

THE QUR'ANIC NARRATIVE OF THE PROPHETS' MISSIONS: REPOSITIONING RELIGIOUS VALUES^(*)

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ABSTRACT²

This study reviews the Qur'anic narration of Prophets' Missions to demonstrate the Qur'anic method of presenting the Islamic stance on the careers of past Prophets and turning it into an essential element of the Islamic worldview. The article deals with some questions regarding the Qur'an's treatment of prophetic narratives, these include: why does the Qur'an mention specific Prophets by name and recount their stories elaborately whereas others are only briefly spoken of or are left entirely unmentioned? What is the Qur'anic stance of key Prophet's? What are the themes and values common to Prophets' Missions? These and related questions will be answered through the review and analysis of Qur'anic accounts of Prophets' missions illustrating the particularities of each and the commonalities they share. Ultimately, and in light of the answers to these questions, I will propose the thesis that the Qur'anic discourse reconstructs the history of prophethood to present Islam as a universal religion premised upon prophetic religious values.

Keywords: *Qur'anic Narrative-Prophet – Missions - Religious Values - Islamic worldview.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The definition through which any religion presents itself largely depends on its stance towards preceding and contemporaneous religions and spiritual beliefs, be it revealed by the divine powers or developed by the human mind. The appeal of a religion continues among its followers due to the reasonableness – short of saying rationality- of its views concerning humanity and religions as well as its ability to renew its discourses vis-à-vis these religions and philosophies, which constantly evolve and change. The stance of a particular religion towards other religions becomes even more important when there is a shared history among them, such as in the case of Abrahamic religions. Judaism, Christianity and Islam overlapped and succeeded one another in time and they share several central claims regarding a number of key figures. Although the Abrahamic religions may share some general claims about these figures, they continue to debate the intricate details occasioned by the textual and social contexts of the narration of these figures by each of the successive religion; each reshaping these figures in line with its scriptural and theological repositioning. In any case, the view on Prophets and their Messages that is offered by each religion forms the core common element in the Abrahamic religions. The literature of the Jewish and Christian traditions was a rich source for several Muslim exegetes and historians who consulted the heritage of the previous traditions for sources regarding the stories of Prophets, especially details about their lives that the terse Qur'anic account did not provide. Subsequently, the detailing elements of the narration of these – once – common aspect developed in various directions and the narratives became largely distinct in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. It is evident already that the Qur'ān itself contains narratives of Prophets and their Messages that differ, if not widely diverge, from the two other religions.

This study will review the Qur'anic representation of the Messages of the Prophets and will seek to illustrate the Qur'anic method of presenting the Islamic stance on both universe and man through its own re-narration of the biographies of past Prophets, making it an integral and essential element of its worldview¹. It is already an evident fact that the discourse on Prophets and their

¹ The discussion on the function of the revelation of the Prophet Mohammed vis-à-vis the Old and New testaments, debated and variously understood as a *fulfillment*, typological or otherwise, of the previous scriptures; or as a *reiteration* or a 'cultural translation' of the previous scripture; or an *abrogation* partial or complete, has been one of the central matters of discussion in modern Islamic and Qur'anic studies. This paper is a modest contribution

messages occupies a great part of the Qur'anic corpus. This is evident from a quick overview of the semantics of the text. For example, the derivatives of the term *rusul* (messengers) used in both literal and technical sense occur more than 400 times. Likewise, derivatives of the root *n-b-w* which gives us terms like *nabī* (prophet) and *naba'* (news, message) occurs about 80 times. However, one-third of these occurrences convey general meanings, i.e. they do not refer to any specific messenger or prophet. Yet, the Qur'ān mentions – by name – twenty-five Messengers and Prophets and these are only some of the Messengers and Prophets sent by God. The Qur'ān points out that there is a large number of messengers and states that for each nation, or community, a messenger was sent. A closer look at the relevant verses shows that specific groups of messengers are frequently mentioned, i.e. those sent to the Children of Israel and those mentioned by name in *sura Al-An'ām*.¹ As far as the frequency of proper names in the Qur'ān goes, Prophet Moses comes first (136 times), followed by Abraham (69 times) and Noah (43 times). Prophet Lot stands in the fifth place (27 times) followed by Jesus (25 times), and that is not counting the other prophets that are mentioned less than 20 times. Already, this quick statistical outline of the Qur'anic mention of messengers and their messages raises some *a priori* questions: First, why does the Qur'ān mention specific Messengers by name and recount their stories whereas others are left entirely unmentioned or only their names are mentioned without any further details? Second, what is the Qur'anic stance on each Messenger in light of its narration of his message and career? Third, what are the themes shared by the calls of Messengers as the Qur'ān has revealed them? How

expressing the inner Islamic view to supplement the works of scholars like Angelika Neuwirth, John Wansbrough, Stefan Wild and Daniel Madigan to mention but a few. See Neuwirth's Two Views of History and Human Future: Qur'anic and Biblical Renderings of Divine Promises, *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, Volume 10 Issue 1, Page 1-20; "Referentiality and scripturality Sūrat al-Hijr" in Boullata, Issa J. (ed.), *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qu'ran*, Routledge, 2013; Structure and the Emergence of a Community in Andrew Rippin, Jawid Mojaddedi (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*, John Wiley & Sons, 2017; See also Wansbrough, John E. *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and composition of Islamic salvation history*. Prometheus Books, 1978; Madigan, Daniel A. *The Qur'an's self-image: writing and authority in Islam's scripture*. Princeton University Press, 2001. For general surveys of the common and received opinion on the matter see Wessels, Anton, *The Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur'an: Three Books, Two Cities, One Tale*, Eerdmans Publishing, 2013, and Peters, Francis E. *The Voice, the Word, the Books: The Sacred Scripture of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

¹ Of these prophets, 18 were mentioned only once in the Qur'ān. See: (Q6:83-86). The remaining seven Prophets and Messengers are mentioned in other verses in the Qur'ān; namely, Idrīs (Enoch), Hūd, Shu'ayb, Ṣāliḥ, Dhu-l-Kifl (Ezekiel), 'Ādam, and Muhammad.

does the Qur'ān discursively employ them to construct the religious-Islamic narrative of history and man? I will attempt to answer these questions through a review of the Qur'anic accounts of the calls of Messengers in their respective chronological order. A special reference will be made to what the Qur'ān highlights in each case to show what is specific to each and what is common to all.

