

What is the Role of Prophethood and of Prophets?

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Prophethood is the highest rank and honor that a man can receive from God. It proves the superiority of that man's inner being over all others. A Prophet is like a branch arching out from the Divine to the human realm. He is the very heart and tongue of creation. He possesses a supreme intellect that penetrates into the reality of things and events.

Moreover, he is the ideal being, for all of his faculties are harmoniously excellent and active. He strives and progresses steadily toward Heaven, waits upon Divine inspiration for the solutions to the problems he faces, and is the connecting point between this world and the Beyond. His body is subject to and follows his heart, figuratively the seat of spiritual intellect, as does his heart. His perceptions and reflections are always directed to the Names and Attributes of God. He goes to what he perceives, and arrives at the desired destination.

A Prophet's perception, developed to the full-seeing, hearing, and thus knowing-surpasses that of all other people. His perception cannot be explained in terms of different light, sound, or some other wavelengths. Ordinary people cannot acquire a Prophet's knowledge.

By conveying the Divine message and guidance, the Prophets give us a limited insight into creation so that we can know some of its meaning. Without them, we would be unable to see or understand the true nature and meaning of things and events, or to deal with our surrounding environment. They also teach us something of God and His Names and Attributes.

Their first mission is to teach the reality, the true purpose and meaning, of this life. Since God is beyond our perception and comprehension, the Prophets have to be the most obedient, careful, conscious, and self-disciplined of people while performing their tasks. If they had not spoken in clear terms about the Creator, we could not think, know, or say anything correct about God.

Everything in the universe tries to exhibit the Names and Attributes of the All-Mighty, All-Encompassing Creator. In the same way, the Prophets note, affirm, and are faithful to the subtle, mysterious relation between God and His Names and Attributes. As their duty is to know and speak about God, they enter into the true meaning of things and events and then convey it directly and sincerely to humanity.

When we are in a new or unfamiliar place, we need a guide to show us around. This analogy applies to the role of Prophets. Would the One who created everything so that we might know Him not provide guides, in the form of Prophets, to inform us of His Names and Attributes and guide us along the right path? To overlook such a need would render the creation useless and futile, yet we know that God does not engage in such activities. Thus, it seems most likely that all people would be informed of such things by a Prophet sent to them by God.

The Qur'an is explicit on this point: For We sent among every people a Messenger (with the command): "Serve God and avoid evil" (16:36). But many people gradually forgot these Divine teachings and fell into such errors as deifying the Prophets and others or engaging in idolatry. We can see this in the deities of Mt. Olympus in ancient Greece, the sanctification of the Ganges river in India, and in many other places. Even accepting that there must be a tremendous difference between the original and the current form of many religions, it is quite impossible to understand the conditions that caused Confucius to appear in China and Brahma and Buddha in India. It is equally difficult to guess what their original messages were and to what degree they have been corrupted.

If the Qur'an had not introduced Jesus to us, we would not have an accurate idea of his life and teachings. Over time, priests (and others) mixed the truth of Jesus with ancient Greek and Roman philosophies and idolatry, attributed divinity to human beings, and anthropomorphized God. The Trinity is an obvious example. Perhaps Rome would accept Christianity as its official state religion only if the various pagan festivals, holy days, rites, and rituals were incorporated. Without the Qur'an's enlightening revelation, it would be very difficult to tell Jesus Christ from Adonis or Dionysus. [1]

Considering that Christianity is relatively recent, and what the Christians did to their Prophet and their Book, we wonder how many other people fell into the same error. One reliable hadith says: "A Prophet's disciples will carry out his mission after his death, but some of his followers will later upset everything he established." [2] This is a very important point. Many of the religions we now consider false turned to falsehood, superstition, and legend over time through the deliberate malice of their enemies (or the mistakes of their followers), despite their possible origin in the purest, Divine source.

To say that someone is a Prophet when he is not is unbelief, as is the case with refusing to believe in a true Prophet. On

the other hand, if the case of false religions is similar to that of Christianity, we should look at them with some caution and reserve judgment. We should consider what Buddhism or Brahmanism may have been in their true, original forms, as well as the doctrines attributed to Confucius or the practices and beliefs of shamanism. Maybe they still have some remnants of what they originally were.

Many once-pure religions have been distorted and altered. Therefore, it is essential to accept the purity of their original foundation. The Qur'an says: There never was a people without a warner having lived among them (35:24), and We sent among every people a Messenger (16:36).

These revelations declare that God sent Messengers to each group of people. The Qur'an mentions the names of 28 Prophets, out of a total of 124,000 (or perhaps 224,000). We do not know exactly when and where many of them lived. But we do not have to know such information, for: We did in times past send Messengers before you; of them there are some whose stories We have related to you, and some whose stories We have not related to you (40:78).

Recent studies in comparative religion, philosophy, and anthropology reveal that many widely separated communities share certain concepts and practices. Among these are moving from polytheism to monotheism, and praying to the One God in times of hardship by raising their hands and asking something from Him. Many such phenomena indicate a singular source and a single teaching. If primitive tribes cut off from civilization and the influence of known Prophets have a sure understanding of His Oneness, though they may have little understanding of how to live according to that belief, a Messenger must have been sent to them at some time in the past: For every people there is a Messenger. When their Messenger comes, the matter is judged between them with justice, and they are not wronged (10:47).

What about those who claim to have been sent no Prophet? Are they held accountable for their beliefs and actions? According to the verse quoted above, a Prophet has been sent to every people. There may be periods when darkness seemed to prevail, but such periods are only temporary. Nevertheless, there is the possibility that the Prophet's work was destroyed so completely by erroneous ideas and rites that the true teachings were lost. In such cases, people may have remained in darkness unknowingly or against their own will. Such people will not be punished or blamed for the wrong they may do, until and unless they have been warned: We never punish until We have sent a Messenger (17:15), for warning precedes responsibility and reward or punishment.

Muslim scholars have different opinions on this matter. For instance, Imam Maturidi and his school argue that no people can be excused, for there is enough evidence pointing to the One Creator to guide anyone to belief in Him. The 'Ashari school, referring to the above verse, argues that warning and guidance must precede judgment, and that people can be held responsible only if they have been sent a Prophet.

Others combine these two positions: Those who have not been sent a Prophet and so did not enter willfully into unbelief or idolatry are ahl al-najat (people who will be excused and so escape punishment and who, as God wills, may be saved). This position is based on the fact that some people cannot analyze their surroundings, penetrate to their meaning, or deduce the right course of belief and action. They first have to be taught the right way, given explanations and directions on how to act, and then they can be rewarded or punished according to what they do with the new knowledge. Those who willfully enter unbelief, fight belief and religion, or knowingly defy God and His commandments will be questioned and punished, regardless of how isolated they are.

[1] Two originally ancient Greek "gods" that were widely worshipped in Greece and those lands under its cultural sway, as well as in the Roman Empire.

[2] Muslim, Fada'il al-Sahaba, 210–12; Ibn Hanbal, Musnad, 417.