



The Last Prophet, in his youth

* * *

Allah, in His mercies, has provided us with clear indicators of the status of his prophets and imams (as) through verses, miracles, their luminous examples, character, judgement and astonishing words. He has made this status apparent in them even in youth, before the assumption of their roles.

This short essay covers some of the qualities of nabi Muhammad (saw) before prophethood which suggested he was destined to play a universal and revolutionary role.

* * *

‘Leaders of society should be forbearing and patient, strong and powerful, brave and valiant, fearless and bold, and should possess a great soul.’[1]

The Beginning:

‘...forbearance, i.e. patience in the face of all calumnies, accusations, injuries and persecutions, is a precondition for the success of Divine leaders...’[2]. Men who are destined for greatness often taste the worst suffering in its course. The prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was subjected to a series of personal tragedies through which he lost almost all of his immediate family over the course of his life. His father died before he had even been born, and his mother followed when the prophet (pbuh) was only six years old. The young orphan passed into the care of his grandfather who loved him very dearly, until the time he was eight years old when his grandfather passed away too [3]. Having lost the core of his family at such an early age must have had a profound effect on the prophet’s (pbuh) character, developing within him strength and patience, courage and resolve. As every sword is forged in flame, so these early events tempered and shaped the spirit of the prophet (pbuh) in preparation for the great struggle that was to come.

Shaped by the Divine Hand:

The loss of his parents at such an early age was key to the development of the prophet’s (pbuh) character in that he was not schooled or moulded by those around him; the prophet (pbuh) had no formal education, and was unable even to read or write before his assumption of the prophetic office [4] as testified to in the Quran [5]. Although he had encounters with various educated men, the prophet of Allah (pbuh) was never in a position to learn from them. He was not shaped by men or society, but instead learnt an independence that helped, ***‘procure the means of his advancement and elevation like a self-made man so that the people may realise that the inspiration in his case is not a human inspiration...[but has] emanated from the fountain of revelation’*** [6]. This aspect of the prophet’s (pbuh) character was important indicator of his future mission in that it allowed no question of the verses revealed to him being of divine origin. This was one of the characteristics of the promised Comforter [7] of the Bible who, ***‘...shall not speak of himself, but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak.’[8]*** ***The prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was untaught by man, a perfect vessel to deliver the purest of messages.***

Compassionate & Caring:

Touched as he was by such loss of those nearest to him, the young prophet (pbuh) held a deep appreciation for the precious ties of friendship and love. The prophet (pbuh) was so visibly heartbroken when his uncle Abu Talib was to leave him for a trading expedition to Syria that the man could not bear to leave his little nephew behind [9]. The prophet Muhammad (pbuh) never forgot his duty to his foster-mother Halima, spreading his cloak beneath her feet whenever she came to visit, and helping her with as much as he could afford when she left [10]. When again touched by tragedy when both of his sons had passed away in infancy, the prophet (pbuh) asked his beloved wife Khadija to buy a young slave by the name of Zaid to console him. This boy became like a son to the prophet Muhammad (pbuh), holding such great love and respect for him that when Zaid's own family came to take him home he refused to leave the side of the prophet (pbuh), who then freed and adopted him as his son [11]. The prophet's (pbuh) sense of love and duty towards his family was so great that when Abu Talib was struggling to support his numerous children, the prophet Muhammad (pbuh) adopted his youngest cousin Ali to help relieve the burden [12]. This kindness and respect towards family and friends endeared the prophet (pbuh) greatly to all those who knew him to the point that they would follow him no matter how many obstacles stood in their way. ***Every great leader must win the hearts of those that follow him; the young prophet (pbuh) unwittingly won the hearts of many in Mecca before becoming a leader, simply through the beauty of his character.***

Rose amongst the Thorns:

