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The Burden of Prophecy: A Reading of Sūrat Hūd

One of the biggest surprises I had as a first-time reader of the Qur'an was a passage in Surat Taha,¹ describing the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh.²

49. He [Pharaoh] said, Who is your Lord, O Moses? قَالَ فَمَنْ رَبُّكَ يَا مُوسَى (٤٩)
50. He [Moses] said, Our Lord is He who gave everything its form, then guided. قَالَ رَبُّنَا الَّذِي كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقَهُ ثُمَّ هَدَى (٥٠)
51. [Pharaoh] said, What about the first generations? قَالَ فَمَا بَالُ الْقُرُونِ الْأُولَى (٥١)

What was striking to me in this exchange was the sequence of Pharaoh's questions, which I take as an indication of what it was that was most challenging in Moses' message of a single Deity. The first question seems logical enough; Moses comes bearing tidings and proofs of God's existence, so naturally, he would like to hear some more details. Having received some clarification, which, brief as it is, is certainly enough to indicate that there is no room for associating God's divinity with other beings,³ Pharaoh's next question does not pursue any kind of theological or philosophical dispute, but rather reflects a concern that is surprisingly human and personal, especially from the mouth of the god-king of Egypt: What about my ancestors? What about my parents? While some exegetes have viewed this question as a kind of trap to lure Moses into an unfavorable position,⁴ such an agenda is necessarily hidden and is not evident in Pharaoh's speech itself. The question could also be read at face value, which is little more than a guileless and genuine concern for the sanctity of long-held tradition and belief. Pharaoh's third question is also telling in its vulnerability: "Have you come to us to drive us from our land by your sorcery, Moses?" (*Qāla a-ji'tanā li-tukhrijanā min arḍinā bi-sihrika yā Mūsá*, 20:57). This exchange was surprising to me because I had expected that a man as powerful as Pharaoh would react dismissively, arrogantly, scornfully—yet in fact, he takes Moses quite seriously and is concerned for the welfare of his ancestors and the potential for political upheaval. Considering the revolutionary scope of the message,⁵ such a reaction is entirely plausible and may humanize Pharaoh to a certain extent.

Deceitful or innocent as he may be, this essay is not about the interior of Pharaoh's psychology—yet the content of this exchange led me to approach other surahs with new questions in mind. What was the relationship between prophets and their peoples? How did unbelievers react to the message? And most interestingly, how did the prophets feel about bringing such challenging and potentially painful news to their communities? I think it is fair enough to say that these relationships could and ought to be read in the context of Muhammad's relationship with his own people, the residents of Mecca, who also had to make a difficult choice between the prevailing social and religious order they had inherited from their ancestors and the comprehensive reform Muhammad called for.⁶ To explore this topic, I have selected Surat Hud, a late Meccan surah and the eleventh in the Qur'an's standard arrangement. The surah recounts this exchange of warning and rejection between messengers and their peoples in the stories of seven prophets: Noah, Hud, Salih, Abraham, Lot, Shu'ayb, and Moses. I found the narratives in this surah cyclic but not repetitive; that is, each prophet has a slightly different exchange with his community, revealing various aspects and dimensions of the same topic. Although there are many other surahs that go into greater detail about individual prophets, or also run down the sequence of seven or eight in regard to a particular topic, this surah seemed to be the one most attuned to this complex and emotional issue of grief, uncertainty, and vulnerability between prophets and their peoples.

Surat Hud begins with a general statement of themes that provide the framework for interpreting the stories to come. The role of the prophet is first defined for Muhammad and his followers: "I am, from Him and to you, a warner and a bearer of good tidings" (*innanī lakum minhu nadhīrun wa-bashīrun*, 2). This is refined by Shu'ayb, who tells his people what a prophet is *not*, a 'keeper' or 'protector' of the community (*mā ana 'alaykum bi-ḥafīz*, 86). The prophet cannot coerce people into following God, nor can he defend them from Him—he can only do his utmost through preaching and exhortation to remind humankind of the consequences of their choices.⁷ This responsibility is difficult to bear without flinching, for it is essentially divisive, realigning humanity into two camps, those who follow truth and those who follow falsehood.⁸ The Qur'an is sensitive to this hardship, referring to the myriad of challenges that Muhammad and other prophets face as warners, the demands for proof, the accusations of fraud, the rejection and denial from friends and family (13-14); it also assuages some of the guilt and responsibility Muhammad must have been feeling by assuring him he has no further duty than to preach without reservation: "Perhaps you are leaving out some of what was revealed to you,

and your heart is worried that they will say, If only a treasure was sent down upon him, or an angel came with him! You are [only] a warner; God is Lord over everything” (12). People will choose their actions for themselves and God will judge them accordingly.

