

# Honour and Dignity in Islam, Part II<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** An analysis of the Qur'an verses and Islamic traditions displays principles and rules that aim to preserve the dignity of humankind. Among the list of ethical concepts in Islam, dignity is one of the most—if not, the most—important concept. Using references from the Qur'an and hadith, this series offers the instructions God gives us to appreciate, safeguard, and add to the dignity we were initially given, and then how to extend this dignity to others. This article describes the dignity that God gives to humankind, as well as the extra dignity that God grants to the angels, the prophets, the people of heaven, and the pious.

In the previous part, we outlined this series by explaining the notion of *'izzah*, and referred to specific verses on this subject, thereby establishing that *'izzah* is an important quality of God. In tens of verses, the Qur'an stresses that God is *'Aziz*; this means that He is the source, origin, and treasure of honour and dignity, and if anyone wishes to seek it, they can

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<sup>1</sup> This series is based on a series of 12 lectures given by the author in the month of Ramadan 2015 at the Islamic Centre of England.

do this by making themselves closer to God. We then defined *‘izzah* based on different sources. Now let us explore more the Islamic account of this important notion.

### **God extends *‘izzah* to His creation**

Everyone naturally seeks and yearns for *‘izzah*. This yearning reflects our origin, our souls. God has absolute existence, and thereafter grants us existence, and we then strive to keep our life going; we try to prolong it, and we also try and add to the quality of our lives.

Similarly, God is utmost light, and therefore all His creatures seek light. He is utmost merciful, and therefore all His creatures seek mercy and try and achieve it. Hence, there is a very natural connection between the qualities of God and what we as His creation seek. God is *‘Aziz* and we are all striving to obtain some kind of *‘izzah*, and we wish to be *‘aziz* in some way.

### **Two general ways that people try to achieve honour**

There are two ways that people may try to achieve this. The first way is genuine and honest, and that is for a person to qualify himself as a recipient of *‘izzah* from God. The other way is to cheat; for example, some people think that by cheating or offering bribes, they can become *‘aziz*. Or they think that through having power or being part of a gang or a strong party, they can somehow become *‘aziz*.

### **Arrogance cannot lead to dignity**

These people assume that by associating themselves to those who have apparent power that they, too, can become *‘aziz*. The Qur’an says that this kind of thinking is wrong:

الَّذِينَ يَتَّخِذُونَ الْكَافِرِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَلِيتَهُمْ عِنْدَهُمُ الْعِزَّةُ فَإِنَّ الْعِزَّةَ  
لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا

*Those who take the faithless for allies instead of the faithful. Do they seek honour with them? [If so,] indeed all honour belongs to God. (4:139)*

For example, if we say that those who achieve good results in their exams will be given good opportunities at university and will ultimately enjoy good jobs, then this will produce two reactions. Some students will study hard and genuinely achieve good results; others, may try to cheat in their exams in order to get good results. These cheaters may deceive some people for some time, but will not be able to deceive everyone forever. We must seek out genuine izzah and not resort to any cheating in the process.

The same principle applies to seeking light. On the Day of Judgement, God says that some believers will have so much light that their light will be displayed and indeed move swiftly in front of them and on their right side:

يَوْمَ لَا يُخْزِي اللَّهُ النَّبِيَّ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَعَهُ نُورُهُمْ يَسْعَى بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَبِأَيْمَانِهِمْ  
يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا أَتْمِمْ لَنَا نُورَنَا وَاغْفِرْ لَنَا إِنَّكَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

*On the day when God will not let the Prophet down and the faithful who are with him. Their light will move swiftly before them and on their right. They will say, 'Our Lord! Perfect our light for us, and forgive us! Indeed You have power over all things.' (66:8)*

Seeing this, the hypocrites, who will have no light on that day, will say:

يَوْمَ يَقُولُ الْمُنَافِقُونَ وَالْمُنَافِقَاتُ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا انظُرُونَا نَقْتَبِسْ مِنْ نُورِكُمْ قِيلَ  
 ارْجِعُوا وَرَاءَكُمْ فَالْتَمِسُوا نُورًا فَضُرِبَ بَيْنَهُمْ بِسُورٍ لَهُ بَابٌ بَاطِنُهُ فِيهِ الرَّحْمَةُ  
 وَظَاهِرُهُ مِنْ قِبَلِهِ الْعَذَابُ

