

Waḥy (Revelation) and Nubuwwah (Prophethood)

IF WE HOLD that there is a need for revelation – *wahy* – what we are saying is that there is a need for a point of contact between the realms of *al-shahādah* and *al-ghayb*. If we assume the reality of what is referred to as *wahy*, or divine revelation – the speech of the Creator which has taken the form of the messages sent to us through the prophets – then on this basis we may categorize people on the basis of their relationship to this revelation. These categories include: (1) those who have received God’s messages and believed in them and obeyed them, (2) those who have received these messages and rejected them for whatever reason, and (3) those who have not received these messages. People’s relationship to the messages of divine revelation holds implications for the ways in which they relate not only to their Maker, but to one another.

There has been disagreement down the ages over who the Creator is, what the Creator’s attributes are, and, assuming there to be a divine revelation, whether to take the Creator’s revelation as a source of knowledge and a basis for people’s ways of life such that they are willing to appeal to the divine revelation as their authority in relation to all aspects of their existence. In other words, their difference has been over whether to treat the divine revelation as the sole source of truth, or whether to draw on other sources as well. The Qur’an’s response to this dispute is to ask: “Say: ‘Can any of those beings to whom you ascribe a share in God’s divinity create [life] in the first instance, and then bring it forth anew?’ Say: ‘It is God [alone] who creates [all life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew. How perverted, then, are your minds!’” (*Sūrah Yūnus*, 10:34).

Throughout human history people have tended to seek knowledge through two sources. The first of these is the material world (the

cosmos), and the second is the spiritual realm. This spiritual realm has included the spiritual experiences and expertise of those recognized as righteous, trustworthy, learned individuals. Some civilizations looked to the heavenly spheres and the movements of the stars and planets as a source of guidance. Some treated idols as symbols of spiritual realities given their inborn desire to worship and seek the unknown. Idol worship has also taken the form of giving free reign to one's instinctual urges rather than looking outward for guidance. Of such people the Qur'an speaks when it asks: "Have you ever considered [the kind of man] who makes his own desires his deity?" (*Sūrah al-Furqān*, 25:43).

As has been mentioned, there is an age-old dispute over whether human beings stand in need of a divine revelation which constitutes the sole source of trustworthy knowledge and guidance – in other words, the sole path to knowledge of *al-ghayb*: the realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Given agreement on the need for such a divine revelation, there has arisen the issue of who could be viewed as a trustworthy conduit or transmitter of revelation. In other words, what prophet or divine messenger could be affirmed to be sinless and infallible, and which message could be vouched for as the one genuine divine revelation? In this connection we read in *Sūrah Yūnus*, 10:37, "Now this Qur'an could not possibly have been devised by anyone save God: nay indeed, it confirms the truth of whatever there still remains [of earlier revelations] and clearly spells out the revelation [which comes] – let there be no doubt about it – from the Sustainer of all the worlds."

The Qur'an, as divine revelation, and the Prophet as its conduit, might be viewed as bridges between *al-ghayb* and *al-shahādah*. Both the Qur'an and the Prophet are material entities to which people can gain access through their senses, but which point beyond themselves to a realm out of reach of human sensory perception. A prophet and the message he brings are thus intermediaries between the human and the divine.

Based on the foregoing, we can identify four purposes of divine revelation and prophethood: (1) The conveyance of good news and warning. As God says to the Prophet in *Sūrah Saba'*, 34:28, "Now [as for thee, O Muhammad,] We have not sent thee otherwise than to mankind at large, to be a herald of glad tidings and a warner." (Cf.

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Sūrah al-Aḥqāf, 46:9.) (2) To bring people out of the darkness of ignorance and error and into the light of right guidance. As God announces in *Sūrah Ibrāhīm*, 14:1, He has sent down the Qur'an in order to "bring forth all mankind, by their Sustainer's leave, out of the depths of darkness into the light." (3) To resolve disputes among people. Thus God tells the Prophet, "And upon you [too] have We bestowed from on high this divine writ for no other reason than that you might make clear unto them all [questions of faith] on which they have come to hold divergent views, and [thus offer] guidance and grace unto people who will believe" (*Sūrah al-Naḥl*, 16:64). (4) To define people's relationship to God in terms of the ways they are to worship and obey Him, and how they are to relate to each other.

