

Fast 23: Broad meaning of word *rasūl* ('messenger').**Also: Prophets were "a single community"**

- Note that there is nothing sacrosanct about the word *rasūl* or 'messenger'. It is not reserved in the Quran, Hadith or classical Islamic literature for those messengers of Allah whom Muslims must believe in and accept as a fundamental of their faith.
- In the Quran, in the story of the prophet Joseph, it is related that when Joseph was in prison in Egypt, on a false charge, the King of Egypt heard of his ability to interpret dreams. The King himself had had some dreams which his advisors could not make sense of. These were conveyed to Joseph in prison, and he was able to interpret them. The King was pleased and sent a messenger to Joseph asking him to come to him:

"So when the messenger came to him..." (12:50)

فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُ الرَّسُولُ ...

Here a man sent by the non-believing King to Joseph with a message is called the *rasūl*. Angels are also sometimes called "messengers" in the Quran, using the word *rusul* which is plural of *rasūl*. For example, the angels who come to take the soul at the time of death are called "messengers" in 7:37.

- In Hadith there are several examples of a person being called *rasūl* who was quite obviously not a messenger of Allah. Once the Holy Prophet, when he was sending his Companion Mu'adh ibn Jabal to Yemen as governor, asked him how he would decide cases. Mu'adh answered that he would first look in the Quran, and if he found no answer there, he would look into the practice or sayings of the Holy Prophet, and if he found no answer in those, he would do his best in using his own judgment. The Holy Prophet was overjoyed by this correct approach and said:

"Praise be to Allah Who has granted the messenger of His Messenger what pleases the Messenger of Allah." (Abu Dawud, hadith 3592)

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي وَفَّقَ رَسُولَ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ لِمَا يُرِيدُ
رَسُولَ اللَّهِ

Here the Holy Prophet has called a man, whom he is sending, as "messenger of the Messenger of Allah", the *rasūl* of the *rasūl* of Allah.

- In Sahih Bukhari, there are some examples of calling a man *rasūl*. When the Holy Prophet was on his sick-bed, he sent out a man with the message that Hazrat Abu Bakr should lead the people in prayer, and that man is called *rasūl* (hadith 687). A famous Companion, Ka'b ibn Mālik, in a long story says that a man was sent to him by the Holy Prophet with a message, and Ka'b calls him: "the *rasūl* of the *rasūl* of

Allah” (hadith 4418). Hazrat Ibn Abbas relates the well-known incident from the early days of the mission of the Holy Prophet when he climbed Mount Safa and called out names of the clans of the Quraish to come and hear him. Ibn Abbas says: “They gathered and any man who could not come out himself sent a *rasūl* to see what it was about” (hadith 4770). Here *rasūl* means a person sent by someone on his behalf.

- The above might sound ‘dry’ and ‘technical’ but it is well worth knowing how the word *rasūl* has been used in its broadest meaning in the most sacred of Islamic literature. It helps in understanding the sense in which this word has been applied in the writings of Muslim saints and luminaries to persons who were not prophets.
- Returning to our theme of prophets in the Quran, we saw earlier that in ch. 21 of the Quran several prophets are mentioned together who appeared before the Prophet Muhammad. That mention ends with a verse about Mary and Jesus. Then it is stated:

“Surely this your community is a single community, and I am your Lord, so serve Me.” (21:92)

إِنَّ هَذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ
فَاعْبُدُونِ ﴿٩٢﴾

In ch. 23 also, the coming of the earlier prophets is mentioned, ending with a mention of Jesus and Mary. There too it is stated after that:

“And surely this your community is a single community, and I am your Lord, so keep your duty to Me.” (23:52)

وَأَنَّ هَذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ
فَاتَّقُونِ ﴿٥٢﴾

The meaning of the prophets being “a single community (*ummah*)” is that they were all raised by Allah in the same way, they gave the same fundamental teachings to their people, they came to fulfil the same mission and they possessed the same qualities. Each of them met with the same kind of opposition and Allah helped everyone of them to overcome opposition and become successful in the same way.

Now the Prophet Muhammad was arising as the latest and last member of this single community. The above verses were revealed to him at an early stage of his mission while he was still at Makkah. No one in the world knew at the time that indeed all earlier prophets were “a single community”. This was a magnificent truth disclosed to the world for the first time. Nor did anyone know that what he was saying about this community would be manifested in his mission as well. No one could know that he would actually prove to be a member of this community and receive the same Divine help as they had done. This was therefore also a great prophecy, whose fulfilment was seen before the death of the Holy Prophet Muhammad.