

A Glimpse of the Character Traits of the Prophet Muhammad, Part II

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ABSTRACT: In Part I of this article published in the previous issue, Ayatollah Zanjani gave a brief account of the Prophet Muhammad's virtuous characteristics displayed throughout his childhood, under his caretakers, and during his employment. The Prophet (s) also showed love and devotion towards the destitute, the oppressed, and the slaves. In offering this description, Zanjani highlighted the admirable qualities the Prophet (s) practiced with utmost perfection, some of them being cleanliness, forgiveness, worship, and companionship. Part II continues with this account on the Prophet's renunciation, his steadfastness, and his respect for public opinion. In accomplishing his mission, the Prophet (s) liberated Muslims from their own whims, thus proving renunciation to be a necessary characteristic. Despite all obstacles, he remained unwavering in his faith. Moreover, he valued public opinion and warned against interfering in the private affairs of others.

Prophet Muhammad (s) lived a virtuous life and he set an example for all of mankind. This paper discusses some of Prophet Muhammad's character traits which we can learn from the Qur'anic verses and from the manner in which he behaved.

Renunciation (*zuhd*)

The Prophet removed all luxurious and unnecessary items from his life and set a righteous example. He used to sit on the ground, sleep on a mat made of palm leaves¹ and place a leather cushion filled with palm fibre under his head.² His main food was barley, bread and dates. He never criticized food he did not like,³ never ate until he was full and would sometimes have barley bread for three consecutive days.⁴ He broke his fast by eating a small amount of dates, and if not available, he had a few sips of water instead.⁵ It has been narrated from 'Ai'shah that sometimes a whole month would pass before the kitchen fire was lit.⁶ When he rode, his horse would be unsaddled and he would let someone else ride behind him, should it be convenient for the animal. He used to patch his own garments, cobble his own shoes, milk his own sheep, and grind his own flour.⁷ Moreover, he would help his family with other household chores. And withal, he would go for prayer whenever he heard the call.⁸

Since the goal of the Prophet and his companions was to save humanity from decadence and to eradicate idolatry to liberate them, how could they be egoists or slaves to their whims? If they had been either of these, it would have been impossible for them

¹ *Nur al-Absar*, vol. 26, p. 26 and *Bihar al-Anwar*, Bab fi Makarim Akhlaq al-Nabi

² *Sahih* of Muslim, vol. 6, p. 145

³ *Ibid.*, vol. 8, p. 217

⁴ *Bihar al-Anwar*, Bab fi Makarim Akhlaq al-Nabi

⁵ *Sahih* of Muslim, vol. 8, p. 218

⁶ *Sahih* of Bukhari, vol. 4, p. 190

⁷ *Nur al-Absar*, p. 27

⁸ *Sahih* of Bukhari, vol. 8, p. 14

to resist three years of hardship in the mountain pass (*shi'b*) of Abu Talib, where the rebels had confined them and denied them access to food and commodities.¹ Similarly, the homeless Meccans (*ashāb al-suffah* – literally meaning people of the ledge or portico) could not have lived on the raised platform by the side of the mosque without food, clothing, or housing and still resisted the pressure against them. Or in the Battle of Tabuk, if they had been slaves to their whims, it would have been impossible for them to patiently tolerate the extreme hardship, hunger, and thirst in the heat of the Arabian Peninsula.² Even when the pressure had been alleviated, the true companions continued to live like desert trees which have to live with little water. In any case, the high ambitions of just and philanthropic rulers did not allow them to live in comfort and luxury as long as poverty and hardship existed and people's basic needs had not been met.

That is not to say, of course, that the blessed Prophet was opposed to the acquisition of wealth and the spending of it in lawful and legitimate ways. In fact, he actually supported this when he said: "The best assistance to guarding against evil (*taqwā*) is wealth (*ghinā*)."³ He considered wealth a means of survival⁴ and taught that there is no means more effective than wealth to further one's objectives.

