

Lesson Six: The Continuity of Prophethood

Continuity is one of the main points in the discussion of prophethood. In the first Sermon of the Nahjul Balaghah, the Commander of the Faithful aims at picturing the line of prophethood as a consistent and continuous line in the course of history extending to the time of the Prophet of Islam.

In fact, never in the course of history has there been a time or place devoid of a Prophet or signs of a Prophet in the past, i.e. either a Prophet has lived among people appointed by God to provide them with good tidings or to make them fear (God's wrath) or there has been something left behind by a Prophet, which the people obeyed as they obeyed the Prophet himself.

Thus, believing in the fact that the earth has never been devoid of a 'proof' (of God) does not necessarily mean that in a given nation or community, a Prophet has always lived who has been immediately taken, over by another Prophet at the time of death. It rather implies that after a prophet's death and before the advent of the next prophet there was something (a book or a faithful disciple), which the people followed and obeyed as the successor of the dead Prophet.

In the Arabian Peninsula, for example, it took a very long time before the Prophet of Islam appeared. There was a long transition between the disappearance of Jesus Christ, peace be upon him and the appearance of Muhammad, peace and the mercy of God be upon him and his descendants. In Sermon No. 88 of the Nahjul Balaghah, the Commander of the Faithful points out this matter saying, „God sent the Prophet when the mission of other Prophets had ended and people had fallen into”.

Now we pursue our discussion concerning the continuity of prophethood with regard to his words in the Nahjul Balaghah. In Sermon no. 1 he says, God never allowed His creation to remain without a Prophet (nabi) deputed by Him, or a book sent down from Him or a binding argument (proof) or a standing plea.

The difference between nabi and rasul is that a nabi merely receives the message from God but a rasul in addition to receiving the message, has the mission to propagate it and deliver it to the people. This is, of course, not totally acceptable because the aim of receiving a message is nothing but propagating and the deliverance of it to others. However, we might suppose that a nabi takes the message but it is not

the time to deliver it, just as the Prophet of Islam received the message (revelation) on the 'Night of Power' "***We have indeed revealed this Message in the Night of Power.***" but it took twenty-three years before he could fulfill the duty of conveying it to the people.

In the Sura Ta Ha, verse 114, the Holy Qur'an addresses the prophet, saying:

"... Be not in haste with the Qur'an before its revelation to thee is completed".

Accordingly, nabi mursal (the deputed prophet), as the Commander of the Faithful puts it, is referred to as a Prophet who actually conveys his message to the people.

What is the meaning of 'Kitabun munzal (a book sent down)? Does this sending down refer to a place? The fact is that to send down a book actually means to transform the book into letters and words (language) which humanity understands, i.e. to adapt the high heavenly concepts and realities to the level of one's thoughts and understanding.

In fact, God, the exalted, inspired the Prophet with the highly complicated facts and learning's in the form of the most simple words and expressions which could be understood by all and which later came to be called the Qur'an, just as a teacher simplifies difficult matters and gives them to his students.

This comparison may, however, be wrong, for in any case there is a logical and ordinary connection between a teachers' mind and heart and those of his students, whereas there is a great gap between an ordinary man's heart and the divine lofty teachings.

The Commander of the Faithful asserts that in the absence of Prophets and heavenly books, there was either a 'binding argument' (an unfading proof by which people could convince the enemies) or a 'standing plea' (a clear and permanent way) on which people could depend.

On the whole, every nation in the course of history has enjoyed one of the following: First a Prophet (like Moses, Jesus, Abraham, etc.). According to a Tradition there has been 124,000 Prophets, the first of them being Adam and the last one being Muhammad, peace and the mercy of God be upon him and his descendants.

Second, a heavenly Book, left behind by a Prophet. In this very Sermon (Sermon No. 1) he speaks of the Last Prophet, saying, "... The Prophet left among you the same (the Book) which other Prophets left among their peoples..." By 'Book' he means a collection of written teachings and commandments, which all the Prophets possessed. Some of these books were, however, descended to the Prophets themselves (these are not more than a few) but others were those left behind by previous Prophets, either distorted or misunderstood, which the Prophets after them undertook to correct or interpret.

As an example, after Moses, the Torah was misunderstood by some, even mingled with polytheistic ideas, and thus such Prophets as Salomon, David, etc., who succeeded Moses, tried to provide the people with the true meanings and concepts of this Book.

