

Article

“The Human Was Created Out of Haste.” On Prophecy and the Problem of Human Nature in the Qur’an

Gabriel Said Reynolds

Department of Theology, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA; reynolds@nd.edu

Abstract: In this article it is argued that the Qur’an’s doctrine of divine mercy is best understood in light of its pessimistic anthropology, an aspect of the text that is often underappreciated. The so-called “primordial covenant” verse (Q 7:172) of the Qur’an holds humans responsible for submission to God. The Qur’anic language on “signs” in the natural world suggests that humans should recognize God (and be grateful to Him) by reflection on nature alone. Yet, according to the Qur’an they do not. The Qur’an refers frequently to humans as “ungrateful” and “hasty”. It also makes divine punishments a regular element of human history, suggesting that rebellion is endemic to human nature. It is, I argue, precisely the rebelliousness of humans that makes God’s initiative in sending prophets merciful. The ministry of prophets in the Qur’an is an unmerited manifestation of divine compassion for a sinful humanity.

Keywords: Qur’an; God; mercy; prophets; sin; punishment stories; primordial covenant; wrath



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1. Introduction

In the opening section of Surah 36 the divine voice of the Qur’an addresses the Prophet directly: “Surely you are indeed one of the envoys, on a straight path, a sending down of the Mighty, the Compassionate, so that you may warn a people. Their fathers have not been warned, and so they are oblivious” (Q 36:3–6).¹ This passage (cf. Q 28:46; 32:3; 34:44) presents Muhammad as a prophet to a people who were previously ignorant of divine revelation (*ummiyyūn*; see Q 3:20, 75; 62:2). It also suggests (“Their fathers have not been warned, and so (*fa-hum*) they are oblivious”) that without prophetic revelation people tend to be ignorant of God. This suggestion is in tension with the many passages of the Qur’an that speak of the signs of creation that should lead a human, exercising reason, to deduce the existence and power of God. Surah 36:3–6, however, implies that without prophetic warning humans tend not to recognize these signs. Consequently, they tend not to recognize the one God, the creator, much less submit to Him.

This tension, I propose, reveals something important about the Qur’an’s view of human nature. Humans, in principle, should be able to reason their way to God. In fact, they need a prophet to remind them of the signs that point to God. In other words, according to the Qur’an humans tend to fall into error. God responds to their erring ways by (mercifully) sending prophets.

Sura 36 continues by describing God’s wrath at those who have rejected the warning of His prophet:

Certainly the word has proved true against most of them: “They will not believe.” Surely We have placed chains on their necks, and it (reaches up) to the chin, and so they (are forced to) hold their heads up. We have made a barrier before them and a barrier behind them, and We have covered them, and so they do not see. (It is) the same for them whether you warn them or you do not warn them. They will not believe. You warn only the one who follows the Reminder and fears the Merciful in the unseen. So give him the good news of forgiveness and a generous reward (Q 36:7–11).

Here, the Qur'an's pessimistic anthropology becomes even more apparent. Humans are "oblivious" when they have no warner to remind them of God's existence and power to judge. Moreover, most of them still refuse to believe, even when such a warner comes to them.² In response God, in His anger, leads them astray still further so that they will never come to believe.

Scholars in the field of Qur'anic Studies have largely passed over the pessimism of the Qur'an's anthropology.³ However, this pessimism, I will argue, is the key to understanding the Qur'an's emphasis on prophets and prophethood and consequently its vision of God's mercy. Without a clear appreciation of human sinfulness in the Qur'an, any description of prophecy, and mercy, in the Qur'an will be incomplete.

2. Human Nature in the Qur'an

The Qur'an teaches that humans were created according to the *fiṭrah* of God, as expressed by Q 30:30: "Set your face to the religion (as) a Ḥanīf—the creation of God for (*fiṭrat allāh*) which He created (*faṭara*) humankind. (There is) no change in the creation of God. That is the right religion, but most of the people do not know (it)." Humans, according to a standard reading of this verse, were originally created according to this "right religion" (*al-dīn al-qayyim*). Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200) explains *fiṭrah* as "the created nature with which God created the human" (*al-khilqah allatī khalaqa allāhu 'alayhā al-bashar*) and quotes a tradition from Mujāhid that this is simply Islam (Ibn al-Jawzī 1404, 6:300).⁴ Still it is worth noting that this very verse also affirms that "most of the people do not know (the right religion)." Ibn al-Jawzī would apply this only to the infidels of Mecca (*kuffār makkah*), but as we will see there is reason to believe that the Qur'an has a more global assessment in mind.

