

## Lesson Five: The Answer of the Prophets to the Illogical Demands of the Polytheists

Without doubt, extreme self-worship, going to extremes in self-worship and in distorting reality and ignoring it, causes the human being's misguidance to increase, together with the dominance of personal, arbitrary inclination over his mind. A true orientation to reality, a decisive entry onto the path of truth, requires the human being to empty his inner being of all obstinate tendencies, the negative consequences of which are irreparable. Everyone has the individual duty of seeking the truth, and this can be attained only by following the path of salvation.

The Qur'an recognizes as logical that miracles be demanded of the Prophets as proofs of the veracity of their claim, and it narrates in detail the practical and affirmative answer given by the Prophets to this demand of mankind. Nonetheless, there were certain obstinate and illogical persons in each age who were in effect unwilling to accept the truth and demanded from the Prophets miracles of their own choosing.

Sometimes they even demanded the performance of deeds that were rationally impossible. Naturally enough, the Prophets who were in communication with the source of revelation did not submit to their childish and obstinate demands. The purpose of miracles is to bear witness to messenger hood, and this aim is accomplished by any miraculous deed that gives assurance that a Prophet has indeed received a mission from God.

Is it necessary that Prophets should produce miracles corresponding to the particular taste and desire of everyone? Must a Divine miracle be subordinate to the will of frivolous and aimless individuals?

The Prophets proclaimed to the human beings that they were entrusted with the guidance and teaching of mankind, so the occurrence of miracles had to be based on the will and desire of God and the necessities of the situation; it was not a means for entertaining illogical and obstinate people. The Noble Qur'an says:

***“No Messenger had the right to perform a miracle without God’s permission” (40:78)***

One of the reasons for the Prophets<sup>1</sup> refusal to submit to those who were demanding miracles of them may have been that those persons imagined the Prophets to be claiming some kind of control over the whole of the universe. The Qur’an therefore says:

***“Tell people I am a human being like you, except that revelation comes to me” (41:6)***

***“Say: God is transcendent and elevated. Am I more than a human being whom God has chosen as His Messenger?” (17:93)***

However, when people were seeking guidance and pursuing the truth, and the Prophets themselves wished to establish the truth of their mission, miracles took place, as is evident from many such instances in the case of Moses, upon whom be peace.

It is always possible for God to draw the attention of the human beings to a miracle in some spectacular way. For example, He can cause inanimate objects and plants to speak or do other remarkable things in order to establish the veracity of His religion. However, such miracles would not be conducive to the human being’s freedom or his conscious choice and development.

Therefore, God has not acted in this fashion and He has not sought to guide the human being at the expense of his intellectual freedom.

Those who turn their back on the truth will naturally come to experience the result of their deeds and the consequence of their behavior. It is thus that everything moves forward in this world in complete harmony. If God were to punish all humans immediately because of their misdeeds, no one would be able to endure it, for if every wrongdoer were to be killed, the human race would inevitably come to an end.

If those opposing the Prophets had no aim other than uncovering the truth, they would come to accept it both as a result of their own extensive and comprehensive reflections and of the manifest miracles displayed to them.

However, the manner in which they demand miracles indicates an evil intention on their part, and a tendency to make unjustifiable objections, not a real search for the truth.

The basic concern of these obstinate persons whose hearts had died within them was denial and turning away from the truth, for considering the existence of clear miracles there was no need for them to be repeated. Even if they had been repeated, those deniers would still not have believed. The Qur’an says:

***“When the Messenger of Truth was sent to them by Us, they said, ‘Why has he not been given what Moses was given’ But did they not disbelieve in what had been given to Moses?” (28:48)***

Many of their demands did not even accord with the conditions of a miracle. Thus, the Qur'an tells us that they proposed the following to the Prophet of Islam:

***"... to prove your mission you must bring God and the angels here to us." (25:24)***

In another verse, their foolish objections and expectations along the same lines are analyzed as follows:

