

Prophet Ibrahim's Dialogue with His Father

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The following are five observations on Prophet Ibrahim's dialogue with his polytheistic father. The dialogue is featured in the Qur'anic *surah* (chapter) *Maryam*, verses (*ayat*) 41-48. Brief references to it are also made in *surah al-An'am*: 74, *surah al-Tawbah*: 114, and *surah al-Mumtahanah*: 4. The father's name was Azar (*al-An'am*, 74) or Tarih.

Rationality versus irrationality

While conversing with his father, Ibrahim resorts to logic and reason. The father did not believe in One God, so invoking Heaven and the revelation was of no use. The father's intelligence was Ibrahim's best chance. The revelation and reason do not contradict, nor challenge, each other. Rather, they complement one another in enlightening and guiding man to the fulfilment of his honourable earthly purpose.

Ibrahim knew that there is nothing more sensible and more consistent than the truth, while at the same time there is nothing more illogical and inconsistent than falsehood. The truth, presented by the revelation and guarded by reason, is irresistible. Falsehood, which not only defies logic, but also the natural order of things, stands no chance against such force. It does not even come close. That is an obvious reality for whoever has eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts (intelligence) to understand: "Could there be any doubt about the existence of God who has created the heavens and the earth?" (Ibrahim, 10).

Ibrahim thus says to his father that it is incomprehensible that he took idols as gods, which could not hear, nor see, nor bring a benefit. Ibrahim as a prophet and a man of truth - yet his son - was right there

with him calling him to see, comprehend and embrace the truth, and to follow a way that was sensible, even and straight. Ibrahim also asked him to reject crookedness, deceit and blind following, for they were the sources of all evil. The father needed urgent help and a sense of direction. Ibrahim was there for him. Almighty God was there for both of them.

Ibrahim wanted his father to be free and make free and reasonable choices. Indeed, if a person's senses are liberated and enlightened, in no way could he ever worship dead matter in lieu of the Most Gracious God, nor could he follow his own or somebody else's fancies instead of the heavenly guidance revealed by the Creator of the universe.

However, Ibrahim's father did not heed the counsels. He was so blinded by pagan arrogance and the worship of brute force and matter that he persisted in bartering truth for falsehood, rationality for irrationality, and reason for inflated and misguided emotions. His intelligence was paralyzed and malfunctioning, making his choices unsound and faulty. In that manner, the father was the devil incarnate. Ibrahim thus warned him that a painful chastisement may afflict him, and that he may become to Satan a friend and an ally.

The myopic father was able to see in Ibrahim just a person who wanted him to desist from his old ways, without understanding why. He did not even try to understand why. Consumed by spiritual insecurity and antagonism, the father constructed a veil of mistrust and miscommunication between him and his son. They were not on the same wavelength.

The father could simply reply to all the emphatic advices and justifications of his son: "Do you reject (hate) my gods?" (Maryam, 46). He did not say more, for he was not in a position to conjure anything sensible in the face of the intensity and profundity of the heavenly counsels of Ibrahim. His best shot was to stubbornly and

insolently remain quite, and whenever necessary, to say as little as possible. The more he spoke, the more he could reveal his weaknesses and the impotence of his standpoint.

The father was capable of seeing only himself and the world of his selfish interests. He was neither ready, nor willing, to be elevated to a higher vantage point whence he could see things differently and make more appropriate judgements. He was forever trapped in the lowliness of matter and self-regard. In such a state, reason and logic are unwelcome companions.

It is an established principle - as a small digression - that falsehood can operate only under the veils of darkness, obscurity, uncertainty, perversity and irrationality. That is why the truth, which is synonymous with light and guidance, is its fiercest enemy. The mere presence of the truth unsettles falsehood and renders it weak and vulnerable. No wonder that in its perennial conflict with the truth, falsehood's preferred strategy is to keep the truth at bay and, by any means necessary, try to undermine it - dim its light and influence - from a distance and deceptively.

Facing the truth under conditions that are balanced and fair is always set to be disastrous for falsehood. Whenever the two are brought face to face and are pitted fairly and squarely against each other, there is to be only one outcome.

The truth is falsehood's antithesis. As such, it is ordained to seek out and incapacitate it. Its mission is twofold: to establish and manifest itself, and to abolish falsehood and all sorts of vanity, bringing them all to naught.

