

REVIVING THE BALANCE

The Authority of the *Qur'an* and the Status of the *Sunnah*

TAHA JABIR ALALWANI



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Taha Jabir Alalwani

Translated by
Nancy Roberts



THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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Foreword

TAHA JABIR ALALWANI'S *Reviving the Balance: The Authority of the Qur'an and the Status of the Sunnah* studies the position of the Sunnah in Islam and its fundamental relationship to the Qur'an.

The work carefully examines the sensitive issue of the development of the oral and written traditions, the problems scholars faced despite painstaking work verifying the authenticity of reports as well as the character of narrators etc., and the ever growing complexity of a body of narratives, with a labyrinthine shroud of scholastic views, that were making the simplicity and clarity of the Prophet's (ṢAAS)* life, words, and actions, a burgeoning maze of information. Taking the without doubt praiseworthy intention and effort to emulate the Prophet into account, the author nevertheless makes the case that once the Sunnah had been collected, the Muslim community began to neglect the Qur'an in favor of narrations of what the Prophet had done and said on the pretext that such narratives "contained" the Qur'an, and it is with the aim of restoring the relationship between the two that this work has been written. The author stresses that the Qur'an should be given precedence with the Prophetic Sunnah tied inextricably to the Qur'an in a way that allows for no contradiction between the two.

The IIIT has undertaken in recent years to produce abridged versions of its key publications, and this translation is taken from the abridged Arabic edition, *Ishkāliyyah al-Ta'āmūl Ma'a al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah*.

We live in an age in which time is at a premium in virtually all spheres of life, including those of writing and production. Copious intellectual, cultural and informational output continues unabated as

*ṢAAS – *Ṣalla Allāhu 'Alayhi wa Sallam*: May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him; said whenever the name of Prophet Muhammad is mentioned or whenever he is referred to as the Prophet of Allah.

Foreword

part of efforts to keep pace with changes in the public and private spheres alike, while publishing houses and websites vie to provide people with the latest, and most up-to-date information in the easiest, most effective manner. The knowledge economy that now dominates the world requires a process of 'creative adaptation' of information as one of the building blocks of the world community at large, hence the IIIT's series of abridged works. The aim is to help readers benefit from available information as easily, effectively, and efficiently as possible and to further develop their critical faculties so they become better able to contribute to the development of humanity. .

The abridged texts have been written in a clear, easy to read style, and while the essential contents of the original works have been preserved, readers will note that, in the interests of space, the abridged editions contain far fewer endnotes than do the original works. The only notes retained are those needed for clarification or the proper establishment of an idea, since the principle aim of this endeavor is to facilitate rapid absorption of the content being conveyed. Readers who wish to go more deeply into the topics of concern or to find full documentation of quotes may refer to the original works, which contain all necessary citations.

The work is being published to widen discourse, and to clarify the relationship between the Sunnah and the Qur'an. No doubt the subject is a delicate one, but it is hoped that for the most part both general and specialist readers alike will benefit from the perspective offered and the overall issues examined.

Where dates are cited according to the Islamic calendar (hijrah) they are labelled AH. Otherwise they follow the Gregorian calendar and labelled CE where necessary. Arabic words are italicized except for those which have entered common usage. Diacritical marks have been added only to those Arabic names not considered modern. English translations taken from Arabic references are those of the translator.

Since its establishment in 1981, the IIIT has served as a major center to facilitate serious scholarly efforts. Towards this end it has, over the decades, conducted numerous programs of research, seminars and conferences as well as publishing scholarly works specialising in the social sciences and areas of theology, which to date number more than

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four hundred titles in English and Arabic, many of which have been translated into other major languages.

We would like to thank the author, translator, as well as editorial and production team at the IIIT London Office, and all those who were directly or indirectly involved in the completion of this book. May God reward them for all their efforts.

JANUARY, 2017

Introduction

THE PURPOSE of this book is to clarify the relationship between the Sunnah* – the sayings and actions of the Prophet – and the Qur'an. This relationship, which has been described in disparate ways and from a variety of perspectives based on changing historical circumstances, has given rise to varied forms of knowledge and expertise. This knowledge and experience have, in turn, left their mark on the sciences through which we examine the Sunnah. Earlier and later^I hadith scholars adopted differing viewpoints and attitudes, while the stances taken by Islamic schools of thought – both juristic and philosophical – on specific types of Sunnah narratives reflected the concrete life conditions of the scholars in question. Similarly, differences over whether to categorize a given narrator as trustworthy or untrustworthy reflected disparate juristic, theological or philosophical principles that might lead some to reject this or that narrator while approving another, to accept this or that hadith while rejecting or reinterpreting those that contradict it, to accept or reject the criteria for criticizing the content of hadith narratives, and so on.

The question of how to approach the Sunnah had not yet arisen during the time of the Prophet, who instructed his followers to emulate him as he adhered to the Qur'an. It was he who showed them how to apply the Qur'an, translating its teachings into concrete behavior and using it as their guide in life. In order to ensure that the Sunnah fulfilled the practical role for which it was intended, the Prophet made a point not to allow the Qur'anic text to be confused with any other. Similarly, he discouraged the Muslim community from preoccupying itself with any text other than the Qur'an, even if divine authority was claimed for it. God has rendered the Qur'an so complete that it contains the entire

*For the various senses in which the word *sunnah* is being used in this translation, see the entry for "Sunnah" in the Glossary of Terms.

Introduction

Islamic religion. It is the Qur'an that provides the explication of everything, while the Prophet's example provides a comprehensive demonstration of how to apply everything taught in the Qur'an.

The Messenger of God was determined not to allow believers' minds and hearts to be occupied by anything that might set itself up as a rival to the Qur'an, or to let their attention be diverted by things far less worthy. Consequently, he warned the Muslim community against writing down, or concerning themselves with, anything but the Qur'an alone.

However, once the Sunnah had been collected, the Muslim community did, in fact, neglect the Qur'an in favor of narrations of what the Prophet had done and said on the pretext that such narratives "contained" the Qur'an. They then abandoned the Sunnah narratives in favor of Islamic jurisprudence on the pretext that Islamic juristic texts tacitly included both the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

In sum, I hope this book will provide answers to the troublesome questions that so frequently arouse controversy or disagreement among those who concern themselves with the study of the Prophetic Sunnah and Islamic tradition.

I

Prophethood and the Prophet's Duties

[FIRST]

The Prophet as Messenger and Human Being

THE FINAL message of God to humankind encompasses the experiences of all previous prophets combined. It provides an overview of the history of the divine messengers with their peoples, some of whom accepted their message, and others of whom rejected it. The Qur'an presents us with many of these encounters and deals with the differences, both overarching and minute, between prophethood and divinity lest the new community of faith repeat the errors of former nations who had lost the ability to distinguish between prophethood and apostleship on one hand, and lordship and divinity on the other, as well as between human free will and divine ordainment. The Qur'an emphasizes the humanity of the Apostle and the need to obey whatever commands he brought from God. The Apostle thus warned people against revering him excessively. He said such things as, "I am a mere human being, who forgets just as you do," "I was born of a woman who eats jerked meat," and, "Do not turn my grave into the site of yearly religious rites or celebrations (*lā tattakhidhū qabrī ʿīd*). At the same time, the Prophet's followers were forbidden, for example, to raise their voices over his (cf. *Sūrah al-Hujurāt*, 49:2).

At one point the Muslim community was in a state of such discord that its members ran the gamut of extremes in their approach to the Prophet. Among the Bedouin Arabs there were those who thought of him as nothing but a tribal chief. Hence, they had no hesitations about

calling him by name without preceding it with the title “Prophet” and following it with the prayer, *Ṣallā Allāhu ‘Alayhi wa Sallam*, “may God’s blessings and peace be upon him,” while others in the community went so far as to ascribe to him attributes of lordship and divinity.

The Concept of “Prophet”

The Arabic words for prophet (*nabī*) and prophethood (*nubuwwah*) are derived from the trilateral root *n-b-ʿ*, meaning to be elevated, high or raised. Hence, the *nabī*, or prophet, might be likened to an elevated rock escarpment which serves as a landmark or guide for travelers. The *nabī* is also one who has informed (*anbaʿa*) others about God, the Arabic noun *nabaʿ* referring to a piece of news or information about an individual of high standing. Al-Iṣfahānī wrote that the word “*nubuwwah* refers to a site raised above the surrounding area.” Grammatically speaking, the noun *nabī* might be found in the form of the active participle *munbīʿ*, referring to someone who brings tidings about God, or a passive participle *munbaʿ minhu*, referring to someone from whom the tidings have gone out. However, the term *nabī*, with a doubled *ī* sound at the end, is the most commonly used.

