

Prophet Ibrahim's Debate with King Namrud

Spahic Omer

The Qur'an mentions prophet Ibrahim's debate with a person whom Allah had given sovereignty (*al-Baqarah*, 258). The debate was concerning Ibrahim's Lord. According to most commentators of the Qur'an, that person was Namrud, a Babylonian king. The debate took place, most probably, following Ibrahim's destruction of the idols and before he was cast into the fire (*al-Anbiya'*, 51-70).

The following are some observations on the event.

Allah is the Owner of all sovereignty

About Namrud, the Qur'an says that it was Allah who had given him sovereignty (*al-mulk*). Here an important message is presented, namely that Allah is the Owner of all sovereignty, authority and power. He gives sovereignty to whom He wills and takes it away from whom He wills (*Alu 'Imran*, 26).

Sovereignty is a test from Allah which is loaded with heavy responsibilities. Allah tests certain people with it, just as He tests others with the lack of it. As a double-edged sword, sovereignty is intrinsically neither a privilege nor a source of pride. Nor is it a sign that Allah loves a person, or favours him over others.

In the same vein as everything else, sovereignty can be a cause of a person's success or failure in his earthly assignments. Certainly, Namrud belonged to the latter category. He was so blinded by his

authority and power that he not only became a hard-core nonbeliever and tyrant, but also he regarded himself as a living god.

The debate between Namrud and Ibrahim occurred because Ibrahim rejected Namrud and his nonsensical claims. He believed in Almighty Allah alone and was inviting his people to do the same. With the debate, Namrud challenged both Almighty Allah and Ibrahim as His messenger.

The genesis of absolutism and the divine-right theory

Namrud was the first ruler in history who combined absolutism - which was rooted in unlimited absolute sovereignty - with the notion of the divine rights of kings. He initiated the idea and instantaneously became its most extreme manifestation. The trend signified the culmination of mankind's deviation from the path of monotheism (*tawhid*) to the abyss of polytheism (*shirk*).

As a result, rulers were held as absolute sovereigns. They wielded supreme dictatorial authority, residing above the jurisdiction of every regulation, law, legislature and tradition. They derived their authority directly from god(s), ruling through the Mandate of Heaven.

Every now and then, a ruler - like Namrud - would elevate himself to the level of divinity. This proved a good and effective way to impose individual programs and to control the masses. Ordinary people's rights were denied and manipulated. They were mere subjects (subordinates, multitudes and mortal servants).

Hence, such rulers were sovereign deities on earth, operating either on behalf or independently from god(s) in Heaven. At times, they were also seen as direct descendants of god(s).

After Namrud, monarchical absolutism by divine right became very popular and widespread. It was a common practice in ancient Egypt (Pharaohs), Mesopotamia, India and China. Later, to varying degrees,

most European monarchs also followed suit. For example, Louis XIV of France (d. 1715) is said to have proclaimed: "I am the State."

It was held that God had bestowed temporal power on political rulers. They were free to do as they pleased, engendering unprecedented genres of cruelty and despotism. Opposing the practice - coupled with opposing the fixed and irrational dogmas of the Church - was the main goal of the Age of Enlightenment in Europe.

The aim was to overthrow absolute monarchies and replace them with republics and the forms of government that would promote popular sovereignty, such as liberal democracies. The French Revolution was the most significant milestone in that evolutionary process. That explains why freedom and equality constitute the mantra of the modern civilization.

Needless to say that since day one, Islam opposed absolute hereditary monarchies. It is likewise noteworthy that whenever the true Islamic spirit weakened, Muslim rulers became inclined to monarchical absolutism. Every so often, some of them yet resorted to the divine-right theory, while desperately trying to secure an acceptable level of legitimacy for their rule. Both the Umayyads and Abbasids were in part guilty of this development.

Indeed, all forms of political and religious absolutism are, at the same time, forms of Namrud-ism.

The strength of Ibrahim's argument

In the debate, Ibrahim, apparently answering a question or an objection, says to Namrud that his Lord is the one who gives life and causes death, to which Namrud replied that he gives life and causes death.

The question that immediately imposes itself is why Ibrahim mentioned "giving life" before "causing death" when in another

context he mentioned "causing me to die" before "bringing me to life" (al-Shu'ara', 81).

The answer - and Allah knows best - is that in Namrud Ibrahim confronted a nonbelieving tyrant who claimed to be a living god, representing both the supernatural and sovereign Godhead. Ibrahim wanted to bring home that it was exclusively Allah who creates things and gives life, and does so out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), without model or material, and after no pre-existing similitude or pattern.

All existing things are the outcome of this heavenly inimitable process, and all the forthcoming things will be subjected to the same. After that, logically, it is only Allah who is entitled to sustain them and to bring them to an end whenever He so willed.

Death denotes the end of a current existential paradigm that presides over all existence. After death comes resurrection (another form of giving life). Nonetheless, Namrud did not believe in the Hereafter, so it was at once unnecessary and unproductive to bring it up.

In this manner, Ibrahim instantaneously cornered Namrud. He could not say to be in charge of life and death because he was not able to create *ex nihilo* anything. The most he could do was to use, re-use, fashion, process and manipulate what was already there, none of which however could amount to the acts of authentic creation and the giving of life.

Namrud himself being a segment of the life phenomenon, and being nothing but a creation, could not transcend the bounds of created existence, nor could he behave outside the prescribed physical laws. And since he did not give life, he could not take it away either.