Steadfastness

Muhammad (s) had not only been sent for the guidance of a tribe or a nation but he had also been assigned a universal mission "...that he may be a warner to all the nations" (25:1).⁵ It was necessary for Prophet Muhammad (s) to save humanity from the darkness of lust and ignorance, from the worship of animate and inanimate idols, from the despotism and authority of unjust rulers,

¹ *Imtā' al-Asmā'*, Miqirzi, vol. 1, p. 25

² *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 472

³ *Wasā'il al-Shia'a*, Bab al-Tijarah

⁴ Chapter 4 (al-Nisa': Women), 5

⁵ Chapter 25 (al-Furqan: the Criterion), 1

from the unconditional imitations of the soothsayers and impostors, from the racial and class biases, and from material and spiritual poverty. He was also sent to liberate humanity from the many chains that had imprisoned them and had eroded their souls and bodies and to abrogate the fake and false criteria that had been accepted for centuries as the means for evaluating habits and character traits and that actually displayed ugliness as beautiful, falsehood as truth, and evil as good. In short, he had to destroy a corrupt world and rebuild a new and better world.

In the beginning, when the command for the open call to Islam had not yet been sent down and when only a small number had converted to Islam, the Quraysh thought that the Prophet was also one of *hunaḥā* (true believers; believers in the faith of Abraham) along with Zayd ibn ‘Amr ibn Kufayl, ‘Uthmān ibn Huwayrith, and Waraqah ibn Nawfal, who sometimes expressed their opinions on certain matters of theology, but generally did not challenge people. The relationship between the converts and the Prophet was thought to be similar to that of a spiritual master and a novice. Although they caused no inconvenience, some looked upon them with suspicion and indignation.¹ The blessed Prophet was not afraid of praying and/or worshipping in public as he was occasionally seen standing in prayer with Ali and his wife, Khadijah, by the side of the Ka‘bah. One day, ‘Afif al-Kindi saw them and asked ‘Abbas ibn ‘Abd al-Muttalib, “O ‘Abbas, what is this religion?” ‘Abbas answered,

This is Muhammad ibn ‘Abdullah, who claims that Allah called him to be a messenger, and that the treasures of Kisra (Khusraw, the Sassanid Persian Emperor) and Qaysar (Caesar, the Byzantine Emperor) will be opened for him. This is his wife Khadijah, daughter of Khuwaylid, who has

¹ *Imtā’ al-Asmā’*, Miqirizi, vol. 1, p. 18

believed in him. The youth is his cousin 'Ali ibn Abi Talib.¹

Three years after this, the Prophet started to open the invitation to Islam under the command of God. His invitation is summarized as follows:

I have brought the best of this world and the next. You who worship the idols are in error, because you are following in the footsteps of your fathers and ancestors. They have no power over gain and loss. It is only the Creator of the world Who is Worthy of praise and Who can reward you for your good and punish you for your evil deeds. I warn you against the path that you have adopted which will lead you to be afflicted with a painful punishment.

These words fell heavily on the ears of the polytheists and upset them. It was his uncle Abu Lahab who first declined the Prophet's invitation in an aggressive tone. From that day onwards, he and the polytheists rose in opposition and resisted the advancement of Islam. Their opposition was not merely because of their bias in favour of their religious beliefs and sanctities, but also because they saw their whole world threatened by this new religion. Their benefits and social status depended on the situation in Arabia at that time. If a revolution or transformation were to occur, the circumstances would naturally change and their supremacy and privileges would disappear. The polytheists had installed three hundred and sixty idols in the Ka'bah² and each of the Arab tribes worshipped one or more of them. They also considered the Ka'bah to be the house of God and had posed as its guardians and thereby imposed their authority on all of the Arab tribes. They imagined that they had gathered together the deities of heaven and

¹ *Al-Sirah al-Halabiyyah*, vol. 1, pp. 334-337

² *Sahih* of Bukhari, vol. 5, pp. 45 and 46

those of the earth so that everybody could worship their own desired object of worship. If they abandoned their idols, they would have to relinquish all the privileges and benefits that had been gained from the frequent visits, offerings, and vows of the pilgrims.

Furthermore, haughtiness and jealousy had blinded them and left a profound impact on the intensity of their resistance. Abu Jahl demonstrated this when he said:

We have competed with the clan of ‘Abd Manaf for honour and position and fell behind them on the race field. Now they claim that a prophet has been sent from among them and wish to overtake us. That will never happen.¹

