

### 3. Banu Ibrahim

Generations after Adam, his descendant Noah/Nuh lived as a righteous man in an unrighteous generation. He listened to God, i.e. he obeyed Him. And he warned his generation of a coming judgment from God, beseeching them to turn to God and obey Him. Unfortunately, they did not listen to his call for repentance.

When God closed the cover of the ark, Noah and his family were safe inside. The text does not say, but it does not seem likely that he was relieved or self-satisfied. It is doubtful that he said in his mind or heart, “I warned them but they didn’t listen. They deserve whatever happens to them.”

Those things were true, but all of those outside the ark were part of his extended family. He and his immediate family were safe, but his brothers and sisters, his cousins, uncles, aunts, nephews and nieces were drowning. The Biblical text does tell us that Noah was a righteous man, and one who is righteous cares about others.

The Quran records Nuh saying to them, “Truly I am unto you a clear warner, that you might worship none but God. Truly I fear for you the punishment of a painful day.”<sup>1</sup>

When the flood ended, Noah and his family came out to a clean, new world. I think, though the text does not tell us this, that for the rest of the years of his long life, there was a sorrow that never left him. Yes, they were all guilty, but they were also all human beings, his family.

The three Holy Scriptures all teach that God has embedded basic laws and distinctions within the heart of every human being. It was the transgression of these laws which brought the flood as judgment. God had given humanity a “way” to live, but they rejected it. They distorted it. They chose violence rather than kindness.

“And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.... The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence/*hamas*. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth. And God said to Noah, ‘The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence/*hamas* through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth.’”<sup>2</sup>

It was that kind of Justice which Noah’s generation deserved. They turned away from the Mercy that was offered to them. But as God said through Ezekiel the prophet, “Say to them, ‘As I live,’ says the Lord God, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked should turn from the evil of his way and live...’”<sup>3</sup>

In Islam there is a caution against presuming the sufficiency of one’s own righteousness. “As a *hadith* states, “‘None of you will enter Paradise by his deeds.’ Someone asked, ‘Not even you, O Messenger of God?’ He said, ‘Not even me, save that God shelter me with His Mercy.’”<sup>4</sup>

Generations after Nuh, God raised up a singular individual who is presented as a model and guide for faith in all three communities, though his life predated them all. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God commanded Abram/Abraham, “For your own sake, go from your country, and from your kindred, and from your father’s house to the land which I will show you. And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, and be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who treat you with contempt, and all the families of the land will be blessed in you.”<sup>5</sup>

Joseph H. Hertz, who was Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, 1914-1946, wrote a Torah commentary. In it, he commented on God’s command to leave “*thy country... thy kindred ... thy father’s house*. These are the main influences which mould a person’s thoughts and actions. The words also indicate the severity of the trial which was being imposed upon him. He was to cut himself completely adrift from all associations that could possibly hinder his mission. A similar ‘call’ comes to Abraham’s descendants in every age and clime, to separate themselves from all associations and influences that are inimical to their Faith and Destiny.”<sup>6</sup>

On the one hand, the comment seems strange because country, kindred, and father’s house are so important in defining any individual or community. But, on the other hand, though these are “the main influences which mould a person’s thoughts and actions,” they are presented as being subservient to obedience to God. Your country, kindred, and father’s house may be headed in one direction, but you, as a child of Abraham, are to listen to God first, and then go in the direction He indicates, even if it is away from where the others in your community are headed.

Throughout the Bible, God is called “the God of **Abraham**, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”. Abraham’s life is presented as both a model of and a guide to the life that is pleasing to God. “Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness, you who seek the Lord; look to the rock from where you have been cut, and to the hole of the pit from where you have been dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who gave birth to you; for he was only one when I called him, and blessed him, and increased him.”<sup>7</sup>

The record of Muhammad’s Night Journedy says that he saw Ibrahim in the seventh heaven, the highest to which a man can go. The Quran asks, “And who is better in religion than the one who submits his face to God, and is virtuous, and follows the creed of Abraham, as a *hanif*? And God did take Abraham for a friend.”<sup>8</sup> A *hanif* is one who follows the monotheism of Ibrahim, which is presented as the basic universal component of faith. It is a faith without the specifics of “the Abrahamic religions”. (In Jewish and Christian tradition, such people are sometimes called “God-fearers”.)

All the Abrahamic religions are to be built on the faith of Abraham. They can add specifics for a particular community, but they cannot supercede the faith that Abraham showed. The question is asked, “who is better in religion than the one who ...follows the creed of Abraham, as a *hanif*?” The implied answer is “No one.”

Abraham is presented to us as “the father of those who believe,” a primary example for us. What does his life show us? First of all, he was a man who was willing to leave his home to go where God wanted him to be. He trusted God for what he could not see or know. He let his ungrateful nephew take the better land, and was content with what was left. Because of the value of a single life, he asked God not to destroy the wicked inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham was a man who was willing to give to God whatever He asked, even his most valuable possession, his hope, and his future.