All humans struggle with the evil impulses of their *nafs* (roughly, "soul"). This innate element of human persons "commands" them to evil (Q 12:53). This *nafs* has qualities of miserliness (*shuḥḥ*; e.g., Q 4:128), envy (*ḥasad*; Q 2:109), fear (*khawf*; Q 20:67–68), anxiety (*dīq*; Q 9:118), distress (*ḥaraj*; Q 4:65), pride (*kibr*; Q 25:21), and grief (*ḥasrah*; Q 35:8, 39:56). The *nafs* has desires (*hawā*; Q 79:40–41), appetites (*ishtahat*; Q 21:102), and needs (*ḥājah*; Q 12:68). It is enticing (*sawwālat*; Q 12:18, 20:96), subjecting (*ṭawwā'at*; Q 5:30), and tempting (*tuwaswis*; Q 50:16). The *nafs* on the whole prompts humans to sin, even if on a few occasions the *nafs* is said to have positive qualities.⁵

The Qur'an also frequently associates the *qalb* ("heart", also represented by *fu'ād*; *ṣadr*, *lubb*) with negative dispositions and actions. The Qur'an seems to have a notion of the heart as the center of intellection, for better or worse. On two occasions (Q 2:88; 4:155) the hearts of the Israelites are said to be "uncircumcised" or "covered" (*ghulf*).⁶ The Qur'an speaks often of a *marad* "sickness" in the human hearts (Q 2:10; 5:52; 8:49; 9:125; 22:53; 24:50; 33:12, 32, 60; 47:20, 29; 74:31) or a hardness of hearts (Q 2:74; 5:13; 6:43; 22:53; 39:22; 57:16). On the other hand, there are also numerous passages that speak of hearts that are "secure in belief", "sound", "penitent", or positive in other manners.⁷

Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) is attentive to the Qur'an's distinctly pessimistic assessment of humankind when he draws a distinction between the way which God intended humans to be and the way they actually are. He concludes that humans have distorted their natural goodness: "Their primordial nature has been distorted almost beyond recognition; they became "Satan's brothers" after God had breathed His own spirit into Adam."⁸ The argument could be made, and I have made it elsewhere, that the Qur'anic vision of humans originally created as good, but subsequently turned bad, is not far from the Christian teaching on original sin.⁹ It is true that this comparison should not be taken too far. The Qur'an on occasion insists that some humans at least are not sinful. Thus, we read in Surah 95: "Certainly We created the human in the finest state. Then We return him to the lowest of the low—except for those who believe and do righteous deeds. For them (there is) a reward without end" (Q 95:4–6). This passage implies that God Himself punishes some humans (those who do not believe and/or do righteous deeds) by humiliating them. Some, however, are righteous believers.

Nevertheless Rahman, while recognizing the sinfulness of humans, still insists that humanity's nature is "to be exalted":

It appears that man does not require much effort to be petty, self-seeking, submerged in his day-to-day life, and a slave of his desires, not because this is "natural" to him—for his real nature is to be exalted—but because "gravitating down to the earth" as we have quoted the Qur'anic language, is much easier than ascending to the heights of purity" (Rahman 1980, pp. 20–21).

For Rahman, humanity's "exalted" nature means that humans have the capacity to find the truth about God and submit to him. On this point Rahman refers to the notion of a "Primordial Covenant", for which he finds evidence in the Qur'an:

The point is that every person and every people have continuously to search their own consciences, and, because of this engraving upon their heart, which represents the Primordial Covenant, none may take refuge in the excuse that they had been preconditioned by their "hereditary memory," by the set ways of "our forefathers" (Rahman 1980, pp. 20–21).

By "Primordial Covenant" Rahman is alluding to Qur'an 7:172:¹⁰

(Remember) when your Lord took from the sons of Adam—from their loins—their descendants, and made them bear witness about themselves: "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes indeed! We bear witness." (We did that) so that you would not say on the Day of Resurrection, "Surely we were oblivious of this".¹¹

In the quotation above Rahman speaks of the primordial covenant not as a mythic event in a primordial time, but rather as the everyday experience of humans who have a natural instinct (an "engraving upon their heart") to submit to God. The covenant, it seems, is found in their consciences. A similar approach is taken by the Iranian exegete Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1981). For Ṭabāṭabā'ī, it is not that humans have some sort of memory of a primordial covenant (and therefore can be blamed for not holding to it). Instead humans experience this covenant through their life in this world:

For this reason a number of exegetes mention that the meaning of the circumstance referred to (in Q 7:172) by His statement "When Your Lord took" is this world (*al-dunyā*). The two verses (Q 7:172–73) refer to the nature of the divine creation that occurs to a human in the world. God (Praise be to Him), sends forth the human descendants from the loins of their fathers into the wombs of their mothers and from them into the *dunyā*. He has them give witness during their lives for themselves. He shows them the effects of His creation and the signs of His oneness and the aspects of their complete need for him from every side, which indicate His existence and His oneness. It is as though He were saying to him through this, "Am I not your Lord?" (*a-lastu bi-rabbikum*) and they respond in the tongue of their condition of their circumstance: "We witness to that. You are our Lord and there is no Lord other than You." (al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī [1417] 1997, 8:315–16).

Ṭabāṭabā'ī's (and Rahman's) creative interpretation of the *alast* verse solves one problem but creates another. His interpretation avoids the problem engendered by the standard reading of this verse, namely that God seems to be condemning humans for not holding up to a "covenant" regarding which they, in fact, have no memory. However, by shifting the locus of the covenant to the experience of each person in this world it begs the question of how (and whether) humans have collectively signed on to this "covenant." Ṭabāṭabā'ī assumes that all humans should respond positively to the evidence of God's essence and oneness in nature by saying, "You are our Lord and there is no Lord other than You." In fact, many humans deny that the natural world points to a creator. In other words, the scenario of the primordial covenant, where all of humanity has a direct experience of God, is not equivalent to the scenario of natural religion, where all of humanity has an indirect experience of God, or no experience whatsoever (of which they are conscious).

