

The First Message of Qur'an and the Last Messenger: Transforming the Savage World

Dr. Humayun Rasheed Khan¹ & Arif Rasheed²

Abstract

Religion is a matter of faith. Faith in one unseen, invisible, and omnipotent God or it may be a faith in many gods and goddesses having a particular shape and gender placed in a particular clean and pious place, capable of being moved from one place to another. History shows that polytheism and idol worship had been in practice since time immemorial. Pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula was a citadel of idolatry. Besides idolatry, girl child killing, slavery in most abhorrent form, degraded position of women, tribal superiority, adoption of fair and fairs means and methods in trade and business pushed the Arabs into complete darkness and ignorance. Into this darkness of ignorance, there appeared a light which was destined to be 'Infinite Light' in terms of its effects. This light was the divine message through the Last Messenger Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, which illuminated the dark Arabia with wisdom and enlightenment that finally spread in the entire World. The Last Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, brought a message of absolute monotheism and unconditional morality. This paper attempts to highlight the significance of monotheism and the exemplary struggles of the Last Prophet towards reforming the Arabian Peninsula. It also brings out the essence of peace in this terror-torn world.

Keywords: Prophet, Paganism, Age of Ignorance, Ka'ba, Jews, Arabs

Introduction

Nature is the primary guide and the intimate companion of faith (Tariq Ramadan, 2007; 13). The Holy Qur'an proclaims that; "In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and alteration of night and day, there are indeed signs for all those endowed with insight" (Qur'an, 3:190).

¹ Judge, presently on deputation as Deputy Director, Judicial Training & Research Institute, U.P., Lucknow, India. Phone: +919415114094, +918273481928.

² M. Phil from Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh U.P, India.

Religion is, indeed, a matter of faith, faith in the unseen and faith which is unconditional. It is a belief in the sacred history and is also a belief in religious miracles often unconditional and not always in consonance with the litmus test of scientific experiments. But there are scholars who believe that religion is not simply faith but is the story of faith (Reza Aslan, 2011; XXIII) and some others more unequivocally state that certainty is a matter of faith rather than fact (Lesley Hazleton, 2010; 13). The human relationship with nature was so present in the Prophet's life from his earliest childhood that one can easily come to the conclusion that living close to nature , observing, understanding and respecting it, is an imperative of deep faith (Tariq Ramadan,2007;13).

On the plain surface, there is nothing exceptional or extraordinary about Islam as a religion because somewhat same historical, cultural, and geographic considerations have influenced this unique religion as they have similarly influenced the development of other religions of the world, transforming it into one of the most eclectic, most diverse faiths in the history of religions (Reza Aslan, 2011; p. XV). A religious life is, of course, a material life as living religiously is a way of conducting a bodily life. It has to do with gesture, place, sound, habit –not first and foremost with what is going on inside. In fact, the whole idea of 'inner life' is, what we put together from a certain reading of visible life (Rowan Williams, 2012; 314). We can get a good idea of Prophet Muhammad's, peace and blessings be upon him, inner life by the reflections of not only his visible life but also the surrounding circumstances.

The Divine message delivered through the Last Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, was radical in nature as it was aimed above all at the inequities of urban life, for despite prevailing image of seventh-century Arabia as nomadic, most of its population had been settled for several generations. Social identity was still tribal and the tribal identity was dominant in which Quraysh tribe played the pivotal role which was not only powerful but was also considered urban elite of Mecca (Lesley Hazleton,2010;13).

The origins and evolution of Islam may be reconstructed more reasonably and pragmatically in the light of Qur'an and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, taking into consideration the overall cultural milieu in which Prophet Muhammad , peace and blessings be upon him, was born and in which the divine message was delivered through him.

The life of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, was as crucial to the unfolding of Islamic ideal as it is today (Karen Armstrong, 2007; p.14). In fact, Prophet Muhammad's, peace and blessings be upon him, revolutionary message of moral accountability and social egalitarianism was gradually reinterpreted by his successors into competing, ideologies of rigid legalism and uncompromising orthodoxy, which fractured the Muslim community and widened the gap between mainstream, or sunni Islam and its two major branches Shiaism and Sufism (Reza Aslam, 2011;p.xxv).

In pre-Islamic era, Ka'ba became the citadel of idol worship (Karen Armstrong, 2006, Tariq Ramadan, 2007, Lazley Hazleton, 2009 & 2013 and Raza Aslan, 2011). Inside the cramped interior of the sanctuary, that the Gods of the Pre-Islamic Arabia reside: Hubal, the Syrian God of the moon; Al-Uzza, the powerful Goddess the Egyptians knew as Isis and the Greeks called Aphrodite; Al-kutba, the Nabataean God of writing and divination; Jesus, the incarnate God of Christians, and his holy mother, Mary. In all there are said to be three hundred sixty idols housed in and around the Ka'ba representing every God recognized in the Arabian Peninsula (Reza Aslan, 2011; p.4).