In this respect, one can additionally remember the meetings between Prophet Ibrahim and Nimrud, Prophet Musa and Pharaoh, Prophet 'Isa and his Jewish and Roman adversaries, all prophets and their

rebellious peoples, and also between Prophet Muhammad and his contemporaries. One should bear in mind what they all offered and eventually contributed to the wellbeing of the world, and what their legacies today are. Those meetings - and confrontations - signified encounters between good and evil, sense and senselessness, reason and folly, as well as light and darkness.

One can likewise reflect on the ways the truth of Islam is dealt with nowadays by the proponents of materialism, liberalism, hedonism, moral relativism, atheism and agnosticism as the latest wide-ranging and fairly sophisticated expressions of falsehood. The most that those deceptive worldviews and ideologies can offer to the world is confusion, uncertainty, ambiguity, insecurity, greed, self-delusion and false hopes - just as their predecessors did centuries and millennia ago. They all speak the same language, albeit with different accents and dialects.

Against the truth of Islam, things are usually done covertly, hypocritically and deviously. Islam as the truth is unwelcome. It is a nemesis that simply does not go away. Just like before, the responses to Islam stand for mixtures of disdain, mockery, double standards, vested interests and physical force. Unquestionably, every age has its own Nimrud, Pharaoh, Samiriyy, Haman, Qarun, Pontius Pilate, Abu Lahab and Abu Jahal.

Kindness versus antagonism

In the course of his dialogue with his father, Ibrahim displays utmost kindness and care. He does so because, firstly, he was naturally "a forbearing, compassionate and tender-hearted person" (Hud, 75); secondly, as a devout son, he was dutiful to his father and wished him well under all circumstances; and thirdly, as a prophet and a caller to the right path, he invited his father to the truth's ways wisely and

with beautiful preaching, arguing with him in ways that were best and most courteous.

Ibrahim uses four times the idiom "ya abati", which means "O my father". The idiom is the most loving and most affectionate way by which a son can address his father. It is a sign of maximum respect, compassion and love.

Moreover, when Ibrahim refers to two most distressing scenarios to which his father was getting ever close: worshipping Satan by following in his footsteps (Maryam, 44), and being afflicted by a chastisement from God (Maryam, 45), Ibrahim refers to God as Most Gracious (*al-Rahman*). He does so because he wants to embed in his father's heart a sense of optimism and hope, for God (*al-Rahman*) showers all of His creation with endless mercy and blessings without discrepancy.

With *al-Rahman*, every sincere repentance is appreciated and welcomed, every sinner can return, every wrong can be fixed, and every aspiration can be fulfilled. The presence of *al-Rahman* and a life with Him negate every sense of hopelessness, anxiety, sorrow and dejection. *Al-Rahman* invites and heals lost souls.

The choice of the *al-Rahman* word was meant as well to have a positive psychological impact on the father. Its mere sound and profound meanings were to mitigate the negativities entailed in the two mentioned scenarios. Hence, in both instances the word *al-Rahman* is placed next to the word *al-Shaytan* (Satan), which when pronounced sound the same. *Al-Rahman* thus easily neutralizes *al-shaytan*, both in sound and effect.

In addition, the universality and absolute character of God's mercy and blessings for His creation effortlessly overshadow the relativity of non-belief, disobedience and polytheism. The former is the rule,

the latter a set of exceptions. The former, furthermore, is supreme and unconditional, the latter just a collection of social, cultural and personal constructs.

The message emphasized thereby is that paths to God and His infinite mercy and benevolence are always open and are beckoning. Ibrahim's father was invited too.

However, all this was met with added antagonism and enmity on the part of Ibrahim's father. The sentiment extended beyond the boundaries of the truth itself, also encompassing Ibrahim as its spokesperson.

This explains why the father could not summon up his courage to address Ibrahim as "O my son", reciprocating Ibrahim's repetitive "O my father". Instead, he simply calls him "O Ibrahim" (Maryam, 46). So saturated with hate and bitterness was his entire being that he could not even pretend. Courage and virtue are not intended to be compatible with falsehood. They repel each other.

The father's reaction was as irrational as the motives that led him to it. He rumbled, contrasting with Ibrahim's placid, gentle and persuasive tone: "If you do not desist, I will surely stone you, so now get away from me for a good long while" (Maryam, 46).

Having heard this, Ibrahim seems to have lost all hopes of his father returning to the realm of the truth. He nevertheless stayed faithful to his principles, never betraying them in the slightest even when under the most challenging of conditions. Thus, while departing from his father, as rancorously commanded, Ibrahim still had nothing but kind and generous words for him: "Peace be upon you. I will ask forgiveness for you of my Lord. Indeed, He is ever gracious to me" (Maryam, 47).