The beauty of the prophet's (pbuh) character was more than remarkable considering the period in which he was born. The prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was, 'right from his childhood, known for his virtue and lofty conduct and was far removed from the prevalent vices of the day like idolatry, dishonesty, drinking, gambling, cowardice...which were the hallmarks of Meccan society'[13]. He was widely known among his society as being upright and virtuous, and was respected by Meccans for his wisdom and noble character [14]. Although surrounded by some of the worst corruption and vice, the prophet (pbuh) kept his distance from society even in youth, and rarely even played with other boys of his age, preferring solitude and meditation. Abu Talib, uncle and guardian of the Prophet (pbuh) relates, 'I never heard from him a lie, or a useless word, nor even a loud laugh'[15]. The Almighty, with His plan for the boy's future in sight, distanced the young prophet (pbuh) from all sin, preserving him from anything unlawful and doubtful [16]. The young prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was elevated far above all those in his society, holding perfect morals and conduct becoming a believer despite the lack of any long-term positive religious role model in his life. Divine providence was at work, 'right from the beginning...grooming, inspiring and educating the young Muhammad (pbuh), and finally introducing him as a model for emulation and a messenger for all mankind'[17].

Steadfast in His way:

The Prophet (pbuh) was unswerving in the pursuit of what he knew to be right. Before the first revelation, the prophet took part in an oath where the participants vowed that, 'at every act of oppression in Mecca, they would stand together as one man on the side of the oppressed against the oppressor until justice was done' [18], about which the prophet (pbuh) was narrated to have said, 'I was present ...at so excellent a pact that I would not exchange my part in it for a herd of red camels...' [19]. This aspect of the young prophet's (pbuh) character was so well known that the Meccans referred to him as *Al Amin*, the Honest, and *Al Sadiq*, the truthful, and turned to him as an impartial judge in their frequent disputes [20]. One of the most famous such incidents occurred when four chieftains were arguing over whom would set the Black Stone in its place at the Ka'bah following some repair work. Work was at a standstill, with no man willing to relinquish his claim to the great honour, until it was decided that the next person to enter the gate should settle the matter. At that moment, the prophet (pbuh) entered the precincts and all present cried, 'it is Muhammad, the honest one. We agree to his acting as the arbitrator!'. This instantaneous agreement of all parties to the judgement of the prophet (pbuh) speaks volumes of his reputation in honesty and fairness. The prophet (pbuh) settled the matter quickly and fairly, by using a piece of cloth held at each corner by one of the chiefs to bring the stone towards its place [21].

Faith:

Perhaps the greatest indicator of the future destiny of the young prophet (pbuh) was his faith. In a society where idol-worship had corrupted the majority of religious activity and humiliating and illogical superstitious rituals had been adopted by most, the prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had, *'never been near idols, let alone worshipped them'*[22]. When Buhaira the monk tested the young prophet (pbuh) by asking him to answer his questions by *Lat* and *Uzza*, the prophet (pbuh) became angry and said, ***'ask nothing in their name; verily they are my greatest enemies in the shape of two stone idols, which my people worship from excessive stupidity'***[23]. Again, when a merchant asked the prophet (pbuh) to swear by *Lat* and *Uzza*, he replied, *'I consider Lat and Uzza, whom you worship, to be the meanest and most despicable things on the face of the earth'*[24]. The prophet (pbuh) had always been a monotheist, saying *bismillah* before eating and *alhamdulillah* once finished from his youth, even though it was not a custom of the Arabs [25]. The first time the prophet (pbuh) went with his foster-brothers to pasture the sheep he became separated from them, but consoled his foster mother Halima on his return with the words, *'fear not, dear mother, God is with me'*[26]. ***The prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was, '...a born believer whose heart was free from the filth of disbelief and polytheism... his pristine purity was indicative of his future greatness, for how could people believe in him and put their trust in him if they see him prostrating before man-made objects and indulging in vices like any ordinary Arab of the day? Surely, none would have responded to his call to Islam, towards virtue and towards deliverance from oppression, and none would have believed in him if they were not sure of vouchsafing his truthfulness and honesty.'***[27]

Miraculous signs:

And as if the greatness of the young prophet's (pbuh) character and faith were not enough of an indication of his elevated status, there were a number of miracles that attested to his position as a great being and perfect messenger to the world. Even before his birth, his mother Amina was afforded the honour of having an angel guard her throughout her pregnancy, which was granted to no other mortal save Maryam, the mother of Isa (pbuh)[28]. ***The very moment of the prophet Muhammad's birth was occasioned by several miracles; every idol was reported to fall on its face, the palace of the emperor of Iran trembled until the dome cracked and 14 of its towers toppled, the sacred fires of Persia were extinguished for the first time in 1000 years, and the demons were forbidden to approach the lower heavens and driven away by arrows of meteoric fire, to name but a few'***[29]. When Muhammad (pbuh) was first adopted by Halima, she reported that, *'daily our abundance increased...every mountain and plain we passed saluted the child by who's blessing our property rapidly increased 'til we became rich'*[30]. And when the prophet (pbuh) was 2 years old the angels *Jibra'eel* and *Mika'eel* came to him in the guise of two men clothed in white. The angels opened his breast and removed a black clot from his heart, explaining that they were cleansing him from doubt and uncertainty. Some say that they were accompanied by the angels *Dardaeel*, who gave him a vision of his progeny and companions, and *Israfeel*, who gave him the distinguishing mark of the last prophet between his shoulder blades [31]. As well as miraculous events, the prophet (pbuh) had a number of astonishing characteristics, by which many scholars and religious men were able to recognise his position. Amongst these was a moon-like light that beamed from his forehead, a beautiful and lingering scent all round him, a cloud that always overshadowed him, and the fact that every rock and tree he passed bowed and saluted him [32]. ***The sight of some of these miraculous occurrences first drew the attention of religious men such as Buhaira towards the young prophet (pbuh) as he passed them*** [33].

Conclusion:

The indications that Muhammad (pbuh) was the promised Last Messenger were recognised by many scholars, monks and soothsayers before the first revelation; all of which had been forewarned of his coming in their scriptures, some of which greeted him with hostility and others with gladness. Before the time of the prophet's (pbuh) birth, a magician and astronomer named Satah recognised the celestial signs of the arrival of the prophet of Bani Hashim, then went to visit the ancestors of the prophet (pbuh) to confirm his prediction [34]. During the prophet's

(pbuh) second visit to Mecca from his time in the desert with Halima, a group of Ethiopian priests recognised him as a prophet and tried to kidnap him [35]. Perhaps most famous is the incident when the previously mentioned Christian monk Buhaira recognised Muhammad (pbuh) as a prophet when he was only twelve years old, telling Abu Talib, '*Great things are in store for this brother's son of thine*' [36]. These instances of recognition occurred through the prophet's (pbuh) childhood and into his adult life, as when Khadija bint Khuwaylid described Muhammad (pbuh) to her uncle Waraqah, who told her, '*...Muhammad is the prophet of our people. Long have I known a prophet is to be expected, and his time hath now come.*' [37]

'Muhammad was distinguished by the beauty of his person, an outward gift which is seldom despised, except by those to whom it has been refused... In the familiar offices of life, he scrupulously adhered to the grave and ceremonial politeness of his country; his respectful attention to the rich and powerful was dignified by his condescension and affability to the poorest citizen of Mecca;... his memory was capacious and retentive, his wit easy and social, his imagination sublime, his judgement clear, rapid and decisive. He possessed the courage both of thought and action;...[and] bears the stamp of an original and superior genius.' [38]

Muhammad (pbuh) was a perfect example of morals, noble character, courage and religious faith in all parts of his life, despite all the corruption prevalent in the society of his time, from which he remained elevated and immune. He bore the character and nature of a prophet for his whole life before the first revelation, and was recognised through this and the numerous traits of the promised final messenger which he possessed, that were prophesied in previous Books. Most importantly, the prophet Muhammad (pbuh) never once bowed to an idol or participated in a pagan ritual, saying, 'I always knew that what they were upon was disbelief.' [39]

Every part of the prophet's (pbuh) early life was an indicator of his great and momentous destiny.