The pre-Islamic era of ignorance was an era of moral depravity and religious discord: a time when the sons of Islamic belief had obscured belief in the one true God and plunged the Arabian Peninsula into the darkness of idolatry. But then like the rising of the dawn, the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, emerged in Mecca at the beginning of the seventh century, preaching a Message of absolute monotheism and uncompromising morality (Reza Aslan, 2011; p.5). This message delivered through Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, put an end to the paganism of the Arabs and replaced the practice of ignorance with the universal religion of Islam. The Message of Islam meant that no more tribe against tribe or rich against poor. They were one people, one community, bound together in the simple but powerful manner. The Message and the Last Messenger with the unique revolutionary content and zeal changed the barbaric world forever in the manner and mechanism which was unknown to the history of religions till then.

1. Discussion

1.1 The Darkness of Ignorance

The religious experience of the pre-Islamic Arabia is that of an era in which Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Judaism intermingled in one of the last remaining regions in the Near East still dominated by paganism.¹ Yemen was the center of one of the oldest civilizations in the Middle East and perhaps the original home of all Semitic peoples. Semitic tribes migrated from there in the earliest times up into Mesopotamia, conquering Sumeria in BCE and transforming it into a Semitic culture.²

History shows that Arabia had long been a land of religions and religious peoples. It had long nourished its own traditional religions consisting of local or tribal gods similar to those known to other Semitic peoples, including earlier Jews. Much worship was centered in the Ka'ba in Mecca, which was a repository for some 360 Gods, reportedly including statues of Jesus and Mary. The shrines lent Mecca considerable economic and political power, it had managed to establish control over a huge tribal confederation with the aim of overseeing the complex inter-tribal politics of the peninsula and limiting disrupting tribal warfare.³ In fact ,Mecca was the financial center of the western Arabia and trade was its *raison d'etre*.⁴

The pagan Arabs believed Ka'ba to have been founded by Adam (AS), the first man. They believe that Adam (AS)'s original edifice was destroyed by the great flood, and then rebuilt by Noah (AS). They believe that after Noah (AS), the Ka'ba was forgotten for generations until Abraham (AS) rediscovered it while visiting his firstborn Son, Ismail (AS), and his companion Hagar, both of whom had been banished to this wilderness at the behest of Abraham (AS)'s wife, Sarah. And they believe it was at this very place that Abraham (AS) nearly sacrificed Ismail (AS) before being stopped by the promise that like his younger brother, Isaac (AS), Ismail (AS) would also acquire a great nation, the descendants of whom now spin over the Sandy Meccan valley like a desert whirlwind.⁵

The truth is that no one is certain as to who built the Ka'ba, or how long it has been there. It is likely that sanctuary was not even the original reason for the sanctity of this place. Near the Ka'ba is a well called Zamzam, fed by a beautiful underground spring, which tradition claims had been placed there to nourish Hagar and Ismail (AS). It is also possible that the original sanctuary held some cosmological significance for the ancient Arabs.⁶

But the fact remains that the source of Mecca's power rested in its sanctuary and it was certain that he who controlled the Ka'ba controlled the city.⁷

Religious history shows that Mecca had rich culture of tribal ethics and this tribal ethics was founded on the principle that every member had an essential function in maintaining the stability of tribe. It was, indeed, meant to maintain a semblance of social egalitarianism so that regardless of one's position, every member could share in social and economic rights and privileges that preserved the unity of the tribe. However, the problem in Mecca was that of concentration of wealth in the hands of a few ruling families which not only altered the social and economic landscape of the city, it had effectively destroyed the tribal ethic. The sudden tide of personal wealth in this great financial center had swept away tribal ideals of social egalitarianism. No longer was there any concern for the poor and marginalized; no longer was the tribe only as strong as its weakest members.⁸

The Jews were found in Mecca from ancient times and their presence in the Arabian Peninsula can be traced to the Babylonian Exile after Rome's sacking of the temple in Jerusalem and again in 132 C.E., after the messianic uprising of Simon Bar kochba. Undoubtedly, the Jews were a teeming and highly influential diaspora whose culture and traditions had been thoroughly integrated into the social religious milieu of pre- Islamic Arabia. Whether Arab converts or immigrants from Palestine, the Jews participated in every level of Arab society. There were Jewish merchants, Jewish Bedouin, Jewish farmers, Jewish poet, and Jewish warriors throughout the peninsula. Jewish men Arab names; Jewish women wore Arab headdress and while some of these Jews may have spoken Aramaic, their primary language was Arabic.⁹

The Pagan Arabs were influenced by the Jewish culture and beliefs and Jews were heavily Arabized as both the groups significantly influenced each other's beliefs and practices. The picture that emerges from this brief outline of the pre-Islamic Arabian religious experience is that of an era in which Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Judaism intermingled in one of the last remaining regions in the Near East still dominated by paganism. The relative distance that these three major religions enjoyed from their respective centers gave them the freedom to develop their creeds and rituals into fresh and innovative theologies.¹⁰

Every period of history is characterized by associating partners with Almighty God either by worshipping idols, deifying individuals, or attributing creativity to nature or material causes. When belief in Almighty God's Unity is removed from people's hearts, their minds and souls darken, standards change, and common things and even the world as a whole are judged from false points of view.