There is a recurrent Qur'anic reference to the multiplicity of Messengers corresponding to the number of nations. However, the Qur'ān only mentions a few from among them, which indicates that the Qur'ān does not intend to recount the history of all Prophets and Messengers. Instead, it has other purposes to highlight pertaining to their relevance to the immediate addressees at the time of the Qur'anic revelation. These purposes are clear in many occurrences in the stories of Messengers. The most important of all is the account that is given after the enumeration of the largest number of Prophets and Messengers in one context. Here, the divine voice speaks: "Those are the ones whom **God has guided, so from their guidance take an example**" (Q7:90). In this verse, God describes them as "guided" and commands Muslims to follow their guidance. This corresponds to *sura al-Fātiḥa* (the Opening Chapter vv. 6-7) in which Muslims are ordered to supplicate the Almighty God to guide them to the "Straight Path" to which He has "guided those on whom He bestowed His favor", i.e. Prophets. It also accords with the first Qur'anic description in the beginning of the *sura al-Baqara* (Q2) that it is "guidance" for 'al-muttaqūn' (those who follow their moral conscience). Further, both the Torah and the Gospel are described as 'guidance' (cf. Q3:3-4). We have here a case of unique compatibility between the human aspiration for guidance, the prophets' designation as guidance, the Qur'ān's self-image and its representation of previous scriptures.

This compatibility in purpose will be our key to understanding the Qur'anic discourse of Messages and Messengers. It was therefore natural to specify the Prophets whose accounts emphasize the purpose of guidance at the time of Prophet Mohammed's revelation. These are the Messengers whom the addressees at the time of revelation could identify, either from their Christian and Jewish religious backgrounds (related to Biblical Prophets), or from the Arab collective memory (related to Abraham and other Prophets sent to the Arabs), or the Prophets who are known to Abrahamic religions and cultures (Adam and Noah). As for other messengers who were sent to other nations, no direct addressees were interested in their persons at the time of revelation. Therefore, the Qur'ān talked about them only generally and merely in the context of them serving the purpose of guidance as pointed out earlier. The Qur'ān talks about Prophets and Messengers as if they all are instances of one persona, who

encounter the same experience, despite the different times, nations, and peoples. In that context, the notion of historical patterns in human and collective histories is emphasized; the common core being the moral attitude towards God and man.

1. Adam and Noah: Guidance, Bestowed Favor, and Justice

The significance of guidance as an ultimate objective of the Prophets' Messages is evident in its role in underlining the proper moral position towards central existential aspects of human life. It enables humans to control their inclination to violate the universal order (*fāsād*, **corruption**) and human rights (*yasfik al-dimā'*, **blood-shedding**) which were mentioned in the two inquiries of the angels about the purpose of the creation of Adam (i.e. mankind, cf. Q2:30). The divine response to the angelic enquiry was the discourse on names and words. The mention of the beginning of human creation and the story of Adam was intertwined with the purpose of existence, the patterns that govern it, and man's moral purpose on earth. The words that Adam learnt and the moral purpose of his creation become the task put in his custody. In that, man was not destined to be left alone; the divine plan was not to leave man alone, and divine support, was present from the beginning, a matter that the angels, apparently, did not recognize. This support is manifest in two dimensions; first, the human intuitive capability to acquire knowledge, the reference to this being made in the discourse of teaching Adam all the names. The second dimension, equally symbolized by the discourse on 'words' is divine guidance.

Man became thus both tasked with the purpose that God set for him, and elected to either act independently based on his natural intuition and knowledge of good and evil, or to seek the divine guidance that accompanied him from the beginning of creation and his entry into the world of *taklif* (according to EI, "the imposition on the part of God of obligations on his creatures). God says, "We said, 'Go down from it, all of you. And when guidance comes to you from Me, whoever follows My guidance, there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve" (Q2:38). In this context, the address directed to Adam is equally applicable to the entire humanity. It bears meanings related to man's mission (as the steward over the earth). That is why we find that many Qur'anic verses begin with a general call: "O children of Adam!" in confirmation of this absolute dimension of the call of Adam, which incorporates foundational concepts recurrent in all the calls of all Messengers. The Qur'anic discourse about Adam does not refer to him personally, but to humanity as a whole. Likewise, the position of Satan towards Adam is a reference to the conflict between good and evil that faces humankind in this world and until the Day of Judgment, and

as such was mentioned with the beginning of *taklīf*. This conflict between good and evil had two models of reactions presented in the story of Adam (Q5:27-31). Shedding blood started in a very early stage. One of the two children of Adam killed his brother before showing regret and repentance. The peaceful brother adhered to *taqwa* (piety, righteousness) in the face of his brother who was keen to kill him. The notion of *taqwa*, which is central to the Qur'anic ethical worldview, is closely related to the guidance especially that of divine Messages.

The Qur'anic reminder of this crime in the story of the two sons of Adam, which recurs in other examples in the stories of subsequent Prophets, emphasizes the basic value underlined by Adam's story. God says: "We have certainly **honored the children of Adam** and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things **and preferred them** over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference" (Q17:70). Any aggression against any human life is an aggression on humanity itself. Conversely, protecting man from any oppression or danger is a protection for the entire humanity. This dimension of the story **elevates humanity as a single unity over any other matter**. Accordingly, the preservation of human dignity, whether alive or dead, is a well-established right underlined by the first heavenly revelation and reiterated in all succeeding Messages of Prophets.

These well-established values in the message of Adam corresponds with the **Message of Noah**, who called his people to *tawhīd* (monotheism) and *taqwa* (Qur'ān, 23:23; 7:63; 26:106-108; 71:3). Noah also forewarned his people against oppression, tyranny,¹ and discrimination visible in the division of people into noble and ignoble.² Noah's call represented a continuity of the Message of Adam. It laid the foundations of the unity of divine religion that all Messengers came to establish (Q42:13). The contexts speaking of Prophet Noah are closely relevant, in terms of purpose, to the final Message. It represents the historical depth of the final call. There is a Qur'anic emphasis on the association between Prophet Noah and Prophet Muhammad and their peoples in respect of their approach to their respective missions and their peoples' attitudes towards them. Furthermore, the story has a functional role in the Qur'anic discourse from both

¹ The Qur'ān describes the people of Noah as oppressors seven times, cf. 11:44; 29:14; 23:27-28; 71:24-28.

