

Fast 22: Prophets and Messengers of Allah —Meaning of terms

- The Arabic word for prophet used in the Quran is *nabī* (نبي). It comes from a word which means *an announcement of great utility imparting knowledge of a thing*, and it is applied to information which is absolutely true. A *nabī* is *one 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* (رسول) which means *a messenger*, literally ‘one who is sent’. The two words *nabī* and *rasūl* are used interchangeably in the Holy Quran.
- For example, in one place it is stated that Allah sent “**prophets** as bearers of good news and as warners” (2:213). Here the word for “prophets” is *anbiyā’*, plural of *nabī*. In another place, using the same expression they are called “**messengers**, bearers of good news and warners” (4:165). Here the word for “messengers” is *rusul*, plural of *rasūl*. This shows that prophets and messengers are the same.

In fact, in 4:163, it says that Allah revealed to “Noah and the prophets after him”. So in just the space of three verses, 4:163 to 4:165, the words prophet and messenger are used to refer to the same category of people.

- In the Quran the same person is sometimes called *nabī* and sometimes *rasūl*; while occasionally both names are combined. Jesus is said to have been made a “prophet” who was given a book in 19:30. In 5:75 it is said that he was “a messenger”. The Prophet Muhammad himself is called *nabī* many times, as in 8:64, and called *rasūl* many times as in 33:40. In 7:157–158 he is called both, “the Messenger-prophet”:

“Those who follow the Messenger-Prophet, the unlettered one...” (7:157)

الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الرَّسُولَ النَّبِيَّ الْأُمِّيَّ . . .

“So believe in Allah and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet...” (7:158)

فَأْمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ النَّبِيِّ الْأُمِّيِّ . . .

The reason for using these two terms seems to be that such a personage 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.

- There is a common notion that a messenger (*rasūl*) was a special kind of prophet who received a new law or book, and therefore only some of the prophets (*nabī*) were also messengers, while most prophets came with no new book. This view is not correct.

The Quran does not make any such distinction between one who is only a prophet and one who is in addition a messenger.

- Some people support the above notion by giving the example of Moses (*Mūsā*) and his brother Aaron (*Hārūn*). Moses, they say, brought the message from God, and Aaron was a helper prophet. This seems to be supported by 19:51 and 19:53:

“And mention Moses in the Book.
Surely he was one purified, and was a
messenger, a prophet.” (19:51)

وَأَذْكُرْ فِي الْكِتَابِ مُوسَىٰ إِنَّهُ كَانَ مُخْلَصًا وَكَانَ
رَسُولًا نَبِيًّا ﴿٥١﴾

“And We gave him out of Our mercy
his brother Aaron, a **prophet.**” (19:53)

وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُ مِنْ رَحْمَتِنَا أَخَاهُ هَارُونَ نَبِيًّا ﴿٥٣﴾

However, in the next chapter, where the story of Moses is given in more detail, when Allah commands Moses to go to the Pharaoh with his brother Aaron, Allah says:

“So go you both to him and say: Surely
we are **two messengers** of your
Lord...” (20:47)

فَأْتِيهِ فَقُولَا إِنَّا رَسُولَا رَبِّكَ . . .

Earlier, when Moses prayed to Allah to give him Aaron as helper, he had said:

“And give to me an aider from my
family: Aaron, my brother; add to my
strength by him, and **make him share
my task.**” (20:29–32)

وَأَجْعَلْ لِي وَزِيرًا مِنْ أَهْلِي ﴿٢٩﴾ هَارُونَ أَخِي ﴿٣٠﴾
أَشْدُدْ بِهِ أَزْرِي ﴿٣١﴾ وَاشْرِكْهُ فِي أَمْرِي ﴿٣٢﴾

Elsewhere Allah says about Moses and Aaron together: “We will give you both an authority” (28:35), and “We gave them both the clear Book” (37:117). This shows that Aaron was a prophet and messenger like Moses. The task of giving a new, detailed law to the Israelites from scratch, to govern their religious and worldly affairs, was so great that it was divided and shared between Moses and Aaron.

But the stature of the Holy Prophet Muhammad was so much greater that he, *single-handedly with no sharer in his mission*, brought a new law and way of life for a large nation, and in fact for all humanity, guiding man spiritually, morally and materially.

- There is a general belief, based on a hadith, that there were 124,000 prophets (*nabī*), out of whom 315 were messengers (*rasūl*). But some renowned scholars who appeared in the history of Islam have commented that this large number of 124,000 includes saints, holy men and those who receive true dreams and visions from God.