Among Jews and Christians, the prophet is an inspired individual who informs others about the realm of the unseen. In ancient Hebrew the word for prophet was used to refer to someone who spoke of legal matters. Among Muslims, the term *nabī* refers to someone to whom God has given a revelation; if this individual is commanded to communicate the revelation to others, he is referred to as a *rasūl*, that is, an apostle or messenger. Hence, every apostle or messenger is also a prophet; every *rasūl* is also a *nabī*. *Sūrah al-Aʿrāf* speaks of those “who believe in Our messages, those who shall follow the [last] Apostle, the unlettered Prophet whom they shall find described in the Torah that is with them, and [later on] in the Gospel” (7:156-157). We read in *Sūrah Āl ʿImrān*: “And Muhammad is only an apostle (*rasūl*); all the [other] apostles (*ruṣūl*) have passed away before him” (3:144). In *Sūrah al-Anʿām*, by contrast, the word *ruṣūl* refers both to angels and human beings: “And We send [Our] message-bearers only as heralds of glad tidings and as warners...” (6:48).

The Concept of “Apostle”

The Arabic word for apostle – *rasūl* – is derived from the verb *arsala*, meaning to send. The verb *arsala* is used in a negative context in *Sūrah Maryam*, where it is used to refer to God’s “letting loose” satanic forces against those who willfully disbelieve: “Are you not aware that We have let loose (*arsalnā*) all [manner of] satanic forces upon those who deny the truth... (19:83)?” The difference between God’s sending (*irsāl*) of His prophets and His letting loose (also *irsāl*) of satanic forces against His enemies is that in the first case, He is sending His prophets to warn others of judgment to come. The singular of apostle, *rasūl*, is found in *Sūrah al-Tawbah* – “Indeed, there has come unto you [O mankind] an Apostle (*rasūl*) from among yourselves (9:128)” – and *Sūrah al-Shu‘arā’*, where the singular form, *rasūl*, is used to refer both to Moses and Aaron together (26:16). The plural form, *ruṣūl*, is used to refer sometimes to angels, and sometimes to prophets: “[Whereupon the angels] said: ‘O Lot! Behold, we are messengers (*ruṣūl*) from your Sustainer!’” (*Sūrah Hūd*, 11:81). In *Āl ‘Imrān* we read: “And Muhammad is only an apostle (*rasūl*); all the [other] apostles (*ruṣūl*) have passed away before him” (3:144). In *Sūrah al-An‘ām*, by contrast, the word *ruṣūl* refers to both angels and human beings: “And We send [Our] message-bearers (*ruṣūl*) only as heralds of good tidings and as warners” (6:48). The word *arsala* may, moreover, refer to the sending of something desirable, such as life-giving rain (*Sūrah Nūḥ*, 71:11), or to something undesirable, such as divine chastisement (*Sūrah al-Dhāriyāt*, 51:33).

The Difference Between Prophethood and Apostleship

The Qur’an draws a distinction between prophet and apostle, or messenger. Both the prophet and the apostle have received a message revealed by God. However, the message that has been revealed to an apostle (*rasūl*) is legislative in nature, whereas the revelation given to the prophet (*nabī*) contains no new legislation. Rather, the prophet is subordinate to and follows the legislation brought by the apostle who preceded him. Both prophet and apostle are held accountable before God for communicating the revelations they have been given and for inviting their people to follow the messages they have brought. The

function or duty of the apostle is to recite the message he has received and to communicate to others whatever God has revealed to him by way of legal commands. As we read in *Sūrah al-Nūr*:

Say: "Pay heed unto God, and pay heed unto the Apostle." And if you turn away [from the Apostle, know that] he will have to answer only for whatever he has been charged with, and you, for what you have been charged with; but if you pay heed unto him, you will be on the right way. Withal, the Apostle is not bound to do more than clearly deliver the message [entrusted to him]. (24:54)

As for the function of the prophet, or *nabī*, it is to teach and lead others by calling upon them to follow the message brought by the apostle who came before him. Prophethood entails a pedagogical mission; hence, a prophet is, as we have seen, subordinate to the apostle who preceded him. This meaning is illustrated in the story of Moses and Aaron. Speaking of Moses, God says, "We granted unto him his brother Aaron, to be a prophet [by his side]..." (*Sūrah Maryam*, 19:53). Hence, Aaron was a prophet; at the same time, however, God sent him with Moses to Pharaoh as Moses' source of support; as such, he supported an apostle as well. The difference between the two brothers was that Moses had been given a divinely inspired message, whereas Aaron had not. Rather, he was in the service of the message revealed to Moses. Similarly, the other prophets sent to the children of Israel were subordinate to the message that had been revealed to Moses rather than being bearers of new legislation from God. They were given commands and instructions in response to which they were to guide others on the basis of Moses's message. The only exception to this was Jesus, to whom himself was revealed a message from God. As such, he was an apostle, and was granted divine protection from being harmed by others.

In this connection, the Qur'an draws another distinction between the prophet and the apostle based on the notion of what is termed in Arabic *ʿiṣmah*, which might be rendered "divine protection." Prophets are not granted such protection. Rather, like all other human beings, some of them have been killed. Nor are they granted divine protection from human failings and foibles such as error, forgetfulness, and

falling into disobedience. The prophet, being a knower of God, fortifies himself against lying and other acts of disobedience by the power of his human will. In other words, it is a self-protection that all people are called upon to engage in. As God commands believers, “And hold fast (*waṭaṣimū*), all together, unto the bond with God” (*Āl ‘Imrān*, 3:103). The Arabic word used in the command to “hold fast,” that is, *iṭaṣimū*, is derived from the verb *‘aṣama*, which means to preserve, guard, defend, or render immune. Hence, believers are being exhorted to guard themselves against the forces of disunity by clinging to God’s “rope.”

As for the *‘iṣmah*, or the protection afforded an apostle, it is marked by two aspects. The first is protection from being killed, the purpose being to enable the apostle to complete his mission. The second aspect of the *‘iṣmah* enjoyed by an apostle is protection against error when proclaiming the words of the revealed message. The revelation is thus preserved both in the memory of the apostle and in the manner in which it is uttered so that there will be no error in the process of transmitting it to others. When an apostle finishes transmitting to others the message with which he has been entrusted, his role as apostle comes to an end and his role as prophet begins. Given the fact that the apostle is the first person to have received the message newly revealed and, therefore, the first one to be held accountable for responding to it, his role as prophet is to act on the revealed message, teach it to others, and call on them to accept and apply it themselves.

Prophethood did nothing to negate the prophet’s humanity. Rather, it accorded him the role of scholar and teacher. Nor, when a prophet became an apostle, did this negate his humanity or his task as a prophet. Rather, maintaining his full humanity and his Prophetic role, he took on the role of apostle as well, saying at God’s command, “I am but a mortal man like all of you” (*Sūrah al-Kahf*, 18:110). Moreover, since prophethood confers the status of teacher, and since prophets are the most illustrious of scholars, then prophets are the most qualified of all to engage in interpretation (*ijtihād*) of the divine message. The prophet engages in *ijtihād* when teaching, inferring rulings and glean- ing information from the divinely given message, and inviting others to embrace and practice it. If, on the other hand, he is [also] an apostle, he

uses the message that has been revealed to him. Hence, given these three distinctions between a prophet and an apostle with respect to the message given, the kind of protection afforded, and the practice of *ijtihad*, it is generally agreed that an apostle is a prophet to whom divine legislation has been revealed, and that a prophet is subordinate to an apostle, hence the principle that “every apostle is a prophet, but not every prophet is an apostle.”

One does not become a prophet through some acquired experience or accomplishments. Rather, one becomes a prophet by being chosen by God for this role. It is a role that involves one in acquiring and imparting knowledge, leadership, and calling others to embrace the divine message. Whatever suffering an ordinary human being might endure, may be endured by a prophet as well, and whatever immunity to imperfection and sin a prophet enjoys, he enjoys by dint of his own will and effort. As a scholar, moreover, the prophet is entitled to engage in *ijtihad*.