From then on, the blessed Messenger and his followers were under a lot of pressure and were prevented from performing their religious rites. They were forced to go to a valley outside Mecca where they could pray together without being seen.² They were abysmally tormented by the polytheists, who laid them on the ground and put heavy, burning hot stones on their bare backs and chests while attempting to force them to abandon the religion of Muhammad (s) and acknowledge that al-Lāt and al-‘Uzzā were their gods.³ They tied ropes around the necks of the believers and dragged them through the valleys. They dressed their naked bodies in armour and laid them out in the burning sun. Some were beaten, imprisoned and kept hungry and thirsty. The holy Prophet (s) was severely saddened at the extent of the cruelty that was being inflicted on his followers. One day, he happened to see ‘Ammār and his mother Sumayyah, who were almost unconscious as a result of the torture they had undergone and said, “O family of Yasir, be patient! Your final destination is paradise.” After a

¹ *Sirah* by Ibn Hisham, vol. 1, p. 388

² *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 275

³ *Imtā’ al-Asmā’*, Miqirizi, vol 1, p. 18

while, Yasir and Sumayyah were martyred,¹ making them the first martyrs in Islamic history.

The infidels of the Quraysh did not refrain from reviling and insulting the blessed Prophet whenever they met him. One day, while the Prophet (s) was in prostration, 'Uqbah bin Abi Mu'it placed the abdominal contents of a camel onto his back in between his shoulders. The Prophet did not lift up his head until his daughter Fatima (a) came and removed them.

On another occasion, while the Prophet (s) was praying in the courtyard of the Ka'bah, the same person came and seized him by the shoulder, twisted his garment around his neck and began brutally choking him. At that time, Abu Bakr came, seized 'Uqbah's shoulders and threw him away from the Prophet (s). The blessed Prophet patiently faced this arduous persecution and continued to enjoin perseverance upon his followers.

Khabbāb ibn Arat narrates:

I complained to the Prophet (of the persecution inflicted on us by the infidels) while he was in the shade of the Ka'bah wall. I said, 'Will you invoke Allah to help us?' He sat down with a red face and said, 'A believer among those who were before you was combed with iron combs so that nothing of his flesh or nerves remained on his bones, yet that never made him desert his religion. A saw might have been put over the middle of his head and his head split into two parts, yet all of that would not make him abandon his religion. By Allah! This religion will be completed and triumphed.'²

¹ *Al-Sirah al-Halabiyyah*, vol. 1, pp. 334-337

² *Sahih* of Bukhari, vol. 5, pp. 45 and 46

On another occasion, it was said to the Prophet (s), “Invoke curse upon the polytheists,” whereupon he replied, “I have not been sent as the invoker of curse; rather, I have been sent as a mercy.”¹

In the face of the steadfastness of the blessed Prophet, his opponents from the tribe of Quraysh intensified their obstinacy and decided to nullify his invitation by staining his good name and reputation and trying to seek out his weak points. He was called a madman (*majnūn*, literally meaning possessed by jinn), a poet, a soothsayer, or a magician wherever he went. Rumours were also spread that he alienated fathers from sons or wives from their husbands by using witchcraft. During the pilgrimage season, they influenced the strangers and pilgrims with nonsensical words to discourage them from communicating with him.²

At first, the Quraysh proceeded toward the Prophet (s) in a threatening manner. Then, they approached Abu Talib who, from within their group, was Muhammad’s only strong supporter. They did so in order to dissuade him from supporting his nephew though he did not succumb to them. As soon as the Quraysh found out that their threats proved to be ineffective, they resorted to bribing. They sent ‘Utbah ibn Rabi‘ah to tell the Prophet (s) that if he wanted wealth, they would make him the richest man in the country. If the Prophet wanted power and leadership, they would make him their ruler as long as he abandoned his call to Islam. However, the Prophet (s) replied, in a decisive and explicit manner deserving of the rank of the divinely-sent Prophets:

I swear by the Name of God that if they place the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left hand in return for giving up this matter [calling people to Islam], I will never desist until either God makes it triumph or I perish defending it.³

¹ *Sahih* of Muslim, vol. 8, p. 24

² *Sirah* by Ibn Hisham, vol. 1, p. 284

³ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 278

In short, neither threat nor bribery nor defamation nor the three-year siege of Shi'b Abi Talib, nor hunger nor deprivation nor homelessness could destroy the Prophet's (s) steadfastness. After twenty-three years of struggle, he accomplished his goal in delivering the message of Islam to the world.

