

Prophethood in Islam

(part 1 of 2): The Nature of Prophethood



Prophethood is not unknown to heavenly revealed religions, such as Judaism and Christianity. In Islam, however, it has a special status and significance.

According to Islam, God created man for a noble purpose: to worship Him and lead a virtuous life based on His teachings and guidance. How would man know his role and the purpose of his existence unless he received clear and practical instructions of what God wants him to do? Here comes the need for prophethood. Thus God has chosen from every nation at least one prophet to convey His Message to people.

One might ask, how were the prophets chosen and who were entitled to this great honor?

Prophethood is God's blessing and favor that He may bestow on whom He wills. However, from surveying the various messengers throughout history, three features of a prophet may be recognized:

1. He is the best in his community morally and intellectually. This is necessary because a prophet's life serves as a role model for his followers. His personality should attract people to accept his message rather than drive them away by his imperfect character. After receiving the message, he is infallible. That is, he would not commit any sin. He might make some minor mistakes, which are usually corrected by revelation.
2. He is supported by miracles to prove that he is not an imposter. Those miracles are granted by the power and permission of God and are usually in the field in which his people excel and are recognized as superior. We might illustrate this by quoting the major miracles of the three prophets of the major world religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Moses' contemporaries were excellent in magic, so his major miracle was to defeat the best magicians of Egypt of his day. Jesus' contemporaries were recognized as skilled physicians, therefore, his miracles were to raise the dead and cure incurable diseases. The Arabs, the contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, were known for their eloquence and magnificent poetry. So Prophet Muhammad's major miracle was the Quran, the equivalent of which the whole legion of Arab poets and orators could not produce, despite the repeated challenge from the Quran itself. Again, Muhammad's miracle has something special about it. All previous miracles were limited to its time and place; that is, they were shown to specific people at a specific time. Not so with the miracle of Prophet Muhammad the Quran. It is a universal and everlasting miracle. Previous generations witnessed it and future generations will witness its miraculous nature in terms of its style, content and spiritual uplifting. These can still be tested and will thereby prove the divine origin of the Quran.

3. Every prophet states clearly that what he receives is not of his own making, but from God, for the well-being of mankind. He also confirms what was revealed before him and what may be revealed after him. A prophet does this to show that he is simply conveying the message that is entrusted to him by the One True God of all people in all ages. So the message is one in essence and for the same purpose. Therefore, it should not deviate from what was revealed before him or what might come after him.

Prophets are necessary for conveying God's instructions and guidance to mankind. We have no way of knowing why we were created. What will happen to us after death? Is there any life after death? Are we accountable for our actions? These and so many other questions about God, angels, paradise, hell, and more, cannot be answered without direct revelation from the Creator and Knower of the unseen. Those answers must be authentic and must be brought by individuals whom we trust and respect. That is why messengers are the elite of their societies in terms of moral conduct and intellectual ability.

Hence, the slanderous Biblical stories about some of the great prophets are not accepted by Muslims. For example, Lot is reported to have committed incestuous fornication while drunk. David is alleged to have sent one of his leaders to his death in order to marry his wife. Prophets, to Muslims, are greater than what these stories indicate. These stories cannot be true from the Islamic point of view.

The prophets are also miraculously supported by God and instructed by Him to affirm the continuity of the message. The content of the prophets' message to mankind can be summarized as follows:

- a) Clear concept of God: His attributes, His creation, what should and should not be ascribed to Him.

- b) Clear idea about the unseen world, the angels, jinn (spirits), Paradise and Hell.
- c) Why God has created us, what He wants from us and what rewards and punishments are for obedience and disobedience.
- d) How to run our societies according to His will. That is, clear instructions and laws that, when applied correctly and honestly, will result in a smoothly functioning, harmonious society.

It is clear from the above discussion that there is no substitute for prophets. Even today with the advancement of science, the only authentic source of information about the supernatural world is revelation. Guidance can be obtained neither from science nor from mystic experience. The first is too materialistic and limited; the second is too subjective and frequently misleading.

