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Revelation in Islam

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The Islamic worldview, which is based primarily on the Qur'an and the hadith (i.e. traditions of the Prophet), reflects a compassionate relationship between Allah and His creation. He provided them with equal opportunity to know Him and to serve Him. This relationship is reflected in a series of revelations that were communicated to humanity throughout its history. In fact, every human being has innate knowledge (*fitrah*), which is considered a kind of revelation, about Allah's Lordship through a primordial covenant:

"When thy Lord drew forth from the children of Adam, from their loins, their progeny and made them bear witness against themselves, saying: 'Am I not your Lord?'" They answered: 'Yes, we witness'. [This] lest you should say on the Day of Judgment: "Of this we were never mindful".
Qur'an, 7: 172

In a famous hadith, Prophet Muhammad states that human beings are born into this state of *fitrah*, which is the equivalent of being a Muslim. It is one's parents, the hadith explains, that provide their children with alternative religions.

The human being is presented as a vicegerent on earth. To assume this position knowledge is required, and this knowledge was communicated to humanity through revelation. At no point in its history humanity was deprived of divine intervention and at no point it was neglected. Revelation was made available to humanity in order to lead it back to paradise. It is a kind of a divine blueprint for a successful life, the end result of which, if fulfilled, will be a return to the gardens of heaven from which the first human beings were dismissed. Humanity cannot unveil the metaphysical world through intellectual endeavor. Reason, in itself, is not equipped to answer questions pertaining to that realm. Humanity relies totally on revelation for its knowledge about the world of the unseen (*Alam Al-Ghayb*). On the other hand, reason can verify the truth validity of revelation:

"Do they not ponder on the Qur'an? Had it been from other than Allah, they would surely have found therein much discrepancy." *Qur'an, 4: 82*

Humanity was well informed and equipped spiritually to face the challenges from the very beginning. In the story of creation, Adam was explained the terms for living in paradise, and he was advised against Satan's temptations. Ultimately he succumbed and disobeyed Allah. Nevertheless, after the "fall", which reflects the fallible nature of humanity, Adam was the first human being to receive revelation on earth:

"Then learnt Adam from his Lord [certain] words and [his Lord] turned towards him; for He is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful." *Qur'an, 2: 37*

It is for this reason that Adam is considered the first Prophet of Islam. Between him and Prophet Muhammad, there are additional twenty three prophets that the Qur'an mentions by name. The names that are mentioned in the Qur'an include Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ and Muhammad (Peace be upon them). This group is considered by some scholars to have strived more than others and that they are the ones described in the Qur'an (46:35) as the "messengers of firm resolution".

Moreover, there is recognition of the existence of other prophets without their names being mentioned:

"Of some messengers We have already told thee the story; of others We have not..." Qur'an, 4: 164

The possibility of new revelation remained in existence until Prophet Muhammad received the last revelation:

"Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but [he is] the Messenger of Allah and the Seal of the Prophets: and Allah has full knowledge of all things." Qur'an, 33: 40

The Islamic worldview, therefore, maintains that there will be no more prophets or messengers and that Islam is the last universal revealed message until the Day of Judgment. There are traditions in which Prophet Muhammad confirmed the message of the previous verse that there will be no more prophets after him. In a tradition narrated in Sahih Muslim, Prophet Muhammad said:

"My likeness among the prophets is as a man who built a house skillfully and beautifully, yet he left one place without a brick in one of the corners. People who saw [the house] were fascinated. Yet, they would exclaim why this brick is not in its place? He [the Prophet] said: I am that brick; I am the Seal of the Prophets."

Bringing the line of the prophets to its completion has important implications. It means that no new revelation is possible and, as such, this last revealed message should be protected against change. Protection, in this case, is divine:

"We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it [from corruption]." Qur'an, 15: 9

Revelation covers both method and content. Regarding method, it is the indirect medium through which Allah communicates with humanity:

"It is not fitting for a human being that Allah should speak to him except through revelation, or from behind a veil, or by the sending of a Messenger to reveal, with Allah's permission, what Allah wills: for He is Most High, Most Wise." Qur'an, 42: 51

The Qur'an contains what *might* appear as exceptions to the non-direct mode of communications. One example is that of Prophet Moses. He is described in Islamic literature as Kalim-u-Allah, or the one whom Allah spoke to. Yet, this needs explanation. The origin of this title is a verse that says:

"...and Allah spoke to Moses" Qur'an, 4:164

To understand this verse, one needs to remember that, in Islamic theology, no anthropological traits can be attributed to Allah:

"...There is nothing whatever like unto Him..." Qur'an, 42: 11

Therefore, it cannot be the case that Allah spoke or listened to Moses the same way that human beings do. This would entail having hearing and talking physical organs, the way human beings have! Moses did ask Allah to see Him. Moses' request was denied, which is consistent with the non-direct mode of communication:

"When Moses came to the place appointed by Us, and His Lord addresses him. He said: "O my Lord! Show [Thyself] to me, that I may look upon Thee." Allah said: "By no means canst thou see Me [direct]"..." Qur'an, 7: 143

It is my understanding that Allah created in Moses the hearing of the words. Ibn Kathir stated in his exegesis of the Qur'an that the Mu`tazilites, Muslim rational theologians, understood this previous verse to mean that seeing Allah is neither possible in this world, nor in the Hereafter.¹ This position is contrary to that of scholars who maintain that beatific vision is possible in the Hereafter, albeit to believers only.