In an analysis of this verse in her article “The Primordial Covenant and Human History in the Qur’an” (al-Qadi 2003)¹², Wadad Al-Qadi takes aim precisely at these sorts of interpretations of the *alast* verse, interpretations which, to her, obfuscate the mythic nature of the idea the Qur’an is presenting:

When the rationalists object to the event of the Covenant on the grounds of physical impossibility, they apply to the event an irrelevant criterion; and when they reduce the momentous and unique dramatic encounter between the divine and the human to a mundane, mediated, ordinary, historical series of encounters, they deflate the pregnant image of that encounter, taking away the awe it is meant to impart (al-Qadi 2003, p. 337).

If, for a moment, we set aside the readings of Ṭabāṭabā’ī and Rahman, what remains of the importance of the *alast* verse? To Al-Qadi it speaks to the high place of humanity in the cosmic order, especially when this verse is seen together with Q 33:72 (which Al-Qadi speaks of as “a consort to the Verse of the Covenant”), a verse that describes how God first gave the “trust” (*amānah*) “to the heavens and the mountains and the earth.” These things refuse to accept this burden out of fear. Humanity, finally, accepts this trust. To most commentators, Al-Qadi notes, the “trust” is an allusion to obedience to God. By this reading, at least, in Q 33:72 something similar to Q 7:172 is unfolding: God is demanding that humans acknowledge His dominion (Q 7:172) and obey Him (Q 33:72). Notably, however, both verses end on a pessimistic note. Q 7:172 raises the possibility that humans will be condemned on the Day of Resurrection and Q 33:72 ends by describing humans as “arrogant and ignorant” (*zalūman jahūlan*).

This pessimistic note, Al-Qadi insightfully notes, is connected to the Qur’an’s view of salvation history. Humans in fact have been arrogant and ignorant. God, however, has responded in mercy by sending prophets. These prophets do not so much reveal mysteries regarding the divine nature as much as remind humans of their obligation to submit: “The primary function of prophets is to *remind* people of the Covenant they have made with God first and foremost, lest they should have forgotten it.” She continues: “Seen from this perspective, men’s acceptance of the various prophets’ calls represents a “renewal” of their Covenantal commitment to monotheism and to its corollary, obedience, and not the formation of a new commitment” (Ibid.).

Al-Qadi is certainly right to connect the “Primordial Covenant” verse and the history of prophets in the Qur’an. The problem of humanity is “forgetting” their “primordial” affirmation of God’s dominion. Prophets accordingly come to remind, as Al-Qadi points out.¹³ It is worth asking, however, if the primordial arrangement between God and humanity presented by Q 7:172 is a “covenant.” In fact this verse, even if it is often called the “Covenant Verse” (*āyat al-mīthāq*) mentions neither *mīthāq* nor *‘ahd* (the two standard Qur’anic terms for “covenant”). More importantly, it does not involve an agreement with obligations on both sides. God promises nothing to humanity in Q 7:172.

Indeed the Qur’an’s interest in this verse is not to describe an element of salvation history. The Qur’an uses this primordial submission of humanity for the sake of a sort of theodicy. God cannot be blamed for condemning humanity to punishment on the Day of Resurrection as though they were not warned. They have been warned, at that primordial moment. Some have gone back on their promises to obey God, and therefore they have been justly condemned.¹⁴ This verse establishes the moral and religious accountability of all humans and exonerates God from any blame.

Rahman, as we have seen, instead weaves the *alast* verse into his description of humanity’s internal disposition for the right religion. Thus, he continues, the job of prophets is not to introduce a new idea to their people but rather “to awaken man’s *conscience* so that he can decipher the primordial writing *on his heart* more clearly and with greater conviction” (emphasis my own) (Rahman 1980, p. 24). For Rahman, humans maintain, in their conscience, potential knowledge of God’s dominion. I agree that the Qur’an seems to teach as much, in its allusions to divine signs. I would add, however, that the Qur’an also teaches that humans are rebellious or (as Q 33:72 puts it) “arrogant and

ignorant.” This is why prophets do not come simply with rational reminders, they come with paraenesis: with desirable images of paradise and terrifying images of hell and divine punishment to motivate (a double move sometimes referred to as *targhīb wa-tarhīb*).

In a way the *alast* verse works for the Qur’an in a way not completely dissimilar to the way the doctrine of original sin works for Augustine. According to Augustine (developing certain verses of Paul including Romans 5:12, 5:19; Ephesians 2:3; I Corinthians 15:22), infants are to be baptized because of the collective participation of humanity in a primordial fall. God, in His mercy, has given them the opportunity of redemption through participation in the saving graces of Christ ministered through the Church. According to the Qur’an, humans are to be judged based on their collective participation in a primordial contract with God. God, in His mercy, offers guidance to humans through the prophets so that they may remain faithful to the contract that took place, somehow, in a primordial dimension. For the Qur’an, it is humanity’s participation in that *alast* contract that makes them liable to condemnation and punishment, much as for Augustine it is humanity’s participation in the primordial sin of Adam that makes them liable to perdition.¹⁵

One might compare the similar approach taken by Anthony Johns in his *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an* article “Fall of Man.” Johns writes that humans in the Qur’an have “fallen” only in the sense that they have descended from the heavenly garden (which is “above”), not in the sense that they bear a burden of original sin. It is true that humans are in a lamentable state (he refers to Q 103:2 *inna al-insān la-ḥi khusrin*)¹⁶, but what they need is only guidance. He writes: “One has to endure hardships from which one would otherwise have remained exempt. One needs guidance, however, not redemption, and the prophets, above all Muḥammad, give this guidance.”¹⁷ Like Rahman, Johns also connects the problem of human sinfulness with the ministry of prophets in the Qur’an. In what follows I will develop this further. Neither Rahman nor Johns, it seems to me, describes fully the Qur’an’s negative assessment of human nature or the relationship between that assessment and its concept of divine mercy.