What does it mean to be like Abraham, a simple righteous man? It at least means caring about God enough to care about people. We live in a time when we have later and more complete revelations, when we have advanced philosophies, theologies, and ideologies, but the faith of Abraham is not superceded or excelled by any of these.

“Allah’s Messenger said, ‘Whosoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should not harm his neighbour, and whosoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should entertain his guest generously and whosoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should talk what is good or keep quiet. (i.e. abstain from all kinds of evil and dirty talk e.g. abusing, lying, backbiting etc.)’”<sup>9</sup>

The Holy Scriptures in Greek record that Simon Peter/*Kefa* was sent by God to speak to Cornelius, who was a centurion in the occupying Roman army. When Peter arrived before Cornelius and his household, he realized something that seems to have previously escaped him: “I perceive that God truly does not regard outward appearance, but in every nation the one who fears Him and works justice is acceptable to Him.”<sup>10</sup>

This is consistent with the universal admonition which God gave through Micah the prophet. “He has told you, Adam, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to be humble in walking with your God?”<sup>11</sup>

### **An Islamic View of Different Communities**

“Let the people of the Gospel judge by what God has sent down therein. Whosoever judges not by that which God has sent down – it is they who are iniquitous.

“We have sent down unto thee the Book in truth, confirming the Book that came before it, and as a protector over it. So judge between them in accordance with what God has sent down, and follow not their caprices away from the truth that has come onto thee. For each among you We have appointed a law and a way. And had God willed it, He would have made you one community, but [He willed otherwise], that He might try you in that which He has given you. So vie with one another in good deeds. Unto God shall be your return altogether, and He will inform you of that wherein you differ.”<sup>12</sup>

There are different ways to hear and understand this and every passage in the Quran. “The Book of the Virtues of the Qur’an” says that “This Qur’an was revealed to be recited in seven different ways.”

“Narrated ‘Umar bin Al-Khattab: I heard Hisham bin Hakim reciting *Surat Al-Furqan* during the lifetime of Allah’s Messenger and I listened to his recitation and noticed that he recited in several different ways which Allah’s Messenger had not taught me. I was about to jump over him during his *Salat* (prayer), but I controlled my temper, and when he had completed his prayer, I put his upper garment around his neck and seized him by it and said, ‘Who taught you this *Surah* which I heard you reciting?’ He replied, ‘Allah’s Messenger has taught it to me in a different way from yours.’ So I dragged him to Allah’s Messenger and said (to Allah’s Messenger), ‘I heard this person reciting *Surat Al-Furqan* in a way which you haven’t taught!’ On that Allah’s Messenger said, ‘Release him, (O ‘Umar!) Recite O Hisham!’ Then he recited in the same way as I heard him reciting, then Allah’s Messenger said, ‘It was revealed in this way,’ and added, ‘Recite, O ‘Umar!’ I recited it as he had taught me. Allah’s Messenger then said, ‘It was revealed in this way. This Qur’an has been revealed to be recited in seven different ways, so recite of it whichever (way) is easier for you (or read as much of it as may be easy for you).’”<sup>13</sup>

The passage indicates that God gives different revelations to different communities; and He requires the different communities to live according to the law and the way which they have received. The meaning of a particular passage may vary in accordance with the context in which it is read. There are different authorized understandings, though there may be great hostility directed toward those who hold a variant understanding.

Accordingly, “It would be contradictory for the Quran to speak of the efficacy of judging by the Torah and the Gospel if it were to also maintain that these scriptures have been abrogated or excessively distorted. It would also make little sense to say that the religions in which these scriptures are applicable are defunct, or were defunct at the time the Quran was revealed, for it is the methodologies developed within the religions that would provide their followers with the ability to judge in accord with them. If previous religions were abrogated by the revelation of the Quran, it would be implausible to tell the Prophet Muhammad to seek their counsel when it says, ‘Ask the people of the Reminder, if you know not’ (16:43; cf. 21:7).”<sup>14</sup>

Most commentators understand “the people of the Reminder” to refer to the People of the Book.<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, the Quran says, “He sent down the Book upon thee in truth, confirming what was before it, and He sent down the Torah and the Gospel aforetime, as a guidance to mankind. And He sent down the Criterion. ...”<sup>16</sup> “O People of the Book! You stand on naught till you observe the Torah and the Gospel, and that which has been sent down unto you from your Lord.... Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Sabeans, and the Christians — whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve.”<sup>17</sup>

The passage (5:47-48) that speaks of the different communities does not dictate a way to resolve or eliminate the differences. God is the One who ordained the differences.

Instead, God's command is to "vie with one another in good deeds". When "you" stand before Him, "He will inform you of that wherein you differ." He will inform us because we do not know, though we may think and believe that we do know.