Worst was the scenario when the Last Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, appeared because the people had lost their knowledge of the true religion and had reverted to worshipping idols of stones, earth, bread and even cheese.¹¹The Qur'an declares their position as: They were serving, apart from Allah, what hurts them not, neither profits them, and they say: "These are our intercessors with Allah."¹²

The people of Arabian Peninsula at that time were so degraded in thought and morals that they used to cut their idols into pieces and eat them.¹³The seminal reasoning for their abhorrent acts was that they were following in the steps of their forefathers. The Qur'an says that "When it is said to them: "Follow what Allah has sent down,"they say: "No. We follow that wherein we found our fathers."¹⁴ The ignorance of Arabs was visible all around; they considered sons to be a great wealth and daughters a burden and disgrace which resulted in their hearts becoming hard. Every day a pit was dug in the desert for an innocent girl to be buried. Human beings were more brutal and cruel than hyenas. They buried their own daughters alive in the most brutal and inhumane manner and the holy Qur'an mentions their animal behavior in these words: "When any of them is given the good tidings of a girl, his face is darkened and he chokes inwardly, as he hides himself from the people because of the evil of the good tidings that have been given to him, whether he shall preserve her in humiliation, or trample her into the dust."¹⁵

The ignorant and barbaric behavior of pre-Islamic Arabia is visible from the narration of one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, who told him what he had done with his daughter: O Messenger of Allah, I had a daughter: one day I told her mother to dress her, for I was taking her to her uncle. My poor wife knew what this meant, but could do nothing but obey and weep. She dressed the girl, who was very happy that she was going to see her uncle. I took her near a well, and told her to look down into it. While she was looking into the well, I kicked her into it.

While she was rolling down, she was shouting: "Daddy, Daddy!" When this companion of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, was recounting this event, the Prophet sobbed as if he had lost one of his nearest relative.¹⁶

History shows that women were despised, not only in pre-Islamic Arabia but also in the Roman and Sassanid lands.

The Qur'an openly declares that men will be questioned concerning this: "When the female infant, buried alive, is questioned- for what crime she was killed."¹⁷ The barbaric atmosphere of pre-Islamic Arabia was that of jungle law where the powerful crushed the weak, brutality was taken for humanity, cruelty received approval, the bloodthirsty were exalted, bloodshed was considered a virtue, and adultery and fornication were more common than legal marriages.

1.2: Appearance of Prophetic Identity and Prophetic Greatness

God creates every community of beings with a purpose and a guide or leader. It is inconceivable that God Almighty, who gave bees a queen, ants a leader, and birds and fish each a guide, would leave us without Prophets to guide us to spiritual, intellectual and material perception.¹⁸ The Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, occupies a particular place in the life and conscience of Muslims today, just as he did in the past. According to Islamic belief, he received and transmitted the last revealed book, the Qur'an, which repeatedly insists on the eminent and singular position of the Messenger of God Almighty, all at once a prophet, a bearer of news, a model, and a guide. He was but a man, yet he acted to transform the world in the light of the Revelation and inspirations he received from God Almighty, his educator (ar-Rabb). That he was chosen and inspired by God but also fully accepted his own humility is what makes Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, an example and a guide for the Muslim faithful.

Islamic monotheism has always stood in community with the sacred history of prophet hood. From the beginning, God Almighty sent humankind prophet and messengers entrusted with the divine message, the reminder of His presence, His commands, His love, and His hope.¹⁹

From the first prophet Adam(AS), to the last prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, Muslim tradition recognizes and identifies the whole cycle of prophet hood, ranging from the most famous messengers (Abraham, Noah, Moses, Jesus (may God Almighty be pleased with them all) to the lesser known, as well as others who remain unknown to us. The one has forever been accompanying us, this creation; from our beginning to our end.²⁰ This is the very meaning of tawhid (the Oneness of God) and of the Qur'anic formula that refers to humankind's destiny as well as to that of each individual: "To God we belong and to Him we return."²¹

The "water of life" for the salvation of humanity should be made known to everyone. Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, was pride of humanity. For the past fourteen centuries, many thinkers, philosophers, scientists, and scholars, each a radiant star in our intellectual world, have stood behind him in respect and admiration and have taken pride in belonging to his community.²² It is enough to understand his greatness that even after so many antagonism towards religion, we still hear the words "I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah" from minarets five times a day. We rejoice while his name is being proclaimed from minarets, as does the dead and other spiritual beings.²³