3. Lamentable History of Humankind

When God announces in Surah 2 that he intends to create a *khalīfa*, the angels not only know that He means by this to create a human, but also that the actions of humans will be evil. They declare: “Will You place on it someone who will foment corruption on it, and shed blood (*yufsidu fihā wa-yasfiku l-dimā’a*), while we glorify (You) with Your praise and call You holy?” (Q 2:30). God does not deny that humans will do these things, but rather declares: “I know what you do not know.” Indeed, the Qur’an itself testifies that humans would “foment corruption” and “shed blood.” It repeatedly alludes to cases where humans “foment corruption” (Q 2:11; 205; 220; 3:63; *passim*), and refers repeatedly to the killing of prophets (Q 2:61, 87, 91; 3:21, 112, 181, 183; 4:155; 5:70). It is curious that the angels know (correctly) at the time of humanity’s creation that humans will be this sinful, especially because God speaks at the end of this verse of their lack of knowledge.¹⁸ As for what God is alluding to by saying “I know what you do not know,” the Qur’an seems to gloss this in the following verses—Q 2:31–32—where the angels do not know the names of things but God gives this knowledge to Adam. The *mufasssīrūn*, however, offered other explanations, including the idea that God knew there would also be “prophets” and “righteous people” among the descendants of the *khalīfa*.¹⁹

The idea is logical enough, as the Qur’an indeed speaks frequently of *anbiyā’* (“prophets”) and *ṣāliḥūn* (“righteous people”). Nevertheless, other passages of the Qur’an suggest that humans tend to be unrighteous. A number of Qur’anic passages relate that humans collectively—and not only certain humans—are ungrateful:

Surely the human is indeed an evildoer (and) ungrateful! (*inna l-insāna la-ẓālūmun kaffārun*; Q 14:34)

He (it is) who gave you life, then He causes you to die, (and) then He will give you life (again). Surely the human is ungrateful indeed (*inna l-insāna la-kafūrun*; Q 22:66).

Yet they assign to Him a part of His (own) servants. Surely the human is clearly ungrateful indeed (*inna l-insāna la-kafūrun mubīnun*; Q 43:15).

The description of humans (*al-insān*) as *kaffār* or *kafūr* (the variation is related to the Arabic rhyme) refers primarily in these passages to ingratitude (as translated by Droge).²⁰ Nevertheless, the concept of ingratitude is closely related to (and shares the same root with) the concept of unbelief (*kufr*) in the Qur'an. The description of human beings as *kaffār* or *kafūr* also connects them to Satan who is described with this way: "Surely the squanderers are brothers of the satans, and Satan is ungrateful (*kafūr*) to his Lord" (Q 17:27). Humans, the Qur'an relates, tend to disbelieve both when things go poorly for them and when things go well for them. Qur'an 39:8 describes how humans turn to God when "hardship touches them" and then forget when "He bestows blessing." Qur'an 17:67 (cf. Q 29:65) explains how humans in a storm at sea call on God but then, when safe on land, turn away from him. However, the opposite is also true: Qur'an 11:9 relates that when a mercy from God is taken away that humans are ungrateful (*kafūr*).

The Qur'an also describes humans as weak (Q 4:28) and "hasty":

Man was created of haste (*min 'ajalin*). Assuredly I shall show you My signs; so demand not that I make haste (Q 21:37).

Man prays for evil, as he prays for good; man is ever hasty (*'ajūl*; Q 17:11).

This description of humanity as "hasty" is best understood in contrast to the Qur'an's frequent commendation of patience (*ṣabr*) as a desirable quality (Q 2:45, 153, 155, 177 *passim*). Humans, in times of trial, or in times of ease, rush to unbelief and do not endure in their devotion to God.

These categorical condemnations of humans correspond well to the way in which the Qur'an sketches a lamentable story of human history. Humans have repeatedly disobeyed God and repeatedly been destroyed. Several Qur'anic Surahs (7, 11, 26, 37, 54) are largely consumed with stories of prophets sent to various peoples (often their own). In almost every case the people disbelieve and God destroys them for their unbelief. The one principal exception is the story of Jonah. After its allusions to Jonah's adventures in the belly of a fish (cf. Jonah 2) to the account of the vine (cf. Jonah 4:5–11) in Surah 37, the Qur'an declares: "We sent him to a hundred thousand, or more, and they believed. So We gave them enjoyment (of life) for a time" (Q 37:147–48).²¹ Elsewhere the Qur'an relates: "Why was there no town which believed, and its belief benefited it, except the people of Jonah? When they believed, We removed from them the punishment of disgrace in this present life and gave them enjoyment (of life) for a time" (Q 10:98). Both of these passages suggest that the salvation of Jonah's people is only temporary; their enjoyment is only "for a time" *ilā hīn*. Eventually, they too were destroyed.²²