Respect for Public Opinion

With regard to the subjects (*mawḍūʿ*) and rulings (*hukm*) that are determined by definitive revelation (*wahy*) and explicit statements (*nass*), including the divinely legislated acts of worship and transactions, the Prophet (s) did not grant himself or others the right to intervene and express opinions. This group of rulings should be unconditionally implemented and violating them is regarded as disbelief in God as stated in the Qur'an: "Whoever does not judge by that which God has revealed: such are disbelievers" (5:44).¹ However, when it came to subjects pertaining to the individual's life and activity, as long as these were permissible, the individual Muslims were entitled to independent opinion and freedom of action. No one had the right to interfere in the private affairs of others.² When it came to society, the Prophet (s) believed that everyone had an equal right to express their opinion. Although his clear-mindedness and extraordinary intelligence excelled that of others in discerning public interest, he never behaved in a despotic and/or imperious manner and did not show indifference to public opinion. He always took the opinions of others into consideration while putting the Qur'anic order into practice and only wanted Muslims to bear this prophetic tendency in mind.

There were three occasions in the Battle of Badr where Prophet Muhammad (s) invited his companions to consult together and asked them to express their opinions. On the first occasion, he consulted his companions as to whether they should fight the Quraysh or leave them alone and return to Medina. All of them

¹ Chapter 5 (al-Ma'idah: the Table), 44

² *Sahih* of Muslim, vol. 8, p. 10

preferred to fight, so he agreed.¹ Secondly, he consulted his companions about where the camp should be established. At this point he agreed with the advice of Hubāb ibn al-Mundhir. In the third instance, he consulted his companions and followers as to how the captives should be treated. Some said that they should be killed; others preferred that they should be set free on ransom. The blessed Prophet agreed with the second group.²

At the battle of Uhud, the Prophet (s) consulted his companions about the best strategy to follow. He accepted the majority preference to go out of Medina and meet the armies of the Quraysh rather than remaining inside the fortifications to fight.³

At the battle of Ahzab, the Prophet (s) held an urgent consultation as to whether they should draw up their forces and arrange them outside Medina or defend themselves inside the city. After the consultation, it was agreed that Mount Sal' should be used as the headquarters of the army of Islam and a trench should be dug to act as a barrier to prevent the enemy forces from proceeding to attack.⁴

During the battle of Tabuk, the Roman emperor was frightened when the army of Islam approached the frontier of Syria. He did not launch an attack because he could not count on his army. At this juncture the Prophet (s) assembled his esteemed officers and, acting on the established Islamic principle of consultation, he asked for their views as to whether they should advance into the territory of the enemy or return to Medina. As a result of this military consultation, it was decided that the army of Islam should return to Medina.⁵

¹ *Sirah* by Ibn Hisham, vol. 2, p. 253

² *Imtā' al-Asmā'*, Miqirizi, vol. 1, pp. 74, 78 and 97

³ *Sirah* by Ibn Hisham, vol. 3, p. 7

⁴ *Imtā' al-Asmā'*, Miqirizi, vol. 1, p. 220

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 463

It is known that all Muslims believe in the Prophet's (s) infallibility and do not find any of his deeds objectionable.¹ However, the blessed Prophet was nevertheless tolerant towards criticism even if it was irrelevant and baseless, and he was careful not to place people under suffocating circumstances. Instead, he used to make the critic aware of his error by using convincing arguments told in a quiet and gentle way. He used to abide by the natural law that the Creator of the world has endowed all humans with the power of thinking and critiquing, and openly acknowledged that this was not exclusive to those who possessed influence and power. He did not allow the rights of freedom of expression and criticism to be denied to the people. He particularly ordered his followers to exercise their rights in the face of a ruler who did something against the laws of justice by rejecting and protesting against it.

In another instance, the Prophet (s) sent out an army to carry out a campaign. He appointed a man from the Ansār as a commander and ordered the soldiers to obey him. During the campaign, the commander became angry with his soldiers and said, "Didn't the Prophet order you to obey me?" They replied in the affirmative. Then he said, "I order you to collect wood and make a fire and then throw yourselves into it." Thus the soldiers collected wood and made a fire, but just as they were about to throw themselves into it, they started having second thoughts. They looked at each other and questioned, "We followed the Prophet (s) to escape

