

Fast 25: Prophets

- The next article of faith in Islam is belief in the prophets. The Arabic word for prophet is *nabī*. It comes from a word which means *an announcement of great utility imparting knowledge of a thing*, and is applied to information which is absolutely true. *A nabī is the man who gives information about God*. God gives him information concerning His Unity and reveals to him secrets of the future and imparts the knowledge that he is His prophet.
- A *nabī* is also called a *rasūl*, which means *a messenger*, literally ‘one sent’. The two words *nabī* and *rasūl* are used interchangeably in the Holy Quran. The same person is sometimes called *nabī* and sometimes *rasūl*; while occasionally both names are combined. The reason seems to be that the prophet has two capacities: he receives information from God, and he imparts the message to mankind. He is called a *nabī* in his first capacity, and a *rasūl* in his second role.

Note: There is a common notion that only some prophets (*nabī*) were messengers, because a messenger (*rasūl*) was a special kind of prophet who received a new law, while all the others prophets came with no new law. This is not correct. The Quran does not make any such distinction between one who is a prophet only and one who is in addition a messenger.

- It may be added here that the word *rasūl* is also applied in the Quran and Hadith to others who are not at all prophets but are messengers in a literal sense. Angels are called messengers (35:1, 7:37, etc.), and a man sent by a king with a message is called *rasūl* (12:50). In Hadith, there are three or four examples when a man sent by the Holy Prophet Muhammad to people is called “a *rasul* of the *rasul* of Allah”.
- As we have already seen, a faith in Divine revelation is one of the essentials of Islam. Since revelation must be communicated through a man, faith in the messenger is a natural sequence, and is mentioned in the Quran along with faith in the revealed books (see 2:177, 2:285).
- There is a deeper significance underlying faith in the prophets, and hence the greater stress is laid upon this article of faith. The prophet is not only the bearer of the Divine message but he also shows how that message is to be interpreted in practical life; and therefore he is the model to be followed. It is the prophet’s example that inspires a living faith in the hearts of his followers and brings about a real transformation in their lives.
- This is why the Holy Quran lays special stress on the fact that the prophet must be a human being:

“Their messengers said to them: We are nothing but mortals like yourselves...”
— 14:11; see also 36:15, 23:24, 23:33–34

and the Holy Prophet Muhammad is told to say to people:

“I am only a mortal like you.” — 18:110, 41:6

The reformation of human beings can only be accomplished through human prophets. God coming into the world would serve no purpose in the reformation of man, even if it were possible that He should come in the flesh, considering that man has to face temptations at every step, but there is no temptation for God.

- **Universality of prophethood.** Just as God has granted His gifts of physical sustenance to all alike, so His spiritual gift of prophethood, through which a spiritual life is awakened in man, is also a free gift to all the nations of the world. It is not, as would appear from the Bible, among the Israelites alone that prophets were raised. According to the Holy Quran, there is not one nation in the world in which a prophet has not appeared. As quoted in the Study for Fast 23 on the topic of revelation, the Quran says:

“There is not a people but a warner has gone among them.” — 35:24

“For every nation there is a messenger.” — 10:47

The Holy Prophet was further told that there had been prophets besides those mentioned in the Quran:

“And We sent messengers We have mentioned to you before, and messengers We have not mentioned to you.” — 4:164

- It is, in fact, stated in a hadith that there have been 124,000 prophets. The Quran contains only about twenty-five names, among them being several non-Biblical prophets: Hud and Salih in Arabia, Luqman in Ethiopia, a contemporary of Moses (generally known as Khidr) in Sudan, and Dhu-l-Qarnain (Darius I, who was also a king) in Persia. This is quite in accordance with the theory of the universality of prophethood.
- As the Holy Quran has plainly said that prophets have appeared in all nations and that it has not named all of them, a Muslim may accept the great luminaries who are accepted by other nations as having brought light to them, as being the prophets of those nations.