

Understanding Islam

Series One: The Big Picture

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Part Five: What is a Prophet?

Amongst the untold billions of human beings who have lived upon the earth throughout the human centuries, God chooses to confer on a number of them great spiritual and intellectual gifts and to endow them with the noblest of characters; such are the prophets. They receive guidance from God and then put it into practice in their daily lives so that they act as a perfect example for other human beings to follow. They are people of the highest spirituality, ever reaching up to enter into a relationship with God; they are thus able to act as spiritual guides to their communities. The gifts that they receive from God are not for their own benefit but are to be used to establish a way of life for their communities to lead them through this life and reach paradise after death.

If some human beings are to be perfect examples to other people, then two things follow: they must be human like the rest of us and they must be without sin, otherwise, if part of the time they were sinning and part of the time they were doing the right thing, we would never know when to believe and follow them. Prophets share our common humanity [Q. 14:11]; they are in no sense divine beings. Prophets are not angels or part-god/part-human; they are fully, one hundred per cent, human – nothing more and nothing less. In this way they share all the potential for good and bad that we share. We can model our lives on the characteristics that we see radiating from their lives. It is as though the prophets are highly polished mirrors in which the qualities of God reflect, so that we can glimpse the highest virtue to which any man or woman can rise.

When it comes to the sinlessness of the prophets, there is a spectrum of beliefs amongst Muslims. The majority of Muslims see prophets as being free from all sin throughout their lives through the power of God – for example through the gift of knowledge. All Muslims hold that all prophets are free from all major sins. A minority of Muslims are prepared to accept that prophets might commit minor sins; and then they are corrected by God and repent immediately [Q. 4:105-106; 40:55]. This sinlessness does not rob them of their humanity; they have the capacity to sin like the rest of us but they do not do so. For the minority group, their immediate repentance is an example in itself.

A long line of prophets

The first prophet according to the Qur'an was Adam. This raises the question of what happened to Adam and his wife in the garden (she is not named in the Qur'an but the Islamic tradition knows her as Hawwa, Eve). According to the Qur'an, they made an error of judgement in thinking something evil was good. This led to them being cast out from the garden. Eventually they repented and were reconciled to God [Q. 2:3039].

Adam and Eve lived in a state of pure innocence; they did not choose to rebel but made an error of judgement. We can never say that God needs anything but in order to be known as the All-merciful, there had to be something for God to forgive, therefore their error of judgement allowed this central aspect of God to be manifest. By tradition, they were reconciled to God on the Plain of Arafat near Makka.

The Qur'an does not give the exact number of prophets that have been sent to the earth [Q. 40:78] but there is a Hadith from Muhammad that mentions one hundred and twenty-four thousand. All the peoples of the earth received at least one prophet at some point in their history [Q. 10:47; 16:36]. They all had essentially the same message – guidance for human beings on how to live a life perfectly in tune with the will of the creator, that is *islam*.

The Qur'an mentions twenty-five prophets by name and twenty-one of them are mentioned also in the Bible:

Name in the Qur'an	Name in the Bible
Adam	Adam
Idris	Enoch
Nuh	Noah
Hud	
Salih	
Ibrahim	Abraham
Isma'il	Ishmael
Ishaq	Isaac
Lut	Lot
Ya'qub	Jacob
Yusuf	Joseph
Shu'ayb	
Ayyub	Job

Musa	Moses
Harun	Aaron
Dhu 'l-Kifl	Ezekiel
Dawud	David
Sulayman	Solomon
Ilyas	Elijah
Alyasa'	Elisha
Yunus	Jonah
Zakariyya	Zachariah
Yahya	John the Baptist
'Isa	Jesus
Muhammad	

Biblical and Qur'anic understandings

The first thing to notice here is that the biblical definition of a prophet is quite different from that used in Islam. In the biblical tradition, prophets are not sinless and thus are not perfect examples of living a godly way of life. They do not receive a direct, literal revelation from God (*tanzil*) as in Islamic understanding but are the agents of God to take a message from God to a particular people, which they express in their own words. The biblical prophets were not necessarily prophets throughout their lives but may have been chosen by God for this function only for a particular purpose. The Christian tradition departs from the Jewish also by interpreting all the biblical prophets as in some way pointing to the future coming of Christ. There are many other prophets mentioned in the Bible, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos. The fact that they are not mentioned in the Qur'an does not mean that they were not prophets of God, they might have been some of the many thousands of unnamed prophets but, as they are not mentioned by name, we cannot be sure.