***"They said: 'We will not believe in you unless you make a spring gush forth for us from the ground, or have a garden of date trees and vines with water flowing through it, or cause the sky to fall in on our heads, or make God and His angels appear in front of us, or have a house covered with gold, or ascend into the sky. But we will not believe in your ascending into the sky unless you bring for us a book we can read.' Say: 'Glory be unto my Lord! Am I anything more than a human being, sent by God with a mission?'" (17:90-93)***

It is evident from these verses that the objectors were demanding from the Messenger of God that, in order to prove his prophethood and his special relationship with the origin of all existence, he should perform miracles such as causing a spring to gush out of the ground or possessing an orchard overflowing with fruit or a palace of gold, these being the marks of aristocratic opulence in that age.

It was possible for those demands to be fulfilled, for certain individuals possessed one or all of the things mentioned; however, they were not Prophets. The possession of material resources can never be a criterion for prophethood and the ability to perform miracles; such things can never be accepted from anyone as a proof of Prophethood.

This shows how short-sighted and banal they were in their thinking; they imagined illusory power, wealth, and abundance, to constitute criteria for leadership.

Another demand of these tricksters, who were interested in nothing more than enjoying the same kind of entertainment that the deeds of an ascetic might have provided, was the immediate descent of Divine punishment, bringing human life to an end. But the ultimate aim of the miracle is something quite different: to guide the human beings and make them aware, to nurture their capacities and to liberate them from attachments. It is for this reason that as a result of his accepting the truth, the human being begins to act within a new system of thought.

As for the demand that God and the angels should descend, considering the fact that God is not a body and is not limited with respect to time and space, He cannot have a material or relative manifestation. To imagine the contrary is the result of childish and illogical thinking.

God's final answer to the illegitimate objections of the miracle seekers is explicit and clear:

***"Say: 'Glory be unto my Lord! Am I anything more than a human being, sent by God with a mission?'"***

Through these words, the Prophet fully absolves God from any weakness or inability, while, at the same time, emphasizing his own utter powerlessness to produce miracles of himself. Miracles proceed from the will of God's unlimited essence and the Prophet follows His will. Without God's permission, he has no right to intervene in the workings of the universe, and under no circumstances can he surrender to every demand made on him for the performance of miracles.

Another objection that was made was that they considered the Prophet's belonging to the same human species as themselves a point of weakness. They imagined that Prophets could not be raised up from within society, from among the masses.

This, too, the Prophet answers with the same words, condemning thereby the narrow and erroneous view that was a result of their failure to understand the meaning of a prophetic mission. With the lesson and message contained in these words, he barred the path to any deviant interpretation of prophecy and messengerhood. Still more amazing was that the polytheists used to say:

***"We will not believe until we receive what was given to the other Prophets." (6: 124)***

For those who have no intention of changing and do not wish to be liberated from bondage to their obstinate illusions in order to enter the straight path of guidance, the repetition of a miracle would be entirely fruitless.

## An Inadequate Analysis

Those whose thoughts lack a foundation of religious belief attempt to explain the question of revelation and the teachings of the Prophets as follows: those teachings did not have a heavenly origin, but arose instead from the intellectual genius of those pure and outstanding humanitarians. Since the peoples that lived in the time of the Prophets could not be convinced by the logic of reason, in order to gain their support, the Prophets attributed to God the laws and regulations they themselves had drawn up which were indeed useful for the reform of corrupt societies.

This interpretation of the matter is neither logical nor realistic, for however much abundant talent and innate genius an individual possesses, his talents will remain buried and his genius unfulfilled unless he receives instruction and education.

By contrast, the knowledge of the Prophets was not learned or acquired; they did not acquire learning from some masters with whom they were contemporary. In addition, the work of geniuses unfolds in accordance with material and natural principles, whereas the miracles of the Prophets are not based on natural and conventional laws or formulae.

If they had no source other than genius and perspicacious intelligence, unless they had discovered some entirely new factor, the teachings they promulgated after claiming prophethood would have to have had some antecedent, and they would have developed their thoughts and ideas gradually, not suddenly

and all at once.