This is also true with the Qur'an. That is to say that there is a considerable difference between our understanding of the Qur'anic teachings and that of the past generations (taking into account the fact that the text of the Qur'an and its concepts and realities have remained untouched). In the past, these teachings were considerably misunderstood because distorted matters and wrong ways of thinking obsessed the people's minds and prevented them from the correct understanding of the Qur'an.

But today, the Qur'an is correctly understood and it is likely that in the future some Qur'anic realities be unveiled that we do not perceive today (According to some traditions, when eventually Imam-Mahdi reappears, he will introduce a new religion—the true Islam. Today, some Sunni and non-Sunni jurists have announced that the religion, which people follow in Iran, is not Islam.

They tell the truth because this is not that Islam in which they believe—that distorted Islam which contains idolatry, polytheistic and anti-Islamic ' values. Our Islam is different from that Islam whose mosque does the President of America inaugurate and whose Qur'an does the Shah of Iran print. There is a great and changing distance between these two forms of Islam).

The Books of the Prophets were, however, sufficient as long as they remained untouched, their concepts were rightly expounded and they were correctly interpreted. In the case of Moses, for example, his Book remained perfect and undistorted after he died, during the time when the Children of Israel were in a state of bewilderment and sought to reach Jerusalem, and guaranteed the victory of Israelites as well as the establishment of the Mosaic community.

(This community, which was powerful and enjoyed a government, came into being after Moses' death. In fact, Moses made preparations for the revolution and provoked the people but he did not live long enough to witness the establishment of his ideal community, and it was the people who accomplished this task). The Torah was actually preserved and kept aloof from distortion by the successors of Moses (Yusha ibn Nun and Kalib ibn Yuhanna) who succeeded in pursuing that heavenly, Islamic and monotheistic dynamism, i.e. the genuine Torah.

Third, a fixed and undeniable proof. This can be seen in the period after Jesus Christ ascended to the heavens (he was not killed), during which time Christians were subjected to manifold oppression; namely, the oppression of the Roman Empire whose foundations were based on polytheism, which severely persecuted the followers of this progressed monotheistic religion; and the oppression of non-Christian Israelites (the Jews) who did not believe in the Message of Jesus Christ.

As a result, Orthodox Christian Israelites lived for many years in concealment and in a state of strangulation without the opportunity to gather together or convey the prophetic legacy to one another freely. The famous disciples of Jesus Christ had to tolerate a great deal of distress in traveling between the cities and lands in order to propagate Jesus' Message.

To say the least, the prevailing state of oppression kept the true Bible of Jesus Christ far away different versions of this heavenly Book; namely, the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, none of

them containing the exact words, sayings and signs of Jesus Christ.

Thus, the original Book (the Bible) was not among the people, yet the existence of the Torah's commandments, which Jesus Christ had announced to be valid and practicable if modified, the existence of the mentioned calamities and the existence of Jesus' guidelines were all an undeniable proof preventing people from refuting the prophecy of Jesus Christ and provoking them to transfer Christian teachings to the coming generations who could, in turn, move and act on the basis of such teachings.

Fourth, a clear and manifest way, i.e. the means and decrees that are not found in the Book but the people possess. It is in a Tradition related from Imam Hassan al'Asgari, peace be upon him, in which he has explained the qualities and Attributes of Islamic jurists. Someone asked the Imam why the learned men of the Christians and the Jews (priests and monks) are reproached in the Qur'an whereas the learned men of Islam are praised.

What is the difference between the two? The Imam gave a detailed answer, the epitome of which is that the learned men of Islam, too, are not unconditionally praised. They are praised provided they possess the Attributes that Islam has determined. But should they contrarily follow the same perversions and disgraces adhered to by priests and monks, they will also be blameworthy.

Priests and monks were actually dependent on the powerful and supported them. Although the realities had reversely been manifest in the people's eyes, they did not take action to provide the people with a true portrait of their religion. But the people could discern, on the basis of a series of natural (primordial) principles, the perverseness of the way to which they had been led.

Basically, at any age there is a set of accepted natural principles among the people, resulting from the continuous instructions of the Prophets in the course of centuries, which enables them to distinguish the truth from falsehood (for example, when a religious scholar or a man of God compromises with the enemies of God, it can be said without reasoning that he is in the wrong. It is quite obvious and natural that he goes the wrong way, for one cannot obey God and His enemies simultaneously).

People can, in effect, distinguish the right way from the wrong by a reference to their hearts and according to their intrinsic beliefs which are the very 'standing pleas' and manifest ways.

