

PROPHETHOOD IN ISLAM

WAMY Series on Islam No. 7

The concept of prophethood is found in the three great monotheistic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. In Islam, however, it has a special status and significance.

According to Islam, Allah created man to worship Him and to lead a virtuous life based on His teachings and guidance. But how can man know and fulfill his role and the purpose of his existence if he does not receive clear and practical instructions of what Allah wants him to do? The existence of prophethood, by which Allah sent a prophet to every nation to reveal His message in terms that the people could understand, has answered this question most effectively

One might ask: How were the prophets chosen and which individuals were so honored?

Prophethood is Allah's blessing and a favor that is bestowed on an individual chosen by Him to convey His message. From studying the lives of the prophets that have appeared, we notice several characteristics:

1. He is the best person in his community as regards morality and intellectual ability This is necessary, for a prophet's life serves as a model for his followers. His personality should not drive people away from his message, but rather inspire them to accept it and to transform their own lives. After receiving the message, he is infallible on all matters dealing with the revelation. Although he might commit some small mistakes, but not in any matter that concerns the revelation, he cannot commit a sin.

2. He is supported by miracles, which derive from the power and permission of Allah and not of the prophet himself, to prove that he is not an impostor. Such miracles are direct challenges to the powers that be, for they do not follow the rules laid down by the experts in the affected field or activity By way of illustration, let us review some of the miracles recorded in the Old Testament, the New testament, and the Qur'an.

Moses' Egyptian contemporaries excelled in magic. Thus his major miracle was to defeat the best magicians that the society could offer.

Jesus' contemporaries were skilled physicians, and so he raised the dead and cured those suffering from incurable diseases. Muhammad's contemporaries were known for their eloquence and magnificent poetry. Therefore Muhammad's major miracle was the

Qur'an, which no poet could imitate or surpass, despite their repeated and vigorous efforts to do so.

All previous miracles were limited to a specific people living at a specific time. This is not the case with the Qur'an, however, for this miracle is universal and everlasting. Although previous generations actually witnessed it, all future generations will continue to witness its miraculous nature in terms of its style, content, and spiritual impact and message. This ability of the Qur'an to rise above the limits imposed by time and space on all other miracles proves its divine origin.

3. Every prophet states clearly that what he receives comes from Allah and that it is for the well-being of humanity. He confirms what was revealed previously and what may be revealed by a future prophet, for his task is to convey the message entrusted to him by Allah. Thus the revealed message is always the same in essence and purpose—it cannot deviate from prior or future revelations.

Prophets are necessary for conveying God's instructions and guidance to mankind. Without this knowledge, we would be unable to answer the fundamental questions of our existence: Why were we created? What happens after death? Is there an afterlife? Are we accountable for our actions? Is there any future reward or punishment for what we do? What about Allah, His angels, heaven, and hell? Each of these questions, and all others, are answered in the revelation brought by the prophet. But in order for his community to believe and accept them, the prophet must be brought by individuals who have attained a position of trust and respect among their people. This is why he must be morally and intellectually superior to his contemporaries.

Based on this understanding, Muslims reject some of the stories found in the Old Testament concerning the prophets. For example: the prophet Lot engaging in fornication—with his own daughters—when drunk, or the prophet David sending one of his military leaders to his death so that he could marry his wife. It is inconceivable to Muslims that a prophet of Allah could do such things.

Prophets are also miraculously supported by God and instructed by Him to affirm the continuity of His message. In brief, the divine revelation consists of the following information:

- a) A clear concept of God, His attributes and creation, and what should and should not be ascribed to Him.
- b) A clear idea about the unseen world, angels and jinn (spirits), paradise and hell.
- c) Why has God created us? What does He want from us? Will we be rewarded (or punished) for obeying (or disobeying) Him?
- d) A clear explanation of how to order our societies according to His will. This involves the implementation of a law that, when applied correctly and honestly, will bring about a happy and ideal society.

