

Prophethood (Nubuwwa)

Prophets were people who received divine revelation and guidance towards righteousness and God. Since the inception of history, God sent numerous prophets and messengers to humankind. The messages of the prophets were of two types: regional or universal. While the local prophets were sent with specific messages to specific groups of people, the universal prophets were sent with messages and books for humankind. There were only five universal prophets: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad.

A unique characteristic of all the prophets and messengers is that they were infallible. They committed no sins. To demonstrate the validity of this concept is to consider that humanity needed prophets and messengers to set an exemplary structured lifestyle to emulate and follow. If they had committed errors, then people might be obliged to exemplify and excuse their errors, thus making the prophets and messengers untrustworthy.

Infallibility means protection from error in teaching doctrine of faith and morals. Infallibility is defined as the spiritual grace of God that enables a person to abstain from sins by his own free will. This power of infallibility and sinlessness does not make a person incapable of committing mistakes; rather, he or she refrains from transgression by his or her own power and will.

Infallibility is essential since the mission of the prophets and messengers was not only to convey divine scriptures from God, but also to lead and guide humanity toward the right path [God]. Therefore, prophets and messengers had to be role models and perfect examples for humanity. The mention of infallibility is stated thirteen times in the Quran. In the Quran, God said to Satan, **“Certainly you shall have no authority over My servants except those who follow you and go astray”** (15:42). Satan then said to God, **“By Your might, then I will surely mislead them all, except Your chosen servants among them [the messengers and imams]”** (38:82).

Prophet Muhammad never committed any sin and was never harsh to any person or animal. God said, **“And by the mercy of Allah you dealt with them [people] gently, and had you been severe and harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from you”** (3:158).

In most societies, people with questionable records of conduct would be ineligible from becoming presidential or gubernatorial candidates since they would be expected to lead society and set examples of righteousness and honesty. Unfortunately, many distorted stories and images about God's prophets exist. For example, stories in the present-day version of the Old Testament accuse Prophet David of adultery with Bath-Sheba, Prophet Noah of being drunk, Prophet Lot of having committed incest, and Prophet Moses of committing adultery. Islam adamantly opposes the unethical and immoral writings that have been attributed to the prophets of God.

However, the Quran does mention the errors of some prophets, such as the divine commandment that forbade Adam from eating of the tree.¹ Nonetheless, the verses should not be literally understood as Prophet Adam having committed a sin. Allegorical and metaphorical verses are common in the Quran.² Prophet Adam did not disobey the obligatory commands of God. The command that Prophet Adam did not honor was a recommended command; therefore, in Islamic teachings Prophet Adam cannot be considered as having committed a sin.

God preordained all the prophets; nonetheless, the prophets had to strive for prophethood. The foremost example of the vocational test that prophets had to endure is told in the life of Prophet Abraham, the father of all prophets. Prophet Abraham was born into an idolatrous society, but the purity of his nature recognized that the worship of idols was wrong, and he recognized that the idols were incapable of doing any harm or good. One day, when no one was present, Prophet Abraham smashed all of the idols, except for the largest statue. People began to question Prophet Abraham about the destruction of their gods.

Prophet Abraham's reply was for the people to question the remaining statue for the answer since they believed that their stone idols had power. Although the people were aware that their idols were indeed powerless, they did not know how to respond to the situation. Thus, out of embarrassment and anger, they cast Prophet Abraham into a colossal fire. However, God protected Prophet Abraham from the fire and confounded the plots of the polytheists.³

After being tortured for and then saved by his faith in God; Prophet Abraham still had to undergo the hardest test of obedience. A direct order to sacrifice his son Ishmael came from God.⁴ The order came to Prophet Abraham in a dream. Although sadness overwhelmed him, Prophet Abraham was a strong believer in God, so he did not question the divine order. Ishmael, too, unquestionably accepted the command of God by allowing his father to lead him to a mountaintop to be sacrificed.

Ishmael's only request was that his father place him face down in order that his father would not see his facial expression during the sacrifice. Prophet Abraham raised his blade, still ready to comply with the command of God, when a revelation intercepted and caused the cessation of the sacrifice of his son. Prophet Abraham had proven his loyalty to God. The incident was a trial to measure Prophet Abraham's faith.