Despite this, the story of Nineveh's salvation is an occasion for the Qur'an to reflect on just how exceptional it is that humans repent and believe. Indeed elsewhere the Qur'an is clear that God will destroy or punish *every* city (including Nineveh) before the Day of Resurrection: "(There is) no town that We are not going to destroy before the Day of Resurrection, or are not going to punish (with a) harsh punishment. That is written in the Book" (Q 17:58). Human history, in the Qur'an, is marked above all by the punishments meted out by God upon one city after another. The marks and signs of this history are literally visible to the Qur'anic prophet's contemporaries. References to the ruins of cities destroyed by divine wrath litter the Qur'anic landscape:

Travel the Earth and see how the end was for the ones who called (it) a lie (Q 16:36).

How many a town have We destroyed while it was doing evil, so it is (now) collapsed on its supports! (How many) an abandoned well and well-built palace!

Have they not traveled on the earth? Do they have hearts to understand with or ears to hear with? Surely it is not the sight (which) is blind, but the hearts which are within the chests are blind (Q 22:45–46).

Have they not traveled on the earth and seen how the end was for those who were before them? They were stronger than them in power, and they ploughed the earth and populated it more than they have populated it (Q 30:9).

Travel the earth and see how the end was for those who were before (you). Most of them were idolaters (Q 30:42).

Have they not traveled on the earth and seen how the end was for those who were before them? They were stronger than them in power, and in the traces (they left behind) on the earth. Yet God seized them in their sins, and they had no defender against God (Q 40:21).

Have they not traveled on the earth and seen how the end was for those who were before them? God destroyed them. The disbelievers have examples of it (Q 47:10).

Another sign of the depraved nature of humanity in the Qur'an is the relative favor which the Qur'an shows to non-human animals, a theme explored by Sarra Tlili in her work, *Animals in the Qur'an* (Tlili 2012). Tlili writes "According to the Qur'an, all animals, with the exception of the vast majority of humans and jinn, glorify God. In this respect they become superior to most humans (who do not), according to the Qur'an" (Tlili 2012, p. 212). In Surah 22 the Qur'an suggests that all animals bow before God, along with "many" people, although "many" others are punished and humiliated.

Do you not see that God—whoever is in the heavens and whoever is on the earth prostrates before Him, and (so do) the sun, and the moon, and the stars, and the mountains, and the trees, and the animals, and many of the people? But (there are) many for whom the punishment is justified, and whomever God humiliates, (there is) no one to honor him. Surely God does whatever He pleases (Q 22:18).

Several verses describe how David, an exceptional human for his praise of God, praises Him along with the birds (Q 21:79; 34:10; 38:19). The Qur'an also relates that the worst beasts (*dawābb*) are unbelieving humans (Q 8:22, 55). On the other hand, in at least one passage the Qur'an emphasizes the favor given to humans (although it is not clear that humans have responded well to this favor): "Certainly We have honored the sons of Adam, and carried them on the shore and the sea, and provided them with good things, and favored them greatly over many of those whom We have created" (Q 17:70).²³

Finally, it might be added that the Qur'an's remarkable interest in repentance (*tawbah*) testifies to the preponderance of sin among humans. The God of the Qur'an calls even its believing audience to repentance: "You who believe! Turn to God in sincere repentance" (Q 66:8). Qur'an 24:31 is similar: "Turn to God (in repentance) (*tūbū*)—all (of you)—believers, so that you may prosper." Indeed the Qur'an even speaks of the repentance of prophets (Q 2:37; 7:143; 21:87).²⁴ The Qur'an's emphasis on repentance, indeed on universal repentance, follows naturally from its assessment of the sinful human condition.

4. Prophecy as a Response to Human Sinfulness

The problem of the human condition allows us to understand the role of prophets in the Qur'an.²⁵ According to the Qur'an, prophets are the channels through which God delivers reminders and warnings to humanity. Prophets, however, do not simply convey divine messages. They are to be obeyed as channels of divine authority.²⁶ Connected to this notion is the description of prophets as imams (Q 11:6; 46:12; 21:73).²⁷ Their books are named "*imām* and mercy" (Q 11:17; 21:73). Prophets even become channels of divine forgiveness:

We have not sent any messenger, except that he should be obeyed, by the permission of God. If, when they did themselves evil, they had come to you and asked

forgiveness from God, and the messenger had asked forgiveness for them, they would indeed have found God turning (in forgiveness), compassionate (Q 4:64).

Most Qur'anic prophets, however, are not obeyed, another sign that humans are fundamentally sinful (and rebellious). Instead, the prophets are mocked (Q 15:11, etc.) and called liars (e.g., Q 3:184; 22:42; 23:44; 35:25, etc.). Their message is denied (Q 11:59) and denounced as "medleys of dreams" (Q 21:5). The prophets are rejected in part because they are ordinary human beings (e.g., Q 14:10; 17:94; 36:15; 64:6). They are accused of being mere poets, magicians, and madmen (e.g., Q 21:5; 51:52). Some are received with questions and provocative demands to prove their prophetic claims (Q 2:108).