¹ It has to be noted that all Muslims believe in the infallibility of the Prophet (s) with respect to his mission, but with respect to his personal life before or after the mission there are differences among different schools of Islam. Shi'a Muslims believe in the infallibility of the Prophet (s) both before and after his mission in his delivery of the message as well as his personal life. Sunni Muslims are divided in this matter. Basically they agree on the infallibility in the delivery of message, but with respect to his personal life some believe in the possibility of committing unintentional sins and others in possibility of committing minor sins. With respect to the period before the mission started, they normally do not believe in the necessity of infallibility. For further explanation see Shomali, M.A., *Shi'i Islam: Origins, faith & Practices* (2001), pp. 97-106 (editor).

from the fire. We embraced Islam to save ourselves from the 'fire' so why should we enter it now?" While they were in that state of indecision, the fire went out and with it went their commander's anger. The event was relayed to the Prophet (s), who said:

If they had entered it [the fire] they would never have come out of it [i.e. out of the fire of injustice], for obedience [to someone's orders] is required only when he enjoins what is good.¹

At the battle of Hunayn, the Prophet (s) deemed it expedient to allocate a large proportion of the booty to the newly converted Meccans. Sa'd ibn 'Ubādah and some of the other Medinite Ansārs who were among the foremost warriors expressed their dissatisfaction with the preference given by the Prophet (s) to the Ansārs. When their discontent reached the ears of Muhammad (s), he assembled the disheartened Ansārs together, and with an eloquent and pleasant mode of expression, he made them aware of the causes of his partiality and of their own error. When they heard the Prophet's (s) words, the Ansārs present started weeping and apologized to him.²

In another incident that occurred after the Battle of Hunayn, a man called Hurqus from the tribe of Banu Tamim, (who later became one of the chiefs of the Khārijites), rebuked the Prophet (s) by saying, "Be just in your distribution, O Messenger of Allah." 'Umar ibn Khattāb was incensed by this rude remark and asked the Prophet (s) to allow him to behead Hurqus. The Prophet (s) said, "Leave him alone!" He then turned to Hurqus and said gently: "Then who can be called just if I am not just?"³

With regards to peace contracts, 'Umar ibn Khattāb strongly objected to the Prophet (s) with regards to the unequal terms of the treaty of Hudaibiyyah concluded by the Prophet (s) with the

¹ *Sahih* of Muslim, vol. 6, p. 16

² *Imtā' al-Asmā'*, Miqrirzi, vol. 1, 431

³ *Sahih* of Bukhari, vol. 4, p. 200

tribe of the Quraysh. The blessed Prophet did not get upset with him, but instead persuaded him with a convincing argument.¹

In yet another instance, a man demanded his debts from the Prophet (s) in such a rude manner that the companions of the Prophet intended to harm him, but the Prophet said, "Leave him, for he [the creditor] has the right to demand it. Buy a camel of the same age and give it to him." They challenged, "But the camel that is available is older than the camel he demands," to which the Prophet (s) replied,

Buy it and give it to him, for the best among you are those who repay their debts in the most generous manner.²

The blessed Prophet (s) imbued both the values of justice and mercy. In this way, he taught the rulers of the world how to rule so that they were aware that their rank and status in society was like that of a kind father rather than an absolute master, and that they should always consider the best interests of their subjects instead of imposing their own whims and wishes upon them. The Prophet (s) said, "I am more considerate and compassionate of the best interests of the believers than they are of themselves." He also said:

The Qur'an describes my rank and status in these words: '*The Prophet is closer to the believers than their own selves.*' (33:6)³ So, if a true believer dies and leaves behind some property, his inheritance will be given to his inheritors [from the father's side], and if he leaves behind some debt to be paid or destitute children, then I am their guardian.⁴

¹ *Imtā' al-Asmā'*, Miqrirzi, vol. 1, p. 296

² *Sahih* of Bukhari, vol. 3, p. 116

³ Chapter 33: 6

⁴ *Sahih* of Bukhari, vol. 3, 118

News and experiences of the noble character and high moral qualities of the blessed Prophet (s) spread so widely within a short period of time and became so deeply-rooted in the hearts of the earliest Muslims that they transformed everything into the best form possible. Through them, the Prophet (s) was able to change Arab pride into humility, mercilessness into compassion, disunity into unity, infidelity into faith, idolatry into monotheism, division into solidarity, immorality into chastity, vengeance into forgiveness, idleness into activity, selfishness into altruism, roughness into tenderness, niggardliness into selflessness, and foolishness into sagacity and intelligence. Indeed, the Prophet's way of life was the very perfect and practical interpretation of God's heavenly Book, the Glorious Quran, which he embodied in all of the various stages of his life.