As we have seen in the above discussion, there is no substitute for prophets. Despite the tremendous and impressive advancements of modern science, even it cannot provide authentic information about the supernatural world or provide guidance. Its very nature, which is too materialistic and limited, precludes it from serving this purpose. Mystic experience is also unsuitable, for it is too subjective and, frequently, too misleading.

Now one might ask: How many prophets has Allah sent to humanity? Although we cannot answer this question definitively, some Muslim scholars place the number at two hundred forty thousand. We are only sure of what is clearly mentioned in the Qur'an: God has sent one or more messengers to each nation, for He would not be just if he were to hold a nation to account for its actions without first informing its people of what is allowed and what is not. The Qur'an mentions twenty-five prophets by name (i.e., Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, who are considered the greatest of all the prophets) and indicates that there were others not known to Muhammad.

Muslims are required to believe in and to respect all of the messengers of Allah without exception. Since all the prophets come from the same God and for the same purpose-to lead humanity to Allah-belief in them all is essential and logical. If some are accepted and others are rejected, it is due to the individual's misunderstanding of the prophet's role or of racial (or other) bias.

The Muslims are unique in considering belief in all of the prophets of God to be an article of faith. The Jews reject Jesus Christ and Muhammad; the Christians reject Muhammad and, in reality, reject Moses because they do not abide by his laws. The Muslims accept them all as messengers of God who brought guidance to mankind. However, this acceptance is characterized with a degree of caution, for the Qur'an and the Prophet states the revelation conveyed by those prophets has been distorted and corrupted by those who received it. We read in the Qur'an:

Say (O Muslims), we believe in Allah 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. (2:136)

The Qur'an tells the Muslims that this is the true and impartial belief. If other nations share this belief, it means that they are on the right track. If they do not share this belief, it means that they are following their own whims and biases. The Qur'an says:

And if they believe in what you believe, then are they rightly guided. But if they turn away, then they are in disunity, and Allah will suffice you against them. He is the Hearer; the Knower: This is God's religion and Who is better than God in religion? (2:137-38)

There are two important points that need to be clarified about the roles of Jesus and Muhammad, as they are usually misunderstood and distorted. In the case of Jesus, the Qur'an rejects completely the Christian assertion of his divinity and his status of the "son" of God. It also states that the unusual circumstances of his birth-without a father-does not make him a "son" of God, for if this logic were followed to its logical conclusion, Adam, who had no father and no mother, would be greater than Jesus, for: Truly the likeness of Jesus, in God's sight, is as Adam's likeness; He created him of dust, then said unto him, "Be," and he was (3:59).

Like other prophets, Jesus performed miracles: he raised the dead and cured the blind and the lepers. He also made it perfectly clear that these miracles were done by God, not by him. But his message

was distorted, because;it was not recorded in his presence and under his direction, but only about one hundred years after his death.

According to the Qur'an, Jesus was sent to the children of Israel to confirm the Torah of Moses and to bring glad tidings of a final messenger who would come 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. (61:6)

(the underlined portion is the translation of Ahmad, which is also a name of the Prophet Muhammad).

However, the majority of the Jews rejected his ministry and plotted against his life. The Qur'anic account of his death differs from the one found in the New Testament: he was not killed or crucified, but rather was raised to heaven by God. It is also implied that Jesus will return one day and that all of the Christians and Jews will believe in him before he dies. This is also supported by authentic sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

Muhammad, the last prophet of God, was born in Makkah in the sixth century CE. Until the age of forty, he was known as a man of excellent character and cultured manners. These characteristics earned for him the nickname of al-Amin (The Trustworthy). There were no prior indications that Allah had chosen him to be His last messenger. Once he was entrusted with this task, however, he began calling his idol-worshipping people to Islam. The revelation was recorded during his lifetime in writing and in the memory of his followers. The care taken to preserve each revelation as it was transmitted by the Prophet ensured that it would reach future generations in an uncorrupted form. As Allah has stated that the Qur'an would be preserved accurately, it is the source of divine guidance for all time, and the Prophet Muhammad is His final prophet.