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Question 35 : Why is the station of Imamate {imamah} higher than that of prophethood {nubuwwah}?

Reply: First, we will examine the precise meaning of three of the words we find in the Qur'an and the *hadith* and these are: prophethood {*nubuwwah*}, messengership {*risalah*} and Imamate {*imamah*} so as to clarify why the station of *imamah* is higher than each of the other two mentioned positions.

1. The station of nubuwwah

The word *nabi* {prophet} is derived from the word *naba'* which means an important piece of news. Therefore, the literal meaning of *nabi* is "bearer of very important news" or "announcer of very important news".1

The word *nabi* which is equivalent to the English word "prophet" is used by the Qur'an to mean a person who receives divine revelation from God, the Exalted, through various means, and conveys to people the news revealed to him without the intervention of other human beings. Scholars define this word as follows:

إنه من مؤدّ من الله بلا وساطة من البشر.

"A prophet is a person who conveys the divine revelation to the people without the intervention of other human biengs."2

On this basis, the nature of the duties of a *nabi* is confined to receiving revelation and conveying to the people what is revealed to him. The Glorious Qur'an says in this regard:

فَبَعَثَ اللّهُ النَّبِيِّينَ مُبَشِّرِينَ وَ مُنْذِرِينَ

"Then Allah sent the prophets as bearers of good news and as warners."[3]

2. The station of risalah

In the lexicon of revelation, the word *rasul* is referred to a prophet who, apart from receiving the revelation and conveying it to the people, shoulders the burden of conveying a divine message {*risalah*} and has the responsibility of delivering the message to the people. In this regard, the Glorious Qur'an says:

فَإِنْ تَوَلَّيْتُمْ فَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّما عَلىٰ رَسُولِنَا الْبَلاغُ الْمُبِينُ

"But if you turn your backs, then know that Our Apostle's duty is only to communicate in clear terms."[4]

Therefore, the position of *risalah* is another station which is given to a *nabi*. In other words, each of the concepts of *nubuwwah* and *risalah* points to one of the peculiarities of the prophets who receive revelation from God in that they are called *anbiya'* (plural form of *nabi*) because they receive divine revelation and bear news. And they are called *rusul* (plural form of *rasul*) because they have the responsibility of delivering the message {*risalah*}.

From what have been stated so far, we can conclude that so long as prophets hold the position of *nubuwwah* and *risalah*, they are only guides who make known to people what is lawful {*halal*} and what is unlawful {*haram*} and show them the ways to attain felicity and prosperity, and they have no responsibility except reporting what is revealed to them by God or delivering a message.

3. The station of imamah

The station of divine *imamah*, from a Qur'anic perspective, is different from any of the two stations mentioned earlier and it is identical with broader discretion and practice in the domain of administering the society and leading the people.

Now, in the light of the luminous Qur'anic verses, we shall introduce some clear proofs in this regard:

1. Concerning the bestowal of the station of *imamah* on a revered prophet, viz. Ibrahim al-Khalil (Prophet Abraham) (*'a*), the Holy Qur'an thus states:

وَإِذِ ابْتَلَى إِبْرَاهِيمَ رَبُّهُ بِكَلِمَاتٍ فَأَتَمَّهُنَّ قَالَ إِنِّي جَاعِلُكَ لِلنَّاسِ إِمَامًا قَالَ وَمِن ذُرِّيَّتِي

"And when his Lord tested Abraham with certain words, and he fulfilled them, He said, 'I am making you the Imam of mankind. Said he, 'And from among my descendants?'"[5]

In the light of this Qur'anic passage, we realize two facts:

a. The quoted verse clearly states the difference between the concept of *imamah* and that of each of the two concepts of *nubuwwah* and *risalah* because many years prior to a series of divine tests, one of which was the decision to sacrifice his own son (Isma'il), Ibrahim (*'a*) attained the station of *nubuwwah*, and we will prove this fact in the following:

We all know that God, the Exalted, granted two sons (Isma'il and Ishaq) to Ibrahim (*'a*) when he was old as he has been quoted by the Glorious Qur'an as saying:

الْحَمْدُ لِلّهِ الَّذِي وَهَبَ لِي عَلَىٰ الْكِبَرِ إِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ

"All praise belongs to Allah, who, despite {my} old age, gave me Ishmael and Isaac."[6]

Now, it is clear that it was prior to a series of hard divine trials one of which was the decision to sacrifice Isma'il (*'a*) that God, the Exalted, bestowed the station of *imamah* upon Ibrahim (*'a*) during the autumn of his life.