As for the apostle, his status is that of someone who has been commissioned to deliver God’s message to people; he has been commanded to do nothing but recite and deliver the message. He has no right to offer his own interpretations of the message’s content as delivered. The apostle enjoys divine protection from losing or forgetting any of the message; he is given the ability to utter the message perfectly, and is protected from being killed in order that he might complete his mission.

Based on the foregoing, we may conclude that the status of prophethood is linked to the person of the prophet himself. Hence, the station of prophethood comes to an end upon the death of the prophet as happened in the case of the prophet Aaron, whereas the station of apostleship is linked not to the person of the apostle, but, rather, to the message he has been given. Hence, if an apostle should die, this has no effect on the message he has brought; this is illustrated in the fact that after Moses’ death, the Torah that had been revealed to him lived on. Prophethood is tied to time and place, while apostleship is universal and ongoing after the death of the individual who fulfilled this role. Given this distinction, it may be said that Muhammad’s prophetic mission was to the Arabs, while his apostolic mission is for all people

everywhere. As God declares, “Say [O Muhammad]: ‘O mankind! Verily, I am an apostle of God to all of you’” (*Sūrah al-Aʿrāf*, 7:158). And in fact, the message brought by the Prophet Muhammad as embodied in the Qurʾan continues to spread among people all over the world. Contrast this with the hadiths, or narratives of the Prophet’s words and actions, many of which have been, and continue to be, the subject of heated discussion and disagreement among Muslims. When the process of revealing the religion of Islam, which had begun in the days of Noah and continued through Abraham, Moses and Jesus, reached completion with the Prophet Muhammad, may God’s blessings and peace be upon them all, this meant of necessity that there would be no more need for prophets. Instead, the completed, final message has continued to be conveyed from one generation to the next via scholars, each of whom fulfills the role of prophet in his or her generation. Given the knowledge and means at their disposal, such scholars teach people, call them to truth and justice, and derive relevant rulings from the divinely revealed message in order to provide remedies and solutions to newly arising issues and problems in the life of society.

All speech addressed to a prophet, whether explicitly or implicitly, is pedagogical and instructional in nature, its purpose being to guide people to a better way and to the best possible solutions given their current circumstances. It is not, however, new legislation. When we encounter discourse that begins with the imperative, “Say...,” we need to examine the content that follows. If it contains legal rulings such as those we find, for example, in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:222, which deals with marital relations when the wife is menstruating, then the person addressed with the imperative “Say” is the Messenger of God in his role as apostle. If, however, the text is simply instructional, such as, “Say: ‘He is the One God....’” (*Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ*, 112:1), then he is being addressed in his role as prophet. If the discourse contains the word “apostle” (*rasūl*) explicitly and the text is related to legal rulings or obedience to God, then the discourse is addressed to the Messenger of God in his role as apostle, whereas if it has to do with instructions or repetition following an act of obedience to God, then it is directed to him in his role as prophet.

Prior to being chosen by God, no one knows that he will become a prophet or an apostle. He has no foreknowledge of this event, nor would such a person seek out such a calling. Rather, “[In His Almighty-ness,] God chooses message-bearers from among the angels as well as from among men. But, behold, God [alone] is All-Hearing, All-Seeing [whereas their knowledge is limited]” (*Sūrah al-Ḥajj*, 22:75; see *Sūrah al-An‘ām*, 6:124). It is essential that we understand the concepts of prophethood and apostlehood as they are set forth in the Qur’an itself, and not as some present them based on their own whims and fancies.

[SECOND]

Prophets in the Qur’an

The Qur’an clears the prophets who came to the children of Israel of the false accusations that have been leveled against them, and stresses their full humanity:

For [even] before your time, [O Muhammad,] We never sent [as Our apostles] any but [mortal] men, whom We inspired – hence, [tell the deniers of the truth,] “If you do not know this, ask the followers of earlier revelation” and neither did We endow them with bodies that could dispense with food, nor were they immortal. (*Sūrah al-Anbiyā’*, 21:7-8)

The Qur’an sets forth the broad outlines of how to view and respond to the prophets, whose stories as told in the Qur’an provide systematic foundations for defining the contours of the human societies with which the prophets dealt in a variety of time periods. The Prophet is quoted in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* as having described the “prophetic structure” of societies in the words:

The relationship between me and the prophets who preceded me might be likened to a man who built a house. The house was well-made and beautiful except for the fact that it was missing a brick in one corner. People walked around the house and marveled, saying, “Why was this brick left out?” I am that brick. I am the seal of the prophets.

Both the Qur’an and the Sunnah affirm the infallibility (*‘iṣmah*) of

the prophets in the sense that no true prophet would be capable of committing a major sin. After all, in order for them to fulfill the purpose for which they were sent, the prophets must be worthy examples to emulate. They must be above any action that would call their integrity or their message into question, and be fortified against the possibility of disobeying God by violating the revelation given to them.

*The Relationship Between the Prophet Muhammad
and the Prophets Who Preceded Him*

The Qur'an sums up the relationship between the Prophet Muhammad and the prophets who preceded them in the words, "Verily [O you who believe in Me,] this community of yours is one single community, since I am the Sustainer of you all: worship, then, Me [alone]" (*Sūrah al-Anbiyā'*, 21:92). God's prophets make up "a single community" with respect to their messages, the source from which these messages have come, their call for adherence to God-given ideals and self-purification, and their call to lay the foundations of human civilization on Earth. The Qur'an sets forth the points of commonality and difference among the prophets and messengers; similarly, it shows the constants and variables in the messages they brought. Specifically, the Qur'an stresses four important dimensions: (1) doctrine, (2) human values and morals, (3) divinely revealed law, and (4) human interactions in society. As for detailed and newly formulated laws, these differ from one society to the next based on variables of time and place.

*The Acts of Worship Engaged in by the Prophet
Before he Received His Divine Calling*

Were the acts of worship engaged in by the Prophet before and after he received his divine calling based on the laws and traditions adhered to by those who had received revelation before his time? Scholars of the fundamentals of Islamic jurisprudence may be divided into three categories based on their answer to this question. One group of scholars denies that the Prophet worshipped in accordance with the rites of those who had come before him. A second group affirms that he did worship in accordance with former practices. And a third group expresses no opinion on the matter.

The difficulty here results from a faulty understanding of the Qur’anic context. Those belonging to the second group cite *Sūrah al-An‘ām*, where God commands the Prophet to “follow the guidance” of those “whom God has guided” (6:90). They also cite *Sūrah al-Nahl*, where God says, “We have inspired you, [O Muhammad, with this message:] ‘Follow the creed of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false, and was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God’” (16:123), as well as other Qur’anic passages which affirm the oneness of the sources in the monotheistic tradition with respect to faith in God alone, worship, values and morals. Through this affirmation of oneness, such scholars have argued that if Jews and Christians truly believe in the divine revelation that preceded Islam, then they are obliged to accept the guidance and light brought in the Qur’an, since they are essentially the same guidance and light that were brought by previous revelations. As for divinely inspired legislation, it will differ from one prophet to the next, but has been crowned at last by the message of compassion and alleviation brought by the Prophet Muhammad. As we read in *Sūrah al-A‘raf* (7:158):

Say, [O Muhammad]: “O mankind! Verily, I am an apostle of God to all of you, [sent by Him] unto Whom the dominion over the heavens and the earth belongs! There is no deity save Him; He [alone] grants life and deals death!” Believe, then, in God and His Apostle – the unlettered Prophet who believes in God and His words – and follow him, so that you might find guidance!

Hence, we may say that the divine message revealed to all apostles and prophets is founded upon specific pillars, which are: the oneness of God, the full humanity of the prophets and the truth of their messages, and the command given to all prophets to follow the message revealed to them.