All this sounded simple and clear. However, Namrud was so much bogged down in arrogance, ignorance and idiocy that the words "simple" and "clear" lost their innate meanings. He had his own

vocabulary, as it were, resulting from the world of his egocentric fantasies and self-delusions.

Namrud is thus said to have brought forward two prisoners, both of whom had been sentenced to death. He then set one of them free and killed the other one, implying thereby that he gave the former life (because he had been earlier sentenced to death) and caused the other one to die (because he was alive and did not have to die, were it not for Namrud's self-governing decision).

Elevating the argument to another level

Having realized how irresponsible, shallow and foolish Namrud's thinking - and conduct - was, Ibrahim decided to elevate his argument to another level, both conceptually and literally. He said to Namrud: "Allah brings up the sun from the east, so bring it up from the west." It was at this point that Namrud became dumbfounded and overwhelmed.

What Ibrahim did to Namrud was as follows.

People like Namrud dwell in their exclusive worlds and spheres, pertaining not merely to their dealings with others, but as well to their own psychological, intellectual and spiritual wellbeing. Nobody has courage to question them, let alone shake them up and expand their horizons. If somehow that happens, such people instantly start displaying symptoms of insecurity, self-doubt and confusion. They become stunned and horrified as they never prepared themselves for the "impossible" and "worthless". Their ivory towers start crumbling.

In other words, Ibrahim transported Namrud to another level of actual reality, which was beyond his foolishness and manipulative powers. That level was compellingly genuine and real, and was unfolding beyond the domains of everything Namrud had ever known. The immediate presence of that reality's innumerable effects, yet its

inaccessibility, intricacy and opacity, made Namrud comprehend who he actually was and how (in)consequential his pretence was.

Namrud was told if he claimed that it was him who brings life and death, then he could also rise to the next challenge. He who brings life and death is expected to control the whole of existence as well, and to create whatever was in it, including controlling celestial bodies and their movements. For instance, "the sun rises every day from the east. Therefore, if you were god, as you claimed, bringing life and death, then bring the sun from the west" (Ibn Kathir).

Namrud's being dumbfounded and overwhelmed was, in fact, a manner of realization, which he never openly admitted. It only increased him in rebellion and cruelty. That is why he proceeded with throwing Ibrahim into the fire. This is indeed something like a realization of Pharaoh of which prophet Musa once reminded him: "Verily, you know that these signs have been sent down by none but the Lord of the heavens and the earth as clear evidences (proofs)" (al-Isra', 102).

Namrud was speechless. Such was not his choice, but rather, he was made to be. If he responded that he could bring the sun from the west, that would have been, by all accounts, plainly implausible and absurd, and would have exceeded even his own standards of irrationality and vanity. And if he, as the second option, declared that he could not do it, that would have meant an admission of defeat, which however did not exist in his book.

Hypothetically speaking, furthermore, Namrud could have counter-challenged Ibrahim to implore his own God to bring the sun from the west. As a form of defence, he could send the ball in Ibrahim's court.

But he did not. He knew if bringing the sun from the west was beyond his alleged powers, and beyond the alleged powers of all deities (idols) his people associated with the supernatural and transcendent Godhead, then it must be that the same Godhead runs the universe and dictates the movement of the sun.

In that case - as yet another implicit realization of Namrud - Ibrahim was closer to that Godhead than he and his polytheistic people. What if that Godhead was Ibrahim's God, Namrud must have dreaded.

Namrud should have reasoned that challenging thus Ibrahim might have spelled a catastrophe in the debate. If challenged, Ibrahim could beseech his God and He could answer his prayer. The fallout of this sudden turn of events would have been of seismic proportions and would have brought about an end to Namrud's status and rule. It would have presaged the end of an ideology and an epoch. The matter was no longer about the debate, but about the sheer survival and the future.

Therefore, the best option was to cut the debate short and to resort to violence and deceit instead, which were Namrud's best weapons and the weapons of all those who walk in his footsteps.

In addition, it should also be supposed that Ibrahim's making recourse to the second part of the argument was a carefully premeditated course of action. That way he seems to have intended to score a double victory: one against Namrud himself and the other against his polytheistic people.

As part of the people's polytheistic beliefs and practices, they worshipped the sun, which was perhaps the greatest and most important god. Similarly they worshipped the moon and stars. Namrud's purported divinity might have been allied with the divinity of the sun as well, because it was in his interest to affiliate himself with the biggest and the best.

Hence, when Ibrahim used the very idea of the sun to overcome and silence Namrud and his false claims, the double triumph was achieved in an emphatic fashion. Not only was Namrud defeated, but also the whole national creed was shaken to its foundations. They were all proven to be as untrue to themselves as they were extraneous to their

alleged deities. If the sun was their god, it should have come somehow to their rescue.

Lastly, it needs to be pointed out that there are many people who believe that in his debate Ibrahim employed two arguments, moving from a weaker to a stronger one. They then go to great lengths to justify such an approach and affirm its effectiveness. However, representing the minority, Fakhruddin al-Razi insists that there were no two arguments. There was only one, albeit with two dimensions that were mutually complementing each other.

The Qur'anic exposition of the event ends by the words: "Allah does not guide the wrongdoing (unjust) people" (al-Baqarah, 258). This means that Namrud, his people and whoever adopts their life example, were not guided solely because they freely and consciously chose misguidance and wrongdoing over guidance and virtue, and injustice and oppression over justice and benevolence. They were not guided because they did not want to be, nor did they prepare themselves to be guided.