Some of the episodes mentioned in the Bible related about Qur'anic prophets cannot be seen as perfect role models for human living. We may think of the story of Lot being

made drunk by his daughters and committing incest with them (Genesis 19:30-38) or David, who committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, whom he had killed so that he could marry his wife (Second Book of Samuel, chapters 11-12). The child of this adultery died because of the sin of David and Bathsheba; later they had a second child, who was Solomon, also a prophet mentioned in the Qur'an. How would Muslims react to these biblical stories? It is clear that such behaviour is not in accordance with a Qur'anic understanding of prophethood and so they cannot be true; they must be later false stories added into the biblical accounts.

Jesus is a prophet mentioned in the Qur'an but Christian claims to his divinity would be regarded as false by Islam [Q. 21:7-8]. Just as the many prophets sent to the Hebrew people were charged with bringing them back to the true message taught by Abraham and Moses, so Muhammad and the Qur'an came to correct the false ideas that had crept into the Jewish and Christian traditions.

Prophets in the Qur'an but not in the Bible

The prophets mentioned in the Qur'an who are not biblical characters: Hud, Salih and Shu'ayb, are understood to be earlier prophets sent to the Arab peoples. Some Muslim scholars have linked Shu'ayb with the biblical Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses (Exodus, chapter 18). Although Muhammad is not mentioned by name in the Bible as we have it today, the Qur'an is clear that Jesus foretold the coming of Muhammad [Q. 61:6] and so some Muslims have searched the Bible for possible references to him.

Spiritual Guides

Prophets are spiritual guides to their people, to bring them into a relationship with God that will guide them through this life and on into the life hereafter. This is made clear in the life of Muhammad in his night journey to Jerusalem (*isra*) and ascent into the divine presence (*mi'raj*). On this occasion, he received practical instructions from God, such as the requirement for his community to pray five times each day, and knowledge was transmitted to him that could only come directly from God, the knowledge of the unseen. In the spiritual wisdom that he transmitted to his followers, they were enabled to progress on their spiritual journey in purity and wisdom, thus, in a sense, to journey on their own spiritual *mi'raj*.

Laying down a way of life

The Qur'an uses two terms when speaking of the prophets: *nabi* and *rasul*. Some English translations use the terms "prophet" and "messenger" to translate these Arabic terms. The distinction is that a *rasul* is a prophet who is sent with a new scripture, such as Moses (Musa), and a *nabi* is a prophet who comes to reinforce and call people back to the scripture and way of life of an earlier *rasul*, such as Elijah (Ilyas). Each *rasul* was required to establish an *islamic* way of life or shari'a, which people were to follow.

The Qur'an speaks in particular of five “resolute prophets” who were sent with a shari'a: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad [Q. 42:13].

For a person to be a prophet is the highest dignity that can be given to any human being. Muslims are not allowed to discriminate between prophets but must believe that they were all prophets sent by God [Q. 2:285]. Some are elevated to a higher function, such as bearing a new scripture, and some have special characteristics: Abraham is called the “Friend of God,” Moses is the one whose encounter with God required him to veil his face, and Jesus was born through a virginal conception. Muhammad is the last and the seal of the prophets. The Qur'an makes clear that there will be no more prophets after him. He is the seal, in that he confirmed and validated all that had gone before him; he is the universal prophet and for all time.

Knowing the prophets' teaching

To the extent that we have an accurate record of the sayings and actions of the various prophets, they all act as role models for Muslims. This is seen *par excellence* in the case of Muhammad, of course, through his biography (*sira*) and his Hadith. Sayings attributed to Jesus have circulated amongst Muslims for many centuries, which are used in character training and etiquette (*adab*). A helpful collection has been put together and translated into English by Tarif Khalidi (*The Muslim Jesus: sayings and stories in Islamic literature*, Harvard, 2001). There is also a genre of such stories of the prophets (*Qisas al-Anbiya*), which can be found in various collections, notably that of Ibn Kathir (d. 1372), translated into English.