Reference needs to be made here to a rare intellectual of sixth century Arabia and that rare soul was Waraqa Ibn Nawfal. He was widely respected for his piety and had deep knowledge of Jewish and Christian faiths and would speak of a Prophet still to come. He also knew the fact that each Prophet that had previously come gave good tidings of this foretold Prophet's arrival. The Torah and the Gospel also made mention of him. In fact, the long awaited arrival was a favorite topic in the whole Hijaz²⁴ and even in the whole Arabian Peninsula. Most of the Arabs seemed to be competing to see who could speak of him most, and they discussed the descriptions of him and his qualities and talked about the environment in which he would emerge and all the signs that would portend his arrival.²⁵

Prophetic greatness is visible in and around the prophets and historical accounts firmly establish this fact. The prophetic characteristics of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, were reflected most prominently much before his birth. Al-Tabari writes that while Muhammad's father, Abdullah, was on his way to meet his bride, was stopped by a strange woman, who seeing a light shining between his eyes, demanded that he should sleep with her. Abdullah politely refused and continued to the house of Amina, where he consummated the marriage that would result in the birth of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him.

The next day when Abdullah saw the same woman again, he asked her; "Why do not you make the same proposition to me today that you made to me yesterday?" the woman replied, "The light which was with you yesterday has left you. I have no need of you today."²⁶ The signs of his prophetic identify continued when his mother Amina was pregnant. She heard a voice tell her, "you are pregnant with the Lord of this people, and when he is born, say I put him in the care of the one from the evil of every envier"; then call him Muhammad."²⁷

In fact, it is strongly believed that in the desert Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, had his first prophetic experience. While herding a flock of lambs, he was approached by two men, clothed in white, who carried with them a golden basin full of snow. The two men came to Muhammad and pinned him to the ground. They reached into his chest and removed his heart. The man was saying to his companion, "What a good heart this upright man has". After extracting a drop of black liquid from it, they washed the heart clean in the snow and gently placed it back into Muhammad's, peace and blessings be upon him, breast .²⁸They also returned the ribs to their place before disappearing.

Another interesting and forceful instance of his prophetic identity is that when his beloved uncle Abu Talib prepared a large trading expedition to Syria and he decided, at the last moment, to take Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, along. As the caravan moved slowly across the scorched landscape, an old Christian monk named Bahira caught sight of it passing by his monastery at Basra. Bahira was a learned man who possessed a secret book of prophecy passed down from generation to generation by the monks in his order. Crouched day and night in his cell, he had pored over the ancient manuscript and discovered within its weathered pages the coming of a new prophet.²⁹

It was for this reason that he decided to stop the caravan. For he noticed that as the convoy balanced its way over the thin gray horizon, a small cloud hovered continuously over one member of the group, shielding only him from the heat of the merciless sun, when this person stopped, so did the cloud; and when he dismounted the camel to rest at a tree, the cloud followed him, over shadowing the tree's meager shade until its splendor branches bent down to shelter him. Recognizing what these signs could mean, Bahira sent an urgent message to the caravan leaders.

The message read; "I have prepared food for you and should like you all to come, both great and small, bond and free."³⁰

The members of the caravan were startled. They have passed the monastery many times on their way to Syria, but Bahira had never before taken notice of them. Nevertheless, they decided to break for the evening and join the old monk. As they ate, Bahira noticed that the one he had seem in the distance, the one who was attended by clouds and trees, was not among them.

He asked the men if every member of the caravan was present: "Do not let any of you remain behind and not come to my feast."³¹

The men replied that everyone who ought to be was present; except, of course, for the young boy, Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, whom they had left outside to watch over the baggage. Bahira was elated. He insisted that the boy should join them. When Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, entered the monastery the monk gave him a brief examination, and declared to everyone present that this was "The Messenger of The Lord of the worlds." Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, was only nine years old.³²

Islamic history shows that spiritual nourishment was given to those who would be close to the coming Prophet as God Almighty was preparing them for all that was to come. Even before their path met, Khadija had dreams and could see signs of the Prophet that was about to be appointed. On one occasion, she saw a strong light, like the moon or sun, come into her house and into her bosom, radiating out and enlightening the whole universe. She woke up in a fearful and nervous state. She believed it had to have meaning because there was no such thing as a coincidence in this world. She went to her mentor and spiritual confident, her cousin, to tell him the dream.³³

This mentor and spiritual confident was none else than Waraqa Ibn Nawfal who was then an old man, immediately realized that there was something going on as soon as she came, and when he heard what she told him, he was astounded. His comments and thoughts were naturally not different from what he had said before, for he was one of those rare people that saw the metaphysical dimension of events.³⁴ He said in great excitement, "Good tidings, and O cousin! Good tidings to you!