* * *

[1] *The Message*, J. Subhani, ch.8, 'Period of Youth'

[2] *The Message*, J. Subhani, ch. 9

[3] as above, ch.7, 'Journey to Yathrib'

[4] '*The Life and Religion of Muhammad, Hiyat al Qulub*', M. B. Al-Majlisi, tr. Rev. L. J. Merrick, Ansariyan Publications – Iran, 1st ed., 1997, p86.

[5] Holy Quran, 29:47

[6] *The Message*, J. Subhani, ch.7, 'Journey to Yathrib'

[7] Holy Bible, John 16:9

[8] Holy Bible, John 16:13

[9] *The Message*, J. Subhani, ch.8, 'A Journey to Syria'

[10] as above, ch.10, 'Sentiments of his Manhood'

[11] *Muhammad, His life based on the earliest sources*, M. Lings, Millat Book Centre (India), p.38

[12] as above, p.39

[13] *Prophet Muhammad, A Brief Biography*, Al Huda Foundation, 3rd ed. (1992), p.23

[14] *Prophet Muhammad, A Brief Biography*, Al Huda Foundation, 3rd ed. (1992), p.25

[15] '*The Life and Religion of Muhammad, Hiyat al Qulub*', M. B. Al-Majlisi, tr. Rev. L. J. Merrick, Ansariyan Publications – Iran, 1st ed., (1997), pp.52-3

[16] *Prophet Muhammad, A Brief Biography*, Al Huda Foundation, 3rd ed., (1992), p.23

- [17] *Prophet Muhammad, A Brief Biography*, Al Huda Foundation, 3rd ed., (1992), p.24
- [18] *Muhammad, His life based on the earliest sources*, M. Lings, p.38
- [19] as above, p.32
- [20] *Prophet Muhammad, A Brief Biography*, Al Huda Foundation, 3rd ed., (1992), p.23
- [21] *The Message*, J. Subhani, ch.10, 'Another Weakness of Quraysh'
- [22] *Prophet Muhammad, A Brief Biography*, Al Huda Foundation, 3rd ed., (1992), p.23
- [23] '*The Life and Religion of Muhammad, Hiyat al Qulub*', M. B. Al-Majlisi, tr. Rev. L. J. Merrick, Ansariyan Publications – Iran, 1st ed., (1997), p.63
- [24] *The Message*, J. Subhani, ch.9
- [25] '*The Life and Religion of Muhammad, Hiyat al Qulub*', M. B. Al-Majlisi, tr. Rev. L. J. Merrick, Ansariyan Publications – Iran, 1st ed.,(1997), pp.52-3
- [26] '*The Life and Religion of Muhammad, Hiyat al Qulub*', M. B. Al-Majlisi, tr. Rev. L. J. Merrick, Ansariyan Publications – Iran, 1st ed., (1997), p. 51
- [27] *Prophet Muhammad, A Brief Biography*, Al Huda Foundation, 3rd ed., 1992, pp.23-4
- [28] '*The Life and Religion of Muhammad, Hiyat al Qulub*', M. B. Al-Majlisi, tr. Rev. L. J. Merrick, Ansariyan Publications – Iran, 1st ed., (1997), p.36
- [29] as above, p.35
- [30] as above, p.51
- [31] as above, p.58
- [32] as above, pp.92-3
- [33] *Muhammad, His life based on the earliest sources*, M. Lings, Millat Book Centre (India), p.29
- [34] *Prophet Muhammad, A Brief Biography*, Al Huda Foundation, 3rd ed., (1992), pp.43-45
- [35] *The Message*, J. Subhani, ch.5
- [36] *Muhammad, His life based on the earliest sources*, M. Lings, Millat Book Centre (India), p.29
- [37] *Muhammad, His life based on the earliest sources*, M. Lings, Millat Book Centre (India), p.35
- [38] *Prophet Muhammad, A Brief Biography*, Al Huda Foundation, 3rd ed., (1992), pp.82-3
- [39] *Life of the Messenger*, An-Nawawi, tr. Abu Rumaysah, Daar-us-Sunnah publications (2001), p.22