*The day the hypocrites, men and women, will say to the faithful, "Please let up on us, that we may glean something from your light!" They will be told: "Go back and grope for light!" Then there will be set up between them a wall with a gate, with mercy on its interior and punishment toward its exterior. (57:13)*

The same applies to *izzah*. It is a quality of perfection that God possesses, and He has placed in us that amount of *izzah* to bring awareness to the beauty of it, and to encourage us to strive for more genuinely.

Another example is that of Iblis. The problem with Iblis was that he wished to have this dignity for himself, but in a way that was not acceptable or moral. He wanted to have a special position with God by bringing others down and keeping them lower than him. We also see this trait in some human beings. At times, when people cannot achieve good results, they sabotage the progress of others by misguiding them and damaging their prospects, for example, by giving them incorrect information about an upcoming examination. If a person wants to be close to God, then this cannot be achieved by bringing others down.

Iblis desired *izzah*, but attempted to achieve it dishonestly. Imam Ali cites the example of Iblis in *Khutbat al-Qāsi'ah*.<sup>2</sup> He explains the tragedy of Iblis and how it is possible for us to be influenced by him.

<sup>2</sup> Sermon 192 of *Nahj al-Balāghah*

In the Qur'an, God says that when He informed the angels about the creation of Adam, He also commanded them to prostrate:

إِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي خَالِقٌ بَشَرًا مِنْ طِينٍ فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِي فَقَعُوا لَهُ سَاجِدِينَ فَسَجَدَ الْمَلَائِكَةُ كُلُّهُمْ أَجْمَعُونَ إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ اسْتَكْبَرَ وَكَانَ مِنَ الْكَافِرِينَ

*'When your Lord said to the angels, "Indeed I am about to create a human being out of clay. So when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My spirit, then fall down in prostration before him. Thereat the angels prostrated, all of them together, but not Iblis; he acted arrogantly and he was one of the faithless." (38: 71-74)*

Although Iblis was not an angel, he was very close to them at that time.

Explaining this refusal to prostrate, Imam Ali says:

اعْتَرَضَتْهُ الْحَمِيَّةُ فَافْتَحَرَ عَلَى آدَمَ بِخَلْقِهِ وَتَعَصَّبَ عَلَيْهِ لِأَصْلِهِ فَعَدُوُّ اللَّهِ إِمَامُ الْمُتَعَصِّبِينَ وَسَلَفُ الْمُسْتَكْبِرِينَ الَّذِي وَضَعَ أَسَاسَ الْعَصِيَّةِ وَنَارَعَ اللَّهَ رِذَاءَ الْجَبْرِيَّةِ وَادَّرَعَ لِبَاسَ التَّعَزُّزِ

His vanity stood in his way. Consequently, he felt proud over Adam by virtue of his creation and boasted over him on account of his origin. Thus, this enemy of God is the leader of those who boast, and the fore-runner of the vain. It is he who laid the foundation of factionalism, quarrelled with God about the robe of greatness, put on the dress of haughtiness.<sup>3</sup>

Iblis felt he was better than Adam because Adam was created from clay and he from fire, not knowing (or not considering) that Adam's honour

<sup>3</sup> Sermon 192 of *Nahj al-Balāghah*

was not from his creation from clay, but from the spirit that God had given him. Iblis's arrogance was due to his assumption that his origin was better than that of Adam.

Imam Ali calls Iblis the leader or fore-runner of the *muta'assibin*, i.e. those who are biased and arrogant, and feel that only they and their party matter. Indeed, we see the results of such an attitude today. Some people are so proud that they feel they have a monopoly over their religion, such as Islam. To them, no one else is Muslim and thus need to be ignored or perhaps even need to be killed. Iblis laid the foundation of bias. He wished to steal the greatness of God, and the dress of dignity which only fits God.