This dream is undoubtedly a gift from God's bounty to you. Soon God will grant you home Divine light. Of course, God knows best, but I think it may be the light of the Prophet."³⁵

She was delighted with the interpretation of her cousin, she knew that she could not be satisfied with this much; she wanted to hear more. So she just stood there for a while. Waraqa, seeing her in this state, decided to spell out his prediction, and made the following astonishing statement: "The Last Prophet has entered the world. You will become his family. In your lifetime, he will receive Divine revelation, and his religion will encompass the entire universe. You will be the first of his believers. This Prophet will be amongst the Quraysh, from the family of Hashim."³⁶

The prediction of Waraqa Ibn Nawfal was not only definite and specific but proved accurate by subsequent historical events. He spoke without any doubts and he was not only certain of the Prophet's arrival but was also aware of the fact that he would marry Khadija. Through him, the final religion would be presented to the humanity, encompassing the whole world.³⁷

When khadija (RTA) was looking for men that may carry out the business in Damascus and a Caravan for this purpose was ready to go. Abu Talib went to see Khadija (RTA) and proposed the name of his nephew Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, for the job. She was delighted and knew that she had already won the greatest prize even before the caravan took to the road. She gave the best of her servants, Maysara, to accompany, Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, on the journey and got the assurance that he would report everything back to her without fault or failure.³⁸

While in Damascus, Maysara caught a glimpse of a heated discussion between Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, and another man in the market. The man was requesting Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, to swear upon the greatest idols of that time, Lat and Uzza, but the future Prophet was objecting to this request, "I will never swear by their names, as there is nothing that seems so unlovable to me as these." The man, who saw the determination of Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, changed his mind about the pledge on the names of Lat and Uzza, finalizing, the business on Muhammad's, peace and blessings be upon him, terms.³⁹

The man then secretly sidled up to Maysara after Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, left his side, asking him about this man who did not swear on Lat and Uzza's names. He excitedly asked, "Do you know him? Who is this man?" Then, even before Maysara had a chance to answer, he made his judgment and said, "Do not leave his side; undoubtedly, he is the Prophet."⁴⁰

After finalizing their business in Damascus, they were on their way back to Mecca. They stopped when it became too hot to walk and the road became arduous. Each member of the caravan found a place to sit, dealing with their sums and trying to relax. Muhammad, peace and blessing be upon him, went to sit under the shade of an old tree. Maysara saw someone running towards them from a distance. This was none other than the famous monk, Nestor, who had been watching them from a distance. He came up to Maysara and breathlessly asked, "Who is that cooling off under the tree?"

For Maysara this was an easy question to answer. Without hesitating he replied, "That is Muhammad, Son of Abd Allah. He is a youth from the family of Hisham." At first the man shook his head, as if he was not happy with the answer and the style. It began to seem his question had been rhetorical. His demeanor showed the response, "you do not know," and he said meaningfully to Maysara, "I swear that none other than a Prophet is sitting beneath that tree."⁴¹

He went on to ask Maysara about the most common signs, and when he received positive answers to his questions, he said in a confident manner, "There is no doubt that he is the awaited Prophet. And he is the last of all Prophets"⁴², the priest, however, could not leave. It was obvious that having found the one he was looking for so near, he wanted to get more information about him. That is why he kept asking Maysara about the future Prophet, resting under the tree, and wanted him to tell him of all the events that they had witnessed along the way.⁴³

Moreover, Warqa ibn Nawfal, who was in constant search of the true path kept talking about the arrival of the Last Prophet because he, found the idea of worshipping idols abominable. His search led him to the information in the scriptures foretelling the Last Prophet, and he started waiting anxiously.⁴⁴ He said the future was hidden from him but he knew that Angel Gabriel would bring revelation to one called Ahmad.⁴⁵ In fact, the holy Qur'an also refers to Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, as "Ahmad" meaning "most praiseworthy,"⁴⁶ who would be appointed a prophet, sent with God's message of salvation to humanity.

The pious path for the divine revelation was prepared and formal divine declaration about the Last Prophet was soon to be made.

It is obvious that the darkness of ignorance which was growing darker in Mecca was deeply disturbing to the pure spirit of Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. The Ka'ba which had been the first place of worship erected to bring peace to humanity was like the centre of gloom. Although he could not separate himself from the Ka'ba , he felt a growing need to distance himself from that oppressive darkness.⁴⁷

The Last Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, made a habit of going away. He would walk for hours to the Jabal an-Nur, the Mount of Light, and it was as though man and mountain were waiting for the true Light to come down from heavens.

He would retreat to the mountain top cave on the Mount of Light, from which he could see Ka'ba, thinking of its pure future, when real faith would be restored, finding a little consolation in the dream of it. Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, would seclude himself from the city on this mountain where he preferred to be with the Lord on certain days and months of the year. The peace he felt there when engaged in deep reflection was indescribable.⁴⁸

1.3: The First Message and Seeking Knowledge from Cradle to Grave

The written word is central to Islam for it is a religion in which the holy book plays the most crucial role. The word 'Qur'an' itself means 'recitation', and in Islam Almighty God is believed to communicate with humankind principally through the medium of revelations that take the form of books.⁴⁹ The holy Qur'an is the sacred word of Almighty God, and its authority remains absolute.⁵⁰ One day, on the Mount of Light, the Infinite light of Revelation descended, creating an unbreakable bond between the heavens and the earth. Gabriel came and delivered to Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, the first message from God Almighty, which had been predicted by so many signs. The radiance of heaven had been bestowed on the light of the earth, and Muhammad's prophetic mission was about to start.

