

The Prophet Nūh

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The Prophet Nūh¹ has a chapter in the Qur'an named after him and it is chapter number 71. This chapter does not talk about the whole history of Nuh, but, as is the case in most of the other messengers' stories, the story of Nuh is scattered in different chapters of the Qur'an. Sura 71 just gives the headlines, or the most important ordeals which he faced while he was preaching the call of God. One very interesting thing is that he is the messenger about whom the Qur'an specifically mentions the number of years he preached Islam – 950 years. In Chapter Al-Ankabūt, a verse states, “And, indeed, in times long past We sent forth Noah unto his people, and he dwelt among them a thousand years less fifty...” *Nine hundred fifty years spent in preaching!* That indicates that his age was more than that.

At the time of Nuh, the people were worshipping idols. The idol worship prevalent at the time of Muhammad, *‘alayhi-s-salato wa-s-salaam*,² was inherited by the Arabs from their predecessors. Special names were given to

the most important idols, but there were about 360 idols in the Ka'bah at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, *‘alayhi-s-salato wa-s-salaam*, and each one was worshipped one day in the year. [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The English translation is:] “Behold, We sent Noah unto his people, saying ‘Warn thy people ere grievous suffering befall them’” [71:1].

The sura starts by the word *inna*. The Arabic word **إِنَّا** is called *inna haf tawkeed – yā-nī*,³ a letter indicating assurance – that something *had* happened, *had* taken place, for sure. It may be translated into English as “verily” or “surely” or “behold”. So the sura starts by saying that God sent Nuh to his people and gave him a task to perform: warn his people before a painful doom befalls them. So, like any messenger, he went to his people and said, “O my people, I came to warn you and I have a very clear message.”

What is the warning with which every messenger

¹ Noah

² Upon him be prayers and peace

³ An Arabic expression which has no equivalent in English and means, loosely, “I mean” or, “you know” or, “in other words” depending on the context

came? [Imam quotes:] **أَنْ اَعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَانْقَوْهُ وَأَطِيعُونَ** [71:3]. The entire verse is composed of three words, and all three are imperatives:

اَعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ (worship God: *Ibadah*). It means: abandon the worship of these idols that you are presently worshipping, and worship God who created you, and who is providing for you. *Ibadah* is the first step.

وَانْقَوْهُ (Fear Him / *taqwa*). *Taqwa* is a higher level of worship.

It is in the category of *ihsan* which the Prophet, peace be upon him, described as “Worshipping God as if you see Him, and if you don’t see Him, to have the awareness that He is seeing you.”

وَأَطِيعُونَ is the third imperative, and it means, “And obey me”. There is another verse, elsewhere in the Qur’an, which declares that when one obeys the messengers, one is obeying Allah. Nuh didn’t come with that message from himself; it was the order of God. [Imam quotes:]

“**يَغْفِرُ لَكُمْ مِّنْ ذُنُوبِكُمْ**” So that He may forgive

you some of your sins **وَيُؤَخِّرْكُمْ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى**...

and grant you respite until a term known to Him alone, but, behold, when the term appointed by God does come, it can never be put back – if you knew it” [71:4].

So the first result of worshipping Allah, fearing Him, and obeying the messenger is forgiveness. Here, from the Arabic language point of view, you notice that it says:

يَغْفِرُ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ He didn’t say: **يَغْفِرُ لَكُمْ مِّنْ ذُنُوبِكُمْ**

“**مِّنْ**” here, in the Arabic grammar, is called “min al-ba’adiyyah”, *yā hī*, indicating “some”. He will forgive *some*

(**مِّنْ**) of your sins, in the meaning that, He will forgive the sins preceding your acceptance of that faith; it is not all-round, unconditional forgiveness. And the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: “Any sins committed before accepting Islam, or before *tawbah* (repentance), will be abolished.”