[THIRD]

The Tasks Assigned to the Prophets

God has assigned His prophets and apostles tasks and responsibilities which they must carry out precisely as given. The Qur’an was revealed

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in order to clarify what these tasks are. It cites the examples of bygone religious communities whose perceptions of who their prophets were had become distorted, and warns against falling into the same errors into which they once fell. The Qur'an stresses the full humanity, and sinlessness, of all God's messengers with a clarification of the meaning of the miracles they performed. It emphasizes the finite nature of the prophets' human capacities, reminding its readers that whatever signs these messengers and prophets performed were the doing of God alone, Who has no partner, and Who granted them these miracles in order to confirm the truth of their messages:

Say thou, [O Prophet:] "I am but a mortal like you. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One God: go, then, straight towards Him and seek His forgiveness!" And woe unto those who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him. (*Sūrah Fuṣṣilat*, 41:6)

The revelations given to earlier prophets took the form of commands to adhere to the rulings that had been revealed to them. They were to exhort their peoples and show them how to practice the revealed teachings, thus applying what might be termed "the jurisprudence of piety." Their lived examples were not an end in themselves, but were, rather, an extension of the revelations they had been given. Hence, as the Torah relates concerning Moses, Aaron and all other prophets sent to the children of Israel, these individuals would inform the people of what was being revealed to them. Then they would exhort them to act on it and warn them against violating it.

[FOURTH]

The Tasks Assigned to the Seal of the Prophets

Task Number 1: Tilāwah (recitation, or "following" the revealed message)

God commanded his Prophet to recite or convey the Qur'an. Thus, we are told in *Sūrah Āl 'Imrān* that "Indeed, God bestowed a favor upon the believers when he raised up in their midst an apostle from among themselves, to convey His messages unto them (*yatlū 'alayhim āyātihī*),

and to cause them to grow in purity, and to impart unto them the divine writ as well as wisdom..." (3:164). Another meaning of the Arabic word *yatlū*, often rendered as "recite" or "chant," is to follow or imitate. God says, "Consider the sun and its radiant brightness, and the moon as it reflects the sun!" (*Sūrah al-Shams*, 91:1-2). A more literal translation of the phrase rendered "reflects the sun" (*wa al-qamari idhā talāhā*) would be "as it [the moon] follows it [the sun]." The moon derives light from the sun, and in this sense it is the sun's "follower" or "successor."

God asks rhetorically, "And what of him who stands upon a clear sign from his Lord, and a witness from Him recites it...?" (*yatlūhu*) (*Sūrah Hūd*, 11:17, A.J. Arberry). In this context, the verb *yatlū* might also be understood to mean "acts on the basis thereof." Hence, the recitation – *tilāwah* – of God's revelations may mean not only to recite them, but to follow them in the sense of acting on the commands, prohibitions, and exhortations they contain. Its meaning also includes the notion of conveying from on high, as when God states, "This message do We convey (*natlūhu*) unto you" (*Sūrah Āl 'Imrān*, 3:58).

Task Number 2: Tablīgh (announcement, declaration)

The verb *balagha*, from which the intensified verb *ballagha* (verbal noun, *tablīgh*) is derived, means to reach one's final or intended destination, whether in a geographical, temporal, or metaphorical sense.

We read in *Sūrah al-Nūr*: "Withal, the Apostle is not bound to do more than clearly deliver the message (*al-balāgh al-mubīn*)" (24:54). The Qur'anic phrase *al-balāgh al-mubīn* intimates that when apostles deliver God's message, they deliver it in its totality and enable people to comprehend it fully in the sense of applying it properly, setting it up as the model they emulate, instructing others in it, and seeking self-purification.

Task Number 3: Bayān (explication)

The purpose for explicating the Qur'an is to prevent or, at least, to reduce disagreements among people over how to understand the Qur'an's message. God says to the Apostle, "And upon you [too] have We bestowed from on high this reminder, so that you might make clear

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(*li tubayyina*) unto mankind all that has ever been thus bestowed upon them...” (*Sūrah al-Naḥl*, 16:44). The process of making the revelation clear takes place through words, actions, and the act of approving this or that idea or action. God declares:

O people of the Book! Now there has come unto you Our Apostle, making clear (*yubayyinu*) unto you much of what you have been concealing [from yourselves] of the Book, and pardoning much. Now there has come unto you from God a light, and a clear divine writ. (*Sūrah al-Mā'idah*, 5:15)

The act of clarifying or making clear might address different levels of meaning. On a more general level, it might address concepts such as lordship, divinity, and the divine attributes. On a more specific level it might address itself to issues of belief, doctrine, law and rites of worship, all of which are areas in which people need clarification. Another area where clarification is called for has to do with what we mean when we say that the Qur'an determines what is true in earlier revelations, or that it confirms the truth of whatever still remains of them (cf. *Sūrah al-Mā'idah*, 5:48), bearing in mind that through his lived example, the Prophet provided a practical model for how to preserve the best and truest of what the earlier revelations contain.

Consequently, God has untiringly preserved His final revelation for His exalted name alone. In *Sūrah al-Qiyāmah* God says to the Prophet:

Move not your tongue in haste, [repeating the words of the revelation:] for, behold, it is for Us to gather it [in your heart,] and to cause it to be read [as it ought to be read]. Thus, when We recite it, follow you its wording [with all your mind]: and then, behold, it will be for Us to make its meaning clear (*bayānuhu*). (75:16-19)

In another verse God declares, “Behold, it is We Ourselves who have bestowed from on high, step by step, this reminder, and, behold, it is We who shall truly guard it [from all corruption]” (*Sūrah al-Hijr*, 15:9). Hence, just as God gave no one but Himself a part in sending down the revelation from high, neither does He give anyone else a part in preserving the revelation, reciting it to His final Prophet, explaining the meanings of its unequivocal verses, “gathering” it in the Prophet’s

heart and causing him to recite it in such a way that he is in no danger of forgetting any of it, then clarifying it in such a way that it, in turn, can serve to clarify everything else. In this way, the various authoritative references for human beings have been united in the Qur'an, which is the final revelation given to the Seal of the Prophets in a sacred land. Therefore, the Qur'an's authority to validate or invalidate other scriptures is absolute. Similarly, the Qur'an stands in judgment over the guidance brought in the Sunnah of the Prophet. This means that the Qur'an removes all the distortion and falsification to which the heritage brought by previous prophets had been subjected. It also corrects uninformed interpretations by the ignorant and self-deluded, thereby presenting the message anew in a true, purified form.

Task Number 4: Nuṣḥ (proffering sound advice)

The Qur'an relates that the Prophet Hūd once said, "O my people! There is no weak-mindedness in me, but I am an apostle from the Sustainer of all the worlds. I am delivering unto you (*uballighukum*) my Sustainer's messages and advising you truly and well" (*Sūrah al-A'rāf*, 7:67-68). The phrase rendered here as "advising you truly and well" might also be rendered, "and I am to you a faithful advisor" (*wa anā lakum nāṣihun amīn*). The task of providing trustworthy advice (*al-nuṣḥ*) follows that of delivering the message (*al-tablīgh*), since the advice proffered is based on the message that has been delivered. The Qur'anic concept of *nuṣḥ* encompasses a number of actions, one of which is to recommend behavior which, if the person being advised engages in it, will benefit him or her. It is understood here, of course, that the person offering the advice wants nothing but the best for the person he or she is advising.

Task Number 5: Ta'limuhum al-kitāba wa al-ḥikmah (teaching them the Book and wisdom)

We read in *Sūrah al-Jum'ah*: "He it is who has sent unto the unlettered people an apostle from among themselves, to convey unto them (*yatlū 'alayhim*) His messages, and to cause them to grow in purity, and to impart unto them (*wa yu'allimuhum*) the divine writ (*al-kitāb*) as well as wisdom (*wa al-ḥikmah*) – whereas before that they were indeed, most obviously, lost in error" (62:2).

“Wisdom” (*al-ḥikmah*) is a broad concept that encompasses everything from the laws of the cosmos to human knowledge and discoveries. Once we learn of such things, we become able to combine a reading of the divine writ – written revelation – and wisdom as it manifests itself all around us. The Prophet taught his Companions how to benefit from the wisdom and knowledge God has deposited in the world so that they could learn to live in harmony with the creation rather than combating it or disregarding it in ignorance.

Task Number 6: Tazkiyat nufūs al-nāsi wa‘uqūlihim (purifying people’s hearts and minds)

In the verse quoted above we read about the Prophet’s task of causing people “to grow in purity” (*yuzakkīhim*) (62:2).