It is obvious that to falsehood, both the truth and its people are enemies. To the truth, on the contrary, only falsehood is the enemy. Its people are victims. They are intended but to be freed and rescued.

In contrast, falsehood aims to rescue but itself. Since it cannot offer anything substantial as an alternative to the truth, falsehood's main task revolves around suppressing and enchaining the truth as much and as long as possible. The more the voices of the truth are restrained, the more room falsehood is afforded to spread its mischievous ways.

Freedom and guidance

The dialogue between Ibrahim and his father encapsulates the essence of the concepts of freedom and guidance in Islam. It does so remarkably in just a few words. At one point, Ibrahim tells his father: "Follow me, I will guide you to a right path" (Maryam, 43).

In Islam, guidance is in the Hand of God. He guides whomever He wills and leads astray whomever He wills. Muslims regularly pray to God to guide them to the right path.

At the same time, however, the Qur'an on more than one occasion explicitly affirms that man has free will and so, chooses to believe and be guided, and chooses to disbelieve and not to be guided. On the Day of Judgment, people will be rewarded and punished solely on the basis of what they have done freely and willingly in this world.

This means that God as the Absolute Creator and Master of the universe knows everything and acts wisely and justly. Nothing escapes His infinite knowledge, will and power. Accordingly, He knows what man freely chooses and willingly does. He thus guides only those who want and deserve to be guided, and leads astray only those who want and deserve to be sent astray.

Man chooses what to do, while God accepts, endorses, facilitates and rewards for the choices made and deeds performed. Man's life is a subtle blend and interplay of personal freedom and divine providence. As a sign of His unbounded Sovereignty, God reiterates that although free, man is subjected to His Will and Authority. If He so wills, God can always overrule man's freedom, choices and intended actions. He does what He absolutely wants, while man does what he relatively wants within a prescribed scope, as well as a framework, of selections and prospects.

Moreover, that God is the only one who guides means that man cannot be guided - or cannot guide himself - except through and by the prophets and the heavenly messages revealed to them. Without them, man will remain forever short of getting to the bottom of myriads of existential secrets and mysteries. In the absence of a divine help, the intellect and senses of man are verified inept to guide him to all truth. They are good merely as far as they go. Nonetheless, they possess enough capacity to lead - or "guide" - man to the threshold of recognizing and accepting the revelation as the supreme source of guidance and truth.

Man's efforts to rival the revelation and Heaven are destined to fall flat. Which ultimately means that there is no guidance but the guidance of God, and if He does not guide, nobody else can. All other alternatives are insufficient.

Praying for guidance means expressing readiness and resolve to enhance the relationship with God as the source and legitimacy of all guidance. It means acknowledging God as the Creator, Master and Self-sufficient, and acknowledging man as no more than a creation, servant and needy. It likewise means registration of willingness, productivity, patience and steadfastness in adhering to the path of righteousness, while fully capitalizing on the boons of free will and sound reason as the two greatest heavenly gifts to man.

Thus, when Ibrahim asked his father to follow him, he meant that he should reason and willingly select the right path, which nevertheless can be determined only by God. Then, in the light of Ibrahim's teachings in his capacity as a prophet of God, he should embark on doing everything that was expected from a follower of that path.

That way, the father would have set himself on a course to God's pleasure, blessings and approval. He at once would have guided himself and would have been guided. That is, he would have chosen the revealed guidance for himself, Ibrahim as a prophet would have symbolized an instrument of his guidance, and God would have accepted, endorsed, aided and rewarded his choices and deeds. Depending on which aspect of the equation one considered, it would be absolutely correct to say that the father guided himself, or that Ibrahim guided him (as it is in fact stated in the verse in question (Maryam, 43)), or that God guided him.

The importance of the revealed knowledge

Ibrahim furthermore says to his father: "O my father, indeed there has come to me of knowledge that which has not come to you" (Maryam, 43).

Here Ibrahim clearly distinguishes between the conventional and revealed knowledge. His father possessed (some of) the former and he possessed (some of) the latter. Ibrahim's message is that conventional knowledge (contemporarily expressed as intuition, empiricism and rationalism) are provisionally valid forms of knowledge. However, they are neither complete nor absolute.

Topping the hierarchy of sources and types of knowledge is the revelation. It aims to enlighten, guide and optimize the other forms of knowledge. It is both absolute and infallible. It is everything conventional knowledge is not.

