



[Studying the Role of the Prophets:](#)
Their Model for Our becoming Better Humans

Allah Swt reveals in a number of places in the Holy Qu'ran, some of which we will quote today, the role of the Prophets / Ambiyā, and the necessity for them. Since this is a subject we have been discussing, I thought we should give a *khutbah* on it.

These are the messengers we endowed, one after the other. Some of them Allah spoke to, and some of them He exalted in rank. We gave Isa, the son of Maryam the clear signs, and strengthened him with the holy spirit. If We had willed, those who came after him would not have fought against one another after they had in turn received the clear signs, but they disagreed among themselves. And among them, some of them believed and some of them covered up the truth. If Allah had willed, they would not have fought against one another, but Allah does as He wishes. (Surah al-Baqarah)

And also in Surah al-Imran, Allah says:

Say, we believe in Allah and that which came down to us, and what came down to us from Ibrahim and Ismail and Ishaq and Yaqub, and the tribes of their descendants; and what was given to Musa and Isa, and the prophets from their Lord. And we do not discriminate between any one of them, and we surrender to Him.

In Surah at-Tawbah, Allah says:

There has come to you a messenger from among yourself. Grievous to him is what you suffer. Full of concern for you; to the believers, kind and singularly compassionate. But if they turn away, say, "Sufficient for me is Allah. There is no deity but Him. On Him I rely, and He is the Lord and the seat of all security."

We understand that prophecy is a very important theme in Al Qur'an, because Allah Swt tries to guide all of us away from errors and sins, and toward goodness, balance, justice, peace and understanding through these prophets. The prophets bring good news about humanity's capabilities and potentials to make progress, to be elevated; and to warn us that if we make wrong choices, we lose our faith and status, both as individuals and as communities of individuals, falling into the depths of ignorance, fear, doubt, bad actions, and war. The function of the prophet, then, is to put humanity on the right track physically, morally, and ethically; to inspire us to higher and higher attitudes and aspirations; to inspire and instill in us qualities and virtues that bring us closer to understanding that Divine Presence that is near to us.

The prophet or prophecy is not only the method through which Allah speaks to us through His messengers; it is also a sign of His compassion, mercy, and favor toward us. The Qur'an presents the role of the prophets throughout its different eras over thousands of years as a kind of universal reality or phenomena. It says He dispatched a messenger to every nation, and they are all equal. He doesn't make a distinction between them. Some are more excellent than others, but as Muslims, we are asked to believe in the revelation of every one of these prophets, to look at their lives. These bearers of the message brought and demonstrated the message in ways that we can apply the message and interpret it in our day to day life. Not only were they human beings who come from within the community, as we are told, but they understand and have compassion and mercy for the suffering of the people in their

diverse communities. They are concerned to the degree that they are trusted by Allah, and hopefully trusted by the people to help lead them out of their difficulties and turmoil.

Allah Swt sends these messengers as special individuals who have certain knowledge and wisdom in order to speak and recite His signs – usually recited or spoken. They become the guides, the leaders, and in some cases, the heads of the community, and communicate their revelation and understanding of Allah St as directed to their specific people. And they do it inevitably with a great deal of patience and love. Revelation is an interesting topic. The Qur'an tells us:

It is not granted to any mortal that Allah should speak to him except through revelation, or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal by His command what He will. He is Exalted and Wise. He has revealed a spirit to you (referring to the prophet) by Our command. You did not know before what the Book is, nor what faith was, but We have made it a light by which We guide whomsoever of Our servants.

That's what revelation is. We are being told by Allah that Allah does not speak directly to the prophet necessarily, but the communication or revelation comes from behind a veil in the form of a light that dwells in the prophet's mind and heart, and comes through the prophets. The prophets know and see things in a way that most human beings cannot see. It's also an interesting thing to understand that this process of revelation is not always clear. The messenger who brings the revelation is not defined specifically, and the message itself comes from the spirit. We have to deduce that the messenger [of the Qur'an to the Prophet] is an angel.

In the open verse of the Sura “The Star,” which is generally accepted as referring to the Prophet Muhammed’s vision in the cave of Hira, where the revelation actually began, the revelation is taught to the Prophet Muhammed (sal) by someone of mighty power and great strength, who stood on the highest horizon. Some people and translators, of course, suggested that it was an angel, specifically Jibreel. But it could also be the same spirit mentioned in previous ‘*āyat* of Qur’an, where angels and spirit are mentioned as two different entities. On the Night of Glory, for example, **“angels descend again with their Lord’s permission on every task, and on the Day whose length is 50,000 years, angels and spirits ascend to Him.”**

Whatever the means or agent of revelation is, the revelation itself is seen and felt by these prophets. *That* has a meaning, too. It means that the prophet’s heart doesn’t distort what he saw. It suggests that there is a kind of vision/*ru’ya*, a kind of intuitive process. Ultimately, revelation remains a mystery, or at least part of it remains always the mystery. It’s a kind of spiritual phenomenological event, and goes beyond rationality and analytical capabilities. It’s judged not just by its descent, but by the end result of that revelation: the quality of the text it produces, the type of language it uses; the enormity of the message, the eternal truth it communicates, and the way it transforms the life of the messenger. Obviously, it stands the test of time, because we are still standing here talking about it.