By contrast, all the profound transformations we see in the lives of the Prophets begin, without exception, at the moment they proclaim themselves to be Prophets. Before that moment, putting aside their abundant spirituality and inward purity, everything in the external circumstances of the Prophets is entirely normal.

This abrupt transformation, this sudden presentation of teachings that within a comprehensive theoretical and practical framework orient the thoughts and actions of the human being toward a specific goal – his liberation from domination by natural and social forces – is clear evidence and proof that a new factor has entered the lives of the Prophets, that a new gushing source for the discovery of truth has been placed at their disposal.

Nowhere in the course of human history will we encounter persons the products of whose talent and the fruit of whose genius make such a sudden, abrupt appearance. However, this was precisely the case with the Prophets.

Any impartial researcher who examines the history of the Prophets will realize that the entirety of their noble lives was characterized by truthfulness, honesty, devotion to the truth, and love of humanity. Particularly apparent in their lives were their spirit of self-sacrifice, their endurance of pressure and overwhelming problems, and their constructive determination at all times to advance toward fulfilling their goal. Even their hate-filled enemies were obliged to credit them with all these virtues.

These qualities demonstrate well what constituted the foundation on which the Prophets stood in their mission devoted to truth and humanity, while confronting the inhumane and impure elements that always emerged to confront the men of God.

Given this, can we attribute the utterance of falsehood, for the sake of gaining greater influence in society, to persons who represent an ideal model of freedom from all crookedness and deviousness? Is it permissible to accuse of making false and unfounded statements personages in whose conduct we see not the slightest trace of selfish desire?

It was precisely their lofty and worthy conduct that accelerated their success in winning over a whole segment of mankind that was drowning in the stagnant waters of ignorance. Furthermore, one of the principal teachings put forward by those men of God, one of the hallmarks of their mission, was a summons to honesty and truthfulness and a condemnation of hypocrisy and deviousness.

## **Specimens of Human Perfection According to Imam 'Ali**

In one of his speeches, 'Ali, upon whom be peace, discusses the lives of the Prophets, describing those most exalted exemplars of human virtue as follows: "Let me speak of the characteristics of Moses, to whom God spoke. When he raised his hands in prayer to the presence of his Lord, he swore and

affirmed, 'O God, I need nothing of all Your bounty save only a piece of bread to relieve my hunger.' He asked for nothing more because in his indigence he used to ward off hunger with the wild grasses of the desert, and so this was he that the greenness of the grass he used to consume was visible through the diaphanous skin of his stomach.

Let me mention David, the Prophet who first introduced reed pipes. He would weave baskets from date fiber, and then ask his companions, 'Which of you will buy this basket?' He would buy barley bread with the money he earned from selling the baskets and eat it.

Let me speak of Jesus, son of Mary, upon whom be peace. He would place a stone beneath his head to sleep on at night; he always wore coarse clothing and passed his days in hunger. The moon was his lamp in the darkness of the night, and the azure roof of the heavens was his shelter in winter. He prepared his food from the plants that grew in the ground; he had neither a spouse to draw his attention to her nor a child on whom to lavish anxious care. He had no wealth calling for his attention, nor greed and desire to abase him with the search for riches. His only mount was his own two feet, and his two hands were always at work in the service of God's creatures.

Follow your own Prophet of pure disposition, Muhammad, upon whom be peace and blessings. He was a perfect example of all human virtues. God loves those who in the conduct of their lives follow His Messenger, who place their feet in his footsteps, and who follow him in their choice of a way of life. He took but a slight portion of the life of this world.

His nurture was dry bread, and he never ate to satiation. They offered him the world, and he did not accept it. He disliked whatever God disliked, and he despised whatever God regarded as lowly.

When he ate, he would sit on the ground. He would sit and stand with the meekness of a slave. He would mend his own clothes and stitch his own shoes. A simple curtain covered the door to his dwelling, and he would tell his wives to remove it, because it reminded him of the worldly life and its adornments.