Conventional knowledge needs the revealed knowledge for its inspiration, direction, guardianship and authentication. The revealed knowledge, on the other hand, needs conventional knowledge for its proper contextualization, procedural operation and implementation.

The two are interlocked in a reciprocal relationship. They need one another if man were to realize the noble goals of his existence. Conventional knowledge without its revealed counterpart is partial, misleading, precarious and anticlimactic, whereas the revealed knowledge alone is dormant, concealed, unexpressed and even suppressed.

It should be observed that Ibrahim does not call his father ignorant, thus giving some credit to the character of conventional knowledge. He also does so out of courtesy and compassion. Ibrahim says to his father that what he had was not enough to attain salvation in both worlds. He needed more, which Ibrahim had.

This in equal measure shows that knowledge (combination of the revealed and conventional types) is pivotal in man's perennial quest for authentic success and happiness. Without knowledge, such becomes impossible. Ignorance, either actual or disguised by erroneous and inadequate knowledge, is man's and his life's archenemy. It is owing to this that in Ibrahim's entire discourse, worship, knowledge and guidance are rendered inseparable (Maryam, 42-43). They are triplets.

Ibrahim also says that knowledge "has come" both to him and his father. It means that no knowledge can be acquired, or learned, in the ontological sense of the word. All knowledge belongs to God who alone is Omniscient. Accordingly, all knowledge originates only from Him, as angels had declared in the context of the creation of Adam: "We have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed, You alone are All-knowing and All-wise" (al-Baqarah, 32).

Thus, technically, the whole of knowledge comes from God as a sign of His care, love, mercy and generosity for man as His vicegerent on earth. Every dimension of knowledge denotes a fragment of the divine treasure that has been deliberately uncovered and presented to man. It follows that humbleness, appreciation, insight and integrity ought always to be associated with the orb of knowledge and its people. Those who truly know are good and morally upright, those who do not know are not.

The truth and blind following

One of the main lessons that can be extracted from Ibrahim's dialogue with his father is that the purpose of man's life is to seek, find, embrace, actualize and live the truth. Everything else is secondary and should be subjected to the interests of the former. For example, a person learns, works, plays, builds a career, etc., but he should not get engrossed in those pursuits for their own sake, nor because they are ends in themselves. Rather, he should undertake them for the sake of accomplishing his ultimate existential purpose, seeing them as sheer means for achieving higher and more consequential ends.

In doing so, a person should be ready to sacrifice whatever it takes, including his comfort zone, personal preferences, society, culture and even family. Nothing should be held bigger and more important than Almighty God and His truth. While doing so, moreover, a person's best allies will be the revelation, sound reason, broad-mindedness, clear conscience, determination and persistence. His worst enemies will be blind following, deadening formalism, myopia, troubled conscience, irrationality, heedlessness and prejudice.

That means that a person should follow the truth (be a Muslim) only because of his own free will, conscious choice, investigation, study, scrutiny, etc., and not just because he was born as a Muslim, or was

told and "trained" to be one, or because of certain social, historical, cultural and national norms. Being a Muslim should be his self-identification and *raison d'être*. It should be the pinnacle of his existential quest and mission.

Similarly, nonbelievers, sceptics and polytheists should do the same. Every person ought to be the architect of his own spiritual destiny. As part of *da'wah* (promoting the message of Islam and inviting people to it) they all should be frankly asked if they are what they are exclusively because of their own rational and free choices, and because of their own probes and studies, or because of something else connected to cultural, social and peer pressures, or to prevalent and often arcane personal as well as social routines and traditions.

The followers of the truth should favour this method because it only strengthens the case of the truth, and weakens, yet completely invalidates, the case of falsehood. There is nothing that upsets falsehood and its people better than luminous mind, common sense, intrinsic human nature and absolute honesty. Falsehood subsists solely due to the lack of those.

While Ibrahim epitomized all the positive traits and energy, his father was a polar opposite. Hence, Ibrahim became an everlasting exemplar for posterity as to how to live and succeed. His father became an example, too, but with regard to how not to live and how not to fail.

It is no surprise that the Qur'an testifies that God took Ibrahim as an intimate friend (al-Nisa', 125) and that he was "an *ummah* (nation, leader and role model), obedient unto God, a man of pure faith and no idolater" (al-Nahl, 120).

The father is designated as "an enemy to Allah" (al-Tawbah, 114). He never changed, as a result of which Ibrahim, in the end, disowned him.