وَيُؤَخِّرْكُمْ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى The literal

meaning is: “Extend your life for a certain time”. Since *ajal*, or the term appointed in this life, is fixed, how will it be

extended? The final part of this verse *itself* says, “...But, behold, when the term appointed by God does come, it can never be put back – if you knew it!” But, Nuh, *‘alayhi-s-salaam*,⁴ is telling his people to worship God alone, so He will forgive their sins, and “extend your life for a certain time.” It seems there is a contradiction here. So, what does “extend your life” mean? The ulama of Islam explain this as meaning that God will bestow on them *barakāt*:⁵ they will live one day but they will live in a state of contentment; that one day will be better than living one week in misery. It means that the short time when you are worshipping God and living at peace with yourself is equal to many days when you are not in such a condition. As a result, the final part of the verse says, when the *ajal*⁶ comes, it can never be delayed: [Imam quotes:] “And for all people a term has been set: and when the end of their term approaches, they can neither delay it by a single moment, nor can they hasten it” [7:34].

[Imam quotes Arabic. The English translation is:] “And after a time Noah said: ‘O my Sustainer! Verily, I have been calling unto my people night and day, but my call has only caused them to flee farther and farther away from Thee. And, behold, whenever I called unto them with a view to Thy granting them forgiveness, they put their fingers into their ears, and wrapped themselves up in their garments [of sin] and grew obstinate, and became yet more arrogant in their false pride. And, behold, I preached to them in public; and I spoke to them secretly, in private...’ [71: 5 – 9].

Nuh, because of his hard task of calling the people to the way of God, and because of their refusal to listen, directed his words to God and said, O God, I have called my people to your way day and night. But, whenever I preach to them, I find that they run from me; they are trying to evade me. My preaching is making them only more stubborn. Whenever I try to lead them to the right away they put their fingers in their ears indicating that they don’t want to listen to the truth. They cover their faces with their garments so they won’t even face me, or see the truth to which I am calling them. They are showing their arrogance by insisting on their *kufri*⁷ and their idol worship. If we reflect on what Nuh is saying, and consider it in the context of our present life, we find this situation

⁴ Upon him be peace

⁵ Blessings

⁶ The end [of a fixed time or the duration of this life]

⁷ Unbelief

prevalent among the Muslims. Lets us see how this is happening.

Religious decrees are of two kinds: clear-cut, straightforward laws and directives, and laws and directives that are not clear-cut; they are somewhat vague. The unambiguous and basic laws of religion are expressed in the Qur'an in verses which are very clear, and no one argues about them. No matter where you go, you will not find two Muslims disagreeing with each other that God has imposed upon Muslims prayer, five times a day, every day; or the fast during the month of Ramadan; or the zakah every year; or the Hajj once in a lifetime. The reason is that the Qur'anic verses regarding these subjects are *Ayāt Muhkamāt* – clear-cut. But there are other areas in Islam, and in the Qur'an, called *Ayāt Mutashābihāt* that are vague. Our forefathers and ulama,⁸ in the first and second century after the Prophet, used to study these vague points in Islam, and the result of their studies is what we call nowadays al-Fiqh.⁹ The term *al-fiqh* itself means “the understanding”.

It means that those past scholars tried to understand what the vague Qur'anic verses and the vague ahādith¹⁰ meant. And everyone made up his mind. As a result of that study, we have schools of thought such as the school of Abu Haneefa, the school of Imam Shafi'i, the school of Imam Hanbal, the school of Ja'far Saadiq, the school of Imam Malik, and within every school there are branches. So, those people differed among themselves in the area of religion. But when they used to give fatwas¹¹ they would say, *wa-Allahu a'lam*.¹² They did not declare that their fatwa was the correct answer, or the only right way. Moreover, they used to tell the people that this is what they understood of that vague verse, or vague hadith, and if they found something better, then, they should follow it. So their advice to their people was that they should follow the other if they found that the other opinion was better than theirs. Nowadays we are not like that.