Task Number 7: Ittibā‘ (teaching them to follow)

The verb *ittaba‘a* (verbal noun, *ittibā‘*) means to follow someone or to walk in his or her footsteps. God declares that “those who follow My guidance (*man tabi‘a hudāyā*) need have no fear, and neither shall they grieve” (*Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:38). The act of following spoken of here is similar to that of imitating when it relates to another person. However, unlike imitation, the following spoken of here is based on understanding and evidence. Hence, when one follows a godly individual, one does so based on the soundness of this person’s behavior and arguments. *Sūrah al-Baqarah* (2:120) and other Qur’anic passages highlight the difference between following based on understanding and knowledge, and following based on mere whim. They analyze the outcomes of these disparate ways of following so as to make it easier for us to make the right choices. Sound “following” is based on reliable guidance and knowledge, not on conjecture and caprice. As God says on the lips of the Prophet Abraham, “O my father! Behold, there has indeed come to me [a ray] of knowledge such as has never yet come unto you. Follow me, then; I shall guide you onto a perfect way” (*Sūrah Maryam*, 19:43). God commanded His apostle to follow the revelation that had been sent down to him, saying, “Follow you what has been revealed unto you by your Sustainer” (*Sūrah al-An‘ām*, 6:106). Similarly, He commanded those who had believed in the Apostle to follow him: “Say

[O Prophet]: ‘If you love God, follow me, [and] God will love you and forgive you your sins; for God is Much-Forgiving, a dispenser of grace’” (*Sūrah Āl ‘Imrān*, 3:31).

Task Number 8: Ta‘līmuhum al-iqtidā’ bihi (teaching others to imitate him)

God commanded the Prophet to imitate (*iqtadib*) those who had been guided before him (*Sūrah al-An‘ām*, 6:90). The act of imitation in this context consists of following a leader’s way of dealing with proofs and evidence, be this leader a prophet, a proponent of virtue, or whatever else.

Task Number 9: Ta‘līmuhum al-ihtidā’ bi al-hadī (teaching others to be guided by truth)

The process of being guided, or finding guidance, has to do with what we seek or aspire to and the choices we make in relation to earthly or spiritual matters. God “has set up for you the stars so that you might be guided by them in the midst of the deep darkness of land and sea” (*Sūrah al-An‘ām*, 6:97). And, speaking to the Prophet, God said:

Say [O Prophet]: “O mankind! The truth from your Sustainer has now come unto you. Whoever, therefore, chooses to follow the right path, follows it but for his own good; and whoever chooses to go astray, goes but astray to his own hurt. And I am not responsible for your conduct.” (*Sūrah Yūnus*, 10:108)

God’s guidance of human beings is of four types. The first is the type of guidance given to every morally accountable human being by way of reason and necessary knowledge and information. As Moses stated to Pharaoh, “Our Sustainer is He who gives unto every thing [that exists] its true nature and form and thereupon guides it [towards its fulfillment]” (*Sūrah Ṭāhā*, 20:50). The second is the type of guidance God gives to people by calling them through one of His prophets. God said to the Prophet:

And indeed, [O Muhammad,] We did vouchsafe revelation unto Moses [as well]: so be not in doubt of [your] having met with the same [truth in the

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revelation vouchsafed to you). And [just as] We caused that [earlier revelation] to be a guidance for the children of Israel and [as] We raised among them leaders who, so long as they bore themselves with patience and had sure faith in Our messages, guided [their people] in accordance with Our behest – [so, too, shall it be with the divine writ revealed unto you, O Muhammad]. (*Sūrah al-Sajdah*, 32:23-24)

The third is the type of guidance that is provided in the form of divinely-given success. As we read in *Sūrah Muḥammad*, “It is such as these whose hearts God has sealed because they [always] followed but their own lusts, just as for those who are [willing to be] guided, He increases their [ability to follow His] guidance and causes them to grow in God-consciousness” (47:16-17). As for the fourth, it consists in guidance to Paradise in the hereafter. This is the type of guidance referred to in God’s words, “Indeed, from on high have We bestowed messages clearly showing the truth; but God guides onto a straight way [only] him that wills [to be guided]” (*Sūrah al-Nūr*, 24:46).

These four types of guidance are founded upon one another. Without the first, the second will not take place. Conversely, if the fourth takes place, this means that the preceding three types have also taken place.

No one can guide anyone else by means of anything but supplication and invitation, and by setting forth the paths that lead to truth. God told the Prophet:

And thus, too, [O Muhammad,] have We revealed unto you a life-giving message [coming] at Our behest. [Ere this message came unto you,] you did not know what revelation is, nor what faith [implies]: but [now] We have caused this [message] to be a light, whereby We guide whom We will of Our servants, and, verily, [on the strength thereof] you, too, shall guide [men] onto the straight way.” (*Sūrah al-Shūrā*, 42:52)

In a reference to the other types of guidance, God tells the Prophet, “Verily, you canst not guide aright everyone whom you love: but it is God who guides him that wills [to be guided]; and He is fully aware of all who would let themselves be guided” (*Sūrah al-Qaṣaṣ*, 28:56).

The types of guidance God withholds from wrong-doers and deniers of the truth are the third type mentioned above, that is, the

divinely given success that is granted only to those who have sought out true guidance, and the fourth type, which consists in entry into Paradise in the life to come. As we read in *Sūrah Āl ‘Imrān*, “How would God bestow His guidance upon people who have resolved to deny the truth after having attained to faith, and having borne witness that this Apostle is true, and [after] all evidence of the truth has come unto them? For, God does not guide such evildoing folk” (3:86).

Some types of guidance are beyond any human being’s power to provide, including even the Prophet himself. These are: the provision of reason, divinely given success, and entry into Paradise. As God told the Prophet, “It is not for you to make people follow the right path, since it is God [alone] Who guides whom He wills” (*Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:272). In *Sūrah al-Isrā’* we are told that “he whom God guides, he alone has found the right way; whereas for those whom He lets go astray you can never find anyone to protect them from Him” (17:97), which means that those who seek out guidance will be granted success by God and brought to Paradise. We read in *Sūrah al-Insān*: “Verily, We have shown him the way: [and it rests with him to prove himself] either grateful or ungrateful” (76:3), and in *Sūrah al-Balad*, “Have We not given him two eyes, and a tongue, and a pair of lips, and shown him the two highways [of good and evil]?” (90:10), where “the two highways” refer to what can be ascertained about good and evil through reason and the law. Speaking of people’s ability to deceive themselves through their willful choices, God warns:

...As it was He Who brought you into being in the first instance, so also [unto Him] you will return: some [of you] He will have graced with His guidance, whereas, for some a straying from the right path will have become unavoidable: for, behold, they will have taken [their own] evil impulses for their masters in preference to God, thinking all the while that they have found the right path! (*Sūrah al-A‘rāf*, 7:29-30)

As for God’s saying, “No calamity can ever befall [man] unless it be by God’s leave: hence, whoever believes in God guides his [own] heart [towards this truth]; and God has full knowledge of everything” (*Sūrah al-Taghābun*, 64:11), it is a reference to the God-given success that a person is capable of seeking. (On the subject of guidance, see also *Sūrah al-An‘ām*, 6:87, and *Sūrah al-Nisā’*, 4:68).

Task Number 10: Ta'limuhum al-ta'assī bihi (teaching them to emulate him as their model)

The Arabic word rendered “model” or “exemplar” (*uswah*) is found in only three places: “Verily, in the Apostle of God you have a good example (*uswatun ḥasanah*) for everyone who looks forward [with hope and awe] to God and the Last Day, and remembers God unceasingly” (*Sūrah al-Aḥzāb*, 33:21), “Indeed, you have had a good example (*uswatun ḥasanah*) in Abraham and those who followed him...” (*Sūrah al-Mumtaḥanah*, 60:4), and, “In them, indeed, you have a good example (*uswatun ḥasanah*) for everyone who looks forward [with hope and awe] to God and the Last Day” (*Sūrah al-Mumtaḥanah*, 60:6).

One of the ways in which to emulate the model found in the Prophet is to abide by the teachings of the Qur'an itself. Once, when asked about the Prophet's character, ʿĀ'ishah replied, “Do you not read the Qur'an? His character was embodied in the Qur'an.”

Emulation of someone whom we take as our example requires that we view this person's words and actions as all growing out of particular causes and occasions, and as being linked to rulings or precepts of some kind. This person's words and deeds must not be examined piecemeal, but in their entirety, as an overall phenomenon ordered by universal laws and principles that can be studied and analyzed so that, having placed the model's statements and actions within a larger framework, we can search for the purposes and aims behind all that this individual said and did.