(part 2 of 2): A Belief in All Prophets without Distinction

One might well ask:

How many prophets has God sent to humanity? We are only sure of what is clearly mentioned in the Quran, that God has sent a messenger to every nation. That is because it is one of God's principles that He will never call a people to account unless He has made clear to them what to do and what not to do. The Quran mentions the names of 25 prophets and indicates that there have been others who were not mentioned to Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. These 25 include Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (peace be upon them). These five are the greatest among God's messengers. They are called 'the resolute' prophets.

An outstanding aspect of the Islamic belief in prophethood is that Muslims believe in and respect all the messengers of God with no exceptions. All the prophets came from the same One God, for the same purpose: to lead mankind to God. Hence, belief in them all is essential and logical; accepting some and rejecting others has to be based on misconceptions of the prophet's role or on a racial bias. The Muslims are the only people in the world who consider the belief in all the prophets an article of faith. Thus the Jews reject Jesus and Muhammad (peace be upon them), and the Christians reject Muhammad. The Muslims accept them all as messengers of God who brought guidance to mankind. However, the revelations which those prophets before Muhammad brought from God have been tampered with in one way or another.

The belief in all the prophets of God is enjoined upon the Muslims in the Quran:

“Say (O Muslims): We believe in God and that which is revealed to us and that which was revealed to Abraham and

Ishmael, and Isaac and Jacob, and their children, and that which Moses and Jesus received and that the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them and unto Him we have surrendered.” (Quran 2:136)

The Quran continues in the following verses to instruct the Muslims that this is the true and impartial belief. If other nations believe in the same, they are following in the right track. If they do not, they must be following their own whims and biases and God will take care of them. Thus we read:

“And if they believe in what you believe, then they are rightly guided. But if they turn away, then they are in disunity, and God will suffice you against them. He is the Hearer, the Knower. This is God’s religion and who is better than God in religion?” (Quran 2:137-138)

There are, at least, two important points related to prophethood that need to be clarified. These points concern the roles of Jesus and Muhammad (peace be upon them) as prophets, who are usually misunderstood.

The Quranic account of Jesus emphatically rejects the concept of his ‘divinity’ and ‘divine sonship’ and presents him as one of the great prophets of God. The Quran makes it clear that the birth of Jesus without a father does not make him the son of God and mentions, in this respect, Adam, who was created by God without a father or mother.

“Truly, the likeness of Jesus, in God’s sight, is as Adam’s likeness; He created him of dust, then said He unto him “Be”, and he was.” (Quran 3:59)

Like other prophets, Jesus also performed miracles. For example, he raised the dead and cured the blind and lepers, but, while showing these miracles, he always made it clear that it was all from God. Actually, the misconceptions about the personality and mission of Jesus, peace be upon him, found a way among his followers because the Divine message he preached was not recorded during his presence in the world. Rather, it was recorded after a lapse of about one hundred years. According to the Quran, he was sent to the Children of Israel; he confirmed the validity of the Torah, which was revealed to Moses, peace be upon him, and he also brought the glad tidings of a final messenger after him.

“And when Jesus son of Mary said, ‘Children of Israel. I am indeed the messenger to you, confirming the Torah that is before me, and giving good tidings of a Messenger who shall come after me, whose name shall be the praised one...” (Quran 61:6)

(The “praised one” is the translation of “Ahmad”, which is Prophet Muhammad’s name.)

However, the majority of the Jews rejected his ministry. They plotted against his life and in their opinion, crucified him. But the Quran refutes this opinion and says that they neither killed him nor crucified him; rather, he was raised up to God. There is a verse in the Quran which implies that Jesus will come back and all the Christians and Jews will believe in him before he dies. This is also supported by authentic sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

The last prophet of God, Muhammad, was born in Arabia in the sixth century C.E. Up to the age of forty, people of Makkah knew him only as a man of excellent character and cultured manners and called him ‘Al-Ameen’ (‘The Trustworthy’). He also did not know that he was soon to be made a prophet and receiver of revelation from God. He called the idolaters of Makkah to worship the one and only God and accept him (Muhammad) as His prophet. The revelation that he received was preserved in his lifetime in the memory of his companions and was also recorded on pieces of palm leaf, leather, etc. Thus the Quran that is found today is the same that was revealed to him, not a syllable of which has been altered, as God Himself has guaranteed its preservation. This Quran claims to be the book of guidance for all of humanity for all times, and mentions Muhammad as the last Prophet of God.