² "So the eminent among those who disbelieved from his people said, 'We do not see you but as a man like ourselves, and we do not see you followed except by those who are the lowest of us'" (Q11:27) "They said, 'Should we believe you while you are followed by the lowest [class of people]?" (Q26:111).

the psychological and homiletic perspectives (Khalafallah 1972: 329).

It is a requisite for the call for monotheism to establish **equality among the members of human community, renounce oppression, and uphold justice**. The Message of Noah aimed to achieve this aim as evident in the dialogue that took place between Noah and his people when he called them to reflect and contemplate. He called them through dialogue, reminder, and petition. Forcing people to believe in something makes no sense when it comes to the call to faith, even if dialogue reaches a deadlock. God says, "He [Noah] said, 'O my people have you considered: if I should be upon clear evidence from my Lord while He has given me mercy from Himself but it has been made unapparent to you, should we force it upon you while you are averse to it?'" (Q11:28). **In this way, Noah asserted the principle of freedom of belief, which is a common principle among the calls of all Messengers.**

Despite the hardships he faced, Noah vigorously kept his moral position and supported the weak among his people; he said, "I am not one to drive away those who have believed" (Q11:29). He honored this position in word and deed until the injustice of his people, lasting over years, necessitated Divine Intervention. It is important to note here that the Qur'ān describes those people who were drowned as oppressors and not as disbelievers (Q11:44; 29:14; 23:28). This corroborates the **centrality of justice** as one of the main objectives of the message of Prophet Noah. Although this moral attitude is evident in the call of Noah, it is not restricted to it. Rather, it is the basic human aspect underlining all prophetic Messages; for religious reform and call for Divine Oneness recur as the means towards overcoming oppression.

2. The Call of Abraham: Unity and Universality of the Divine Message

In its recounting of the call of Prophet Abraham, the Qur'ān presents a new dimension of the Qur'anic discourse about Messengers, namely, its relevance in the lives of nations and communities. Prophet Abraham is an exceptional and central figure in the Qur'ān, which reflects his special status among all religions, even the polytheists and the People of the Book revere him and take pride in relating their spiritual genealogy to him (al-Rāzī 1935: vol.4, pp. 36-44). He is mentioned in 25 *suras*, most of which have been revealed in Mecca. This early reference to Prophet Abraham significantly reveals the position of the polytheists towards the call of Prophet Muhammad. It was similar to the position of the people of Abraham towards his call (Al-'Abdūlī, Tuhāmī 2001: 102). Abraham

was also the reference of *hanīfis* (the pre-Islamic Arabs who believed in the Oneness of God) in the Arabian Peninsula. As for the verses revealed in Medina, they explore the differences in views concerning Abraham from the perspective of the nascent community of Islam and the People of the Book. The Qur'ān (53:36-56; 87:19) states that Abraham has a revealed message including the principles and values preached by all Messengers throughout history.

The most important aspect of the Qur'anic discourse on the call of Abraham is his relationship to Prophet Mohammed as the Seal of the Prophets, as well as the reclamation of Prophet Abraham in the last Message (Q2:129; 3:68; 4:163; 16:123; 60:4.). He relates to other Messengers in terms of the unity of the origin, the identity of revelation, and the similarity of the legislative content of prophetic Messages, which reflects a similarity in the positions of the prophets vis-à-vis their relationships with communities and nations (Q2:136; 3:33-84; 6:84-90; 19:58; 33:7; 38:45; 42:13; 53:36-37; 57:26; 87:19). The Qur'ān reminds its audience of the Abrahamic religion, stresses Islam and the *hanīfiyya* (pre-Islamic monotheism in Arabia), and confirms that Abraham was not a Jew, a Christian, or a polytheist (Q2:130-131, 135, 140; 3:65, 67, 95; 4:125; 6:161; 12:38; 16:120-123; 22:78). The mention of Abraham in the Qur'ān underlines the unity of the divine message; relating Messengers to their respective communities and their responses to revelations thus emphasizing the monotheistic (here read: unifying) content of religion. In relating the story of Abraham, the Qur'ān presents an aspect of his suffering for the sake of promoting the monotheistic call. Like Noah, who was afflicted with his own son's denial of his call and his disbelief leading to his drowning, Prophet Abraham's predicament would be with his father Azar, who worshipped the very idols that Prophet Abraham was sent to forewarn his people against. Abraham could do little else than dissociate himself from the doings of his people (Q43:26-28; 60:4-5), who in turn eventually planned to burn him. Prophet Abraham, like Prophet Noah, challenged the tyrant rulers who claimed were gods and confronted them by demonstrating the absurdity of their claims that they can resurrect the dead (Q2:258).

Considering the Qur'anic discourse about the call of Prophet Abraham, we find a new form of narrative revealing new details from the Messengers call. New concepts that were not raised by past Messengers appear, such as **the discussion of rituals and acts of worship** e.g. *ṣalāt* (prayer Q14:37-40) and call to ***hajj*** (pilgrimage Q22:26-28). It also explores other fundamental concepts, such as ***al-dīn*** (religion Q2:133), ***al-millah*** (creed Q2:130-135; 3:95; 4:125; 6:161; 12:38; 16:123), and ***al-hanīfiyyah*** (the purely straight way Q2:135; 3:67; 95; 4:125; 6:79, 161; 16:120, 123). Meanwhile, other concepts appearing in the

narratives of past Messengers are reiterated, such as *Īmān* (belief, Q2:126, 259; 29:26), *Islam* (Q2:128-133) and *kufr* (disbelief Q2:126, 258) as well as a number of moral principles. The Qur'ān discusses in detail some of the principles revealed in the Scriptures of Prophet Abraham as well as Prophets, the most important of which is the individual's "**personal responsibility**" for his behavior. This responsibility is not transferable and remains confined to the agent who committed the action, reminding people of their exclusive accountability for their deeds (Q53:36-56; 87:19).