The truth of revelation that infused the Prophet Muhammed (sal) **“with a spirit of Our command (as Allah says)”** is embodied in the Qur’an itself. So the Qur’an distinguishes between two types of prophets, the *rasūl* and the *nebi*. Both are inspired by the Divine. Only *rasūls*, the messengers, receive revelation in the form of a book. **“These were the men to whom We gave the book and the authority and prophethood,”** Allah Swt says. While every *rasūl* is a *nebi*, not every *nebi* is a *rasūl*. As communicators of revelation, both the *rasūls* and the *nebi* (and we call Prophet

Muhammed (sal) both) serve as witnesses to a message that comes from Allah Swt. On the Day of Judgment, these witnesses are called, **“and the truth shall be clear from falsehood. We shall call a witness from every community and say, ‘Produce your evidence,’ and they will know that truth belongs to Allah alone, and the gods they invented will forsake them.”**

Adam was the first *nebi*, and Muhammed is the last *rasūl*. In between, the Qur’an mentions 23 other prophets, many of whose names we are familiar with: Idris, Enoch, Nūh, Hud, Saleh, Ibrahim, Ismail, Ishaq, Lut, Yaqub, Yusuf, Ayyub, Musa, Harun, Dhul l’Kifl, Ezekiel, Daoud/David, Suleiman, Elias, Elisha, Yunus/Jonah, Zakariyya, Yahya/John, Isa / Jesus. All are He says one community with the same message, which is the unity of Allah Swt and the importance of upholding justice and equality for everyone. Two prophets receive very particular attention. Isa (as) is mentioned in 93 verses in Qur’an as ‘Isa.’ But he is also referred to as Messiah, as servant, as messenger, as the Word, as a Sign, and as the prophet to whom a book was revealed.

He was born as we know a virgin birth of Maryam, and performed many miracles. There are 5 ‘*āyāt* in Sura al-Imran, 45-50, where Allah speaks of Maryam. While the Prophet Isa (as) is born of Divine intention, the Qur’an emphatically states that he is not the “son of Allah,” and emphasizes that point by frequently referring to him as the “son of Mary.” This is obviously an important differentiation. **“They say Allah has children, may He be exalted. He is the Self-Sufficient One. Everything in the heavens and the earth belongs to Him.”** It would be a negation of the Qur’an’s basic teaching if the whole idea of the son is accepted, or the Trinitarian idea. Jesus himself, according to Qur’an, made no claims on divinity. Indeed, Allah will question him on the Day of Judgment about such claims.

Isa, son of Maryam, did you say, “Worship me and my mother as two gods alongside God?” He will say, “May You be exalted! I would never say what I had no right to say. If I said such a thing, You would indeed have known it.”

The Qur’an also denies that Isa was crucified to death, but acknowledges that he ascended to the heavens, which is a sign and affirmation of his prophethood. **“They said, ‘We have killed the Messiah, the messenger of Allah.’ They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, though it was made to appear like that.”** The overall conclusion is that the Messiah, the son of Mary, was not only a messenger. Other messengers had come and gone before him.

The second prophet that was focused on is the Prophet Mohammed (sal), and many things are addressed to and through him in Qur’an. His proper name only occurs 4 times in Qur’an, but like Isa, he was given a more universal role. He is assigned to all beings. He is a witness, a guide, a mercy to those devoted to him. So these two witnesses will play a prominent role in the drama of the last days, which we began to talk about last night. Unlike Isa, the Prophet Muhammad (sal) does not perform miracles. His greatest miracle was the Qur’an that comes to him. It was not his only miracle, but his major one. He is known as the “unlettered prophet,” and endowed with great character. He is told to warn people. He does everything in a very kind and loving way. Allah says:

“Had you been severe and hard—hearted, they would have broken away from about you.

There are many accusations against him, but none of the things he is accused of is what he is. **“He, Muhammad, is not the father of any of your men, but he is the Messenger of Allah, and he is the Seal of the all the prophets,”** Allah tells us.

