heritage of the hosts of nations? and I said, Thou shalt call me, My father; and shalt not turn away from me.'

These words are addressed to the people of Judah. Because of their behavior, God asks how He can count them as sons and allow them to live in the land of Hamda. He answers that He can do so if they acknowledge Him as father and if they do not turn away from Him, that is, if they repent. The context is that of impending deportation, which does in fact take place, since the people do not repent.

The figure of speech, sons and father, in relation to God implies a relationship of obedience, as a child to

its father. This is the required relationship between God and humankind. Humankind is obliged to obey God or suffer the consequences. The Jews of the time, through failure to obey God, were deported to Babylon first and finally under protest from Jeremiah, to Egypt.

Thus they lost the right to live in the land of Hamda and take their place among the sons of God, that is, those obedient to Him. The context makes it clear that the land of Hamda is the land promised to Abraham (as) and his descendants. The fact that the expression parallels that of Psalm 106:24 might lead us to consider this also to be a proper name, although the context here does not require it.

Does this text have any eschatological implications, that is, can it be applied to the figure of the Mahdi? The text clearly applies primarily to the time of the prophet Jeremiah (as). The reaction of Judah to Jeremiah's prophecy was failure to repent with the result of deportation. The final portion of the text seems to indicate that the Jews would respond by repenting, which we see that they did not do at the time of Jeremiah.

There is therefore every reason to give the text an eschatological application. Applied in an eschatological way, the implication is that the Jews are given a chance to repent and thus take their place among the nations who are obedient to God.

This is consonant with the eschatological hope and the figure of the Mahdi, who should fill the earth with justice. In this sense, the land of Hamda must be the whole earth to be inhabited by those who respond with repentance to the call of the Mahdi (as), here referred to by his primary name of Muhammad or Hamda.

The reference to the land of Hamda has an eschatological application here. This means that we may be justified in attributing an eschatological application to Psalm 106:24 as well, since the expression is the same. Psalm 106:24, which is the vital text to show that Hamda is a personal masculine name in the Hebrew Scriptures, ought then to have a dual application, that is, to both the prophet Muhammad (as) and the Mahdi (as).

The land of Hamda is also mentioned in Zechariah 7:14 'But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them, that no man passed through nor returned: for they had laid desolate the land of Hamda.'

This text seems to refer to the diaspora of the Jews among all nations. The last half of the text is enigmatic and suggestive. The first desolation of the land is the desolation of having lost its population. That no man passed through nor returned refers specifically that no Jews were living or traveling there.

The last clause is introduced with the Hebrew copula *we-*, but the authorized translator interprets it correctly as an explanatory attachment, giving the cause of what went before. The Jews had not laid any physical land desolate. 'Laying the land of Hamda desolate' must be understood in a figurative sense. To give a literal sense to this clause would be redundancy on the level of saying that water is wet

because it is wet.

The expression 'land of Hamda' is used three times in Scripture, which is a great proportion of the whole corpus. It has almost as great a claim to lexicalization as the expression "instruments of Hamda." But its meaning is far clearer. Several levels of meaning appear.

The bottom layer is a reference to the land promised to Abraham (as) in Genesis 12:1–3. The promise that in Abraham (as) all families of the earth should be blessed already at the beginning takes on an eschatological perspective that has not gone unnoticed by non-Muslim scholars. The 'land of Hamda' is the heritage of Abraham (as) in its eschatological sense.

Laying the land of Hamda desolate implies spoiling the covenant of Abraham, that is, basically introducing injustice. The prophets are clear in their denouncing of Israel for injustice to the weak, and this is one of the foundations for the exile. This is repeated for the diaspora, as prophesied by Zechariah (as).

All of this affirms the application of the expression 'land of Hamda' in an eschatological sense and by the same token to the figure of the Mahdi (as).

In sum, all of the texts are potentially examples of the use of the word Hamda as a masculine personal name. One of these, Psalm 106:24, requires this interpretation, and the others, within their context, are best understood by appeal to this usage.

Thus the Biblical usage of this word can be seen to be uniform and consistent. Psalm 106:24 is also unique in that it must be applied primarily to the prophet Muhammad (as). Its eschatological implications are dependent on the lexicalization of the expression 'land of Hamda.' A dual application may be seen in all of the other texts as well, although most of them show a clear reference to eschatology, and by implication the possibility of perceiving in them a reference to the Mahdi (as).

There is an occurrence of the word Hamda in the construct in Haggai 2:7ff 'And I will shake all nations, and the Hamda of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, saith the LORD of hosts. The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the LORD of hosts: and in this place will I give Islam [shalom], saith the LORD of hosts.'

This particular usage, with the construct, speaks against interpreting the word Hamda in this case as a proper name. However, the text is late, and the lexicalized expressions might have become so ingrained that the proper name had become synonymous with an awaited figure.

Perhaps a middle ground translation of the term would best express the meaning of the text: 'the desired one of all nations.' The reconstructed temple did not last to see a messianic figure at all. It was desecrated, reconsecrated, and renovated beyond recognition by Herod.

So neither Jesus (as) nor Muhammad the prophet (as) could fulfill literally the first promise. A literal fulfillment would have to be sought in the Maccabean period. Given the vocabulary, the night ascent of Muhammad (as) is as good a fulfillment of this prophecy as any history has to offer. The translation of shalom as Islam rather than the generalized term “peace” is predicated on the tone of the sentence, which is specific. The grace of a particular event is implied.

There is a single occurrence of an interesting form of the word including the participial prefix as in Arabic, and what appears to be a plural suffix in form. This is mahamadim in Song of Solomon 5: 16. This cannot be a plural, however, since the referent is clearly stated to be masculine singular in the preceding words. Song of Solomon 5: 16 ‘His mouth is most sweet: yea, he is altogether lovely (Hebrew: Mahamadim). This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.’

At this point it may seem surprising to what extent these texts actually express details in the ministries of the prophet Muhammad (as) and the Mahdi (as). However detailed these references may be, an examination of the texts referring not to the primary name, but to other epithets and their surrounding ideas, is likely to show an array of detail of convincing proportions, especially considering that the word Hamda is used as a proper name with eschatological connotations.

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