The narrative regarding the construction of the Sacred House and the establishment of the *hajj* ritual (pilgrimage to Mecca) consecrates these as embodiments of a spatial locus connecting all messengers and the world as a whole (Q22:26-29) to Mecca, which will witness the final Message. Through this story, the Qur'ān establishes the **religious-Islamic position** as a position commonly shared by all Messengers from Abraham onwards (Q2:130-133). His creed becomes the standard faith, and there shall be no deviation from this true religion and pure way. Leadership (*imāma*) of communities and nations is established as a new dimension in the Messages of prophets as Prophet Abraham was chosen [by God] as a leader (*imām*) for the **people** (Q2:124), and his religion became a universal human religion. The entirety of the humankind is meant to follow it (Q2:130) and to take Abraham as their role model (Q60:4-5), where his call to his offspring and spiritual descendants to perform *hajj* and prayers (Q14:35-41) confirms his historical–universal dimension¹.

All these facts indicate the universality and **centrality** of the Abrahamic discourse among the Prophets. The call of Abraham would add a new dimension to the form of Islam that started with the call of Prophet Noah. Indeed the term 'Islam' becomes a proper noun that refers to the 'pure' and 'upright religion' whose promotion will become the duty of the offspring of Abraham. The sublime truth of the Abrahamic monotheistic faith (*hanifiyya*) becomes the distinguishing feature of the Message of Islam (here interpreted as the inclusive call of all Prophets), especially its denial of all aspect of exclusive right to divine grace, or any forms of exclusivity for that matter. This includes the exclusive right to God and divine favor, i.e. Moses' call for Judaism, or the exclusive claim to the possession of absolute truth, i.e. Christ's call for Christianity.

¹ For more about the relationship between Abraham and other Prophets, see Q2:136; 3: 33-84; 6:84 -90; 9:70; 19:58; 33:7; 38: 45; 42:13; 53:36-37; 57:26; 87:19.

3. Prophets and the Call to Nations: Examples from Divine Norms

The Qur'ān presents examples from the Messages of other Prophets in the period between Abraham and Moses highlighting the most important aspects of their calls and emphasizing their role in forming the conception of Divine Message in its historical manifestation. For example, The Qur'ān mentions prophets, such as **Hūd**, **Ṣāliḥ**, **Lot**, and **Shu'ayb** and their peoples, most of whom, it must be noted were Arabs (Bayoumi 1995: vol. 1, pp. 239, 265, 297). Their messages and reminders are successively reported in mostly Meccan *suras*. This indicates that they were known to the pre-Islamic Arabs. Reminding them of the past Prophetic history based on the Arabs' previous knowledge of these stories and events, these Qur'anic narratives tell the Arabs of their ancestors. These Prophets are solely mentioned in the Qur'ān and the Torah makes no mention of them (al-Ṭabarī 1407 AH: vol. 1, p. 141). The verses that speak of **Prophet Hūd** (Q7: 65-72; 11:50-60; 42:123-140) remind us of his call to monotheism and piety and his warnings to his people to stay away from transgression and tyranny. He also reminded them of God's blessings and warned them against His punishment and the evil consequences that befell them. After affluence, wellbeing, development, and construction of palaces and fortresses, they behaved like tyrants, and had no one to protect them from God's punishment. This was the case of the people of Noah before them. Material prosperity and wellbeing led them to transgression and ingratitude, only to face the divine destruction and replacement by other peoples.

Equally, 'Ād was an instance of God's practice (*as-sunan al-ilāhiyya*) in nations, who transgress materially and fall into injustice and arrogance that all Prophetic Messages resist. The people of Thamūd came after them and God sent the Prophet **Ṣāliḥ** to call them to **monotheism**, **warn them against transgression**, and remind them of God's Graces and blessings, not least of which was God raising them to power after the tribe of 'Ād (Q7:73-79; 11: 61-68; 26: 141-159; 27: 45-53). Both stories are similar and reminiscent of each other. They are also similar to the story of Prophet Noah with his people. This mention comes in the context of mentioning those who denied the calls of the Prophets and subsequently faced destruction after a period of prosperity.

As for **Lot**, who lived at the time of Prophet Abraham and believed in him, his call focused on the **depravity** that led to the destruction of his people (Q7:80-84, 11:69-83; 15: 57-77; 26:160-175; 27:54-58; 29:26-35; 37:133-138; 54:33-39). As such, they became an example of the consequences of ingratitude and transgression (Q11:89, 15:43, 38:13, 50:13; 66:10). The call of Prophet **Shu'ayb** stresses another aspect of human corruption on a collective level;

namely, the economic variety, which prevailed in the cities of Midian. They are mentioned in the context of the past destroyed people; i.e., the people of Prophet Noah, the tribes of 'Ād and Thamūd, and the people of Prophet Lot. Prophet Shu'ayb used to remind his people of them (Q11:89) and his Message reiterated the same principles of the earlier Prophets' messages with regards to monotheism, piety, and reminding people of the Hereafter. Midian was exceptionally noted for its geographical location and commercial activities, which led the call of Shu'ayb to focus on the moral side of the divine Message related to the **economic aspect**. Thus, he warned his people against defrauding measure and weight, depriving people of their due and spreading mischief in the land (Q7:85-93; 11:84-95; 26: 176-191; 29:37). Apparently the Prophets' Messages to communities or nations, as the Qur'ān represents them, **emphasize the general pattern and salient details of the universal divine Message throughout history**. The fact that some Prophets are mentioned with greater details does not take away from the integrity and unity of all Messages of Prophets, indeed it confirms it; for the narrative pattern is the same. The integrity of the pattern contributes to an understanding of the role of prophets as a singular unity that progresses towards completion and eventually the closure of prophetic traditions on earth.

As for the mention of Prophets **Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob** in the Qur'ān, it is axed around the personality of their father Abraham. God made prophets of their progenies and revealed to them the Scripture (Q6:84, 11:71, 14:39, 19:49, 21: 72, 29:27, 37:112-113). The Qur'ān proceeds to mention them in other verses to reemphasize Prophet Abraham's affiliation with the true religion and his belonging to Islam. His sons enjoin their children to remain faithful to Islam and their children describe their parents as Muslims (Q2:132-133; 12:6-38). For further affirmation of the unity of Messages, the followers of Prophet Muhammad are required to believe in the Messages of Prophet Abraham and his sons Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob (Q2: 136; 3:84). The Qur'ān formulates an inclusive religious stance with an exceptionally wide horizon in describing the relationship between Abraham and his –ideological- progeny, transcending all sectarian Jewish or Christian classifications of Abraham and his sons (Q2:140). The Qur'anic verses consecutively relate the Prophets' declarations in affirming of the unity of revelation and religion and the common aspects bidding divine Messages.