Prophet Abraham was then given a sheep to sacrifice instead. The great trial of Prophet Abraham is commemorated every year as the *Feast of Sacrifice (Eid al-Adha)*. This is a holy holiday for Muslims in which the meat of animals is distributed to the poor. After passing these tests, Prophet Abraham became the leader of humankind, as well as the father of the prophets of the three main monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Why did God Send Different Prophets and Different Religions?

Although God sent prophets to nearly all civilizations, the Quran only mentions twenty-five names. The first of them was Prophet Adam, the father of humanity, and the last prophet was Prophet Muhammad, the seal of the prophets.

Throughout history, different messengers with slightly different messages were sent to diverse societies. The reason was that the religious needs of humanity were growing and developing just as the human race was growing and developing. Also, diverse civilizations needed to be approached differently in relation to guidance. Nevertheless, the source and basic message behind the calling was the same—that there was only one God.

God sent Prophet Moses with the Torah as light and guidance for the Children of Israel, along with many other prophets, such as Prophet David and Prophet Solomon. Fifteen-hundred years after Prophet Moses, God sent Prophet Jesus, the son of Mary, confirming the Torah and bringing the Gospel, which is also a book of guidance and light. Finally, six-hundred years after Prophet Jesus, God sent Prophet Muhammad with the Quran to confirm all the messages sent before him and to complete the revelation of a universal religion to humanity.

Since all the Judeo-Christian-Islamic prophets were sequentially sent, the question arises as to why Judaism, Christianity, and Islam now exist as separate religions. The answer is that the followers of these religions, particularly Judaism and Christianity, interpreted the teachings of their prophets differently. The Quran says:

Verily, the religion with Allah is Islam [total submission to Allah's will]; and those whom the Book had been given did not differ but after the knowledge [the truth] had come unto them, out of envy among themselves (3: 19).⁵

Nevertheless, many scholars consider the different religions as a divine test. The Quran says:

For each of you, We have made a Law and a clear way. If Allah had willed, He would have made you one nation but that He may test you in what He has given you. So strive as a race in good deeds. Your return is to Allah; then He will inform you about that which you used to differ (5:48).

The Life of Prophet Muhammad

In 6th century C.E. Arabia, the majority of people were pagans. They lived in tribes, each with its own leader. Some were agriculture and cattle farmers, others were merchants and traders, while others raided tribes for booty as a means of survival. It was into this society, in 570CE, that the Prophet Muhammad was born within the tribe of Quraysh,⁶ in the city of Makkah.

When his parents⁷ died, his grandfather⁸ looked after him. When his grandfather died, his paternal uncle, Abu Talib,⁹ cared for him. While growing up, Prophet Muhammad became known as “Muhammad the Truthful, the Trustworthy” (*Assadiq, al-Amin*). Early into his adulthood, Prophet Muhammad worked for a successful widow, Khadijah,¹⁰ who was so impressed with his honesty that she asked him to marry her. The Prophet was twenty-five, and they remained in a monogamous marriage until Khadijah's death twenty-five years later.

Often, Prophet Muhammad would take a respite from the bustle of Makkah by traveling to a cave for periods of reflection. During one such time, when Muhammad was forty years old, he heard the voice of an angel named Jibrail¹¹ giving him a command.

Recite in the Name of your Lord who creates, creates man from a clot. Recite! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful, who taught the use of the pen, taught humankind that which they knew not (96: 1-5).

Prophet Muhammad repeated the words until he had memorized them. The Prophet then rushed home and told his experience to his wife, Khadijah who comforted and reassured him. Khadijah and the Prophet's young cousin, Ali were the first people to understand and accept that God had chosen “the Truthful, the Trustworthy” to deliver God's final guidance. Prophet Muhammad continued to receive revelations for over twenty years.¹²

As time passed, it became clear to the ever-increasing number of people that Prophet Muhammad was indeed the Messenger of God. The least receptive people were the powerful Makkans who trafficked in idols and slaves. They benefited mostly from idol worshiping and pilgrim trade. The Makkans treated Prophet Muhammad with derision. Despite this, Prophet Muhammad continued to deliver the revelations of God's mercy and justice, which were welcomed by the poor and oppressed.