Nowadays, if someone has an opinion in religion, he/she considers it as the only right one, while all the rest are wrong. Moreover, if you don't follow my opinion, you are my enemy. And Islam is never supposed to be like that. The

Prophet, peace be upon him, said, “When someone makes up his mind to understand some vague Qur'anic verse, if he is correct, he will be rewarded twice; if he is wrong, he will be rewarded once.” Either way, you are benefiting. So, we should take this advice ourselves. This is called tolerance. Nowadays, we find the Muslims divided into groups, and every group is interpreting Islam its own way. I was in a certain place recently, and I found the people explaining the concept of *al Jannah*¹³ in a very interesting way: “It has apples, grapes, peaches, watermelon, all types of fruit, and rivers are flowing underneath” as the Qur'an states. [Imam quotes numerous verses in Arabic in support of that.] They were explaining these verses literally, and they asked me, “What do you think?” I replied that the Qur'an was initially revealed to the Arabs living in the desert where they had no trees, no rivers; they were starving, and had no fruits, and had limited choice in food, so, the Qur'an was appealing to their imagination by talking in that language, but it is not to be understood in its literal sense because *al Jannah wan-Nār*¹⁴ belong to the realm of the Unseen. We haven't been there to be able to describe the details. And when the Qur'an describes them, it does so in the language which we human beings, living on this earth, can comprehend; it means to say, people, jannah is a very lovable place, so work hard to gain it. But, from the logical point of view, if you eat grapes, apples, and watermelon just like we do here, then, we have to go to the toilet. Is there a toilet in Heaven? What type of a life are we going to have there? Is it like the life on this earth? If it is like the life on this earth, then there is no difference between this life and the next life; the other life should be a life characterized by different conditions.

Moreover, when such people read a verse like

...يَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ وِلْدَانٌ مُّخْلِذُونَ¹⁵ they interpret it

as “servants” – that there will be servants serving us in Heaven. Imagine, having servants in Heaven? What about those servants themselves? From where would they come? Won't they have some sort of reward also? But it is described in that language so human beings will understand it. Not everyone who picks up the Qur'an and reads it can explain it. I informed the people who were explaining the concept of jannah in literal terms that it took me 17 years in Al-Azhar to

⁸ Scholars

⁹ Jurisprudence

¹⁰ A report or account of what the Prophet said

¹¹ Religious verdicts

¹² And God knows best what is most correct

¹³ Paradise

¹⁴ Heaven and Hell

¹⁵ 56:17

read the explanation of only one quarter of the Qur'an. Then our teachers said, "Now go and live your lives, and do your best to finish the other three quarters before you die; we have given you the basic guidance as to how to understand the Qur'an." But you come across people who have studied only sixth grade explaining the Qur'an, and if you disagree with them, you are not Muslim. We have that type, nowadays, everywhere. And this means that tolerance is absent among the Muslims; and that is why we are divided and torn apart. Wherever you find two Muslims, there are three parties, as they say in some proverbs. So, Sayyidna Nuh¹⁶, 'alayhi-s-salaam, said the same thing: I have preached to my people day and night, but the more I preach, the more their kufr and stubbornness increases. So, history repeats itself; the only difference is that he was preaching to non-believers, while, nowadays, this is happening among the so-called believers.

"And, behold, I preached to them in public; and I spoke to them secretly, in private. . ." This is exactly what the Prophet Muhammad, 'alayhi-s-salato wa-s-salaam, did also: he started his preaching secretly, and continued that way for three years. The school, *Dar-ul Arqam ibn Abi al-Arqam al-Makhzūmi*, where the new Muslims were educated is very well known to this day. After three years he received the order of God to preach openly and not to pay any attention to those *mushrikeen*.¹⁷ [Imam quotes Arabic verses. The English translation is:]

"And, behold, I preached to them in public; and I spoke to them secretly, in private; and I said: 'Ask your Sustainer to forgive you your sins – for verily, he is all forgiving, He will shower upon you abundant rain and will aid you with worldly goods (*amwaal*) and children (*banīna*), and will shower upon you gardens and bestow upon you running waters" [71: 9-12].

