

Prophets as mortal human beings and the righteousness of Mary, mother of Jesus

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 1 January 2021

قَالَتْ لَهُمْ رُسُلُهُمْ إِنْ نَحْنُ إِلَّا بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُكُمْ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ يَمُنُّ عَلَىٰ مَنْ يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ ۗ وَمَا كَانَ لَنَا أَنْ
نَأْتِيَكُمْ بِسُلْطَنٍ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ ۗ وَعَلَى اللَّهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١١﴾

“Their messengers said to them: We are nothing but mortals like yourselves, but Allah bestows (His) favours on whom He pleases of His servants. And it is not for us to bring you an authority, except by Allah’s permission. And on Allah let the believers rely.” (The Quran, 14:11)

This verse refers to all the messengers sent by Allah before the Holy Prophet Muhammad and says that every one of them told his people that he was a mortal like them. In the two verses before this, it is stated that when the messengers started preaching their mission to people, they rejected the messengers and said to them: “You are nothing but mortals like us” (14:10). So in this verse 11 which I read out here, the messengers *confirmed* to their people that indeed: “We are nothing but mortals like yourselves”.

The Quran mentions in several places the objection raised by people to the fact that their messengers were mere mortals. For example, they said: “Shall a (mere) mortal guide us?” (64:6) or they said: “Has Allah raised up a mortal to be a messenger?” (17:94). About the Holy Prophet Muhammad, they said to one another: “He is nothing but a mortal like yourselves” (21:3). But the Holy Prophet Muhammad is commanded in the Quran to say to his people that, yes, this is true: “I am only a mortal like you” (18:110, 41:6).

All the requirements and limitations of human life applied to each and every messenger of God. It is stated about all messengers: “Nor did We give them bodies not eating food, nor did they live forever” (21:8). One objection raised against the Holy Prophet by his rejectors was: “What a Messenger is this? He eats food and goes

about in the markets.” (25:7) and the answer given a few verses later is as follows: “And We did not send before you any messengers but they surely ate food and went about in the markets” (25:20). Eating food stands for satisfying the needs of the body which keep it alive, and going about in markets stands for everyday human activities of all kinds. But the people among whom the messengers came wanted the messengers to possess superhuman powers, to work wonders which no human can, to have no bodily limitations of the kind which restrict all humans.

In the particular case of Jesus too, who is recognized in the Quran as a prophet and messenger, the Quran says: “The Messiah, son of Mary, was only a messenger — messengers had indeed passed away before him. And his mother was a truthful woman. They both used to eat food” (5:75). This verse was revealed to correct the wrong belief that Jesus, son of Mary, was God, which is referred to in the verses before this. Both Jesus and Mary had the physical needs which every human being has. And as it was the law of God that every messenger passed away after completing the span of his life on this earth, this verse says that the same had applied to Jesus and Mary. Earlier in this same chapter 5, the notion that Jesus, son of Mary, was God is rejected and it is stated in strong language: “Who then could control anything as against Allah when He wished to destroy the Messiah, son of Mary, and his mother and all those on the earth?” (5:17) Who could prevent God in the least from bringing an end to the life of Jesus, of Mary or of any other human being? Thus according to the Quran, Jesus and his mother Mary were subject to the same laws and limitations of human life as other human beings.

The Christian belief is that Jesus was born of a virgin, and there was no human male who made her pregnant. There may be several reasons why this belief became necessary in Christianity. One reason is connected with the concept of the original sin and its inheritance by every human being. According to this concept, Adam and Eve committed a sin, by going against a command of God not to eat the fruit of a certain tree, and as a consequence all humanity inherited from them the tendency to commit sin. So in order for Jesus to be born free of this sinful nature, as they imagined it to be,

they had to believe that he was conceived without a father. In this way, he would not be a descendant of Adam and thus not inherit the so-called sinful nature from Adam.

But this raises the point that since Mary had both a father and a mother, then if it is true that sin is inherited by all humans, she would have a sinful nature. Therefore, Jesus, being born of Mary, could inherit a sinful nature from her, even if he didn't have a father! To cover this point, they devised the belief that Mary was miraculously kept free of sin by God. The great protestant thinker Martin Luther said: "The infusion of Mary's soul was effected without original sin...From the first moment she began to live she was free from all sin." In 2005 Anglican and Roman Catholic theologians issued an agreed report stating: "In view of her vocation to be the mother of the Holy One (Luke 1:35), we can affirm together that Christ's redeeming work reached back in Mary to the depths of her being, and to her earliest beginnings. She was preserved from all stain of original sin and from the first moment of her conception."

