

**M. Nooruddin**  
*Bangalore University*

## **PROPHETS IN ISLAM**

Prophets have been referred to in the Holy Quran as *nabi* or *rasool*. According to Imam Abul Qasim al Hussain's definition, 'nabi' means an ambassador functioning between God and mankind. The Qamus defines a 'nabi' as a man who gives information about God. In Taj-ul-Aroos it is further explained as the man to whom God in addition to giving information about His Unity, reveals secrets of the future and imparts the knowledge that he is His Prophet. Rasool means an apostle or messenger.

It is clear from the above definitions that a prophet has two capacities: to receive information from God and to impart God's message to mankind. But that is not all. A prophet is the chosen one of God. No person can take a claim to prophethood unless he is ordained to do so by God himself. Referring to the arrogance of unbelievers, the Quran says: "When a sign is revealed to them they say: We will not believe in it unless we are given that which Allah's apostles have been given. But Allah knows best whom to entrust with his message" (6:124).

Further, a prophet has to be one among the humans. An angel, however holy he may be, can never be a prophet. "Had there been on the earth angels walking about as settlers, we would have sent down to them an angel from the heaven as a messenger" (17:95). "And we did not send before thee any but men to whom we sent revelation.... nor did we give them bodies that ate no food" (21:7,8).

This has a deep significance. A prophet is not only the bearer of the Divine message, but he also shows how that message is to be interpreted in practical life. He is the model to be followed. All his words and deeds are watched. It is his example which inspires followers to place their faith in him and bring about a true transformation in their

lives. So a man he should be. Man of flesh and blood. An angel or ~~god-incarnate~~ can never serve that purpose.

The Holy Quran states emphatically that prophets were not the exclusive privilege of semetic nations. "To every nation is (sent) an apostle" (10:47). "There is not a people but a warner has gone among them" (35:24). The Holy Quran further informs us: "And we sent apostles we have mentioned to Thee before and apostles we have not mentioned to Thee" (4:164).

### **Belief in Prophets**

The Holy Quran enjoins upon its followers to believe in all the prophets: "We believe in Allah and that which is revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, and Issac and Jacob, and the tribes, and in what was revealed to Moses and Jesus and the other prophets from their Lord. We do not make distinction between any of them" (2:136).

"The apostle (Muhammad) believes in what was revealed to him from his Lord and so do the believers; they all believe in Allah, and His angels and His Books and his apostles; we make no distinction between any of his apostles" (2:285).

A belief in all the prophets of the world is thus an essential principle of Islam. A muslim accepts all the prophets of the world whether their names are mentioned in the Quran or not. It is one of the most striking characteristics of Islam that in ordaining its followers to believe in all the prophets sent earlier by God, it requires of them to believe that all the religions preceding Islam were revealed by God. This way Islam paves the way for universal brotherhood.

The prophets have been sent by God over the ages for the uplift of humanity and freeing men from the bondage of sin. They carry the message of God, interpret it and practise it. The Divine revelation that comes to them is a gift of God to his subjects so that they see the light and guidance and equip themselves to withstand the perils of sin. "There will come to you a guidance from Me, then whoever follows my guidance, no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve" (2:38).

The coming of prophets into this world in an unbroken chain over many centuries is according to a fully developed Divine scheme. The early prophets were sent to preach to their tribes or communities. Thus the Quran says that Noah was sent to *his people* (7: 59, 71: 1). Moses was commanded to "bring forth *thy people* from darkness into light" (14: 5). Jesus was sent as "a messenger to *the children of Israel*" (3: 48). This was a step by step help as well as localized guidance for the human race as each nation lived almost an exclusive life and the means of communication between different races was wanting. But the grand aim which the Divine scheme had in view was the uplift and unification of the whole human race. The final step, therefore, in the institution of prophethood was the raising up of one prophet for the entire humanity so that the consciousness of being one whole might be brought to the human race. It is the view of the Quran that "we have not sent thee but to *all men* as a bearer of good news and a warner" (34: 28). Again, "And we have not sent thee but as a mercy to *all the nations*" (21: 107). The Holy prophet Muhammad is never spoken of in the Holy Quran as having been sent to his people only. Thus the prophethood culminated in naming Prophet Muhammad in the Quran as (Khatam-al-Nabi-yyin) "last of the prophets" (33: 40). The doctrine of finality of prophethood in Muhammad (peace be upon him), therefore rests on the clear words of the Holy Quran. That the message of God as preached by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was so perfect that it not only met the requirements of contemporary times but of future generations as well was claimed in the unequivocal words of God in the Holy Quran: "This day have we perfected for you your religion and completed on you my blessing" (5: 3).

