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Lesson one: Prophethood (nubuwwah)

Prophethood is among the subjects which have been dealt with in the *Nahjul Balaghah* and a discussion about which can help us understand one of the basic principles of Islam. In fact, it is not only a subject which can be followed throughout the *Nahjul Balaghah* but one of the most important and fundamental principles of Islamic ideology.

I have repeatedly mentioned in various discussions that in order to analyze and understand the numerous matters of Islamic thought and ideology, the principle of prophethood is an axis around which these matters can be discussed as well. As –to the principle of monotheism, we believe that its social and revolutionary dimensions can only be clarified when we discuss it within the vast spectrum of the matters concerning prophethood.

Accordingly, our method in this chapter is to point out and analyze the different dimensions of prophethood and to support our discussion with an explanation of “Ali’s ibn Abi Talib's sayings wherever necessary. In this manner, two aims will be fulfilled, i.e. some important sections of the *Nahjul Balaghah* will be translated and interpreted, and issues among the basic Islamic principles will be made apparent.

It is to be mentioned at the beginning that in the discussion about prophethood, revelation and its relevant matters will not be discussed. Rather, prophethood will be viewed as a historical reality and an unquestionable event. Undoubtedly, prophethood has existed as a phenomenon in the history of mankind. There is no difference of opinion in this regard between us and those who disbelieve in it.

However, the difference lies in the interpretation of this event and the message it conveys. In fact, no one denies such personalities as Moses, Jesus and other Prophets whether or not the history of their lives is more or less known or vague. History reports that all of them have existed.

Therefore, prophethood will be considered as a historical event in our discussion and the following questions will be answered in the analysis, which follows:

1. What was the social background (social, temporal and historical situation) when this event occurred?

2. Where did this event originate? Did it appear among the kings, the oppressed, the scholars and thinkers... which class of people?
3. What position did it enjoy? Was it to the benefit of a special class of people? Was it directed towards material advantages? 'Was it directed towards mystical and spiritual aspects of life? What was its social and intellectual direction?
4. What were the pros and cons when the Prophet first offered his message? Who were those who opposed it and to which class of the society did they belong? What were their motives and means of opposition? Who were in favor of it and to which class did they belong? What were their motives and how did they assist the Prophet?
5. What was the aim behind the message of prophethood? Was prophethood aimed at material welfare? Was it aimed at class distinction? Was it aimed at enhancing the level of people's knowledge and understanding? Was it aimed at opposing or accounting for the powers of the time?
6. Did the Prophet call the people? Was it 'monotheism' with its social, political, economic and revolutionary dimensions?

Answering these questions, with regard to Islamic texts and records, will shed light on different aspects of this social reality and will acquaint us with a vast scope of Islamic thought. Of course the *Nahjul Balaghah* will be the axis of our discussion, although different verses of the Holy Qur'an as well as mental reasoning may be of great help both in answering the questions and in interpreting All's words.

The first question which is relevant is "What grounds were available for the manifestations of prophethood?" What was the social, economic and historical setting for the appearance of the Prophets? And among which class of people have they appeared? *The Nahjul Balaghah* has answered these questions on several occasions. In the first sermon, speaking about monotheism, the creation of heavens and the earth, the angels and other matters, the appearance of the Prophets and the background to prophethood in general are discussed as well.

We read the preceding sentence so that the connection to this matter is made clear.

From his progeny (Adam) God chose prophets and took their pledge for His revelation and for carrying His message as their trust. In the course of time, many people perverted God's trust with them and ignored His position and took partners along with Him. Satan turned them away from knowing Him and kept them aloof from His worship.

Then sent His messengers and series of His prophets towards them to let them fulfill the pledges of His creation, to recall to them his bounties....¹ the last part of this quotation reveals some peculiarities of the community in the 'Age of Ignorance', in which Prophets were sent by God to people. These peculiarities are hereunder explained.

It says that 'in course of time many people perverted God's' trust. The Holy Qur'an speaks about *'ahd* on several occasions, examples of which are given below,

"Thy Lord has decreed you shall not serve any but Him ... " (17:23)

"Made I not covenant with you, children of Adam, that you should not serve Satan – surely he is a manifest foe to you ... ?" (36:60)

"... And God made them testify concerning themselves, 'Am I not your Lord? 'They said,' yes, we testify ... " (7: 172)

These verses imply that God's covenant (*'ahd*) is to abstain from servitude to Satan, that man's servitude should be exclusively for God and that human beings have primordially admitted that they are servants of God and should serve Him alone.