"The subsequent command, *vie with one another in good deeds* (cf. 2:148; 3:114), however, seems most plausibly addressed to human beings as a whole (T) and thus supposes not a process of supersession among religious forms, but rather a contemporaneous existence of different religious communities competing in virtue. The competition is in *good deeds* and thus on the practical rather than theological level. Resolving the intractable theological differences between the religions may not be a vocation for religious adherents in this world; rather, these may be matters only resolved by God in the Hereafter, when *He will inform you of that wherein you differ*. This verse carries enormous importance for the question of religious pluralism from an Islamic perspective. Since it is one of the key verses confirming the essential truths of different religious forms and indicating that the formal differences between religions have been divinely ordained, it has played a central role in contemporary Islamic discussions of religious pluralism."<sup>18</sup>

There are many people in the world who do not want to have anything to do with any of its religions. Their varying reasons can be evaluated in different ways, but if the adherents of the different religions were to "vie with one another in good deeds," then the number of those who detest "religion" might decrease. Some people would still have their reasons, but a great obstacle between people and God would have been removed. Religious people tend to think that their own derived categories are holy in themselves, but their Scriptures say the opposite.

"O you who believe! Be steadfast for God, bearing witness to justice, and let not hatred for a people lead you to be unjust. Be just; that is near to reverence. And reverence God. Surely God is Aware of whatsoever you do. To those who believe and perform righteous deeds, God has promised forgiveness and a great reward."<sup>19</sup> Divine Justice, by its nature, is not sectarian; nor is Divine Mercy.

"For every community We have appointed a rite they are to perform; so let them not argue with thee over the matter. And call to thy Lord. Truly thou art following a straight guidance. And if they dispute with thee, say, 'God knows best what you do. God will judge between you on the Day of Resurrection concerning that wherein you used to differ.'"<sup>20</sup>

It is important to understand the different Holy Scriptures in their own context. Some actions and commands are connected to specific situations which arose at a particular time. Though they still contain lessons to be learned, all their specifics are not intended to be universalized to all times and places.

There are some things that we know, but God knows everything. And He is the Judge of all the earth. So we are not to place ourselves as judges of others on the same level as

God. In this, He does not need a partner. Muhammad said, “And had thy Lord willed, all those who are on the earth would have believed altogether. Wouldst thou compel men till they become believers? It is not for a soul to believe, save by God’s Leave.”<sup>21</sup>

Consistent with that view, the “Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam” states that “Everyone shall have the right to live in security for himself, his religion, his dependents, his honour and his property.... It is not permitted to excite nationalistic or doctrinal hatred or to do anything that may be an incitement to any form of racial discrimination.”<sup>22</sup>

Self-righteousness is not limited to the people of any particular country, religion, ideology, or political party. It appears among people of all kinds, but it is not recommended in any of the Holy Scriptures. It is not approved by any of the three religions that are most connected to our primary concern here. (It is not likely that Noah was self-righteous while the waters were rising around the ark.)

Sometimes a person’s actions and attitude communicate something in conflict with what they say. “Say, ‘Shall I inform you who are the greatest losers in respect to their deeds? Those whose efforts go astray in the life of this world, while they reckon that they are virtuous in their works.’”<sup>23</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

1. Quran, Hud 11:25-26
2. Genesis 6:5, 11-13. *Hamas* is the Hebrew word used for “violence” in these verses.
3. Ezekiel 33:11
4. *The Study Quran*, comment on The Calamity/*al-Qariah* 101:9 at 91087
5. Genesis 12:1-3
6. *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, ed. by Dr. J. H. Hertz, (London: Soncino Press, 5716/1956), p. 45.
7. Isaiah 51:1-2
8. Quran, Women/*al-Nisa* 4:125. Abraham is designated as the friend of God in 2Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8; Jacob [James] 2:23.
9. Al-Bukhari, 71. The Book of *Al-Adab*, CHAPTER 13. Whosoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, should not harm his neighbour, 2023, p.956. [8:47-O.B.] “Narrating Abu Huraira:...”
10. Acts 10:34-35
11. Micah 6:8
12. Quran, The Table Spread/*al-Maidah* 5:47-48
13. Al-Bukhari, p.877-878. Chapter 2. [6:514-O.B.]
14. *The Study Quran*, Joseph Lumbard, “The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions,” at 97849
15. “To remind is the function of all revelation; hence the Torah is called *a Reminder* (40:54) and the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) are referred to as *the people of the Reminder* (16:43; 21:7).” *The Study Quran*, comment on 36:63 at 63516.

16. *Quran*, The House of Imran/*Al-Imran* 3:3-4
17. *Quran*, The Table Spread/*al-Maidah* 5:68-69. [2:62]
18. *The Study Quran*, Comment on 5:47-48 at 17890.
19. *Quran*, The Table Spread/*al-Maidah* 5:8-9
20. *Quran*, The Pilgrimage/*al-Hajj* 22:67-69
21. *Quran*, Yunus/Jonah 10:99.
22. "Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam," ARTICLE 18: (a) and ARTICLE 22: (d).
23. *Quran*, The Cave/*al-Kahf* 18:103-104