Revelation, therefore, is either sent to the Prophets and Messengers "directly" from Allah, or through the intermediacy of angels.

Revelation contains a message that is considered either personal or public. Religion belongs to the latter category and is revealed to humanity at large as in this verse which is addressed to Prophet Muhammad:

"We have not sent thee but as a [Messenger] to all mankind, giving them glad tidings, and warning them [against disbelief and sin], but most people know not." Qur'an, 34: 28.

An example of a personal message is that which was sent to Prophet Moses' mother at the time when the Pharaoh was killing the children of the Israelites who lived in Egypt:

"Behold! We revealed to thy mother the message: 'Throw [the child] into the chest, and throw [the chest] to the river: the river will cast him up on the bank..." Qur'an, 20: 38-39

The Islamic worldview presents divinely revealed monotheistic religion as the direct outcome of revelation. The oneness of Allah is reflected in the oneness of the truth. There is only one monotheistic belief confirming the oneness of Allah (*tawhid*) that was revealed again and again until it culminated in the final revelation to Prophet Muhammad:

"That which We have revealed to thee of the Book is the Truth, confirming what was [revealed] before it: for Allah is assuredly-with respect to His servants- Well Acquainted and Fully Observant." Qur'an, 35: 31

Therefore, the message that was revealed to Moses, Jesus and Muhammad (Peace be upon them) was the same. That all the prophets and messengers had the same monotheistic message, *tawhid*, to convey to their peoples, was reiterated in numerous verses in the Qur'an:

"Not a messenger did We send before thee without this revelation sent by Us to him: that there is no god but I: therefore worship and serve Me." Qur'an, 21: 25

To confirm the organic relationship between all originally revealed messages, Prophet Muhammad was asked to follow the footpath of previous prophets. This shows a remarkable unity in the direction humanity is invited to pursue:

"Those were the [Prophets] who received Allah's guidance. Follow the guidance they received; Say: "No reward for this do I ask you: This is but a Reminder to all the nations." Qur'an,6: 90.

Yet, the Law varied in certain aspects from one phase of revelation to another:

"To thee We sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety: so judge between them by what Allah hath revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the Truth that hath come to thee. To each among you have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If Allah so willed, He would have made you a single people, but [His plan is] to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute." Qur'an, 5: 48.

The relationship of all prophets to revelation was simply to receive and convey the message as is. They did not choose to become prophets or messengers:

"Allah chooses Messengers from angels and from men, for Allah is He who hears and sees [all things]." Qur'an, 22: 75

The original message of all revealed religions emerged from the same source. They projected the same ethos. Yet, one of the most serious problems associated with revelation is that, in the course of time, many of the followers of those prophets had the liberty to "develop" the message and at times to edit it. This is exactly the rational behind renewing the original message. Whenever a revealed message suffered from change, a new revelation was due. Therefore, the Islamic message did not contradict the original revelation that was sent to the previous prophets. In fact, belief in them and their messages is part of the Islamic creed:

"The Messenger believeth in what hath been revealed to him from his Lord, and so do the believers, each one of them believeth in Allah, His angels, His Books and His Messengers. We make no distinction [the believers say] between one and another of His Messengers..." Qur'an, 2: 285.

Furthermore, names of revealed Books are recognized in the Qur'an:

"It is He Who sent down to thee, in truth, the Book, confirming what went before it; And He sent down the Torah and the Gospel." Qur'an, 3: 3

The Book of Psalms is mentioned in another verse:

"We have sent thee Revelation, as We sent it to Noah and the Prophets after him: We sent

Revelation to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, to Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon, and to David We gave the Psalms (Zabur)." Qur'an, 4: 163

The recognition of these revealed books is the foundation for the title the "People of the Book" which is bestowed on the Jews and Christians. Such a position softens the otherness of the followers of previous revelations.

On the other hand, the Islamic worldview maintains that the previous revealed messages suffered from human editing. What the Qur'an mentions about the changes that occurred to earlier revelations is, at least in part, the *raison d'etre* for the Qur'an to be revealed.²

This means that while the Islamic worldview is in harmony with the original previous messages, it does contradict the changes that took place in text or understanding. The Qur'an, in this respect, could be considered as a critique of the modified messages. While no changes to text happened to the Qur'an itself, there were numerous groups that emerged throughout Islamic history that deviated from the original message. The factors that led to these changes include cultural influences from the Greek heritage, especially neo-Platonism, and the Judeo-Christian heritage which is known in Islamic literature as *Israeliyyat*.