This is the meaning of *'ahd* (trust and covenant) to which the Commander of the Faithful refers in the *Nahjul Balaghah*. In fact, he says that most of the people broke their allegiance with God and disobeyed His commands by worshipping idols, taking partners (holders of power and possessions) along with Him, imposing themselves on other people as worship-deserving idols and perverting the divine decree through ignoring or exclusive obedience to God.

It was under these conditions, the Commander of the Faithful asserts, that God brought about prophethood and appointed His Prophets. This is also emphasized in other statements of the first Sermon after describing the appearance of the Prophet of Islam and not the appearance of the prophets at large, although the social conditions and mental atmosphere in which all the Prophets, including Abraham, Moses, Jesus and others, have appeared have been the same, and thus what is said about the Prophet of Islam fits other Prophets as well.

"The statements run as under the people of the earth at this time were divided in different Parties, their aims were separate and their ways were diverse. They either likened God with His creation or twisted His Names or turned to other than Him. ..,"[2](#)

It says that the Prophet was appointed to prophethood at a time when people were divided in groups with different ways of thinking, i.e.. a universal mentality did not govern the is minds of all people, which indicates the lack of an acceptable culture at that time, separation among people and, finally, ignorance. It continues with the statement that 'their aims were separate'.

This has two implications. The simple one is that in different parts of the community or in different corners of the world people enjoyed desires and manners of there own. The members of each community or class of people favored something, which the members of other classes and communities despised. In fact, the society at large lacked a common aim and aspiration, which shows the decline of that society.

The second implication is that there was not more than a few poles of power throughout the world at that time, and they were Sassanian Kings, Roman Emperors, Ethiopian Sultans and other despots, dictators and idols who stood at the peak of their communities, ruling over the people with tyranny and according to their own aims, desires and self-centeredness. The existence of insufficiencies and oppression in the Iranian community, the existence of impenetrable classes among the people, the boundless mastery of Brahmans, aristocrats and soldiers over the lower classes and the existence of moral, cultural, economic and class tyrannies, the pressure of which tortured the people, were all a manifestation of the sensuality and selfishness of the idols (kings) who possessed the leadership of the Iranian community. Thus, the whims and desires of a minority dominated all the affairs of a majority of mankind.

„They likened God with His creation”. It implies that those people who, according to their nature and spiritual feelings, believed in the existence of a deity and a creator, found it in the form of creatures and small, imperfect beings. Some of them worshipped cows as their gods. Others worshipped stone or wooden idols. In fact, all the people were in some way or another worshippers of God as their nature demanded but they were devoid of a perfect knowledge concerning God. This was the most manifest perversion.

“They twisted His Names or turned to other than Him». This was a kind of mental deviation prevailing among the believers of God. They were actually so involved in the Name of God that they could not take step beyond it. In ancient times, for example, those who had a vague view of God in their minds, being unable to know God perfectly, turned to His Names *Allah*, *Mannan* or *Ilah* and worshipped them. They were ignorant of the reality of God.

Another example can be observed in the extremist ideologies of today. Advocates of these ideologies claim to believe in God but if they are asked what God is, they cannot explain the true concept and meaning of this word. Rather, they take the 'whole existence', the rules governing nature and the cause and effect, conventions current in nature and history to be a god. They lack the ability to know the real meaning of God, i.e. to know Him as an independent 'Necessary Being' who is undoubtedly the Creator of this universe rather than being Himself the universe. They cannot perceive this reasonable, philosophical concept. Thus, they are confused about the Name and the real Being of God.

Naturally, wisdom, love, knowledge, spiritual attractions and moral Attributes, all of which originate from monotheism and a knowledge of God, do not develop in them and, therefore, prayers, incantations and the wise prayers of Imam Sajjad, peace be upon him, for example, become meaningless to them. Accordingly, what such people worship is 'God' as a word without being concerned with its meaning and concept. This is a sign of the decline and deviation of religious as well as a characteristic of the people who lived at the time when Prophets appeared.

In the second Sermon, the Commander of the faithful has more detailed statements concerning the social background to the appearance of the prophets. They run as follows „At that time people had fallen in to vices whereby the rope of religion had been broken, the pillars of belief had been shaken, principles

had been sacrilegied, systems had become *topsy turvy*, openings were narrow, passages were dark, *guidance* was unknown and darkness prevailed. God was being disobeyed. Satan was given support and Belief had been forsaken.

As a result, the pillars of religion fell down, its traces could not be discerned, its passages had been destroyed and its streets had fallen into decay. People obeyed Satan and tread his paths. They sought water from his watering places. Through them Satan's emblems and his standard was raised in vices, which trampled the people under their hoofs, and treaded upon them with their feet. The vices stood on their toes (in full stature) and the people immersed in them were strayed, perplexed, ignorant and seduced as though in a good house with bad neighbors. Instead of sleep they had wakefulness and for antimony they had tears in the eyes. They were in a land where the learned were in bridles (keeping their mouths shut) while the ignorant were honored.”[3](#)

This is a very beautiful and artistic picture (in the form of an ordinary lecture from the pulpit) of the social conditions in the age of ignorance, in which the Commander of the Faithful portrays the adversities, deficiencies and disorders casting shadows over the people's life– the people who were mentally bewildered and perplexed and who did not know the aim and purpose of life.