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/beliefs/immaculateconception.shtml>

For this reason Mary's own conception, i.e., when her mother conceived her, is called the Immaculate Conception. These theologians have got into this tangle because they declared the whole of mankind as born with a nature inclined to commit sin, but then they had to make an exception for just one person: Jesus. Only he, out of all mankind of all times, would be sinless and only through him will anyone be liberated from the burden of sin. So they had to come up with the doctrine that he had no human father and his mother was miraculously free from sin, but she was only made free from sin because she was going to give birth to Jesus, and not on account of herself. So she becomes a vehicle for the birth of Jesus. That is what makes her good.

The Quran does not teach that every human being is inclined by his or her very nature, from birth, to commit sin. It says: "Certainly We created the human in the best make. Then We reduce him to the lowest of the low, except those who believe and do good; so theirs is a reward never to be cut off" (95:4-6). Being created "in the best make" is quite the opposite of being born with sin as his inheritance. It means that at his creation he has the potentialities to rise and advance, not fall. If he misbehaves, he

is reduced to the lowest of the low, lower than any animal. But those who believe and do good deeds are not lowered but they will advance and advance. Their reward is “never to be cut off” because they will never regress and go backwards.

Mary is mentioned several times in the Quran, but it presents her as a holy person in her own right. Chapter 19 is entitled *Mary*. It relates briefly the histories of several prophets. The first begins with the words: “A mention of the mercy of your Lord to His servant Zacharias” (19:2). Then we have: “And mention Abraham in the Book” (19:41), “And mention Moses in the Book” (19:51), “And mention Ishmael in the Book” (19:54), “And mention Idrīs in the Book” (19:56). In addition to the mention of these prophets, it relates the story of Mary giving birth to Jesus and that section begins with the words: “And mention Mary in the Book” (19:16). She is thus accorded an equal mention in the Quran alongside the greatest of prophets.

In chapter 3 the Quran relates her birth and early life. We are told that at Mary’s birth her mother prayed to God in these words: “I have named it Mary, and I commend her and her offspring into Your protection from the accursed devil” (3:36). This prayer clearly shows that Mary’s mother did not believe in the doctrine that humans are born with a sinful nature. She believed that God’s protection can safeguard people from being misled by the devil. Mary’s mother prayed for Mary as well as for Mary’s offspring. Her prayer shows that she was envisaging a time when Mary would marry and have children. She obviously did not have in mind that Mary would conceive a child by herself without a human husband.

The account in the Quran then tells us that Mary became an accepted one of God. She was given in the charge of Zacharias and dedicated to the service of the temple as a child. Zacharias became highly impressed by her devotion and as he was himself childless he prayed to be granted such a virtuous child. Allah accepted his prayer and granted him Yahya, or John the Baptist as he is called in the Gospels. The Quran says that Zacharias was told that this son would be “honourable and chaste and a prophet from among the good ones” (3:39). So a righteous *boy, moreover a prophet*, was granted to Zacharias to be worthy of the spiritual rank of a girl, Mary. This clearly

shows that a female can set an example and a goal which males should aspire to attain. Note that all this happened before the birth of Jesus, i.e., that highly righteous persons, one woman and one man, Mary and John the Baptist, came into this world as a result of prayer to God. This shows that people close to the time of Jesus, just before his time, could also be righteous through the mercy of God without receiving any grace from Jesus.

Yahya or John the Baptist was born after his father, seeing the righteousness of Mary, prayed for such a child for himself and his elderly wife. Jesus, of course, was born of Mary herself. So Jesus is the second man, after Yahya or John the Baptist, who owes his birth and indeed his righteousness to Mary. According to the Quran, before Mary was given the news by God of the birth of Jesus, she received the revelation: “O Mary, surely Allah has chosen you and purified you and chosen you above the women of the world. O Mary, be obedient to your Lord and humble yourself and bow down with those who bow” (3:42–43). So she held this high position in the eyes of God before she had conceived Jesus or even knew that she would conceive Jesus. It is reasonable to conclude that, although Jesus was a prophet of God and therefore he was purified by God Himself, yet his mother’s noble character and spiritual qualities must have played a vital role in the upbringing of Jesus. This answers the question who made whom righteous? Did Jesus make Mary a righteous woman and she owed her goodness to him, or was it that Mary made Jesus a righteous man and he owed his goodness to her?

بَارَكَ اللهُ لَنَا وَكُنْمُ فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعَنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-