Task Number 11: Al-Haymanah (the exercise of finality and supremacy)

The process or act of *haymanah* is spoken of in *Sūrah al-Mā'idah*, where God says to the Prophet, “And unto you have We vouchsafed this divine writ, setting forth the truth, confirming the truth of whatever there still remains of earlier revelations and determining what is true therein” (5:48). The phrase “determining what is true therein” is a rendering of the Arabic phrase *muḥayminan ʿalayhi*, which means to watch or guard over, to oversee, and hence to exercise supremacy or ascendancy over someone or something. This is the role the Qur'an is

described as exercising in relation to the scriptures that preceded it: determining what truth they still contain and confirming that truth. Being the final revelation, the Qur'an becomes the unified source of religious authority or governance for human beings. As such, it removes whatever distortions, falsehoods, and misinterpretations had been introduced into, or imposed on, the message brought by previous prophets as passed down from one generation to the next, and presents this message in its pristine form.

[FIFTH]

The *Āyah* (Miracle or Sign) in Previous Messages
and in the Final Message

It was necessary in the divine wisdom for the prophets to be specially chosen, since it was they who would bring God's messages of guidance and light to humankind. As God declared to the Prophet, "And, truly, We sent forth apostles before you, and We appointed for them wives and offspring" (*Sūrah al-Ra'd*, 13:38). Although the prophets are human beings from the physical standpoint, they are, from the spiritual standpoint, part of the realm of divine command prepared to receive divine inspiration and spiritual power for which they have been singled out. Concerning Jesus, God states, "And We vouchsafed unto Jesus, the son of Mary, all evidence of the truth, and strengthened him with holy inspiration" (*Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:253) and, addressing Muhammad, "trustworthy divine inspiration has alighted with it from on high upon your heart, so that you may be among those who preach in the clear Arabic tongue" (*Sūrah al-Shu'arā'*, 26:193-195). They were enabled to receive inspiration through the mediation of angels, while the human bond they shared with those around them equipped them to deliver to others what had been revealed to them. As God explains in *Sūrah al-An'ām* regarding the Prophet's opponents:

They are saying, too, "Why has not an angel [visibly] been sent down unto him?" But had We sent down an angel, all would indeed have been decided, and they would have been allowed no further respite [for repentance]. And

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[even] if We had appointed an angel as Our message-bearer, We would certainly have made him [appear as] a man... (6:8-9)

The Qur'an talks about how, in all ages, people have asked the prophet in their midst for a "sign," or *āyah*. When this request grew out of a sincere desire to find the truth, it was met with a positive response, whereas, when it was made with other motives, the prophet concerned would refuse to engage in this sort of "bargaining" with the Almighty.

A miracle, or sign, serves as a declaration by God that His servant has spoken the truth. However, it does not cause the messenger to cease being a mere human being. Nor does it abrogate the laws of nature or aim to paralyze human reason or force it into abject submission.

1. The Qur'anic Distinction Between a Miracle (Mu'jizah) and a Sign (Āyah)

It has become commonplace to use the phrase "the *miracles* of the prophets" in place of the more Qur'anic concept of "the *signs* of the prophets." The question then arises: What outcomes have resulted from this confusion? One might say that even though both "miracles" and "signs" were originally seen as evidence of, or a witness to, the veracity of the person through whom God had brought about the event in question, the confusion between the concepts of "sign" and "miracle" has entrenched an attitude of stubbornness and defiance among those prone to resist the truth. The difference between the two is actually quite significant. The stuff of "the miraculous" tends to stir up resistance and defiance among those who witness it. As for the "sign," it includes the element of miraculousness, but presents the miraculous event as a kind of evidence, the function of a "sign" being to prepare those who witness it to listen more attentively, and to be more receptive to the message and the message-bearer.

2. The Term "Miracle" (Mu'jizah): Its Definition, and its Qur'anic Usage

The Arabic term *ʿajz* conveys the sense of failure, weakness, or inability to do something; as such, it connotes the opposite of ability or strength. As Cain cried out, "Oh, woe is me! Am I then too weak (*ʿajaztu*) to do

what this raven did...?” (*Sūrah al-Mā'idah*, 5:31). Elsewhere God states, “Verily, that [reckoning] which you are promised is bound to come, and you cannot elude it (*wa mā antum bi mu^ʿjizīn*)” (*Sūrah al-An'am*, 6:134). In other words, they are unable either to slow the coming of the divine judgment for themselves, or to prevent others from following the prophets. In *Sūrah Saba'* we find another derivative of the root ^ʿ-j-z, as God speaks of “those who strive against Our messages, seeking to defeat their purpose (*mu^ʿajizīn*)” (34:5) in the mistaken belief that there is no resurrection, reward or punishment in the life to come. The same root appears in the Prophet's warning to deniers of the truth that “you cannot elude Him on earth (*wa mā antum bi mu^ʿjizīna fi al-ard*)” (*Sūrah al-Shūrā*, 42:31).

As will be clear, the Qur'anic usage of terms derived from the triliteral root ^ʿ-j-z has nothing to do with the signs, or *āyāt* brought by the prophets in support of their messages. In fact, there is nothing to indicate that the words *mu^ʿjizah* and *āyah* are synonymous. Hence, there is a need to reclarify Qur'anic concepts, such as sign, or *āyah*, and to distinguish them from non-Qur'anic ones, such as that of miracle, or *mu^ʿjizah*. There is a constellation of complementary Qur'anic concepts, the use of any one of which will evoke associations with other, complementary, terms and concepts. However, if some extraneous, non-Qur'anic concept is interpolated among them, they lose their coherence and mutual complementarity, which in turn distorts them and robs them of their meaning.

Al-Qāḍī ibn al-Bāqillānī has mentioned four conditions that must be met in order for something to be termed miraculous (*mu^ʿjiz*). These four conditions are: (1) that God alone would be capable of it; (2) that it is so out of the ordinary that it may be said to violate a law of nature; (3) that no one but a prophet would be able to manifest the likes of it; and (4) that it take place at the hands of an apostle who is challenging the people to whom he has been sent, and with the claim that it is a sign of the truth of his message.

3. *The Meaning of the Term Āyah*

The word *āyah* has been defined as a sign or signal. It may also refer to a unit or verse of the Qur'an. According to Abū Bakr, “The reason a

verse of the Qur'an is referred to as an *āyah* is that it serves as a sign that a unit of speech has ended, and that another unit of speech is beginning." It has also been suggested that the reason each verse of the Qur'an is referred to as an *āyah* is that, as a set of words from the Qur'an, it reveals God's signs and wonders. Further, the word *āyah* can refer to a lesson or moral, as when God says, "Indeed, in [the story of] Joseph and his brothers there are messages for all who search [after truth]" (*Sūrah Yūsuf*, 12:7).

4. *The Concept of Āyah in the Sayings of the Apostle*

It has been narrated on the authority of Abū Hurayrah that the Messenger of God said, "Every prophet has been given signs (*āyāt*) on the basis of which people have placed their trust in him. What I have been given is a revelation with which God has inspired me. Hence, I hope on the Day of Resurrection to be the one with the greatest number of followers." Note that he did not use the term "miracle" (*mu'jizah*); rather, he used the Qur'anic concept of "sign," or *āyah*.

5. *The Concept of Āyah in the Qur'an*

Al-İşfahānī defined *āyah* as a clear, visible sign. The term *āyah* has also been used to refer to a tall building, as when Hūd says, "Will you, in your wanton folly, build [idolatrous] altars (*āyatan*) on every height and make for yourselves mighty castles...?" (*Sūrah al-Shu'arā'*, 26: 128-129). The word *āyah* is derived from the verbal noun *al-ta'ayyī*, which is the act of settling and establishing oneself on something. The verb *ta'ayya* has also been defined more or less synonymously with the verb *arfaqa*, meaning to be useful to, or serve, or with the verb *awiya*, meaning to provide lodging for shelter for.