The Makkans were becoming more and more intolerant of Prophet Muhammad and felt threatened by the messages he was advocating, such as the oneness of God. With the increasing number of converts to Islam within the region, Prophet Muhammad was becoming a serious threat. In an attempt to dissuade the expansion of Islam, Quraysh exiled the Prophet, his family, and followers from Makkah. Quraysh then sanctioned an economic blockade on trade and association with the Muslims.¹³ For three years, the Muslims were sheltered in the valley of Abu Talib, near Makkah. In conditions of hardship and hunger, the Muslims often faced the ration of one date a day; and at times, two people shared the date.

Yet, because of the Muslims tenacious faith, the siege ended unsuccessfully.

Shortly after the siege ended, the Prophet was once again faced with tribulation. The two most influential and dearest people to the Prophet died; his uncle, Abu Talib and his beloved wife, Khadijah.

Overwhelmed by grief, the Prophet declared that year as “a year of sadness.” No longer being protected and supported by his uncle, the Prophet became more vulnerable to the escalating pressure by Quraysh.

Leaders from the distant town of Yathrib¹⁴ secretly invited the Prophet and his followers to settle in their hometown and to preach the word of Islam. Before migrating to Madina in 622 CE, the Prophet narrowly escaped an assassination attempt in Makkah.¹⁵ The migration from Makkah to Madina became known as the *Hijrah*, which is also the starting point of the Muslim calendar.¹⁶

Prophet Muhammad was received with excitement and jubilation¹⁷ in Madina, where he became head of what was to become the first Islamic state. Throughout the first ten years in Madina, Muslims witnessed several occasions that were to become milestones in the history of Islam.

The primary task was building a mosque in Madina. The Prophet himself participated in building the mosque of which also housed the Prophet's home. Companions of the Prophet built their homes in close proximity to the mosque to be near the Prophet. It was necessary for the Prophet to create a center where its members could assemble. The mosque was not only a place of worship, but also a center of social, political, and educational services.

The unity of brotherhood was introduced. There were two major tribes in Madina: Muhajreen (immigrants) and Ansar (indigenous).¹⁸ The Ansar were divided into two groups: Aws and Khazraj;¹⁹ they fought for 120 years. Under a common purpose [Islam], the Prophet appeased the animosity that existed among the two tribes by forming them as brethren of one another. “*Now you should become brothers in faith, by pairs,*” the Prophet said to his followers.²⁰ By this method, the Prophet insured the political and spiritual nature of his nation. Today, the unity of brotherhood continues to remain a tremendous act of equality among Muslims. Islam is the foundation on which all races, nationalities, cultures, socioeconomic levels, and genders can be united by religious kinship.

The Prophet made the institution of matrimony easier. The gift in marriage (*mahr*) was made moderate, and inter-marriages with other tribes became more accessible. Socio-economic or ancestral descent was no longer a major factor in marriage. The establishment of marriage became a form of uniting, securing, and promoting Islam within various tribes and nations. Marriage not only symbolized the religious union of a man and a woman, but also, indirectly influenced and affected social and political ties. The Prophet said, “*He who wishes to appear before God with a pure soul, should marry.*”²¹

The Prophet set the example of marriage with his own daughter, Lady Fatima. Although many companions had proposed marriage to Fatima, they were aware that the marriage of Fatima was not going to be based on affluence, rank, or descent. The men knew that the person that resembled the

Prophet in matters of truthfulness, spiritual merit, and moral excellence would be none other than Ali. The Prophet (by God's direction) told the suitors that the marriage of Fatima would only occur by divine order. When Ali approached the Prophet to seek his blessings to marry his daughter, he was overcome with shyness.

The Prophet encouraged him to speak. Ali then proposed, but the Prophet did not answer him immediately. The Prophet then consulted Fatima, and she accepted. The marriage of Ali and Fatima was then solemnized with a symbolic marriage mahr.

After the migration to Madina, the Prophet faced continual threats from Quraysh and the polytheists of Makkah, and the non-Muslims in Madina. Peace and security were paramount, yet attempts to keep peace within the region by the Prophet were futile. The opposition in Makkah mobilized its troops to demolish the newly established Islamic state in Madina. Standing firm in the face of military aggression, the Prophet was compelled to defend Islam in what became known as the “Battle of Badr.”