Even within his heart, he would wage war against worship of the world, obliterating all consciousness of it from his heart. He expelled all concern for worldly well-being from his mind and closed his eyes to all adornment and luxury.

Every possessor of intelligence must ask himself whether God was honoring the Prophet through this way of life or, on the contrary, humiliating and abasing him. If he says that God was abasing him, he has spoken in error and accused God of a monstrosity.

So follow the Prophet in the conduct of your lives, for it is he who holds the banner of resurrection and who provides the measure by which all humans deeds are to be measured. He entered the arena of this world with a pure intelligence and conscience and passed through this world, closing his eyes to the things of the world for the sake of God's message. He never placed one stone on top of another in order to build himself a dwelling, and he never constructed a palace.

How grateful we should be to God that in His kindness and favor sent us Muhammad, upon whom be peace, for us to follow and take as our model, and to follow step by step the path he traced out with his life." [1](#)

The way of recognizing Prophets is not restricted to the miracles they performed. Indeed, the method prescribed by reason and knowledge represents the most profound way of recognizing a Prophet, particularly in an age when the intellect has developed and knowledge has advanced. Through careful examination and objective analysis, by taking into consideration both individual and social characteristics, as well as the content of the teachings being proclaimed, it is possible to recognize the true Prophet, and to do so, in fact, at a more profound level than do those who merely witness the miracles they perform.

A distinct school of thought can present itself to researchers and investigators more effectively and convincingly than by means of a miracle; it can demonstrate the veracity of the program it proposes.

The clearest, most evidential and primary proof of a correct school of thought, in an age when knowledge and learning are fully present, is its complete conformity with the criteria of science and the observable realities of the universe. It should, therefore, be realized that if a school of thought does not accord with the criteria of science, and if, from the point of view of its content and regulations, it contradicts science and free thought, that school definitely has no relation to the Creator.

It is thus that with the advancement of knowledge and the intellectual development of society, the authentic teachings of the Prophet – which ensure the perfection of the human being, provide for his spiritual and material needs, and enable both the individual and society to grow and advance, shine ever more strongly through the darkness of illusion and superstition and display their brilliant visage ever more clearly. The heavenly nature of the Prophets, which is clearly delineated in the Qur'an, is an indication of their lofty standing and status before the Creator.

A whole separate surah was revealed concerning the Prophet Noah. He has such an exalted status that God invokes peace on him in the following terms:

***"Peace be upon Noah and greetings be unto him! Thus do we reward the doers of good, for he was truly one of our believing servants." (37:79-81).***

The Qur'an mentions Abraham, upon whom be peace, the champion of Divine unity, as follows:

***"God chose Abraham as His friend." (4: 125)***

***"It is fitting for the believers that they should follow Abraham." (60:4)***

***"He was a truthful bestower of counsel." (11: 107)***

Concerning Solomon, that just ruler, He says: ***"We bestowed Solomon on David; he was a virtuous***

***servant who turned always to God." (38:30)***

God granted him His favor and generosity in both worlds, as is apparent from these two verses:

***"This is a limitless bounty bestowed in this world. (38:39)***

***{For Solomon} there shall be a goodly return in the next world, and a station of nearness in the presence of his Lord." (38:40)***

Concerning David, God says:

***"Mention Our servant David. He was most powerful, and he constantly turned to Our presence in repentance." (38:17)***

***"We strengthened his kingdom and rule, and gave him the power to perceive truths and to distinguish the true from the false." (38:20)***

God mentions Joseph, that veracious one who taught all seekers of virtue the lesson of struggle against sin, in the following terms:

***"Joseph who had heard these words, raised up his hands in supplication and said: 'O God, the torment of prison is more preferable to me than the ugly deed the women demand of me.'" (12:33)***

Finally, expressing the respect that is due to all of the Prophets, He says:

***"God's peace and blessings be upon His cherished Messengers." (37: 181)***

1. Nahj al-Balagha, ed. Muhammad Abduh, pages 57-60.

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