6. *The Meanings Associated With the Words Āyah and Āyāt in the Qur'an*

It will be necessary here to draw a distinction between an *āyah* in the sense of a structural unit of the Qur'an, and an *āyah* in its more purely logical sense. Used in the first sense, every clause in the Qur'an that conveys a ruling or a self-contained meaning would be an *āyah*, whether the linguistic unit in question constitutes an entire surah, or

chapter, of the Qur'an, or just one part or division of a surah. Alternatively, every clause separated from another by a verbal marker might be referred to as an *āyah*, on which basis we calculate the number of verses (*āyāt*), in a surah. The following are three senses of the word *āyah*:

- a) "Signs," or *āyāt* in the sense of the ongoing patterns and laws observant in the cosmos. This sense of the word is found in the passage that reads:

And among His wonders is this: He creates you out of dust, and then, lo! you become human beings ranging far and wide! And among His wonders is this: He creates for you mates out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you: in this, behold, there are messages indeed for people who think! And among his wonders is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colors: for in this, behold, there are messages indeed for all who are possessed of [innate] knowledge! And among His wonders is your sleep, at night or in daytime, as well as your [ability to go about in] quest of some of His bounties: in this, behold, there are messages indeed for people who [are willing to] listen! And among His wonders is this: He displays before you the lightning, giving rise to [both] fear and hope, and sends down water from the skies, giving life thereby to the earth after it had been lifeless: in this, behold, there are messages indeed for people who use their reason! And among His wonders is this: the skies and the earth stand firm at His behest. (*Sūrah al-Rūm*, 30:20-25)

- b) Social "signs" such as those we find in the stories of the prophets. This sense of the word may be seen in the following passage:

As God declares, "And indeed, [in times long past] We sent forth Noah unto his people, and he dwelt among them a thousand years bar fifty; and then the floods overwhelmed them while they were still lost in evildoing: but We saved him, together with all who were in the ark, which We then set up as a symbol (*āyah*) [of Our grace] for all people [to remember]. (*Sūrah al-ʿAnkabūt*, 29:14-15)

- c) The verses of the Qur'an. This sense of the word is found in *Sūrah al-Naml*, which reads, "These are messages (*āyāt*) of the Qur'an – a divine writ clear in itself and clearly showing the truth" (27:1).

7. *The Āyāt, or “Signs” of the Prophets*

In the Qur’ān the word *āyah* appears sometimes in the singular, and at other times in the plural, *āyāt*. In *Sūrah al-Mu’minūn* it is used in the singular: “And [as We exalted Moses, so, too,] We made the son of Mary and his mother a symbol (or “sign”) [of Our grace]” (23:50). The singular form, rather than the dual, is used because each of these two individuals – Jesus and his mother Mary – contributed to a single, greater “sign” through their relationship to each other. Speaking of Moses, God says, “And indeed, We gave unto Moses nine clear messages (*āyāt*)” (*Sūrah al-Isrā’*, 17:101). In *Sūrah al-A’raf*, the Prophet Ṣāliḥ speaks to the people of Thamūd, saying:

O my people! Worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him. Clear evidence of the truth has now come unto you from your Sustainer. This she-camel belonging to God shall be a token (*āyah*) for you: so leave her alone to pasture on God’s earth, and do her no harm, lest grievous chastisement befall you. (7:73)

This “token” was sent to present the people with such a clear sign that they would have no excuses before God should they fail to respond to it with faith and obedience. Again, we read in *Sūrah al-An’ām*, “Yet whenever any of their Sustainer’s messages (*āyatun min āyāti rabbihim*) comes unto them, they [who are bent on denying the truth] turn their backs upon it” (6:4), and in *Sūrah Yūnus*: “Say: ‘Consider whatever there is in the heavens and on earth!’ But of what avail could all the messages (*al-āyāt*) and all the warnings be to people who will not believe?” (10:101).

8. *Signs Intended to Inspire Fear or to Present a Challenge*

God declared:

And nothing has prevented Us from sending [this message, like the earlier ones,] with miraculous signs [in its wake], save [Our knowledge] that the people of olden times [only too often] gave the lie to them: thus, We provided for [the tribe of] Thamud the she-camel as a light-giving portent, and they sinned against it. And never did We send those signs for any other purpose than to convey a warning. (*Sūrah al-Isrā’*, 17:59)

The “signs” referred to here are those which were sent to bygone nations in order to arouse holy fear in those who witnessed them. As for the generation of people among whom the Prophet was born, God affirmed that He would not overtake them with chastisement. Rather, in dealing with these people, God limited Himself to evidence rather than inflicting on them the punishment that they had so foolishly sought to hasten (*Sūrah al-ʿAnkabūt*, 29:54).

9. *Distinguishing Features of the “Sign” of the Final Message*

The final message to humankind as it pertains to miracles (*al-muʿjizāt*) and signs (*al-āyāt*) differs from previous revealed messages in style, form and content. God caused Muhammad’s prophethood and message to be founded on knowledge and reason. By the Prophet’s day, human beings had been prepared to comprehend the Creator’s final discourse addressed to them. As such, they began realizing their capacity to draw the proper connections between the signs of the cosmos (the observed patterns and laws of nature) and the written “signs” found in the Qur’an in such a way that they were led to believe in the reality of the Unseen Source of all. God addresses the people of the Prophet’s day, saying, “Would you, perchance, ask of the Apostle who has been sent unto you what was asked aforetime of Moses? But whoever chooses to deny the [evidence of the] truth, instead of believing in it, has already strayed from the right path” (*Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:108). God’s intention for us is to further develop tools for investigation, reflection, contemplation on the expanses of the universe and its laws, and strengthening the bond between ourselves and the One who has placed the Earth and its resources at our disposal. The cosmos and its laws are miraculous signs (*āyātun muʿjizāt*) that have been manifested to human beings in order for them to contemplate their meanings on both the material and spiritual planes and, having done this, put them to use in the service of the Earth and all its inhabitants.

The sign granted to Muhammad, the last of God’s prophets, was the Qur’an. In giving this sign, God left humanity with the responsibility to discover, investigate, and reflect on the realities of the universe in successive ages. As we read in *Sūrah al-Dhāriyāt*, “on Earth there are signs (*āyātun*) [of God’s existence, visible] to all who are endowed with

inner certainty, just as [there are signsthereof] within your own selves. Can you not, then, see?” (51: 20-22). Here we have an exhortation to combine a reading of written revelation in the form of the Qur’an, and the natural revelation manifested in the universe around us.

This exhortation is found in numerous passages of the Qur’an, since it is through this “double reading” of revelation that we are empowered to fulfill our God-given responsibility as vicegerents and stewards on Earth. It is through this same double reading of revelation that we develop tools with which to reason, reflect, investigate, understand, explain, interpret, reinterpret, and put our knowledge to creative uses.

All these functions require autonomous, effective, sound reasoning abilities. The message of the Qur’an directs us to the realm of the unseen not to paralyze reason, but rather, to put our reason to work, and to help us see that the realm of the unseen is subject to the same Majestic Creator to Whom the visible world is subject and that the relationship between these two realms is precisely ordered and controlled. Hence, there is no reason for us to fear Nature, or to flee from the unknown. Rather, we are called upon to study and understand it with assistance from the “signs” of the revealed Book. As for the universe, is it not intended to dazzle or frighten us into a submission born of ignorance. Rather, it is a realm for the constructive action that lies at the heart of true stewardship.

If we confuse Qur’anic concepts with notions that are extraneous to the Qur’anic frame of reference, we endanger our ability to understand the Qur’an properly. The reason for this is that notions derived from non-Qur’anic sources or frames of reference will be laden with presuppositions or premises that differ from, and may well conflict with, the Qur’anic perspective. Hence, the interpolation of such notions into our constellation of Qur’anic concepts, which derive directly from God, will obscure and distort the Qur’anic conceptual framework. And this, in fact, is what has happened in relation to the concepts of sign (*āyah*) and miracle (*mu‘jizah*), the former of which is Qur’anic, and the latter of which is not. When scholastic theologians and Muslim philosophers replaced the phrase “the signs of the prophets” (*āyāt al-anbiyā’*) with the phrase “the miracles of the prophets” (*mu‘jizāt al-anbiyā’*), this

worked at cross purposes with the divine intent behind the concept of *āyah*, or sign, which fosters an association between manifestations of the Divine in the physical universe and its manifestations in the written revelation. Given the proper understanding of the concept of *āyah*, or sign, the finality of the Prophethood and message of Muhammad is reflected in people's ability to connect the concrete signs of God's existence and attributes in the natural world with the linguistic signs of the Divine in the Qur'an, with or without the direct presence of a prophet.