These four elements (this clear way) always existed in man's life before the advent of Prophet of Islam. It sometimes happened, however, that two Prophets were living at the same time in different corners of the world or two heavenly Books were followed by two different nations. But the important point was that heavenly guidance made its appearance in all places and at all times (even among the wild, primitive people). Yet, more important of the number of those who denied them never caused the Prophets to neglect fulfilling their obligations.

In Sermon No. 1 of the Nahjul Balaghah the Commander of the Faithful says, "These Messengers were such that they did not feel little because of the smallness of their number or of largeness of the

number of their falsifiers.”

In fact, none of the Prophets fell victim to disappointment but rather all of them succeeded in achieving their aims although the number of them was small (124,000 in proportion to the world population from the very beginning till now) and the number of their falsifiers was large. Falsifiers were the ones who spread out falsely the point that the Prophets' way, message and prophethood were wrong.

They were great in number and in some cases they even killed some of the Prophets. yet the Prophets never fell short in pursuing their general and ultimate aim, i.e. prosperous community, and never became hopeless in accomplishing their mission.

They not only struggled for the spiritual elevation of the people of their own time but they also tried to attain the total prosperity and historical evolution of human beings as a whole. And they were successful in this respect. Even those Prophets who were killed had the opportunity beforehand to convey their message and introduce their heavenly lines of thought, which although were kept hidden for some time, were finally unveiled and practiced again.

Muddarres, as a follower of the Prophets, had a message to convey at the time of the strangulation of Reza Shah's reign. He believed in the policy of „Negative Equilibrium” or in his own terms “adami”, meaning that we shall neither pay tribute to the West nor to the East. He said, „Religion should not be separated from politics.” For the deliverance of such a social and political message, he was arrested, exiled and finally poisoned and choked by stuffing his own turban in his mouth (his grave is now besides a small farm in Kashmar).

He departed and was buried in the remote deserts, but gradually one of his beliefs, „Negative Equilibrium” (before the announcement of this policy by Muddarres, Russian and British governments were equally privileged in Iran. For example, in 1919, Vuthuq ad-Dulih granted the western part of Iran to Britain under a treaty. Russians objected to it, and he granted the north to them.«Positive Equilibrium») was revived eighteen or twenty years later, at the time of Dr. Mussadiq.

Muddarres, Sayyid Jamal (of Asadabad) and others, all being messengers of truth and justice and compassionate lecturers of their own time, were so devoted and courageous that they expressed their views and left behind their lines of thought. But it could be much better if they themselves could have the opportunity to materialize their messages in a better manner and could witness the overthrow of the Pharaoh and the freedom of the people after they had been exposed to so much trouble and distress. However, their names, actions and messages are recorded in history despite their untimely death. They did not neglect their aims and duties and history will not neglect them either.

Questions and Answers

Q. Will Jesus Christ appear after the reappearance of Imam Mahdi?

A. Yes, the Traditions attest this.

Q. We know that the Torah and the Bible have been subjected to distortion. Why has the Qur'an been an exception?

A. It has been proved with sound reasonings that not even a “,” (and) has been deleted from or added to the Qur'an. During the time of the third Caliph (Uthman) someone recited the following verse of the Qur'an but intentionally omitted the «,» before „alladhin” which changed the meaning of the verse to a great extent, implying that only those priests and monks who bury gold and silver are condemned, whereas the verse refers to two groups of people – priests and monks who devour the substance of men in falsehood and the people (they may be by priests and monks or not) who pile gold and silver. The verse reads as follow,

“O ye who believe! There are indeed many among priests and anchorites, who in falsehood devour the substance of men and hinder (them) from the way of God. And there are those who bury gold and silver and spend it not in the way of God. – Announce unto them a most grievous penalty ... » (9: 34)

At this event, 'Abdullah ibon Mas'ud, who was present there, put his sword on his shoulder and said angrily, „If you do not recite the verse with the “,” you deleted, I will secede from Islam.” They were this sensitive. They themselves had heard the Prophet reciting the verses of the Qur'an and had recorded them in their hearts and writings and, thus, they preserved them at the expense of their life. In this way, the Qur'an, which came down to the Prophet was preserved in the original form by the retentives and recitors who permanently recited the Qur'an and kept it from additions and deletions.

Q. What is the difference between „bayyeneh” and „hujjat”?

A. Bayyeneh is a clear and manifest proof, which merely convinces a person, but hujjat is a proof or reasoning by which a person disputes with his enemies.

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