Nuh is telling his people if they asked God's forgiveness He will let "abundant rain" fall from the sky. What does that mean? Without water we cannot live. The rain will increase the plants, the crops, the provisions – *amwaal* – which will feed them, and that is exactly like the Qur'anic verse [Imam quotes Arabic. The English translation is:]

[The Prophet Hūd¹⁸ speaking]"Hence, O my people,

ask your Sustainer to forgive you your sins, and then turn towards Him in repentance – whereupon He will shower upon you abundant rain, and will add strength to your strength. . ." [11:52].

Notice how Nuh starts by *amwaal* – wealth – while *bani*, or children is mentioned second. That indicates the nature of man: he loves wealth more than he loves his children. In many verses in the Qur'an we find the same: [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The English translation is:]

"Wealth and children are an adornment of this world's life: but good deeds, the fruit whereof endures forever, are of far greater merit in thy Sustainer's sight, and a far better source of hope" [18:46].

When the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad, the people were worshipping idols just like the people of Nuh. Therefore, the Qur'an concentrates a good deal on *Al-Wahdāniyyah*,¹⁹ and His existence, and what ought to be the attitude of His creation towards Him. In such verses, normally, the Qur'an talks about examples from the lives of people, from the universe around them, and from the land, or the earth on which they live. This sura follows the same pattern, but, when it talks about these matters, it talks only briefly. Other verses in the Qur'an give more details about the topics touched upon here. Imam quotes:

مَا لَكُمْ لَّا تَرْجُونَ لِلَّهِ وَقَارًا [71:13]. Nuh is

saying to his people: "What is amiss with you that you cannot look forward to God's majesty – that you refuse to believe in God?" It is stated as if it is a question. But it is not a question. It starts with the word "*ma*" which is an article of interrogative, or what we call in Arabic, *adat 'istifhaam*. It means, "Why are you not worshipping God the way He deserves to be worshipped?" but it is not a question. In Arabic language it is called *'istifhaamun inkaari* (a denial). It intends to convey that their attitude towards their Creator is one of denial and, as a result, they are worshipping idols, which are of no benefit and of no harm, and what they are doing is barring them from worshipping God. Then, in the next verse comes a confirmation to answer that denial by saying: "He created you in stages."

"What is amiss with you that you cannot look forward to God's majesty (that you refuse to believe in God) seeing that He has created every one of you in successive

¹⁶ A title of respect

¹⁷ Idol worshippers

¹⁸ An Arabian prophet. He may be identical with the Biblical

'Eber

¹⁹ The unity of God

stages?" [71:13-14]

It is saying that, if you would like to know God, look at your own creation, which occurred in stages. And the verse stops at that point and does not elaborate. But, details on the stages of creation may be found in Chapter Al-Mo'minūn;²⁰ this is known as *al-Qur'an yufassiru ba'duhu ba'dan*.²¹ [Imam quotes Arabic. The English translation is:]

"Now, indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay, and then We cause him to remain as a drop of sperm in the womb's firm keeping, and then We create out of the drop of sperm a germ-cell, and then We create out of the germ-cell an embryonic lump, and then We create within the embryonic lump bones, and then We clothe the bones with flesh – and then We bring all this into being as a new creation (*khalqan aakhar*): hallowed, therefore is God, the best of artisans!"

It is seven stages, and it ends with *khalqan aakhar*.²² It starts by talking about Adam, or the first human being created on earth, as being created out of a piece of clay, or mud. It is now left for the human intellect to prove this fact. Nowadays, we hear about a science called genetics which posits that one inherits instincts, emotions, and physical similarities from his predecessors. A child may inherit a disease from his parents. So, if man was originally created from the earth, did he inherit something from the earth? Yes, nowadays science has proved that. Nowadays, when you go to a physician and he orders blood tests, the result comes back stating that you have low calcium, or low magnesium, or low iron, and on the basis of that result, the doctor will give you medicine to correct the problem. All of these elements, we find, are a part of the earth. We get calcium, magnesium, iron and all other things from the earth. So, this research is open for the human mind. We may not discover everything we are looking for, but, at least, it will prove for us scientific facts stated in the Qur'an by using methods of analysis and logical thinking.