The first story in the sequence is that of Noah, verses 25 to 50. It is one of the longer stories of Surat Hud, and it establishes Noah as a rather tragic figure. When he approaches his people with the warning to worship none other than God, he tells them that he is afraid for them (*innī akhāfu ‘alaykum*), that they will face a painful punishment if they do not heed the warning (26). His skeptical audience responds with three points of criticism: that they see nothing in him that is not merely mortal, that only the base and contemptible among them follow him, and that they do not see any merit (*fadl*) in him over them (27). These comments provide the archetype for all the encounters between prophet and people in the subsequent stories and may well reflect the chief objections Muhammad himself faced from the people of Mecca. Noah’s response to these accusations also establish the pattern for the other prophets to follow. He explains that he cannot force his people to see God’s proof if they are averse to seeing it (28), that he cannot drive believers away, wherever they come from (29-30), that he does not possess any kind of esoteric knowledge or sight of the hidden, and that he does not condemn those people whom his society condemns, for that would place him among the wrongdoers (*al-zālimīn*, 31). Particularly significant are the phrase “my reward is with God alone” (*in ajrī illā ‘alā Allāh*, 29), and the rhetorical question, “Who will save me from God if I turned them [the believers] away?” (*man yanṣurunī min Allāh in ṭaradtuhum*, 30).

As a prophet, Noah’s behavior in this situation is exemplary of those who will enter Paradise, as detailed in verse 23. He has no ulterior motive, he seeks nothing in personal gain, and he refuses to perpetrate evil in spite of the pressure mounted against him. When his people demand a proof of God’s intention to punish them, Noah responds that it is not he who can (or would) deliver it—God will do so when He wills (33). The important thing is that they must be warned of its coming, for there is no way to prevent it from doing so (33). Despite his loyalty and good behavior, Noah is unable to face divine judgement unscathed. When he learns of God’s plan to drown the wrongdoers, Noah is admonished not to grieve for them: “None of your people will believe except those who have already believed, so do not feel wretched for what they do” (36). Among the drowned is Noah’s own son, who mistakenly believes that he can save

himself by climbing to the top of a mountain (43). Grief-stricken, Noah cannot help but beg for God's intercession, resulting in this moving exchange between the prophet and God.

Noah then called out to his Lord saying: "My Lord, my son is of my family; and Your Promise is surely the truth and you are the Best of judges." (45) He said: "O Noah, he is not of your family. It is an act which is not righteous, so do not ask Me about that of which you have no knowledge. I admonish you not to be one of the ignorant."⁹ (46)

At this moment, Noah suffers from the divisiveness of the very message he came to bear. The radical realignment of the world into believers and non-believers literally robs Noah of his son and leaves him with very few of his people at his side (40). This is one of the most powerful examples of the experience of grief and loss on the part of a prophet in the Qur'an. Far from exuding righteous self-confidence, Noah's love for his people affects his certitude and afflicts him with no small measure of pain. The personal hardship that Noah endures as a responsible bearer of the message will resonate not only with the story of Muhammad, who also had to see families split in two and loved ones turn away, but with anyone who felt personally wronged in some way by the turnings of divine judgement. In the end, the story is left for future generations; God blesses Noah and those who follow him with the promise that they will create new nations (*umam mimman ma'ak*) who will receive the same bounty and face the same ultimate judgement (48).