The story of Prophet Joseph, which occurred in one context in a single *sura* named after the prophet himself, confirms his commitment to **monotheism, and the 'upright religion' (ad-dīn al-qayyim)**, i.e. the religion of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. His narrative also includes several scenes addressing particular

aspects of the human struggle for the attainment of higher values to which the Messages of the Prophets repeatedly call. Through his story, the Qur'ān narrates the life of a Messenger who lived a mundane life and encountered different circumstances in which he was exposed to various hardships and had to deal with several moral challenges. As a model, he manifested the purpose and requirements of the divine Message that was sent to man. The Qur'ān describes His story as the 'best of stories' (*aḥsan al-qaṣṣas*) in terms of its significances, making it a model of proper religious and moral comportment.

The infrequent mention of Prophets Idrīs (Enoch), Ilyās (Elijah), Alyasa' (Elisha), and Dhul-Kifl (Ezekiel) comes in the context of mentioning other Prophets, collectively describing their stances and patience as well as their belonging to the 'select' (*muṣṭafīn, aḥyār*) whom God guided and ordered His people to follow (Q6:87-90). The story of Prophet Job highlights his patience of which he became a role model, evincing just how firm man ought to stand in the face of calamities and trials. One narrative that stands out is that of the prophet Jonah. Unlike other transgressing nations who faced destruction, the context of recounting the story of Prophet **Jonah** demonstrates how faith saved his people from suffering and admitted them to a blissful life (Q10:98). As far as his character is concerned, the Qur'ān presents his attitude towards his people as one of anger and turning away. The verses describing him, portray him as hasty and easily incensed, two common human vices, thus setting him in contraposition to Job, known for his patience and resilience. Both prophets function as poles of the human moral attitude towards the trials of life.

3. The Call of Moses: Fighting Tyranny and Effectuating Justice:

The character of Prophet Moses, its treatment and description, is the single largest narrative element in the Qur'ān. Various verses tell of his life, Scriptures, miracles, and other issues concerning his Message and his relation to other Prophets (Q27:7-14; 79:15-26; 40:53-54; 2:87, 6:91; 154, 41:45, 19:51-53; 21:48; 32:23, 3:84, 11:17, 17:2, 25:35; 33:7, 42:13, 46:12, 30, 53:36; 87:19). Further, his narrative includes an extensive account of his mission with Pharaoh and the Children of Israel and emphasizes their arrogance and attitude towards their prophet and source of their laws in the various stages of his mission¹ (Zaghlūl 1982: 209; Khalīfa Ḥasan 1991:150 ff.). The Qur'ān recalls the life of

¹ See the Qur'ān, 20: 80-101; 7: 138-156, 159-171; 2:40-86, 92-93, 246-251, 4: 153-164, 5: 20-26; 61:5.

Prophet Moses, particularly the stages of revelation, prophecy, and confrontation with Pharaoh. Having been raised in the tyrant's court the Prophet was most familiar of the inner life of the court, which was dominated by injustice, tyranny, and transgression.¹

The Prophet Moses directly challenged the **tyranny of the Pharaoh and faced him regarding the gravest aspects of his tyranny, i.e. his claim to divinity**. Like the case with the calls of Noah and Abraham when oppression and tyranny prevailed, the return to the core existential issues of recalling the Omnipotence of God and calling for monotheism become the fundamental elements for confronting tyrants. Thereafter, Prophet Moses moves to his second element in his mission: the **emancipation of the Children of Israel and enabling them to respond to his Message**. Yet, the Message of Moses would be treated in further detail with regard to his followers and the Children of Israel. Moses's call to Pharaoh focused directly on religious and moral attitude, monotheism, and liberation of the oppressed people who faced Pharaoh's persecution and injustice. However, his call to his people focused on **delivering them from persecution** and giving them freedom thus enabling them to achieve the second objective of Prophet Moses' Message: **resuming their apostolic history**.

He reminded them of God's favors, who endowed them with prophecy and Scriptures and saved them from the persecution of Pharaoh and led them towards a new life. However, their stubbornness and ingratitude, despite the blessings that God bestowed upon them, gained them God's wrath. As a result, God ordered them to accept his commandments and withhold their covenant with Him. God says: "[Recall] when We took your covenant, [O Children of Israel, to abide by the Torah] and We raised over you the mount, [saying], "Take what We have given you with determination and remember what is in it that perhaps you may become righteous" (Q2:63). The covenant included the principles of their faith, ethics, and legislations of the Prophets before Moses. Nevertheless, the Children of Israel violated the covenant, for although they were previously coerced to accept it, they were neither convinced of it nor did they put

¹ The Qur'an attributes vile and evil qualities to Pharaoh. He and his people were infamous for the following evils: rejecting religion, disbelief, and denial of Allah's signs (Q8: 52,54); transgression (Q27: 12); misguiding people (Q20:79); arrogance in the world and dividing people into factions (Q28: 4, 10; 83); claiming divinity when saying, "I do not know of any god for you besides myself" (Q28: 38); totalitarianism in his saying, "I do not show you aught but that which I see (myself)" (Q40: 39); he also said, "Is not the Kingdom of Egypt mine" (Q43: 51); tormenting people (Q7: 141); spreading corruption (Q28: 4); oppression (Q26: 46); tyranny, which encompasses all the previous vices "he has transgressed" (Q20: 24, 43, 79:17).

into practice. Coercion was of no avail in guiding them to their best interest.¹

In addition to the **details of the covenant**, there were other impositions (*takālīf*) ordained on the Children of Israel as the Qur'ān states them. For example, they had to **fight and enter the sacred land**, which was forbidden to them for forty years due to their remissness. As the Qur'ān tells, the call of Moses forbade **killing, except for retribution or for combating those who spread corruption**. This law came in the context of the Qur'anic account of the first murder in human history. Moses' legislation ordained that **murder, usury, and unjustly appropriating other people's property** (Q4:161) are some of the worst offenses possible. In addition, there were other legislations that the Qur'ān mentions such as **making lawful for them the amenities, which were prohibited for them, and prohibiting them to work on Saturdays**. Some of these legislations that the Qur'ān mentions are a recognizable part of the Ten Commandments.²