The beginning of revelation to Prophet Muhammad began as very clear visions while sleeping. Here we talk about those visions that he saw before the revelation of the first verses of the Qur'an to him in the cave of Hira'. Al-Bukhari narrated a hadith in which Aysa, wife of the Prophet, said:

"The beginning of revelation to the Messenger of Allah (May Allah's peace be upon him) was vision during sleep. He would see a vision except that it comes [as clear] as the break of the day."

These visions were intended to pave the way and prepare the Prophet for his mission. The actual revelation that signaled the beginning of his career as a prophet came during one of his stays in the Cave of Hira'. Prophet Muhammad used to go often to this cave to be on his own in seclusion to meditate on the universe, with provision that would last him for few days.

The first revelation of the Qur'an came when the Prophet was forty years old. Al-Bukhari and Muslim narrated a tradition in which the archangel Gabriel came to the Prophet in the Cave of Hira' and asked him to read (i.e. Iqra'). The prophet could not read and he said so. Three times he was asked to read and he would give the same answer. Apparently, "read", was the first revealed word:

*"Read in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, who created-
Created the human being from a leech-like clot:
Read! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful,-
He Who taught [the use of] the Pen,-
Taught the human being that which he knew not..."Qur'an, 96: 1-5*

This first encounter shocked the Prophet. He went home where he found comfort in the support of his wife Khadijah who was the first to believe in him. Afterwards, there was a lull for few days without revelation, which made it difficult for the Prophet. These days were necessary for the Prophet to realize that it wasn't his spiritual endeavor or meditations that brought about revelation. He could not control when and where the next revelation would take place. Though he was afraid the first time, he was longing for the time.

The following encounter took place unexpectedly in one of the valleys of Mecca. Al-Bukhari and Muslim narrated that the Messenger of Allah (May Allah's peace be upon him) said:

"While I was walking I heard a sound coming from the sky. I raised my sight and I saw the angel, who came to me in [the cave of] Hira', sitting on a chair between heaven and earth. I was terrified and I returned [home] and said: "cover me". Then Allah Most Exalted revealed:

*"O thou wrapped up [in a mantel]!
Arise and deliver thy warning
And thy Lord do glorify!
And thy garments keep free from stain!
And all abomination shun!..." [Qur'an, 74: 1-5]
Thereafter, revelation continued uninterrupted."*

The archangel Gabriel, at times, showed up as a human being to Prophet Muhammad. Al-Bukhari narrated that Aysa (May Allah be please with her) said that Al-Harith Ibn Hisham (May Allah be please with him) asked the Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon him): O Messenger of Allah! How does revelation come to you? The Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon him) said: "Sometimes it comes to me resounding like a bell, and this [form] is the hardest for me. It separates from me when I have remembered what he said. And some times, the angel takes the shape of a man. He talks to me and I remember what he says."

Revelation of the Qur'an spread over twenty three years, thirteen in Mecca and ten after migrating to Medina. Revelation during the Meccan period focused on theological issues. It was the Medianian period that provided most of the teachings on issues of jurisprudence.

The Qur'an is the Word of Allah, and hence it is eternal. It is supra-historical despite the break down of revelation over these twenty three years. This has implications for the status of the Qur'an amongst Muslims. Indeed, the Qur'an forms the axel on which Islamic life rotates. Muslims are Book-centered and revelation continues to form the bases for legal and moral teachings.

Not only is the Qur'an considered revelation. In a hadith, Prophet Muhammad stated the following:

"Verily, I was given the Qur'an and a similar [revelation] along with it"³

This hadith describes the status of the traditions of the Prophet. His statements beyond the Qur'an are considered revealed meanings with wording coming from the Prophet. The Qur'an mentions this part of the Islamic worldview as the wisdom the Allah sent down to Prophet Muhammad:

"It is He Who has sent amongst the Unlettered a messenger from among themselves, to rehearse to them His Signs, to purify them, and to instruct them in the Book and Wisdom, -although they had been, before, in manifest error;-" Qur'an, 62: 2

Not all traditions contain revealed message. The Prophet did mention, on specific occasions, that what he said was a personal opinion. As an example, one hadith addressed issues in agriculture. Part of the hadith indicates that revelation is not the source for technical matters, or in the words of the hadith "the affairs of your world".

Endnotes

¹ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Al-Qur'an* () vol.2: p.234.

² See Qur'an, 2: 75;4: 46; 5: 13-14, 41.

³ Narrated by Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Al-Tahawi.