The next two figures in the sequence are the prophets Hud and Salih, respectively of the tribes 'Ad and Thamud. Their stories are shorter than Noah's and less oriented towards their individual personalities. They rather function as a kind of unit, a dual iteration of a single scene that establishes the cyclical nature of prophecy and punishment through echoing the story of Noah. Hud and Salih both come to their tribes with the basic message that they need to worship God; Hud tells them that they have been deceitful (*muftarūn*),¹⁰ while Salih reminds them of their indebtedness to their Creator for their existence. Like Noah, Hud adds that he expects no reward except from He who created him (*in ajrī illā 'alā alladhī faṭaranī*, 51), while Salih repeats Noah's question, "Who will save me from God if I disobey Him?" (*man yanṣurunī min Allāh in 'aṣaytuḥu*, 63). In response to both prophets, the people doubt the truthfulness of the message and refuse to abandon their old gods. Interestingly, these two objections alternate in priority; the people of 'Ad tell Hud that he has not brought any proof, and they do not want to

abandon their gods anyway (*mā nahnu bi-tārikī ālihatinā*, 53), while the people of Thamud’s response is one more concerned with the traditions of their ancestors: “Do you forbid us to worship what our fathers worshipped?” (*a-tanhānā an na‘buda mā ya‘budu ābā’unā*, 62). They then add that they are in doubt (*innanā fī shakkīn*), almost as an afterthought. Thus, the tension between the prophets’ struggle to convince their audience on the one hand and the people’s fear of change and loss on the other are both acknowledged and kept in balance.

Neither Hud nor Salih seem as affected by their peoples’ fate as was Noah. Hud emphatically stresses his innocence of any wrongful association and places his complete trust in God’s protection (54-56), then concludes with this rather interesting statement, “If you turn away, I have delivered to you that with which I was sent” (57), which suggests that their turning away and subsequent punishment will, in fact, fulfill the divine plan. This is a radical departure from Noah’s attitude; Hud does not beg God to spare ‘Ad and indeed sees its destruction as both just and necessary for a people who denied (*jahādū*) the signs of God and disobeyed (*‘aṣāū*) His messengers (59). Salih is unique in that he is the only prophet in Surat Hud who responds to his people’s demands for proof with a miraculous sign, bringing forth a she-camel (*nāqah*) of God as a physical sign for them to take heed of. When they kill her, Salih simply tells them they have three days in their houses (to live), and that their doom cannot be altered (*dhālika wa‘d ghayr makdhub*, 65). The contrast between the two episodes reinforces their shared basis—that judgement is inevitable and imminent, and the procurement of signs to a people set on disbelief will have no effect, as Noah had said (28).

When we arrive to the city of Sodom and the prophets Abraham and Lot, we see a striking return to themes of ambivalence and sorrow. Abraham, the great patriarch of the prophets, is surprisingly the most skeptical of God’s plans. When he is visited by angels, he offers them food and grows suspicious when they do not take it. When they inform his wife of her pregnancy, she reacts with distress and disbelief, and they are forced to admonish her for her wonderment at God’s command (73). Finally, the angels tell Abraham of Sodom’s impending destruction, and Abraham, who is “gentle, tender-hearted, [and] repentant” (*halīm, awwāh, munīb*, 75), begins to plead with God on its behalf (72). He too is rebuked for his efforts: “O Abraham, stop this! Your Lord’s command has come and an irreversible punishment has come upon them” (76). The inefficacy of intercession from any party is a central tenant of the Qur’an, reiterated in surahs Najm, Taha, Maryam, Baqarah, and Zukhruf among others, but even

Abraham cannot help but attempt it, moved as he is by pity. Lot, too, is disturbed by God's punishment. "And when Our messengers came to Lot, he was grieved by them and felt unable to protect them. He said: 'This is a dreadful day'" (77).¹¹ His attempts to intercede, first by offering his daughters to the people of Sodom (78), then by wishing for the power to prevent them from evil (80), are of course fruitless, and he has no choice but to flee the city, losing his wife in the process. Like Noah, he is forced to reconcile the destruction of his city and the loss of his wife with the necessary justice of such a punishment, and while he does acquiesce to God's will, it is clear that he is under great distress nevertheless.