The heavenly radiance, a presence he felt strongly, embraced him and pulled him towards its bosom with the word, "Read!" The heaviness he felt, due to the greatness of this duty, was unbearable. Thus was revealed the first recitation of Qur'an. When the Prophet was released and he rushed back towards Mecca.⁵¹ When the Last Prophet was returning to the city strangely, every tree and rock that he met bowed in his presence and greeted him openly saying, "May God's peace be upon you, O Messenger!"⁵² The first revelation given to Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, stressed the importance of knowledge which is an anti-thesis to ignorance and the accompanied darkness in the manner as under:

"Read: in the name of thy Lord who createth, Createth man from a clot.
Read: And thy Lord is the Most Bounteous, Who teacheth by the pen,
Teacheth man that which he knew not".⁵³

The first Qur'anic revelation was the most beautiful invitation to acquiring knowledge, finding truth and wisdom. The striking illustration of the importance that the Qur'an gives to knowledge is the fact that of the 634 verses of the sacred text, the obligation to offer prayers is mentioned in about 200, while the verses exhorting the believers to ponder on the mysteries of nature, to reflect on God's creation and to use their reason are more than three times that number.⁵⁴ Rational faculty of man is the most wonderful gift of Almighty to human beings which could be used to discover the creator himself before discovering anything else in this World.

The Holy Qur'an is full of expressions like "that you became wise", "that you may think," "that you may know." It is said at the beginning of the Holy Qur'an: And He (God) taught Adam all the names"⁵⁵, and the subsequent verses show that owing to his knowledge of those names man is, in a certain respect, superior to angels. The 'names' are a symbolic expression for the power of defining terms, the power of articulated thinking which enables him, in the words of the Qur'an to be God's Vicegerent on earth.⁵⁶ In order to make a systematic use of his thinking, man must learn and therefore the Last Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said: "If anybody goes on his way in search of knowledge, God will make easy for him the way to Paradise."⁵⁷

In this world moving fast towards material progress, atheism and agnosticism propagating ownership of self and free choice, religion, indeed, teaches us the identity of our creator whose existence we can discover with our reason. Although most people have the capability to grasp this fact, they spend their lives unaware of it.⁵⁸

The Qur'an repeatedly stresses the need to acquire knowledge, insisting that the knowledgeable are actually the truly God-fearing. It announces that God exalts those who have faith as well as knowledge, the two being seen as inseparable. It also refers to the superiority of human beings over the angels and other creatures on grounds of reason and knowledge.⁵⁹

In fact, we the muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, being constantly under Almighty God's care and supervision while discharging his Prophetic duty, was inspired and guided by God Almighty in all his actions.⁶⁰ Imparting wisdom is specifically and recurrently mentioned in the Qur'an as the prophet's main assignment: "God has revealed to you the Book of wisdom, and He taught you what you did not know".⁶¹

Knowledge and reason takes us out from the darkness of ignorance and illuminates our lives with wisdom. It is the beauty of knowledge that it breaks the stranglehold of ignorance, arrogance and egotism paving the way to discover the might of Omnipotent God. Islam, therefore, puts a lot of emphasis on acquisition of knowledge. The importance which is accorded to acquisition of 'knowledge' is also clearly visible in a number of sayings of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. Reference is often made to Muhammad's, peace and blessings be upon him, assertion, 'I have been sent only as a teacher.' 'Knowledge is the life of Islam and a pillar of faith,' Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, is said to have remarked. A hadith relates that Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, declared it a duty binding on all Muslims, men as well as women, to acquire knowledge. Another Prophetic tradition advises; 'seek knowledge from cradle to grave and search for it even if you are to go to China.'⁶²

Moreover, a very interesting instance of the importance accorded to knowledge is that acquisition of knowledge is also compared and associated to martyrdom in Islam. The seeker of knowledge is regarded as one who strives in the path of God (Jihad), and Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, is said to have declared, 'the ink of the scholar is more holy than the blood of a martyr.'

Insisting on the need for all muslims to acquire knowledge, a hadith declares that 'valueless is the Muslim who is not a teacher or a student.' Another hadith puts it, 'knowledge is the friend of the true believer and reason is his guide.'