Then the Qur'an gives another example – an example from the universe: [Imam quotes Arabic. The translation is:]

"Didn't you see how God created seven skies (*samā*) in layers (*tibaaqan*) one above the other?" [71:15] What is the sky? In the Arabic language the word "sky" or *samā* means "anything that is above you". We normally look up at

the sky, or the planets, and say, "This is the sky" but that is not correct. *Samā* – sky – belongs to the Unseen. "Seven skies." That is something which needs thinking. I don't know why that number seven is always mentioned in the Qur'an: it talks about seven skies, and seven earths. The week is seven days. We go to Hajj and circle around the Ka'bah seven times. We have *sa'y* between Safā and Marwah seven times.²³ These are mysteries. The number seven, which is repeated in these rituals and *'ibadaat*²⁴ – what is the secret behind it, God knows? When it comes to the seven skies it says, *tibaaqan – yā'nī*, one above the other. Nowadays we are hearing about the spaceship which was sent to Venus. Traveling at the speed of sound²⁵ it would take five years to reach there. How far is that? And Venus is in the lowest sky. Some ulama speak about the galaxies as representing sky number one, but all this is guessing. The universe is a strange thing. When you think about it, you don't reach a solution, but the advantage of thinking is that it leads you to ask, "Who is behind all that? Who made it?" When you see a table you know that somebody made it, it did not come into existence by itself. So when you ponder that universe, you ask, "Who made it? There must be a maker." That maker is what we call Allah. So, this is why the Qur'an always exhorts us human beings to ponder the universe in order to know God.

In the Arabic language the word *siraj* means "a light source whose power, or energy, or light is self-contained." It is a *source* of light. The word *qamar* means a light source whose light is not coming from itself – it is *not a source* of light. The Qur'an calls the sun *siraj* and the moon *qamar*, so the Qur'an makes that distinction between the sun and the moon. But we, only now, understand from science that the moon reflects the light of the sun to earth at night, and that it has no light of its own. That is another advantage when you read the Qur'an: if your body of knowledge is wide enough, then it will convince you that the words of the Qur'an cannot be the words of a human being. It must be the word of the One who created that universe, who created the moon and the sun because He knows the secrets of these creations. [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The English translation is:]

"Do you not see how God has created the seven heavens one above another, and made the moon (*qamar*) a light

²⁰ 23:12

²¹ The Qur'an explains itself

²² A new creation, a new human being

²³ One of the rituals of Hajj

²⁴ Worship of God

²⁵ 761 miles/hour at sea level

in their midst, and made the sun (*siraj*) as a glorious lamp?" [71:15-16]

[Imam quotes:]

وَاللَّهُ أَنْبَتَكُمْ مِّنَ الْأَرْضِ نَبَاتًا [71:17].

"And God has produced you from the earth growing gradually." Here, the ulama were confused. What does that verse mean? Are we like the plants growing from the earth?

أَنْبَتَكُمْ means "made you," or, "created you, like a plant coming out of the earth." Some ulama said, because our first father, Adam, was created from earth, so, the Qur'an is referring to that creation, and it means to say that we were created from the earth just as the plants grow from the earth. Another group of ulama disagreed. They say it means that because man is living on everything that comes out of the earth – his food and drink are coming from the earth – so he is exactly like a plant, and the earth is his mother.

And here is a point which will invite one to think also. Plants could be living, and could be dead. Human beings could be living, and could be dead. Animals could be living, and could be dead. And the difference between death and life is the soul. Does that mean that the plants have a soul? Do the animals have a soul? And if there is a soul in them, what is the similarity between their soul and that of the human soul?