The prophets also suffer actual persecution, such as the threat of expulsion (Q 14:13; 47:13; 60:1), and even murder at the hand of their own peoples. The Qur'an frequently accuses the Israelites of killing the prophets, and makes this crime one of a list of sins that has made them subject to divine wrath (Q 2:61, 87, 91; 3:21, 112, 181, 183; 4:155; 5:70).²⁸ The sufferings of the previous prophets are recounted to comfort Muhammad in his own distress, which resembles that of his precursors. As stated in Q 41:43: "Nothing is said to you but what was said indeed to the messengers before you." Not only humankind but also the demons are enemies to the prophets. In Q 6:112, God says: "And thus did We make for every prophet an enemy, the satans from among humans and jinn . . ." Satan's enmity is seen in that he makes rebellion look attractive to nations to whom messengers were sent (Q 16:63).²⁹

The role played by the prophets in the divine economy is beautiful in part because of the opposition they face. Prophets are the agents of divine mercy. They deliver their message at great cost, and indeed at the risk of their lives. Earlier scholars have noted the noble role played by prophets in the unfolding of divine mercy. Scholars have tended to miss however, the connection between the sinful human condition and the Qur'an's prophetology. God responds to the sinfulness of humans by sending prophets among them, an act of unmerited mercy.

Indeed, when the Qur'an insists that every nation has a prophet sent to it (Q 10:47; 16:36; cf. 35:24), this suggests that the Qur'an has a vision of the universal scope of prophecy (although it would be true, strictly speaking, that certain generations would have lived and died before the mission of the prophet to their people). This posited universal scope implies that the God of the Qur'an, in His mercy, is attentive to a universal problem. God sends prophets to warn people to repent and believe, precisely because people tend to sin and disbelieve. In Surah 41 the Qur'anic messenger exhorts the people to repent and believe, while warning of the consequences of rejecting his message:

Say: "I am only a human being like you. I am inspired that your God is one God. So go straight with Him, and ask forgiveness from Him. But woe to the idolaters, who do not give the alms, and (who) are disbelievers in the Hereafter!" (Q 41:6–7).

An important feature of this and similar passages that describe the ministry of prophets is the way in which a prophet is said to "purify" (*yuzakkī*) his people. It is possible that the Qur'an sees this quality as a function of the prophet's intercessory ability. Andrew O'Connor writes:

Thus Q 2:129, 151, and 3:164 remark that the Messenger, who was raised up from among the same people group as the addressees, not only recites God's revelations but also purifies his people ("(he) will purify you (*yuzakkikum*)" / "brings them purity (*yuzakkīhim*)"), in addition to teaching the Scripture and the Wisdom (*al-kitāb wa-l-ḥikmah*). The Prophet's presence cleanses his followers, and he functions as an expeditor of their sanctity. Sinai notes the "sacerdotal quality" with which this material endows the Messenger, who here takes on a "quasi-priestly role." Q 62:2 clarifies that this was done to a gentile or "common people": "(It is God who) has sent among the common people (*al-ummī*) a messenger from among themselves, to recite His signs to them and to purify them (*yuzakkīhim*) and

to teach them the Scripture and the Wisdom—previously they were in manifest error.”³⁰

Prophets come to purify their people because people are impure.

5. Conclusion: A Divine Test

Yet while prophets are a manifestation of divine mercy in the Qur’an, this does not mean that God is simply merciful. As I argue in *Allah: God in the Qur’an*³¹, the God of the Qur’an is above all free. He is free to show mercy and to guide, but also free to be vengeful and to lead astray. The sending of a prophet, consequently, does not begin a process in which divine mercy and love envelop humanity. It begins a sort of test.

In an article on divine mercy, Mustansir Mir argues that all divine characteristics or attributes are ultimately related to mercy. The existence of evil on earth is but a test (*balāʾ*) which gives humans “an opportunity to succeed on the test and thereby regain paradise, the former abode of their ancestors” (Mir 2016). For this reason, “the ultimate warrant of *balāʾ* . . . is divine mercy” (Ibid.). Mir is certainly right to note the importance of the concept of *balāʾ* in the Qur’an. Mir refers to the following verses:

We divided them (into) communities on the earth, some of them righteous and some of them other than that, and We tested them (*balawnāhum*) with good things and bad, so that they might return (7:168).

Every person will taste death. We try you (*nablūkum*) with evil and good as a test, and to Us you will be returned (Q 21:35).

One might add to these 5:48:

If God had (so) pleased, He would indeed have made you one community, but (He did not do so) in order to test you (*li-yablūwakum*) by what He has given you. So race (toward doing) good deeds. To God is your return—all (of you)—and then He will inform you about your differences (Q 5:48).

Notably, at the end of each of these verses that invoke the divine test there is a reference to the return to God for judgment. Mir puts the accent on the possibility of a merciful judgment, but there is no clear indication from the Qur’an that God will be merciful in His judgment. Indeed, the Qur’an speaks frequently of God’s wrath, of God’s severity in punishing unbelievers and sinners, and even of his taunting the condemned in hell.³² The Qur’an also speaks *both* of divine guidance and of divine leading astray (*tadlīl*; see Q 2:26; 4:88, 143; 6:125 *passim*). The point of the test (*balāʾ*) is much starker than Mir would have it: humans are to be judged with a real possibility of being condemned, and God will have no remorse for sending them to hell. The verses that describe God’s disposition upon condemning unbelievers and sinners to hell makes this clear.