All prophets, including Moses came to preach the same commandments that God ordained, and reveal the same divine Truth; it is one religion preached by all prophets and all were ordered to uphold it. In this context the term 'Islam' is mentioned, namely in the story of Moses (Q10: 83), whose call is an episode in the long series of Prophets' messages throughout history. All these Messages agree on the method of calling people to believe in **the Oneness of God and the liberation of humankind, that is** through lenient dialogue and reasonable discourse that appeals to the rationality of humans and their direct experience of the truth. Moreover, the mission of Moses includes some recurrent historical patterns (*sunan*) concerning the attitude of Messengers towards tyranny and

¹ The scene that the Qur'ān presented here gives proof to the followers of the final Message, which emphasized that there shall be no compulsion in religion and made dialogue the basis of conveying the Message. Only God can force anyone to accept Him; He is the Creator of all people. Coercion is of no avail whatsoever, when it comes to guiding people. It contradicts the everlasting divine judgment that man has a free will. The Children of Israel were made by God to accept the covenant. Yet, after the mountain was raised away from them, they returned to disbelief and violated their covenant. This means that coercion, even when done by the All-Powerful, is of no avail. Its outcome is nothing but hypocrisy. As such, the story of their violation of the covenant is a practical example the Qur'ān presents to underline that coercion is useless.

² The Ten Commandments are mentioned in many chapters such as Exodus (20:2-7) and (10:26-34) and Deuteronomy (6:5-21), see Al-Shāmī, Rashād 'Abd Allāh, *al-Waṣāyā' al-'Ashr fī al-Yahūdiyyah: Dirāṣah Muqārana fī al-Masīhiyyah wa al-Islam* (Cairo: Dār Al-Zahrā', 1993).

oppression, namely, the defeat and destruction of Pharaoh and the delivery of Moses remind us of God's protection of Noah and Abraham against the evil schemes that their peoples drew against them.

Having conveyed his Message to Pharaoh and resumed his call to the Children of Israel, Moses prepares to enter the Holy Land and complete a historical pattern of the Messages sent to the Children of Israel. It aimed to establish a new religious environment wherein the Torah was revealed to set the scene for a historic era where the Children of Israel were in charge of building civilization and promoting growth and prosperity on the relics of the bygone Pharaonic civilization (Q28: 20). In its historical context, the call of Moses to the Children of Israel represents a qualitative shift in the history of humanity and embodies the divine presence in history. It expresses a religious and moral attitude that interacts and integrates with the Messages of the Prophets in the Qur'ān.

This dimension renews the question about the Message of Moses: Was his mission universal or national?¹ This is a recurring question concerning the call of other Prophets as well. In the Qur'ān, nevertheless, the Messages of the Prophets are related without reference to their nationality and locality in space and time. The focus is made, rather, on their common central purpose (i.e. guidance), which is also the case for their revealed Scriptures. In terms of content, achieving **monotheism and liberating the human will are the central themes in the careers of the Prophets with their peoples**. In this sense, the Qur'ān introduces the Messages of all Prophets as serving the same religious and moral purpose, however different the historical experiences of the particular prophets in achieving that purpose. Such experiences were complementary and integral, forming together an evolving experience in different circumstances of human life.

The Message of Moses dealt with the experience of the Israelite nation and the problem of succession, after having failed as a nation. Thus, God sent them Prophet David and Solomon, who were granted prophecy, kingship, and wisdom. They are mentioned in the context of affirming the unity of revelation (Q4:163) and in the context of mentioning Prophets Abraham, Noah, and their offspring. God made David a successor upon the earth (Q38:26), whom Prophet

¹ Muslim scholars disagreed on the universality of the Message of Prophet Moses. Some scholars maintained that it was a universal Message because he called Pharaoh and his people to follow him and because the Queen of Sheba followed the Prophet Solomon who was preaching the same Message of Moses. They cited other proofs as well. Yet, some other scholars said that it was a specific Message for a certain people. See al-Saqqā, Aḥmad Ḥijāzī, *Taḥqīq Kitāb al-Nubuwwā li al-Rāzī* (Cairo: Dār Ibn Zaydūn, 1st edition, 1986), p. 189 footnote No. 2. However, most exegetes did not discuss this issue.

Solomon in turn inherits and the bounties of the earth were made available to them. With these immense means their kingship and power (Q21:79-80; 34:10-11; 38:17-20) they were divinely ordained to do justice not only to the Children of Israel but to the entirety of humanity. Solomon's rule extended to the land of Sheba (Q27:20-44), which gives a non-national – or non-ethnic – dimension to the Messages of the Prophets sent to the Children of Israel. It should be noted that Qur'anic contexts speaking of David and Solomon make no reference to or mention of the Children of Israel¹ or their identity as a nation for that matter. This could be legitimately interpreted as an indication of the de facto transition of the divine Message in its Mosaic form at the hands of David and Solomon from ethnic particularity to universality. The stewardship of man on earth entrusted to David was free of any nationalistic qualities,² in contrast to the way it is interpreted in later Judaism.

The call of David and Solomon sought to raise the Children of Israel, establish justice among people, and ensure the transmission of the stewardship that the Israelites failed to achieve in the Mosaic period. Thus, the rule of David and Solomon is set apart with kingship and authority but resembles the calls of other prophets in calling people to the same essential revelation. The difference being that the Prophets called for monotheism, supported the oppressed, and shared their suffering, while David and Solomon called for monotheism and established justice through kingship. In the same manner that the Qur'ān mentions David and his son Solomon, it mentions Zacharias and his son John. The Qur'anic account of Zacharias and John is centered on the end of the genealogical line of the Prophets of the Children of Israel. The birth of John, which shook the Israelite society, was followed by the extraordinary birth of Jesus, thus setting the stage for the Messianic Message, which ended the era of the Children of Israel and paved the way for the final Message, or rather, for the seal of prophecy.

4. The Call of Jesus: Preparation for the Seal of Prophecy

¹ Except for the statement of God, the Exalted: “Cursed were those who disbelieved among the Children of Israel by the tongue of David and of Jesus, the son of Mary” (Q5:78).