### Attributes of Prophets

I have quoted from the Quran in the preceding pages that a prophet is the chosen one of God. When certain chiefs of Arab clans demanded that they be proclaimed prophets as a pre-condition for believing in Islam, God sent this revelation: "When a sign is revealed to them, they say: we will not believe in it unless we are given that which Allah's apostles have been given. But Allah knows best whom to entrust with his message" (6: 124).

### Miracles

And God endowed every prophet of his with clear signs to command peoples' faith in Him as a prophet of God. Many were gifted with strange

powers, ability to perform miracles etc. The prophets did not acquire these powers through labour, and they could not perform except by the will of God. The miracles had a direct bearing on the social psyche of the people in question. Where it appeared futile to appeal to reason, the people were guided by the power of miracles. The times of Moses were agog with acts of sorcery. He was endowed with powers of sorcery. There are a number of instances in the Quran wherein the prophets have admitted that they have acted as ordained by God and their own will was of no consequence. Once prophet Moses accompanied prophet Khidger who damaged a boat full of passengers, killed a boy, and repaired a wall in the city of unbelievers. He later explained to Moses why he did all that and said finally: "... a mercy from your Lord. What I did was not done by my will" (18: 81).

Jesus says: "... bring you a sign from your Lord. From clay, I will make for you the likeness of a bird. I shall breathe into it and, by Allah's leave, it shall become a living kind. By Allah's leave, I shall give sight to the blind man, heal the leper, and raise the dead to life" (3: 49).

The miracles were actually the signs of God to convince the people of the prophethood of a prophet. They were the stepping-stones to induce faith in God. So a person can be safely excluded from prophethood when he performs miracles sans Divinity.

## **Revelations**

The endowment of miraculous powers was never an essential attribute of prophets. Miracles were mostly performed for the benefit of the hardcore unbelievers among mankind. But revelations are an essential attribute of prophets. It is through revelations that God sends his message to mankind. The prophet acts as an ambassador of God who receives the message, interprets and practises it. Prophets are trained by God to define, interpret, explain and to put into practise the message of God but they cannot receive revelations at their will.

When unbelievers pestered the Prophet about the exact Hour (of Doom), this revelation was sent to him: "They ask you about the Hour (of Doom) and when it is to come. Say: None knows except my Lord. He alone will reveal it at the appointed time" (7 : 186).

Then making clear the status of a prophet, another revelation followed: "Say: I have not the powers to acquire benefits or to avert evil from myself, except by the will of Allah. Had I possessed knowledge of what is hidden, I would have availed myself of much that is good and no harm would have touched me. But I am no more than one who gives warning and good news to true believers" (7:188).

The Archangel Gabriel is charged with the duty of communicating the Divine message of God to prophets. When the first revelation came to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), he was meditating in the cave of Hira outside Mecca. Gabriel appeared and commanded him to repeat the first message of God. "Read in the name of your Lord who created, created man from clots of congealed blood. Read, your Lord is the most Bountiful one, who taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know" (96:1).

The revelation of the Quran is spread over 23 years and it was revealed to the Holy prophet by Gabriel whose communication is considered the highest form of revelation i.e. *wahi*, and it has come to an end with the last of the prophets, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).