In Medina, Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, is said to have arranged for some of his companions to teach others to read and write. After the Battle of Badr, two years after his migration to Medina, Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, agreed to release Meccan prisoners of war if they would each teach ten Muslims how to write.⁶³

The very first message of Qur'an puts heavy emphasis on reading, proclamation or acquisition of knowledge which spreads light into the darkness of ignorance as the pre-Islamic Arabia was a den of darkness and ignorance and it could have been the true knowledge which could have cleared the dark clouds of misconceptions and ignorance surrounding the Arabian Peninsula. But the wisdom contained in the first message revealed through the last Prophet illuminated not only the ignorant Arabia but the rest of the humanity as well.

It was made certain that reason, intelligence, language, and writing will grant people the qualities required to enable them to be God's khalifahs (vicegerents) on earth, and from the very beginning, Quranic Revelation allies recognition of the Creator to the knowledge and science, thus echoing the origin of creation itself.⁶⁴

1.4 The Message, Resistance and Adversity

It is, indeed, a common human and social tendency that a fresh piece of wisdom (Divine or human) howsoever valuable it might be, gets concretized only gradually and most often with initial opposition and vehement resistance. The same is true about the very first divine revelation also. The number of conversions remained small during the first few months. Tradition reports during the first three years, only thirty to forty Quraysh became Muslims. Prophet Muhammad's, peace and blessings be upon him, wife Khadijah (RTA) was the first convert to Islam. The circle of those who accepted the message was to widen to include members of his close family, then his friends. Ali Ibn Abi Talib (RTA), Zayd (RTA), his adopted son, Um Ayman (RTA) and his lifelong friend Abu Bakr (RTA) were among the first to recognize the truth of the message and to pronounce the profession of faith (ash-Shahadah) expressing their adherence to Islam: "I bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, is His messenger."⁶⁵

The number of converts slowly grew challenging those who were getting huge dividends from polytheism in Mecca. The surrounding atmosphere became more and more hostile as inhabitants of Mecca learned about the essentials of this new message and realized its heart touching impact on the poor, orphan, women and the young. Mecca turned on the Muslims with all its might and began to suffocate them. Abu Jahal, in particular, became like the Pharaoh of old, plotting these monstrous acts. The plan was that they would exterminate Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, and his believers by forcing them out of Mecca, so that they would die of hunger and thirst.⁶⁶ It is, indeed, commonly believed that it was this new, uncompromising monotheism that ultimately brought the wrath of the Quraysh upon Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, and his small group of followers, such a view fails to appreciate the profound social and economic consequences implied by this simple statement of faith⁶⁷ that "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is God's Messenger."

Historical accounts make the fact amply clear that the Quraysh were quite sophisticated with regard to religion. After all they made their living off it. Polytheism, henotheism, monotheism, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Hanifism, paganism in all its varieties, the Quraysh had seen it all. Traditions list a number of well known prophetic figures living throughout the Arabian Peninsula who preached monotheism, prophets Suwayd (AS) and Luqman (AS) are two such predecessors of Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. There is, indeed, a complete sura in the holy Qur'an devoted to Luqman (AS) in which he is called a man upon whom God Almighty had bestowed great wisdom.⁶⁸

Then what was the reason which enraged the Quraysh far more than his monotheistic beliefs? First reason inviting their wrath was that, unlike Luqman (AS) and the Hanifs, Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, did not speak from his own authority. Nor were his recitations mediated by the Jinn, as was the case with the Kahins. On the contrary, what made Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, unique was his claim to be "the Messenger of God". Second and perhaps the more important reason was that the Hanif preachers may have attacked the polytheism and greed of their fellow Meccans, but they maintained a deep veneration for the Ka'ba and those in the community who acted as keepers of the keys.⁶⁹

But Muhammad, peace be upon him, was uniquely gifted by Almighty God with a wisdom and vision which none else possessed and consequently understood which the Hanifs could not that the only way to bring about radical social and economic reform in Mecca was to overturn the religio-economic system on which the city was built; and the only way to do that was to attack the very source of the Quraysh's wealth and prestige- the Ka'ba which was the centre of idolatry and most vehement symbol of polytheism at that time.⁷⁰

Day after day, clan chiefs became aware of the danger the new religion posed as the message was a straightforward rebellion against their gods and their customs, and it was eventually bound to endanger the chiefs' power. They first decided to send a delegation to the Prophet's uncle, Abu Talib, who had so far been protecting his nephew. They asked him to speak to his nephew Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, and make him stop spreading his message, which they considered dangerous and unacceptable because it directly attacked their gods and their ancestors' heritage. Abu Talib took no action after their first visit, so they came back and insisted that the matter was urgent.⁷¹

Abu Talib then sent for his nephew and tried to convince him to terminate his activities in order not to embarrass him. But Muhammad's, peace and blessings be upon him, answer was unequivocal but firm as he replied: *"O my uncle, I swear to God that, should they place the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left hand in order for me to abandon this cause, I would not abandon it before He (God) had made it triumph or I had perished for its sake."*⁷²