The battle erupted only two years into the hijrah (migration), and although the Prophet's army was far outnumbered, they triumphed. A story about the battle in the Quran reveals that God had sent an army of angels to assist the Muslims against the Makkans.²² The Muslim success in the battle gave immense prestige to the infant Islamic community in Madina and dealt a major blow to the pride of the Makkans.

The following year, the Makkans wanted to avenge their defeat. On a hill called Uhud, west of Madina, the second major battle was fought in what has become known as the “Battle of Uhud.” In the beginning of the battle, the Muslims showed signs of victory; however, the insubordination²³ of some Muslim men caused the final setback in the battle in which many Muslims were injured and lost their lives. The Prophet himself was injured and he lost his uncle, Hamza ibn Abd al-Muttalib, who was his greatest supporter. Although the Battle of Uhud was a set back for the Muslim community, they were able to remain in Madina. Afterwards, many other victorious battles of defense consolidated the Muslims;²⁴ hence, Islam became an ever-increasing spiritual and political force in Arabia, which eventually paved the way to the conquest of Makkah.

In the ninth year of the hijrah (630CE), the Prophet Muhammad and his followers entered Makkah after a peaceful surrender by the Makkans. The Prophet went directly to the *Kabah*²⁵ to perform the circumambulation (*tawaf*) around the Kabah. As he entered the station of the Kabah there sat the three main idols that the pagans had worshipped above the Kabah's door entrance. With his spear, Prophet Muhammad destroyed them while reciting, “**And say, truth has arrived and falsehood has perished, for falsehood is bound to perish.**”²⁶

Subsequently, hundreds of idols were destroyed inside and around the Kabah. The destruction of the idols symbolized the arrival and the proclamation of truth and the end to falsehood. Islam was now home. The Prophet then granted general amnesty to all the Makkans who had fought against him for twenty-two years. Afterwards the Prophet addressed them with these words:

You have been unreasonable countrymen. You refuted my prophethood and turned me out of my home, and when I took refuge in a far-off place, you rose to fight against me. You killed my uncle and my best companions. However, in spite of all these crimes of yours, I forgive all of you and make you free, and declare that you may go after the pursuits of your life.[27](#)

During the tenth year of the hijrah, the Prophet performed the “Farewell *Hajj*,”[28](#) his only and final *Hajj* pilgrimage. On the day of Arafat, over 100,000 pilgrims were present when the Prophet commenced his sermon by saying:

O People! Hear my words, for it possible that I may not meet you at this place in the future. O People! Your blood and property (honor and reputation) are forbidden toward one another till the day you meet Allah. O People! Your women have rights upon you and you also have rights upon them. You should treat them with kindness and love, and you should provide them with a comfortable means in life...[29](#)

Less than three months after the farewell pilgrimage, and days before the Prophet's death, the final verse of the Quran was revealed. **“Today I [Allah] have perfected for you your religion, completed my favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion”** (5:3). On the 28th of Safar, 11H, at the age of sixty-three, the Holy Prophet died. At the time of his death, the majority of the people in Arabia had accepted Islam as their religion and way of life.

[1.](#) See Quran 20: 115–123.

[2.](#) See Quran 3:7.

[3.](#) This story is mentioned in the Quran 21:51–68.

[4.](#) A similar story is mentioned in the Old Testament; however, the difference in the Old Testament from Islam's account is that Isaac was the son that was to be sacrificed, not Ishmael.

[5.](#) Also see Quran 10:93.

[6.](#) Quraysh, a major tribe in Makkah, of which the clan of Hashim was a part and to which Prophet Muhammad belonged.

[7.](#) Father, Abdullah Ibn Abd al-Muttalib. Mother, Amina, daughter of Wahab.

[8.](#) Paternal grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib Ibn Hashim.

[9.](#) Paternal uncle, father of Imam Ali, one of the chiefs of Makkah and nobleman of Quraysh. He was famous for his generosity, bravery, and dedication in protecting his nephew, Prophet Muhammad. He had accepted Islam and supported the Prophet until the end of his life.