Iblis also showed *ta'azzuz*. *Ta'azzuz* means that in reality a person is not *áziz*, but only wants to present himself as *áziz*. Such people have nothing valuable but want to pretend they are valuable. This is like a person that does not possess knowledge, but wishes to be respected and treated like scholars so he acts like a religious scholar, and dresses like them by e.g. keeping a longer beard or wearing a big *'imāmah*.<sup>4</sup> Imam Ali continues:

وَحَلَعَ فِتَاعَ التَّدَلُّلِ أَلَّا تَرَوْنَ كَيْفَ صَعَّرَهُ اللَّهُ بِتَكْبَرِهِ وَوَضَعَهُ بِتَرْفُعِهِ فَجَعَلَهُ فِي  
الدُّنْيَا مَذْحُورًا وَأَعَدَّ لَهُ فِي الْأُخْرَةِ سَعِيرًا

He [Iblis] took off the covering of humility. Do you not see how God made him low on account of his vanity and humiliated him for his feigning to be high? He discarded him in this world and provided for him burning fire in the next world.

Then Imam Ali explains:

<sup>4</sup> Or turban, a headwear done through cloth-binding, traditionally worn by men of various countries and religions.

وَلَوْ أَرَادَ اللَّهُ سُبْحَانَهُ أَنْ يَخْلُقَ آدَمَ مِنْ نُورٍ يَحْطَفُ الْأَبْصَارَ ضِيَاؤُهُ وَيَهْرُ  
الْعُقُولَ رِوَاؤُهُ وَطِيبُ يَأْخُذُ الْأَنْفَاسَ عَرْفُهُ لَفَعَلَ وَلَوْ فَعَلَ لَطَلَّتْ لَهُ الْأَعْتَاقُ  
خَاضِعَةً وَلَحَقَّتِ الْبُلُوعَى فِيهِ عَلَى الْمَلَائِكَةِ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ سُبْحَانَهُ يَبْتَلِي خَلْقَهُ بِبَعْضِ  
مَا يَجْهَلُونَ أَصْلَهُ تَمَيِّزاً بِالِاخْتِبَارِ لَهُمْ وَتَقِيماً لِلْأَسْتِكْبَارِ عَنْهُمْ وَإِعَاداً لِلْخِيَلَاءِ مِنْهُمْ

If God had wanted to create Adam from a light whose glare would have dazzled the eyes, whose handsomeness would have amazed the wits and whose fragrance would have caught the breath, He could have done so; and if He had done so, people would have bowed to him in humility and the trial of the angels through him would have become easier. But God, the Glorified, tries His creatures by means of those things whose real nature they do not know in order to distinguish [good and bad] for them through the trial, and to remove vanity from them and keep them aloof from pride and self-admiration.

Imam then points out what we can learn from this episode:

فَاعْتَبِرُوا بِمَا كَانَ مِنْ فِعْلِ اللَّهِ يَا بَلِيسَ إِذْ أَحْبَطَ عَمَلَهُ الطَّوِيلَ وَجَهْدَهُ الْجَهِيدَ  
وَكَانَ قَدْ عَبَدَ اللَّهَ سِتَّةَ آلَافِ سَنَةٍ لَا يُدْرَى أَمِنْ سِنِي الدُّنْيَا أَمْ مِنْ سِنِي الْآخِرَةِ  
عَنْ كِبَرِ سَاعَةٍ وَاحِدَةٍ فَمَنْ بَعْدَ إِبْلِيسَ يَسْلَمُ عَلَى اللَّهِ بِمِثْلِ مَعْصِيَتِهِ؟ كَلَّا، مَا  
كَانَ اللَّهُ سُبْحَانَهُ لِيُدْخِلَ الْجَنَّةَ بَشَرًا بِأَمْرٍ أَخْرَجَ بِهِ مِنْهَا مَلَكًا

You should take a lesson from what God did with Satan; namely He nullified his great acts and extensive efforts on account of the vanity of one moment, although Satan had worshipped God for six thousand years - whether by the reckoning of this world or of the next world is not known. Who now can remain safe from God after Satan by committing a similar disobedience? None at all. God, the

Glorified, would not let a human being enter Paradise if he does the same thing for which God turned out from it an angel.