On the Day when (some) faces will become white and (other) faces will become black. As for those whose faces are blackened: “Did you disbelieve after having believed? Taste the punishment for what you were disbelieving!” (Q 3:106).

Certainly God has heard the words of those who said, “Surely God is poor and we are rich.” We shall write down what they have said, along with their killing the prophets without any right, and We shall say, “Taste the punishment of the burning (Fire)!” (Q 3:181).

Surely those who disbelieve in Our signs—We shall burn them in a Fire. Whenever their skins are completely burned, We shall exchange their skins for others, so that they may (continue to) feel the punishment. Surely God is mighty, wise (Q 4:56).

What justifies divine anger towards the unbelievers is precisely the unfolding of mercy in the Qur’anic drama through the ministry of prophets. Humans have not been left alone to seek guidance in natural signs, or in their conscience. They have been reminded of those natural signs by the prophets, and indeed they have received supernatural signs from the

prophets (according to the Qur'an): miracles, wonders, and divine scriptures. The God of the Qur'an grows wrathful that humans, after the mercy He has shown them, are lacking belief, righteousness, and gratitude. The Qur'anic vision of the divine economy involves a process in three steps: 1) humans fail on their own to submit to God; 2) God in response mercifully sends prophets to remind them of their obligation to do so; and 3) most humans refuse the prophetic reminder. This process involves a fundamentally positive vision of divine mercy, but it also involves a fundamentally pessimistic vision of human nature.

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Notes

- ¹ All Qur'an translations are from Arthur Droge, unless indicated otherwise. Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200) reports also an alternative interpretation that *mā* (v. 6) could mean *kamā*, meaning something like "so that you may warn a people *as* their fathers were warned . . .". See Ibn al-Jawzī, 7:5.
- ² Rosalind Ward Gwynne writes: "The people who reject [prophets] either do not know God's custom of sending prophets or ignore messages that clash with their own man-made customs." (Gwynne 2004, p. 32). In this article I will argue that the problem is more complicated. The principal problem with humans is not their culture (or their unfamiliarity with God's *sunnah*). It is their nature.
- ³ To give one such example, Shabbir Akhtar contrasts the pessimism of Christianity regarding the human person with the optimism of Islam: "If the essential element in human nature is, for Muslims, an intellect endowed with the capacity to know and appropriate a salvifically significant theological truth, it is, for Christians, a will defiled by sin." See S. Akhtar, *A Faith for All Seasons: Islam and the Challenge of the Modern World*, Dee, Chicago 1990, 154. Quoted by D. Howard, "The Nature of the Human in Contemporary Christian-Muslim Relations", in D. Thomas (ed.), *Routledge Handbook on Christian-Muslim Relations*, Routledge, London 2018, (320–328) 321.
- ⁴ Ibn al-Jawzī, 6:300. Ibn al-Jawzī also quotes the opinion of Ibn Qutayba that the *fiṭrah* is not simply Islam but "affirmation and knowledge of God" (*al-iqrār bi-Llāh wa-l-mā'rifah bihi*). He refers to the affirmation of the souls of humanity of God on the day of "alast" (Q 7:172).
- ⁵ On the *nafs* in the Qur'an see further (Picken 2005). As Picken points out, the *nafs* also can have some positive qualities, including the ability to endure patiently (*ṣabr*) (e.g., Q 18:28), to comprehend (*idrāk*) (e.g., Q 31:34), and to be tranquil (*muṭma'innah*) (e.g., Q 89:27–30).
- ⁶ See J. McAuliffe, "Heart," *EQ* (= *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, Leiden 2001–6) 2:406–10. A variant reading has this term as *ghuluf* (meaning "containers"). See (Reynolds 2019, pp. 51–55).
- ⁷ For *qalb*: Q 16:106; 26:89; 50:33; 64:11; and *qulūb*: Q 3:126; 5:113; 8:2; 8:10; 13:28; 48:4; 48:18; 49:7, 14, 57; 57:16; 57:27; 58:22. I am grateful to Mun'im Sirry for these references.
- ⁸ *Ibid.* 13.*
- ⁹ Reynolds, "Original Sin and the Qur'an," *Islamochristiana*, 46 (2020), (Reynolds 2020b, pp. 197–218).
- ¹⁰ The passage quoted from Rahman also alludes to Q 7:173 which has the unbelievers take refuge in the idolatry of their fathers.
- ¹¹ Much has been written on Q 7:172, particularly its place in theological and mystical thought. Among theologians, particularly the Mu'tazila and Imāmiyya, the *alast* verse is often described as humanity's prime act of intellect (*'aql*), vis-à-vis the transmission of revealed knowledge (*naql*). At the same time it complicates a rationalist reading of the Qur'an as it seems to remove agency from individual humans. Some rationalist theologians reject completely the historical reality of the "Day of *alast*." Among Sufis the verse becomes a source of reflection on the life of the soul with (or within) God. See, for example: (L. Massignon 1962; Gramlich 1983; al-Qadi 2003; Böwering, "Covenant," *EQ*, 1: 463–67; Abdulsater 2019).
- ¹² See also the longer version of this article (under the same title): "The Primordial Covenant and Human History in the Qur'an," *The Margaret Weyerhaeuser Jewett Chair of Arabic Occasional Papers* (2006), ed. Ramzi Baalbaki (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 2006), 5–55.
- ¹³ She writes that this verse "lifts forgetting to the level of sin, thereby making the primary function of prophets sent to mankind to remind people of their covenant with God" (al-Qadi 2003, p. 334).
- ¹⁴ One might compare Q 3:81 which speaks of a primordial contract that God makes with all of the prophets committing them to believe and help the "new" prophet (evidently, Muhammad): "(Remember) when God took a covenant with the prophets: 'Whatever indeed I have given you of the Book and wisdom, when a messenger comes to you confirming what is with you, you