² I do not support the viewpoint of Muhammad Abū Al-Qāsim Ḥajj Ḥamad who underlines the national Israelite context of the divine Message and succession. Although his analysis is compatible with the development of Messages, restricting these Messages to national purpose contradicts their very content. Furthermore, the narrations from Prophet Solomon negate this dimension. See Ḥajj Ḥamad, *al-'Alamiyyah al-Islāmiyyah Al-Thāniyah*, (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2nd edition, 1996), vol. 2, p. 47 ff.

The mission of Jesus Christ is the conclusive moment in the line of the previous Prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān pays special attention to his persona owing to the importance of his mission especially its effect on the character of the subsequent religion that ensues from it. Indeed the Qur'ān emphasizes particularly this dimension. The verses mention the creation of Jesus and his mother Mary as well as his relationship to his people and the attitude of the Children of Israel towards him (Q3:52-55; 4:157; 5:78, 112, 114; 61:14), the divine proofs of his mission, the Scripture that he was given (Q2:87-253; 5:110) and his mission to the Children of Israel (Q5:46-72; 43: 63; 61:6). The Qur'anic verses reprobate the subsequent excessive veneration of his person (Q4: 171-172, 5: 17, 72, 116; 9: 30-31; 19: 34; 57:27) and confirm that he was only a Messenger like other Prophets and Messengers in whom one should believe without discrimination, given that his message is identical to that of all other Prophets (Q2:136; 3:84; 4:163; 5:75; 6:85; 33:7; 42:13).

The Qur'anic narrative maintains that despite the successive dispatching of the Prophets to the Children of Israel (Q2:87; 5:75; 57:27) and the presence of the Torah among them (Q5:46; 61:6), they did not abstain from differing on their creed and submitting to internal divisions (Q43: 63). In this stage of their history, the Israelites are said to have lost the true spirit of their religion which was reduced to rigid observance of rituals and commitment to external forms of worship (Bayyūmī 1995: 3/291). The development in their spiritual circumstances required a new divine intervention to bring the Children of Israel back to the way of Moses and other Prophets and reminding them of the divine Providence that saved them. Hence, the incidents that took place when Mary was in the sanctuary, the birth of John and Jesus (Q3:35-51) represented a remarkable event for the Jews at that time. The Messiah, who grew up among them in a Jewish environment and learned the Torah, was sent to confirm it, and renew the Prophets' call to monotheism. He was also required to remind the Children of Israel of the Hereafter (Q3:50; 5:72; 9:31; 43:63) and resolve some of their -theological- differences (Q43:63-64). His mission also made lawful some of what was forbidden to them (Q3:50) and bought good tidings of a Messenger to come after him (Q61:6). To achieve these teachings, God revealed the Gospel to Jesus to confirm the Torah with **guidance**, light, and admonition. The People of the Gospel were ordered to judge according to what they received (Q5: 46-47), as were the People of the Book required to uphold the Laws of the Torah and the Gospel. In this way, the Message of Moses and that of the previous Prophets were

revived;¹ they ordained the same Commandments and similar confirmed the identity of revelation.

Accordingly, the religious import of Jesus' Message, as presented in the Qur'ān, is established in the context of other Prophets throughout history (Al-Āyeb 1997: 147). His Message integrates the call of Moses and his Torah. In this sense, it is fair to say that the Torah, like the Gospel, is part of the scripture of Jesus, by virtue of being the basis of his religion. The Gospel is a completion and a revival of the spirit of the Torah. Exegetes² have differed about the nature of the relationship of Jesus' call to the Torah and the Mosaic Message. One may reduce their different opinions to three main strands:

1. Some exegetes maintained that the Message of Jesus is entirely **independent and entirely abrogating the Message of Moses**, as he came to make lawful what was forbidden for the Children of Israel. He commanded the People of the Gospel to judge by what is therein (al-Bayḍāwī 1996: vol. 2, p. 331-343/ al-'Imādī vol. 3, p. 44.).
2. Jesus is **following the Message of Moses in most of its legislations and abrogating some of them**. This opinion is based on what has been revealed in the Qur'ān. Jesus said, "And to make lawful for you some of what was forbidden to you" (Q3:50). He partly permitted some forbidden matters to his people. This is the prevalent opinion among Muslim scholars and exegetes (al-Ṭabarī 1405 AH, 3/81/ al-Zamakhsharī 1995: 1/497/Ibn Kathīr 1401 AH, 1/366, 2/65/ al-Alūsī 3/171).
3. **The Message of Jesus did not abrogate anything of the Message of**

¹ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (Matthew 5:17-18).

² Difference is not restricted to the exegetes of the Qur'ān. The exegetes of the Gospel have differed as well about Jesus' position towards the Torah. Some said that he did not abrogate the Jewish law at all, nor did he abolish anything thereof. Rather, the new aspect in his call was to "purify the believer's legal obedience" by submission to God with a deep internal and spiritual motive unlike the different forms of false religiosity and temptations related to the traditions of ancestors. Unlike this opinion, other exegetes are of the view that the teachings of Jesus represent a radical breakaway from the Jewish religion. They cite the free and amazing stance of Jesus towards the Temple, Jewish law, and traditions as well as religious authorities of his time. (See, *al-Mawsū'ah al-Falsafiyah al-'Arabiyyah*, Beirut: *Ma'had al-Inma' al-'Arabī*, 1986, 2/1231).

Moses. What the Qur'ān states that Jesus made lawful for the Children of Israel some of what was forbidden—does not refer to what God has forbidden to the Children of Israel, but what they had forbidden for themselves without a divine injunction. Based on this opinion, the Gospel did not posit new legislations, nor did it include an additional knowledge regarding what is lawful or forbidden. It only includes parables, admonitions, and edificatory deterrents. As for all other legislative matters and legal rulings, the reference remains the Torah. Jesus himself followed the Torah, observed the Sabbath, prayed towards Jerusalem, prohibited swine, and maintained circumcision. However, the Christians changed all of that after him and observed Sundays instead of Saturdays and so on. This is the opinion of a number of exegetes (al-Qurṭubī 1372 AH: 4/96/ Ibn Kathīr, 1/366/ al-Shawakānī 1/342/ al-Alūsī/ Hījāzī, 34.).