That is, it was during the last phase of his life that he became a leader over the people, whereas he held the station of *nubuwwah* a long time earlier; for, he used to receive divine revelation, which is a sign of *nubuwwah* before he had children {*dhurriyyah*}.[7]

b. It can also be inferred from the verse, *"And when his Lord tested Abraham with certain words..."* that the station of divine *imamah*, i.e. governing the society and leading the people is higher than the station of *nubuwwah* or the station of *risalah*; for, as stated by the Qur'anic verses, while Hadrat Ibrahim (*'a*) was holding the station of *nubuwwah* and the station of *risalah*, he was required to pass difficult tests before the station of *imamah* was granted to him.

The reason is clear; apart from the responsibility of receiving revelation and delivering the message, the station of divine *imamah* also includes the supervision of society, leadership of the *ummah* and proper administration of the affairs of people for the purpose of reaching the pinnacle of perfection and felicity. So, it is natural that this station has a peculiar importance and grandeur and its attainment is impossible without passing a series of difficult tests.

2. It is clear from the previous verse that God, the Exalted, granted the station of *imamah* and leadership of the community to Ibrahim (*'a*) after exposing him to hard tests. Then, Ibrahim (*'a*) asked God to assign this station to his descendants as well.

Other Qur'anic verses clearly state that God accepted the request of Ibrahim (*'a*) and after granting the

station of *nubuwwah* to Ibrahim's righteous and upright descendants, He appointed them to the position of the leadership of the community and rule over the *ummah*. The Holy Qur'an says in this regard:

فَقَدْ آتَيْنا آلَ إِبْراهيمَ الْكِتابَ وَ الْحِكْمَةَ وَ آتَيْناهُمْ مُلْكًا عَظيمًا

"We have certainly given the progeny of Abraham the Book and the wisdom, and We have given them a great sovereignty."[8]

We can deduce from this verse that the position of *imamah* and leadership of the society is different from that of *nubuwwah*, which God, the Exalted, granted to His prophet, Ibrahim (*'a*), after passing a series of difficult divine trials.

When he prayed to God and asked Him to give the position of governance and leadership to his descendants too, the Lord granted that prayer by granting that high station to his just descendants and offspring, and apart from the (heavenly) Book and wisdom {*hikmah*}, which are the signs of *nubuwwah* and *risalah*, He granted them "great sovereignty" {*mulkan 'azimah*}, which means governance and leadership over the people.

As such, the request of Ibrahim (*'a*) was granted. Thus, some of his descendants such as Yusuf (Joseph), Dawud (David) and Sulayman (Solomon) (*'a*) were chosen for the position of governance, administration and leadership of the society in addition to the station of *nubuwwah*.

It is evident from what we have stated that the station of *imamah* is different from any of the two stations of *nubuwwah* and *risalah*, and on account of its broader domain of discretion and responsibilities, *imamah* has greater value and higher status.

Superiority of the station of imamah

From the previous discussion, it is clear that the responsibility of a *nabi* and *rasul* does not go beyond reminding the people and showing them the way. Whenever a *nabi* or a *rasul* reaches the station of *imamah*, he has to shoulder a more crucial responsibility, and this entails that he has to implement divine programs and execute the decrees of the sacred religion on the way of establishing a model and prosperous society to ensure for his *ummah* felicity in this world and the next.

It is evident that great spiritual power and special competence are indisputable for bearing such a crucially important responsibility, and shouldering such a heavy burden, which involves difficult problems and struggling against one's inclinations, requires more maturity in the way of God and excessive fortitude.

This goal cannot be achieved without divine love and annihilation {*fana'*} in attaining God's good pleasure. For this reason, God, the Exalted, granted Ibrahim (*'a*) the station of *imamah* after exposing

him to a series of hard trials during the last moments of his life. For this reason, too, He honored His most anointed servants, including the Holy Prophet of Islam (S), with the station of *imamah* and leadership of the *ummah*, and appointed them to govern and lead the society.

Are nubuwwah and imamah correlative?

The following questions may arise here: Must every prophet who has the station of *nubuwwah* be an Imam as well? Or, must the one who has the position of *imamah* be a prophet as well?