The extensive worship and obedience of Iblis was wiped away because of one moment of pride. This displays the long-standing problem of arrogance. At times a person is apparently good, but then when they are faced with trials and tribulations, one moment of arrogance and bias can destroy their life on both a personal level as well as with their family. We see that sometimes people live together as husband and wife for a few decades and then everything comes crashing down.

One should not think that because they have lived to the age of 30, 40, 50, or even 60, that they are somehow immune to such problems. Nay, these character flaws can be very much hidden and are waiting for the opportunity to come to surface.

Imam Ali makes it clear that no one should feel relaxed and laid-back if they suffer these spiritual diseases. The Qur'an says:

تِلْكَ النَّارُ الْآخِرَةُ نَجْعُهَا لِلَّذِينَ لَا يُرِيدُونَ عُلُوًّا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا فَسَادًا وَالْعَاقِبَةُ  
لِلْمُتَّقِينَ

*This is the abode of the Hereafter which We shall grant to those who do not desire to domineer in the earth nor to cause corruption, and the outcome will be in favour of the Godway. (28:83)*

The sermon continues to describe the episode of Iblis and how he deprived himself of the close position he had with God and the close company of the angels.

Hence, some ways of seeking dignity in a wrongful manner is to display arrogance, or to engage in *ta'azzuz*, or create a false image of oneself to gain dignity. However, this in no way helps a person and will not lead to good results. Many may attempt these methods, but will eventually discover that they do not work. Indeed, it is quite the opposite; if a person wishes to acquire a high position and status then humility is required. The world is made such that those who are humble will be raised, and those that are arrogant will be sent down. Imam Sadiq (a) is quoted as saying:

إن في السماء ملكين موكلين بالعباد فمن تواضع لله رفعاه ومن تكبر وضعاه

There are two angels in the heavens who are appointed on the people so that one who is humble for the sake of God may be exalted in status by them and one who is proud and arrogant may be degraded and humiliated by them.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, this humility must be genuine. At times, people speak very humbly about themselves, but this could be to cover their arrogance. For example, some sign off their letters with the word *al-ahqar* which means 'the most insignificant', referring to their position as a lowly servant of God. Sometimes this is written with honesty yet sometimes it may be written to impress the reader. If the latter is the case, then this person does not really think that he is *al-ahqar*, but rather he feels that he is *al-akbar* (the greatest or the most significant) or *al-kabir* (great). This is a very delicate and subtle issue. Sometimes a person can suffer from pride and not realise it.

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<sup>5</sup> *Al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, p. 122.

Therefore, one way of seeking dignity that is a dishonest and unproductive method is through arrogance, i.e. *takabbur* and *ta‘azzuz*, as Iblis did, and this can be seen in those who follow his path, such as Pharaoh, who was extremely arrogant and promoted himself as a god. This shows the problem of arrogance: it has no limit. An arrogant person will not be satisfied even after dominating millions of people, or an entire country, or even a few countries. Imam Khomeini used to say that if arrogant people had full control over the entire world, they would look for other planets to control and dominate.

Fir‘awn was not happy to be just the king and ruler. He declared himself as a god and wanted people to worship him:

فَقَالَ أَنَا رَبُّكُمُ الْأَعْلَى

*[Fir‘awn] said, ‘I am your exalted lord! (79:24)*

On another occasion he said:

وَقَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ يَا أَيُّهَا الْمَلَأُ مَا عَلِمْتُ لَكُمْ مِنْ إِلَهٍ غَيْرِي فَأَوْقِدْ لِي يَا هَامَانَ عَلَى  
الطِّينِ فَاجْعَلْ لِي صَرْحًا لَعَلِّي أَطَّلِعُ إِلَى إِلَهِ مُوسَى وَإِنِّي لَأَظُنُّهُ مِنَ الْكَاذِبِينَ

*Pharaoh said, ‘O [members of the] elite! I do not know of any god that you may have other than me. Haman, light for me a fire over clay, and build me a tower so that I may take a look at Moses’ god, and indeed I consider him to be a liar!’ (28:38)*

Not only did Pharaoh claim to be the greatest and most high god, he also declared that he was the *only* god. This is the path of Iblis. We should not think that these traits will not apply to us, and we should not say that we are far from being Pharaoh or Nimrod (*Namrūd*), as there is a possibility – had we the same power and opportunity – that we could

have been like them. We do not have such opportunities and scope, and therefore it may be easier for us to be humble. However, if we had such power and scope, then that would truly show us whether we were humble or not.