This controversy which occupied Muslim exegetes and theologians arises from the assumption that there is a special system for each Message. It is based on the view that every Messenger was sent – uniquely – to his people. However, there are a number of proofs in the Qur'ān indicating the complementary relationship governing the careers of Prophets, while the particularity of each is confined to the local laws they impose (*shir'a wa-minhāj* Q5:48) and not in the universal principles of divine Messages that are common to all. The arguments for the independence or dependence of prophetic messages contradicts the very nature of the tradition of prophecy, where every Messenger confirms or completes the previous Messengers and Scriptures and corrects the mistakes of the adepts of their faiths. All Qur'anic contexts assert that Jesus was one of the Messengers of God, who upheld the previous Scriptures and confirmed the Prophets of God (al-Zamakhsharī: 4/513). Jesus did not fulfill the Messianic expectation of the Jews as they had envisaged or expected. He sought to get them back to the pure spirit of religion and end the path to the most sublime horizon, a path that Moses previously opened and sought to qualify his people to reach, i.e. the transition path to the universal aspects of the divine Message and the stewardship of the world. As such, Jesus spoke clearly to the near end of the divine intervention and foretold the coming of the seal of Messengers and divine revelations. In this point, the peculiarity of the religious position of the call of Jesus clearly represents a transitional period in the divine Message, as it reclaims prophetic history, seals the prophetic project of qualifying mankind to receive the final teachings embodied in the final Message after which man shall be in no need of a new revelation.

The followers of Jesus would subsequently find themselves facing the challenge of confronting the previous religion that forms the basis of their own

religion, which by the same token puts them on track for conflict over the legitimacy of the claim of the possession of the truth. As such, the Christians would come to reiterate the same previous Jewish claims, namely, that they are the children of God and His beloved ones (Q5:18); that none other than them shall enter Paradise (Q2:111); that the Jews have no supporting evidence to the truth of their claims (Q2:113); that Guidance is strictly present among the Christians (Q2:135); that the seal of Messengers will follow their religion (Q2:120); and finally the appropriation of the Prophet Abraham and subsequent Prophets into their – Christian - tradition (Q2:140). It is evident that the Qur'anic narrative recalls the history of Christ and his call to connect the past of Islam with its present as a religion based on monotheism in order to underline the integrity of divine Messages, which Prophets regularly confirmed and which was crowned with the seal of prophecy. Man could, as a result, assume the responsibility of stewardship over the world without further need for divine intervention.

5. The Religious–Islamic Stance: The Seal of Prophecy and Human Responsibility

It has been narrated that the Prophet Muhammad once said: “The Prophets are paternal brothers; their mothers are different, but their religion is one.”¹ This prophetic simile expresses the complex relationship between Prophets and their messages; it is an expression of the **duality consisting of the unity and particularity of the call of –each- prophet as well as the complementarity yet uniqueness of their calls**. Each Prophet within his time, place, and environment called his people to one horizon beyond history, in harmony with absolute truth to which man aspires by nature. **This horizon represents a single system that Messengers successively pursued and upheld until prophecy was sealed**. The prophetic history in the Qur'ān, becomes, therefore, a single model to be followed. The calls of Messengers complete one another in establishing a common religious position based on a comprehensive system of moral values and principles that exalt man and raise him beyond the adoption of material historically-bound divinities and adherence to earthly life. The system of moral values emphasizes spirituality as tool to moderate, if not transcend, the spirit of materialism that recurrently prevails in human societies that, not incidentally,

¹ Recorded by Imam Ahmad in his *Musnad* on the authority of Abu Huraira: 2/406 (9259), 2/437 (9630) and al-Ḥākim in his *al-Mustadrak*, 2/648 (4153) and Ibn Ḥibbān in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* 15/233 (6821), edited by Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūt, 2nd ed., Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1993.

distort the religion of Prophets and subjugate them to human tyrannies and selfish tendencies. The Messages signaled that success in all walks of human life is conditional upon following the sublime moral values that Prophets came to perfect and call people to it. The biographies and careers of Prophets and their experiences with their peoples in the Qur'ān were practical and historical embodiments or demonstration of the 'divine pattern' (*sunnatu L-lāh* Q33:38, 33:62, 40:85, 48:23) that inheres in their traditions, which was ultimately distilled into the theoretical presentation of principles and values summarized by the last – sealing – Message.

Prophecy, whose *raison d'être* came to an end following the completion (here read: perfection) of religion is an invitation to man to assume responsibility for promoting growth and prosperity on earth. This duty must be based on the knowledge and guidance that God provided to humankind through the Prophets from Adam until Mohammed. The teachings of the Messengers, as defined by the Qur'ān, represent the principles that humans need in order to protect themselves from failure in their stewardship over the world. When one surveys the salient prophetic models, one immediately realizes the common human dimension; Messengers regularly called for the liberation of humanity from any authority that interferes in their religious affairs and forces them to follow the religion of kings and rulers. In addition, all Messengers fought injustice of all kinds and in all its manifestations and sought to spread justice among people. They supported the weak, resisted tyrannies, and refined the moral behavior of man through the establishment of the principle of monotheism as a benchmark reference for all values and virtues.

In the words of Fazlur Rahman, "prophecy is an indivisible unit, and although Messengers or prophets were sent each to his people at first, the message they deliver is not merely of a local nature but has a universal import". (Fazlur Rahman 2009: 80). The Qur'ān mentions the Messengers repeatedly and in different contexts depending on the context of each *sura*. Sometimes, this mention aims to strengthen the Prophet Muhammad and help him patiently withstand the maltreatment of his people. At other times, it comes in the framework of presenting a divine norm in history or in the context of raising arguments against the people of the Book about Prophets or about the content of their Messages. All these contexts serve an essential function, which is uniting them into a cohesive religious position.

The concept of guidance appears to be central in the discussion about Messengers; it began with the call of Adam and was confirmed by the verses regarding the Prophets who were sent as guides for humanity. The Qur'ān described divine revelation and revealed Scriptures as guidance; this function is

the shared element between the Messages of Prophets and the revealed Scriptures. Its importance for human life has not decreased with time, for Man remains morally confused and existentially bewildered, despite the advancement of his empirical knowledge and as such, "man's moral maturity is conditional upon his relentless search for guidance in the Divine scriptures, especially the Noble Qur'an." (Fazlur Rahman 2009: 81).

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