[10.](#) Lady Khadijah, the first and most revered wife of the Prophet. She was the first female to embrace Islam. Khadijah bore the Prophet six children; two sons, Qasim and Abdullah; four daughters: Ruqayyah, Zaineb, Um-Kalthum, and Fatima. The male children died before the ordination of his prophethood. The daughters survived beyond the advent of their father's prophethood. Khadijah was known for her noble traits and sincere dedication to the Prophet. Prophet Muhammad once described Khadijah in the following statement: “I have not acquired a better wife after her, she believed in my prophethood at a time when people rejected it. She placed her wealth at my disposal when people deprived me of attaining it, and Allah gave me, only through her, children, and not from any other woman.” Jaffar Subhany, *The Message*, p. 190.

[11.](#) Angel Jibrail is one of the four Archangels and is considered one of the greatest of all angels since he was the channel through which the divine books and the scriptures were revealed from God to the prophets. The other three angels: Izrail, the angel of death; Israfil, the angel assigned to sound the trumpet on the Day of Resurrection; Mikail, who watches over places of worship.

[12.](#) See *Seerat Ibn Hisham*, v. 1, p.236.

[13.](#) *Seerat Ibn Hisham*, v. 1, p.350. An economic treaty was initiated by the grand counsel of Quraysh which entailed an

endorsement and a pledge, until their deaths, by the community not to end the economic ban on the Muslims with the following criteria: 1. Every type of trade or business with the supporters of Muhammad shall be banned. 2. Association with Muhammad and his followers is strictly prohibited. 3. Not one person is entitled to establish matrimonial ties with Muslims. 4. Opponents of Muhammad should be supported in all circumstances.

[14.](#) Yathrib was a town approximately 350 miles north of Makkah. Yathrib was later renamed Madina, meaning the city of the Prophet.

[15.](#) See Quran 8:30.

[16.](#) The Islamic calendar began at the migration of the Prophet from Makkah to Madina, and it is based on the lunar cycles. Two important incidents occurred before the migration to Madina: the birth of the Prophet, during the Year of the Elephant 570CE, which symbolizes the year that King Abraha came to destroy the Kabah with a herd of elephants (See Quran c. 105) and the ordination of Muhammad to prophethood. Islam, in its first thirteen years in Makkah, was constantly suppressed and its followers were tormented. The migration (hijrah) marked the turning point in liberating Islam and its followers. In addition, Madina provided a safe haven and an opportunity to establish the birth of the Islamic state. Quranic verses regarding rules of social, economic, political, and formal rituals were mostly introduced in Madina. Muslims consider the migration to Madina as an Islamic victory for freedom of religion.

[17.](#) The Prophet proceeded to Madina. When his camel descended at Thaniyatul Al-Wida and set its foot on the land of Yathrib, the people warmly welcomed and greeted the Prophet with jubilation. The mood surrounding this event is marked by a well-known lyric: The moon rose from "Thaniyatul Al-Wida." It is our duty to be thankful for this blessing, till the day when even one person on the face of the earth prays to Allah and worships Him.

[18.](#) Muhajreen (Muslim immigrants from Makkah) and Ansar (the Helpers who received the Prophet in Madina) were the two major groups of Muslims in Madina.

[19.](#) Aws and Khazraj were major tribes within Ansar that lived and supported the Prophet in Madina.

[20.](#) Seerat Ibn Hisham, v. 1 p. 123.

[21.](#) Jaffar Subhani, The Message, p.358.

[22.](#) See Quran 3: 124– 126.

[23.](#) See Quran 3: 152. Seerat Ibn Hisham, v.2 p.400.

[24.](#) Battles such as: Ahzab, 5H, Khaybar, 7H, Mutah, 8H, and Thatusalasil, 8H.

[25.](#) Kabah is a cube made of stone. It was first built by Prophet Adam. Later, Prophet Abraham and his son Ishmael rebuilt the Kabah's foundation. The Kabah is the center and direction of Muslim prayers.

[26.](#) Quran 17:31.

[27.](#) Seerat ibn Hisham, v.4 p.55.

[28.](#) See Quran chapter Hajj.

[29.](#) Seerat Ibn Hisham v.2 p.605.

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