These are special features of the prophets—and there are others, of course. When we understand Islam in a better way, in terms of these prophecies and prophethood, we understand it is a continuum. In that continuum, Allah ends it by saying, **“On this day, I have perfected your religion and completed my favor upon you, and chosen Islam as your religion.”** But the practice of being a Muslim is the practice of being a human being, not a Divine being. This is why these prophets had these human concerns, challenges, doubts, fears. They overcame them to show us the way to do that. In other spiritual and mystical paths you hear talk about perfected beings and how to be perfect. Often, people say, “I am not like that.” You have the Krishnas and the Ramas – the perfected gods. And how can you aspire to that?

With the prophets, we see trials and tribulations, the tests and the vicissitudes of day to day life. To practice being a humane human being, as we all know, is not an easy task. Human beings can never be perfect. We see today that a lot of what happens under the name of Islam is destructive. Because Mohammed (sal) is the seal of the prophets, and because the message of Allah Swt has reached its fulfillment, all that is left is to understand it and implement it. That’s a pretty big “all that is left.” The fact that Muhammed (sal) is designated as the last prophet means that those who follow have a very special responsibility. They have to prove, not by their words, claims, or forms, but by their behavior that his message is the final message, that it lifts weights off of people, that it creates a world of peace and understanding or at least sets the stage for that, that the evidence that is given in Qur’an and his life is flawless. But today, what we see is deeply flawed.

There are those who said that by the time Islam appeared in the world and the Qur'an was revealed, humankind had become rationally and morally mature. They were reading and writing and had cultures. Large cultures accepted Islam, and the benefits of the ethical and moral principles of Islam were appreciated. That's all very nice to say, but the fact is that human beings are plagued to this very day with confusion, doubt, misunderstanding, and misuse. I don't personally accept that argument. I say that we are in a progressive world that easily can get distorted, distracted, and derailed. The fact that we can say there are great advances in knowledge I don't think is even true. We have to consider that great advances in knowledge are manifest by great advances in community / human behavior.

I think our understanding of why Qur'an describes Prophet Muhammed (sal) as the last prophet has to be based on something other than this kind of historical, evolutionary argument of time and knowledge. After the Prophet Muhammed (sal), we didn't need another person chosen to lead us through the morass of human foibles. We may be "developed," in the developed world, in relationship to certain issues; but certainly not in relationship to energy, not in relationship to the environmental issues like water and food security, or health for everyone, or violence. But we are very immature in relation to other things, even those issues in their complexity. The responsibilities for resolving the moral, ethical, and social problems that rest on our own individual and collective shoulders, or on our doorsteps, are ours. It means we have a duty to create a very fair, equitable, just, and tolerant society.

There is not going to be a new Moses to lead us to a promised land. There is not going to be a new Jesus to save our souls, or a new Prophet Muhammed to establish another kind of social order. The fact that the prophecy has come to an end is to make us take responsibility for what has been revealed, and place the burden

squarely on our shoulders to mature. It is our responsibility to stand up against tyranny and destruction of the environment, or nations, or groups of people, using the prophets as our models and what they have revealed to us to motivate us to act properly, to behave morally and equitably, to be guided in the right way, following the example of individuals... unfortunately not being able to follow the example of historically successful communities, yet. Only small periods of time in history can we look at relative peace, tolerance, and understanding.

This is what is on our shoulders. What the prophets achieved in a small degree, but their message for the future, we have to achieve today. The Qur'an describes a special event in the life of the Prophet Mohammed, the Night Journey. We know it is a journey that takes Prophet Muhammed (sal) from Mecca to Jerusalem, and from there to the seven heavens. **"Glory be to He Who made the servant travel by night from the sacred place of worship to the furthest place."** This *isra* is the first stage of *miraj*, or the ascension to heaven. The Prophet Muhammed is at the highest point of the horizon, and comes down and stands within 2 bows length or even closer, and saw the signs of Allah. What this means to us, perhaps, is that great distances can be achieved by the purification of our faith, allegorically.

We can take it as literal, but it has an allegorical meaning, too. It makes it clear that the *Isra* and *Miraj* are spiritual journeys also. Prophet Muhammed (sal) saw the Lord's greatest signs with spiritual eye. It tells us that each one of us has a possibility to see things in a different way. This is the message of the prophets. Here is a very clear message, but if you understand it, you will see everything with a different eye. You will be saying to everyone, "*Asalaamu aleykum*. Peace be upon you." And the response from everyone will be, "*wa alaikkum wa salaam*." As simplistic as that may sound, can you imagine a world where people really said it

and meant it? How probable is that? It's not for us to talk about the probability of it, only the possibility.

The humanity of these prophets, their inspiration, their guidance from Allah, and their devotion to humanity still remain the models for all of us, Inshallah. Hopefully, this will help us understand why we are studying, and what we can gain from the prophets other than an historical understanding of their lives.