And this reminds us of the Medieval Age... You know, here, in America now, we hear constantly that Islam treats the woman as a second-class citizen, and that the woman is of no value among the Muslims. But, in fact, if you read the history of Christianity, you will find that in the Medieval Ages some conferences called *al-majama' al-muqaddasa* – The Sacred Conferences – were held. They gathered together the scholars of Christianity to discuss topics such as "Is the woman equal to man or not?" The answer was, "No." "Does she have a soul or not?" That was a topic discussed – does she have a soul or not? And the majority agreed that she has a soul otherwise she would be dead. So the third question discussed was, "Is her soul like that of the human being or like that of the animals?" And the second part of the question [meaning that her soul was more like that of an animal] was the predominant opinion. As a result, the woman could not buy any property without the signature of her husband. In France, until this century – till the 1930s – a woman could not buy property unless her husband signed for that. People sometimes don't know their own defects, but they look at the defects of others. There is a

difference between Islam and Muslims. We don't deny that the woman is treated differently in some areas of the Muslim world. No one can argue that. But is that Islam? It is not. There is a very big difference between Islam and the Muslims, because Muslims could not be abiding by Islam in their rulings, but, truly, Islam, since the creation of the human being, talked about the two as equal: [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The English translation is:]

"O mankind, fear your God who has created you out of one Soul and out of it created its mate. . . ." ²⁶ So, they are created of the same Soul, and that denotes equality. That's Islam. If Muslims are deviating from the teachings of Islam, it is the sin of the Muslims, not the sin of Islam.

[Imam quotes 71:19 and explains:] God created the earth for you *bisaata*. The word *bisaata* means "flat". Some of our ulama, until this very day, maintain that the earth is not a globe, and that it is flat, because "the Qur'an says so", and they refer to this verse. That's because they translate the Qur'an literally, and they would like to reconcile the Qur'an with what they see with their eyes: they claim that it is very plain to see that the earth is flat, and the highways are flat.

The earth is a globe, it is not flat. This verse intends to convey the meaning that God created the earth flat for you, as it *appears* in your eyes, so you can walk on it easily, you can plant it easily, and live on it. Consequently, the next verse [71:20] says: "So you can build your highways and roads and walk thereon on spacious paths." It means: "God has made the earth a wide expanse (*bisaata*) for you so that you might walk thereon on spacious paths."

After all that, after Nuh had invited his people to the way of God for 950 years and explained all these things to them, and no one listened to him except a few people, then God inspired him and said to him: No one will believe other than those who have already believed, so don't tire yourself any more. So what did Nuh do? He prayed: if that is the situation, O God, don't let any one of the rejecters of your faith remain alive on this earth. If You will leave them they will lead the people astray, and their descendants will be *kuffar* exactly like them. They will deny your faith exactly like their fathers and forefathers. [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The English translation is:]

"And Noah prayed: 'O my Sustainer! Leave not on earth any of those who deny the truth: for, behold, if Thou dost

²⁶ 4:1

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leave them, they will always try to lead astray those who worship Thee, and will give birth to nothing but wickedness and stubborn ingratitude” [71:26-27].

The Prophet, peace be upon him, consulted with his companions, after the Battle of Badr, about what to do with the captives of war, since, in those days, all prisoners of war were slaves, and Islam was fighting to abolish slavery. AbuBakr said to him: “They are your relatives, O Prophet, they are from your tribe, forgive them, maybe God will guide them.” Omar bin Khattab – you know, the family of al-Khattab is a very severe one – said: “*Ya Rasūlullah*,²⁷ chop off their heads,

because, if you leave them, they will cause corruption on earth.” The Prophet then made his well-known remark: “You, Abu Bakr, are like Ibrahim,²⁸ *‘alayhi-s-salaam*, when he prayed: ‘Anyone who follows me is one of my people, and anyone who is disobedient to my faith. . . You are the Forgiver, forgive them.’” And turning to Omar, the Prophet said: “*Ya Omar*, you are like Nuh, *‘alayhi-s-salaam*, when he prayed to God to obliterate all rejecters of the faith, because if they were left, their descendants would be *kuffar* exactly like them.”

The end result was the *Great Flood* and they all perished except Nuh and those in the ark with him.

²⁷ O Messenger of God

²⁸ The Prophet Abraham