As time went on, a confusion arose between the sign that had been given to the Prophet – the Qur'an – and the miracles that had been wrought at the hands of earlier prophets such as Moses, Jesus and others. The miracles of former prophets, particularly Moses and Jesus, were observable events in the material world that were appropriate to the eras in which their associated divine messages were revealed. In many such situations, those whose hearts were hardened to God's message demanded miracles. Following the miracles' occurrence however they persisted in their unbelief and were destroyed by God, which served as a warning to others. As God states in *Sūrah al-Isrā'*, "And nothing has prevented Us from sending [this message, like the earlier ones,] with miraculous signs [in its wake], save [Our knowledge] that the people of olden times [only too often] gave the lie to them" (17:59).

Unlike earlier messages from God, the Qur'an served as an announcement of both warning and good tidings. Moreover, it was conveyed in a way that did nothing to paralyze or hinder human intellectual powers. The miraculous signs given to Moses in the time of Pharaoh, which were met with hardness of heart on the part of the children of Israel, were linked to a tightening of the divine law, as though subjection of the children of Israel to a theocracy was a substitute for the chastisement of being exterminated. This was the basis for the divine decree among the children of Israel "that if anyone slays a human being, unless it be [in punishment] for murder or for spreading corruption on earth – it shall be as though he had slain all mankind..." (*Sūrah al-Mā'idah* 5:32). Hence, such a person had to be put to death without the possibility of either pardon or the payment of bloodwit, for example.

The Qur'an draws Muslims' attention to the connection between the rejection of God's miraculous signs and subsequent divine chastisement, and it was because of this very connection that God did not grant concrete miracles such as the raising of the dead, healing the sick, multiplying food and the like to the people of Muhammad's time. As we saw in *Sūrah al-Isrā'* quoted above, "And nothing has prevented Us from sending [this message, like the earlier ones,] with miraculous signs [in its wake], save [Our knowledge] that the people of olden times [only too often] gave the lie to them" (17:59) or, like "the people of olden times," such individuals were simply looking for an excuse to reject faith in Muhammad, his message, or the afterlife. As we read in *Sūrah al-Furqān*:

And [even] before you, [O Muhammad,] We never sent as Our message-bearers any but [mortal men] who indeed ate food [like other human beings] and went about in the marketplaces: for [it is thus that] We cause you [human beings] to be a means of testing one another. Are you able to endure [this test] with patience? For [remember, O man,] your Sustainer is truly All-Seeing! (25:20)

Whenever people raised an objection to the Prophet's message, the Qur'an would refute it with a stronger argument. Thus, for example, when people complained about the Qur'an's being sent down piecemeal, the response came in *Sūrah al-Furqān*, where God declared:

Now they who are bent on denying the truth are wont to ask, "Why has not the Qur'an been bestowed on him from on high in one single revelation?" [It has been revealed] in this manner so that We might strengthen your heart thereby – for We have so arranged its component parts that they form one consistent whole, and [that] they [who deny the truth] might never taunt you with any deceptive half-truth without Our conveying to you the [full] truth and [providing you] with the best explanation. (25:32-33)

We have a plethora of verses which offer cogent arguments for the Qur'an's being the greatest and most irrefutable of all signs. However, even though no prophet or apostle had produced a sign like the Qur'an before, the people of the Prophet's day were steeped in narratives of physical miracles that had been performed by previous messengers. As a

consequence they viewed the absence of such miracles on Muhammad's part as a denigration of his message and his station. People compared him to Moses, at whose hands plagues were visited on the people of Egypt under Pharaoh and who parted the Red Sea, causing his enemies to be drowned in their pursuit of the children of Israel, and Jesus, who raised the dead and healed the sick. Of course, these mighty signs and miracles weren't enough to prevent the people of Israel from worshipping a golden calf in the wilderness not long after they crossed the Red Sea. Nor were they enough, after they saw other peoples of the land bowing down to idols, to deter them from demanding that Moses make them an idol to worship. Clearly, then, these miracles had failed to address the people's minds and hearts.

Nevertheless, narratives such as these led some people to attribute physical miracles to the Prophet Muhammad and, as a consequence, to preoccupy themselves with miracle stories rather than focusing their attention on the Qur'an. Meanwhile, they set aside the Qur'an's intellectual proof of its own message, which addresses human beings everywhere in all stages of their cultural, scientific and academic development, in favor of miracle stories attributed to the Messenger of God. This was followed by attempts to reconcile such stories with the Qur'anic verses which state unequivocally that the one and only sign, or miracle, associated with the Islamic messages is the Qur'an. All miracle accounts attributed to the Messenger of God must be judged in light of what the Qur'an has to say on this topic. Otherwise, the Muslim's mind is turned into a hotbed of superstition. The Qur'an's position on this matter is clear, and the position of Muslim scholars must conform itself to that of the Qur'an. The momentous, lasting miracle of the Qur'an was sufficient for the Messenger of God, and it should be sufficient for the Muslim community as well. And God knows best.

10. *The Final Message and its Distinguishing Features*

The Qur'an has been preserved by God Himself: in its arrangement, its style, and its uniqueness and inimitability, whereas the task of preserving earlier revealed books had been entrusted to scribes and clergy, who forgot, distorted and lost parts of their scriptures. In the Prophetic

Sunnah, we have been given a complete, integral body of literature that works in harmony with the Qur'an on the levels of explication and application, the role of the Qur'an being to confirm and "watch over" the Sunnah in the sense that it serves as the criterion on the basis of which we determine what is valid, or invalid, of the Sunnah as it has come down to us. Along with the Qur'an, the Prophetic Sunnah plays a role in shaping Islamic legislation. Rules have been set down to regulate the role the Sunnah plays in this process, which is founded upon a combination of rational evidence, secondary evidence, and evidence around which some disagreement exists. Given the comprehensive, rounded nature of this process and its ongoing universal relevance, it has rightfully survived and thrived.

CONCLUSION

The Prophet Muhammad's Sunnah is the Summation of the Examples and Experiences Left by the Prophets Before Him

The life story and example of the Prophet merit the attention of people everywhere, as they bring together the experiences and teachings of all other prophets and messengers. In him we see, for example, Noah with his patience and perseverance. We see Abraham with his struggle to find truth, his piety, and his obedience. We see Moses, his toil, and his keen concern for his people. We see Jesus, his self-denial, and his striving to ground his people in the deepest, most essential truths of their religion. For the Qur'an constitutes the substance of the divine revelation, while the Sunnah is the quintessence of the experiences of earlier prophets with their respective people and the examples they have left us. God commanded the Prophet:

Say: "I am not the first of [God's] apostles; and [like all of them,] I do not know what will be done with me or with you: for I am nothing but a plain warner." Say: "Have you given thought [to how you will fare] if this be truly [a revelation] from God and yet you deny its truth? ..." (*Sūrah al-Aḥqāf*, 46:9-10)

Seen from this perspective, the Qur'an and the Sunnah are capable of empowering worshippers from all times and places, protecting them from the attempts of Satan and his followers to bring such worshippers into the ranks of those who refuse to bow down. Partial, decontextualized readings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah are dangerous unless they are bound firmly to the universal principles and values set forth in the Qur'an and its higher purposes. The Prophetic Sunnah must be tied inextricably to the Qur'an in a way that allows for no contradiction or conflict between the two but, rather, combines them into a seamless structural unity. The preservation of the Prophet's example (Sunnah) and life story (*sīrah*) depends on the Qur'an, and everything said or written by Muslim scholars, be they earlier or later, that indicates otherwise is not worth discussing.

This work studies the position of the Sunnah in Islam and its fundamental relationship to the Qur'an. The author carefully examines the sensitive issue of the development of the oral and written traditions, the problems scholars faced despite painstaking work verifying the authenticity of reports, the character of narrators, etc. and the ever growing complexity of a body of narratives that were making the simplicity and clarity of the Prophet's life, words, and actions, a burgeoning maze of information. Taking the praiseworthy intention and effort to emulate the Prophet into account, the author nevertheless makes the case that once the Sunnah had been collected, the Muslim community began to neglect the Qur'an in favor of narrations of what the Prophet had done and said on the pretext that such narratives "contained" the Qur'an. Eventually they then abandoned the Sunnah narratives in favor of Islamic jurisprudence on the pretext that Islamic juristic texts tacitly included both the Qur'an and the Sunnah. It is with the aim of restoring the relationship between the two that this work has been written, that is, the Prophetic Sunnah must be tied inextricably to the Qur'an in a way that allows for no contradiction or conflict between the two, to avoid misapplication and abuse of hadith, and to meet the requirements and challenges of a new age.

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