We can easily and clearly understand the meaning of these words of his, because they provide us with an exact portrait of the situation of our own time, when the Iranian nation was severely oppressed and fell victim to the tyrannies brought upon it by the Pahlavi executioners and American mercenaries. In fact, what in this Sermon and other Sermons have been expressed about the background to the appearance of the Prophets (which the writer used to interpret consciously in connection with the situations of strangulation at the Pahlavi time conforms exactly to the conditions under which we lived during the Pahlavi rule).

In those days, especially in the last three years of the Pahlavi reign, the people were so mentally deceived and misled that they got on the buses and trucks in many cities, applauded, played the flute and shouted, „Long live the Shah”. Meanwhile, the awakened conscience of a group of people was severely wounded; yet, this was not the common conscience of our community, for even those who refrained from participating in such shows, whether they were government employees, clergymen of other classes of people, accepted the ways and procedures of the ruling regime by their indifferent and apathetic behavior towards the prevailing situation.

The people were actually bewildered and dead. No one was aware of the aim behind his daily labor. They worked day and night but they were ignorant of the aim, aspiration and the future for the achievement of which human beings endeavor. The similitude of them was the like similitude of the 'mill donkey' that constantly moves in a circular direction and never reaches an end.

They were endowed with the best dwellings and lands, having all the God–given bounties and with the territory of human conscience, faculties and beauties, which have been hidden but now have bloomed in

our revolutionary boys and girls, fathers and mothers. In fact, such a blessed background existed in people but the 'neighbors were bad' in the words of the Commander of the Faithful, i.e. the rulers and holders of power were incompetent and dishonest.

On the whole, under such conditions, which he recounts in the above-quoted statements, and we experienced in our own time, the Prophets were appointed to prophethood. We shall, God-willing, give more details about the background to prophethood, as pointed out in the Commander of the Faithful's words, which are very important so far as the philosophy of history is concerned, and which is misunderstood by some deviated individuals who draw wrong, material conclusions on the basis of their incorrect analysis in this regard.

Questions and Answers

Q. What is the difference between prophethood (nubuwwah) and appointment to prophethood (ba'tha)?

A. Appointment to prophethood is the sudden resurrection and awakening of an individual or a community of people who have plunged into the sleep of negligence, ignorance and bewilderment. Prophethood is the principal factor of the appointment, i.e. after the necessary competence and readiness is found in someone to connect with god and the Divine revelation then he is appointed as a prophet. Thus, the appointment is the consequence of prophethood.

Q. Is "Ali's view a universal one, applicable to all communities such as the corrupt western ones? Are these communities subject to destruction without anyone saving them?"

A. Yes, it is applicable to all communities at all times. But it should be added that at a time when the chain of prophethood ends in the Last Prophet and no one is appointed to prophethood any longer, it is the religious scholars as heirs of the Prophets who will lead the people and save human communities from destruction.

Q. Are, the signs, which Hadrat 'Ali provides us for the appearance of the Prophets the same as the signs, which we have received concerning the appearance of Hadrat Mahdi?

A. Concerning Hadrat Mahdi, mention should be made of the fact that before his reappearance the world will achieve a relative perfection. In fact, the universal government of Mahdi would be a perfectly just government. You and the coming generations before his reappearance should provide half of this justice. Today, due to the establishment of the Islamic government of Iran, which conveys a remarkable percentage of the message of Islam in this strategic region of the world, we have approached nearer to the reappearance of Hadrat Mahdi.

Q. It is true that all these signs are existent in our Revolution and in the whole world. Is the reappearance of Hadrat Mahdi possible in this period?

A. Yes, it is possible. But another thing, which is quite possible, is the decline of the superpowers of the world and the appearance of new movements and resurrection, which we have pointed out repeatedly. This is because the world has entered a new period with the advent of our Revolution, a period in which the deprived of the world and the weak nations will no more remain indifferent to the tyrannies of the great powers, will stand against them and will finally demolish them as a small animal can destroy a huge elephant by mounting its ears.

[1.](#) Ash-Sharif Ar-Radi, the Sermons of 'Ali (Tehran: World Organization for Islamic Services, 1979), part one, page 19.

[2.](#) Ibid. p. 20.

[3.](#) Ibid. p. 30.

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