Then a new delegation came to the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, and offered him goods, money, power and position. He refused their offers one by one and confirmed that he was interested only in his mission of inviting people towards the immortal truth to believe and recognize one God, whatever the price might be. The Last Prophet is reported to have said that; *"I am not possessed, nor do I seek among you honours or power. God has sent me to you as a messenger, He has revealed me a Book and has ordered me to bring you good news and warn you. I have conveyed to you my Lord's message and I have given you good advice. If you accept from me what I have brought, this will cause you to succeed in this world and the hereafter; but if you reject what I have brought, then I shall wait patiently until God judges between us."*⁷³

In practice, hostilities had now begun: clan chiefs kept insulting the Prophet and saying that he was insane, possessed, or a sorcerer. Abu Lahab, his uncle, pressured his two sons to divorce the Prophet's daughters, whom they had married, while his wife relished tossing the household garbage out into the street as Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, passed by. Rumors spread that Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, was actually a sorcerer, that he broke up families, separated parents from their children and husbands from their wives, and was a troublemaker.⁷⁴

The force of the message and the exceptional determination of the Last Messenger (PBUH) were so transformatory that the clan chiefs adopted isolation strategy against Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, which worked fairly well but some people did not allow themselves to be influenced, such as the highway robber Abu Dharr, from Banu Ghifar. Having heard of this new message calling for faith in one God, he came to the Prophet in spite of Quraysh people's warnings. He found Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, lying in the shade near the Ka'ba. He called the Prophet's name and asked about his message: he listened, then immediately pronounced the profession of faith, surprising the Prophet, who said, looking at him: "God guides whom He will".

Abu Dharr al- Ghifari was to become one of the Prophet's most famous Companions; he was known for his devotion, his rigor, and his criticism of luxury and laziness.⁷⁵

The verses of Qur'an build into an impassioned protest against corruption and social inequality. They took the side of the poor and marginalized, making a declaration for advantaging the disadvantaged. The Qur'an condemned the concept of sons as wealth and consequent practice of female infanticide which was common practice of pre-Islamic Arabia. The future is considered uncertain and this uncertainty about future leads to accumulation of wealth by individuals, institutions and societies which is most often unending and this human desire for more and more money⁷⁶ was a prominent practice in the pre-Islamic Arabia. Accumulation and ardent passion for wealth was attacked in the most forceful manner by Qur'anic commandments.⁷⁷ The Qur'an declares that "And those who hoard up gold and silver and spend it not in Allah's way, unto them give tidings (O Muhammad) of a painful doom."⁷⁸

In fact, in several other verses of the Holy Qur'an one finds strong denunciation of the accumulation of wealth. The chapters 104 and 107⁷⁹ are devoted to denunciation of accumulation of wealth and not helping the poor and sufferers.⁸⁰

In a sense the verses were an invitation to the people of Mecca to reform them and it also contained an implied message as also a warning of what would happen if they ignored this prophetic call. Prophetic it definitely, was, placing itself explicitly in the tradition of previous prophets from Moses down through the ages to Jesus.⁸¹ In fact, the message of Qur'an appeared like oxygen in the suffocating savage atmosphere of Mecca and was highly appealing and elevating for slaves, widows and orphans who were cut out of the elite by birth or circumstances.⁸²

Conclusions

Islam as a religion is just more than fourteen hundred years old and so has been the presence and absence of the Last Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, but the effects of this religion and the Last Messenger had been and continue to be infinite in different spheres of human life in general and upon the savage atmosphere of Arabian Peninsula in particular at that time. Neither the Holy Qur'an made any declaration that it was the only divine revelation nor was any such claim made from the side of the Last Prophet (PBUH) that he was the only prophet of Almighty God.

Instead the Qur'an declares that it is a divine revelation in continuation to the other divine revelations-Torah, Gospel & the Bible [revealed on Moses (AS) and Jesus (AS)].

In the same manner, the Last Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, declared himself to be a messenger of Almighty God and a Warner. The period in Arabian peninsula in which Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, brought the divine message was a period of ignorance, darkness, inequality, tribal superiority, high female infanticide and persistent idolatry which needed persistent reforms and a benevolent reformer. Almighty Allah who is the most compassionate and Merciful sent His messenger Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, as the mercy of the World (21:107). Prophet of Islam, indeed, represents the Universal mercy.

The Qur'an again and again shows its sympathy for the weaker sections of the society such as orphans, widows, poor and exploited, the slaves and other socially, politically or economically exploited segments of society. The exploitative mechanism sustained and promoted by the ruling clans of the pre-Islamic Arabia was bound to act hostile towards the message of love, compassion, truth, mercy, justice and equality brought to the world through the Last Messenger Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him.

After initial sustained opposition, they were bound to realize that the divine message through the Last Messenger was transforming their savage world into a civilized society where knowledge, truth, compassion, equality and justice were the fundamental values. The truth in the Divine message was bound to be established and the rare determination of the Last Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, was to result in fast multiplication of his followers which was unknown to the history of religions till the seventh century.

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