The answer to either question is negative. We shall elaborate on this issue in the light of the logic of revelation: The verses about Talut (Saul) and his struggle against the oppressive Jalut (Goliath) clearly state that sometime after the passing away of Hadrat Musa (Moses) (*'a*), God, the Exalted, granted the station of *nubuwwah* to a person named "Samuel" while the station of *imamah* (leadership and governance) was given to Talut. Here is the detailed account of this event:

After the demise of Musa (*'a*), a group of the Children of Israel said to the prophet of their time: "Appoint a ruler for us so that we may fight in the way of God under his command." The reply of their prophet was:

إِنَّ اللّهَ قَدْ بَعَثَ لَكُمْ طَالُوتَ مَلِكًا قَالُوَاْ أَنَّىٰ يَكُونُ لَهُ الْمُلْكُ عَلَيْنَا وَنَحْنُ أَحَقُّ بِالْمُلْكِ مِنْهُ وَلَمْ يُؤْتَ سَعَةً مِّنَ الْمَالِ قَالَ إِنَّ اللّهَ اصْطَفَاهُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَزَادَهُ بَسْطَةً فِي الْعِلْمِ وَالْجِسْمِ وَاللّهُ يُؤْتِي مُلْكَهُ مَن يَشَاء وَاللّهُ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ

"'Allah has appointed Saul as king for you. They said, 'How can he have kingship over us, when we have a greater right to kingship than him, as he has not been given ample wealth?' He said, 'Indeed Allah has chosen him over you, and enhanced him vastly in knowledge and physique, and Allah gives His kingdom to whomever He wishes, and Allah is all-bounteous, all-knowing'."[9]

From the above verse, the following points can be inferred:

1. It is possible that in case of expediency, *nubuwwah* is separated from *imamah* and rule and at a certain time, *nubuwwah* is granted to a certain person and governance and rule to another person, each of whom is worthy of the position granted to him.

On account of the possibility of separating these two positions from one another, the Children of Israel never said that their prophet (Samuel) was more qualified than him (Talut). Rather, they said complainingly: ***"We have a greater right to kingship than him"***.

2. The station which Talut held was granted to him by God, as the Qur'an says: ***"Allah has appointed Saul as king for you"***. It also states: ***"Indeed Allah has chosen him over you."***

3. The divine station and responsibility Talut had was not merely to command the army but he was

rather the ruler and head of the Children of Israel as it is deduced from the word, “king” {*mulk*}, i.e. headship of government.

Although the aim of this headship at that time was the leadership of the Children of Israel in *jihad* in the way of God, the divine position he held also allowed him do other things all of which are related to governance, as the latter part of the verse states: ***“Allah gives His kingdom to whomever He wishes.”*** **4.** The most important condition of the governance of a society, *imamah* and leadership of the *ummah* is possessing vast knowledge and required spiritual and physical capabilities, especially by the rulers live at a time when they are supposed to play an active role in leading the army.[10]

From what have been said so far, it is clear that there is no concomitance and inseparability between *nubuwwah* and *imamah*. In fact, a person may attain the position of *nubuwwah* but he is not Imam and leader of the *ummah* who has the discretion of ruling over the people.

Also, a person may be designated by God as administrator and ruler of a society but he is not a prophet. And sometimes, God, the Exalted, grants both stations to a person who is worthy of both of them, as the Glorious Qur’an says:

فَهَزَمُوهُم بِإِذْنِ اللّهِ وَقَتَلَ دَاوُودُ جَالُوتَ وَآتَاهُ اللّهُ الْمُلْكَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَعَلَّمَهُ مِمَّا يَشَاءُ

“Thus they routed them with Allah’s will, and David killed Goliath, and Allah gave him the kingdom and wisdom, and taught him whatever He liked.”[11]

1. If the literal root of the word nabi is intransitive, then it carries the first meaning, and if it is transitive, then it carries the second meaning.
2. Shaykh at-Tusi, Rasa’il al-‘Ashar, p. 111.
3. Surah al-Baqarah 2:213.
4. Surah al-Ma’idah 5:92.
5. Surah al-Baqarah 2:124.
6. Surah Ibrahim 14:39.
7. Refer to Surah as-Saffat 37:99-102; Surah al-Hijr 15:53-54; Surah Hud 11:70-71.
8. Surah an-Nisa’ 4:54.
9. Surah al-Baqarah 2:247.
10. Cited from Prof. Ja‘far Subhani’s Manshur-e Jawid-e Qur’an.
11. Surah al-Baqarah 2:251.

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