The final stories of the sequence, those of Lot, Shu'ayb, and Moses, recount a confrontation with a different sort of population than those of the initial four, one that is not damned for association, denial, or error in belief, but damned rather for transgressive acts: the "evil deeds" (*sayyi'āt*) of Sodom, the penny-pinching and filching of Midyan, and the outright tyranny of Pharaoh. The story of Shu'ayb is very close to that of Salih in its form, but his encounter with the people of Midyan reflects this difference. When he reminds them to worship God, Shu'ayb begs them not to let the rift (*shiqāq*) between them prevent them from realizing their evil ways, and even draws upon the memory of Noah, Hud, Lot, and Salih to convince them of his truthfulness (89). The people of Midyan do not seem as threatened as those of 'Ad or Thamud by the warning, neither in its political implications nor its religious challenges; they rather come across as proud and arrogant: "O Shu'ayb, does your prayer command you that we should abandon what our fathers worshipped and that we should not do with our wealth what we wish?" (87); "O Shu'ayb, we do not understand much of what you say; and surely we see you weak in our midst. Were it not for your family, we would have stoned you" (91).¹² In the face of such arrogance, Shu'ayb is not in a position to change any minds, and all he can do is tell them, "O my people, do as you like, as will I; you will learn who will be visited by punishment" (93). Perhaps Shu'ayb is not grieved to see such proud people go, but in any case, he seems aware of his role as a warner and comfortable in fulfilling his duty. The reference to Moses in this surah, which is quite brief, also does not show any signs of emotional attachment—the Qur'an blandly says, "they followed Pharaoh's command, and Pharaoh's command is not rightly guided" (97).

It is with this tone that we arrive to the end of the surah. We have seen many reactions to the prophetic burden of bearing good news (*bishārah*) and warning (*andhār*) to the people, ranging from sturdy confidence to doubt to grief and bitterness. Through these stories, the

Qur'an provides Muhammad with a set of examples to inspire him and give him hope. From the stories of Noah, Abraham, and Lot, it is clear that questioning God is not called for; from Hud, Salih, and Shu'ayb, that fully relying on God's mercy will keep him on the straight path. I suspect that there is a logic to ending the sequence with Shu'ayb, even though there are other prophets (notably Jesus) who are closer to Muhammad's own time; the prosperous, mercantile society of Midyan most closely reflects Mecca in its character, and Shu'ayb's ability to faithfully execute his mission while distancing himself emotionally from those who deny him seems like the best model for Muhammad to follow. The many injunctions throughout the Qur'an to Muhammad and the Muslims to be patient (*uṣṣurū*) and not to grieve support this, as do the final verses of Surat Hud:

And your Lord would not have destroyed the cities unjustly, had their inhabitants been righteous. (117) And had your Lord willed, He would have made mankind a single nation; but they will continue to differ among themselves, (118) ... And all We relate to you of the tidings of the Messengers is to strengthen your hear; and you have received in these the truth, admonition and a reminder for the believers. (120) And say to the unbelievers: "Continue with what you are doing, and we shall continue with ours." (121) "And wait; we too are waiting."¹³ (122)

Endnotes

1. Because this is a critical essay and not an academic paper, I have opted to avoid Arabic diacritics in my transliteration, except when directly quoting qur'anic passages.

2. Except where otherwise noted, all translations are my own, although I referred to the Majid Fakhry translation as a guide (see below).

3. 'Association' is the word I have selected for the Arabic term *shirk*, which is sometimes somewhat misleadingly translated into 'polytheism.' *Shirk* more accurately means 'the association of divinity with anything other than God.' Thus, pagan idol-worship and the Christian belief in Jesus as the literal son of God both fall into this category.

4. See Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: text, translation & commentary*, Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1938, p. 799.

5. Cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Major themes of the Qur'an*, Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980, p. 44.

6. Karen Armstrong has a good description of the enormous challenges posed by revelation in her book *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*, San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992, p. 108. Even Muhammad's foster father and protector, Abu Talib, could not bring himself to enter the new faith, out of reverence for the ways of his forefathers.

7. Rahman, 83.

8. Rahman, 139.

9. Translation by Majid Fakhry, *An interpretation of the Qur'an: English translation of the meanings: a bilingual edition*, New York: New York University Press, 2004, p. 222.

10. The verb *iftará*, from which the word *muftarūn* derives, carries two principal meanings. On the one hand it can mean lying and deceit; on the other it means the fabrication of falsehoods. In the context of this verse I think it is most likely that it means the people of 'Ad have been lying about God's existence despite clear signs to the contrary (as described in verse 18, which uses the same word).

11. Fakhry, 225.

12. Fakhry, 227.

13. Fakhry, 230-231.