are to believe in him and you are to help him.’ He said, ‘Do you agree and accept My burden on that (condition)?’ They said, ‘We agree.’ He said, ‘Bear witness, and I shall be with you among the witnesses.’”

- 15 On Augustine and original sin see especially (Couenhoven 2005). For the sources of Augustine’s thinking on original sin, and in particular the connection thereof with the pseudonymous Ambrosiaster see (Bonaiuti and Piana 1917).
- 16 One might compare the frequent Qur’anic references to the opponents of the Qur’anic prophets as *khāsirūn* and *min al-khāsirīn*: 2:27, 64, 121; 3: 85; 3:149, passim (32 occurrences).
- 17 Johns, “Fall of Man,” EQ 2:173b.
- 18 The most common tradition regarding this is that the angels made a prediction of humanity’s future actions on the basis of the actions of those whom the first human (named *khalīfa*, or “successor”) followed, namely the *jinn* (although this is nowhere clear in the Qur’an) who “fomented corruption” and “shed blood” while on earth. See Ibn al-Jawzī, 1:61, referring to Ibn ‘Abbās, Abū ‘Āliyyah, and Muqātil b. Sulaymān.
- 19 Ibn al-Jawzī mentions three other possible explanations for God’s knowledge: knowledge of Iblīs’ rebellious spirit, knowledge that the unrighteous will go to hell, or knowledge of the final outcome of things (Ibn al-Jawzī, 1:61).
- 20 Note the description of *al-insān* in Q 100: “Surely Man is ungrateful (*kanūd*) to his Lord, and surely he is a witness against that! Surely he is passionate in his love for good things.” Cf. also Q 96:6 “Surely the human transgresses (*yaṭghā*) insolently indeed.” I am grateful to Mun’im Sirry for this reference.
- 21 On the relationship of the Qur’an’s references to Jonah and its Biblical subtext see (Reynolds 2010, pp. 117–29).
- 22 This is possibly an allusion to the reflections on Nineveh’s destruction in the book of Nahum.
- 23 I am grateful to Mun’im Sirry for this reference.
- 24 On repentance in the Qur’an see U. Rubin, “Repentance and Penitence,” EQ: 4:426–30; F.M. Denny, “Tawba,” E12 (= *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Leiden—London, 1960–2005), 10:413; (Denny 1980; Ayoub 1997; Zilio-Grandi 2013; and most recently Khalil 2018).
- 25 The classical study of Qur’anic prophetology (although he does not consider closely the nature of the prophetic mission in the Qur’an) is Horovitz, “Die koranische Prophetologie,” in (Horovitz 1926, pp. 44–77). See also (Wensinck 1998; Ahrens 1935, pp. 127–39; Jeffery 1952, pp. 18–46; Bijlefeld 1969; Rubin 2017).
- 26 Notice the repeated demands of the prophets to be obeyed in Surah 26: Q 26:108, 110, 126 passim. Jesus also demands to be obeyed in Q 3:50. The Qur’an’s own messenger frequently demands obedience (e.g., Q 3:32; 24:51). On this feature (which he labels “theonomic”) of Qur’anic prophetology (particularly concentrated in passages traditionally associated with the Medinan period) see (O’Connor 2019).
- 27 On this see (Gwynne 2004, p. 32). See also (Rubin 2017, p. 257). Rubin notes that the Qur’an’s vision of a prophet as more than a simple messenger explains the militancy of certain prophets: “The purpose for which the Qur’anic prophet has been sent is to make God’s religion, i.e., Islam, prevail over all religions (Q 9:33; 48:28; 61:9). This may involve waging war on the infidels, as is stated about the preceding prophets in Q 3:146: ‘And how many a prophet has fought, and with them were many worshipers of the Lord; so the (prophets) did not become weak-hearted on account of what befell them in God’s way, nor did they weaken, nor did they abase themselves; and God loves the patient.’” Ibid, 256.
- 28 On this see (Reynolds 2012).
- 29 See (Rubin 2017).
- 30 (O’Connor 2019, p. 408).
- 31 (Reynolds 2020a).
- 32 See (Reynolds 2020a, chp. 7). Already in the first Surah of the Qur’an there is an allusion (Q 1:7) to those with whom God is wrathful (see also Q 4:93; 5:60; 7:71, 152; 8:16, passim). The Qur’an speaks of God’s devising (*makr*) against those who oppose Him (Q 3:54; 7:99). Mentions of divine mercy in judgment are frequently followed by mentions of divine severity and the promise of a “painful punishment” (see e.g., Q 6:147; 76:31).

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