Divine revelation is only bestowed on a prophet. Consequently, there is a need for prophets to serve as conduits through which divine revelation is conveyed to people at large. It is God alone who determines who will be chosen as a prophet. As we read in *Sūrah Ghāfir*, 40:78, "And it was not given to any apostle to bring forth a miracle other than by God's leave." This verse might also be understood to mean that no apostle can bring a divine message to others but by God's leave. Similarly, as we are told in *Sūrah al-Jinn*, 72:26-27, "He [alone] knows that which is beyond the reach of a created being's perception, and to none does He disclose aught of the mysteries of His Own unfathomable knowledge, unless it be to an apostle whom He has been pleased to elect." Ever since the days of Adam confirmation of an individual's status as a prophet has been demonstrated via well-attested proofs. As we read in *Sūrah Āl 'Imrān*, 3:33, "Behold, God raised Adam, and Noah, and the House of Abraham, and the House of 'Imran above all mankind." God graces prophets with miracles that are initially for the benefit of the prophet themselves, as a means of reassuring them that they are, in fact, God's messengers, and that revelation is being bestowed on them. Once they are certain of their role and identity, prophets will have the boldness to deliver the message they have been entrusted with. At this point, then, the miracles a prophet has been given to perform serve as a reassurance not only to the prophet, but to the people to whom his message is being communicated. In the story of Moses, for example, we are told that before sending him to

Pharaoh, God enabled Moses to perform the miracle of throwing his staff down and seeing it turn into a serpent. It was only after this that God commanded Moses to go to Pharaoh (*Sūrah Ṭāhā*, 20:17-24) with “the divine writ – and [thus] a standard by which to discern the true from the false” (*Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:53; cf. 2:176; *Sūrah al-Isrā’*, 17:9).

A true prophet of God, though human, is a person of exceptional character: prudent, virtuous, obedient, and chosen by God to deliver His revealed message. A prophet must of course speak the language of the people to whom he has been sent, and demonstrate his claim to be a prophet by performing miracles that would be impossible without divine intervention. The prophet’s miracles thus become a source of certainty for those who witness them, as they can be sure that his message is a revelation from God.

Once a prophet has delivered the divinely revealed message to the people to whom he has been sent, his audience will be divided into groups depending on what their response to him and his message has been. Those who have heard his message and witnessed his miracles will be divided among those who affirm his identity as a prophet and his message as a divine revelation, and those who reject his message and his miracles. Others might not even have heard of a given prophet or believe in the phenomenon of prophethood. In order to demonstrate the truthfulness of his message and the genuineness of his identity, a prophet needs two types of evidential proof. One consists of proof of the possibility and necessity of prophethood and divine revelation. The second is proof that he himself is a prophet who is delivering a divine revelation from its very Source. To this end a prophet is sent with two types of signs: verbal and nonverbal. The verbal signs consist of a spoken and/or written revelation, while the nonverbal signs consist of supernatural feats, usually termed miracles, that could only be performed by someone who has been given special power and authority from God.

A divinely revealed message will be comprehensive in nature in the sense that it encompasses all parts of the perceptible realm in which people live. It also connects the perceptible realm with the realm that lies beyond the grasp of human perception. Of this latter realm, there

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are parts that God has revealed only to His angelic messengers. Other parts, God has revealed to the angels and the prophets. Still others, He has made known to people through His apostles. And lastly, there is a part that God reveals to no one, and of which He alone is knowledgeable. This part is referred to in the Qur'an as "the keys of the unseen (*mafātīḥ al-ghayb*), the treasures that none knows but He" (*Sūrah al-An'ām*, 6:59; cf. *Sūrah Āl 'Imrān*, 3:40). As a divinely given source of knowledge, the divine revelation granted to human beings encompasses only a fraction of *al-ghayb*, while the created universe, likewise a source of knowledge, consists of elements that are perceptible to human beings, and others that are not.

In sum, the sources of knowledge available to us might be classed as either uncreated, or created. As a source of knowledge, *wahy* speaks of both entities that lie beyond the grasp of human perception, and of realities that human beings can grasp with their senses and their minds. As such, *wahy* is something that can be perceived, studied, understood and reflected on. It is also, and equally importantly, something to be acted upon as a means of drawing nearer to God, and establishing justice on Earth. As God declares in *Sūrah al-Ḥadīd*, 57:25, "Indeed, [even aforesaid] did We send forth Our apostles with all evidence of [this] truth; and through them We bestowed revelation from on high, and [thus gave you] a balance [wherewith to weigh right and wrong], so that people might behave with equity."

NOTES

¹ The Arabic term *ta'jīz*, translated here as impossibility, refers to the use of the imperative not to give an actual command, but to demonstrate the impossibility of what is being “commanded.” Thus, for example, when the Qur’an exhorts skeptics to produce a surah like what is found in the Qur’an (see, for example, *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:23), the intent is not actually to command them to do this, since they would be unable to do so even if they tried. Rather, the intent is to make the point that such a feat would be unachievable.

² As in the case of *ta'jīz*, the term *irshād* refers here to the use of the imperative voice for a purpose other than that of giving an actual command. For example, when the Qur’an exhorts people who have lent money to write down the transaction, it is simply advising them to do so as a matter of good practice, but not commanding them to do so (see *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:282).