Imam Khomeini, when he was teaching in the *hawzah*,<sup>6</sup> would be careful not to allow any of his students to walk behind him. A habit of students in the *hawzah* is to follow their teachers to speak about some matters or to simply remain in their company. But Imam Khomeini would always walk alone. If anyone followed him, he would ask them if they had any questions. He would deal with their requests or questions and then bid them farewell. Imam Sadiq (a) is quoted as saying:

إياكم وهؤلاء الرؤساء الذين يتزأسون فوالله ما خفت النعال خلف رجل  
إلا هلك وأهلك

Distance yourself from those leaders who aspire to position and leadership. By God, the shoes did not move behind any person except that person has been destroyed and had destroyed.<sup>7</sup>

Such pure souls are cautious and may think that if lots of people begin to walk behind me and show me respect, then it may cause me to consider myself as important. Gradually, pride and arrogance may seep in, and so they avoid this.

If we look at history, we find that people who opposed to certain governments, when they took power some of them remained humble and sincere, whilst others had strived for the power, money, and played politics. These people used to call for justice and equity, but later they

<sup>6</sup> Seminaries where Shi'a Muslim female and male clerics are trained

<sup>7</sup> *Al-Kāfi*, vo. 2, p. 297.

were intoxicated with power. We have not yet been tested properly in this regard to see clearly whether we are able to remain humble or not.

### **Association with those in power cannot lead to dignity**

Hence, one false way of achieving dignity is arrogance. Another false way is to attach one's self with people who have power and position. This is also not productive. The Qur'an says:

الَّذِينَ يَتَّخِذُونَ الْكَافِرِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَلِئِنَّهُمْ عِنْدَهُمُ الْعِزَّةُ فَإِنَّ  
الْعِزَّةَ لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا

*'Those who take the faithless for allies instead of the faithful. Do they seek honour with them? [If so,] indeed all honour belongs to God.'* (4:139)

### **Sins cannot lead to dignity**

Another unproductive way is to commit sins and yet expect to achieve dignity and honour. At times, some people feel that by not observing God's rules and regulations they can be successful. They feel they can achieve money, power, and respect. Some of them say that when we are established, we will ask for forgiveness and lead a good life full of good deeds. In other words, they think that I will amass money and power, and later sort my situation out.

No one can gain *'izzah* by disobeying God. *'Izzah* comes from obedience, not from disobedience. If someone offers you a job, business, friendship, relation, etc., if there is a slight act of disobedience to God, then do not even think about it; even thinking about it is wasting your time and energy, let alone accepting it. Indeed, we should be so well-presented to people that they do not even offer us a sinful thing. Such deals can be transactions that involve usury or mischief. People should feel

embarrassed to talk to you about this. Believers must strive to behave and appear in such a way that those who are bad move away from them.

In future, we will discuss how God has given us opportunities to achieve real dignity, not the false dignities and honour that we have discussed above. There is a real dignity that God has given to human beings in general, and then there is extra dignity that they should qualify for.

### **God grants honour to His creation**

We have already said that everything God created possesses some level of dignity. For example, when we know of a renowned and great writer or scholar, then anything written by that person—whether volumes or just something brief—will be deemed valuable. Consider, for example, the late Allāmah Tabataba’i, due to the level of respect we have for him and his knowledge, and his expertise and his *taqwa* (God-wariness); we will appreciate anything written by him, whether it is his famous *Tafsir al-Mizan* or a short essay.

Similarly, for a famous artist or painter, anything they produce is valuable. But among their paintings, some of them are regarded as masterpieces, whilst others although not masterpieces, they nonetheless remain valuable.

The same principle applies to God and His creation. Everything He created is valuable. Even the smallest creation has His signature. We cannot underestimate anything created by God. The names and the greatness of God have filled everything. In Du‘a Kumayl we say:

وَيَسْمَائِكَ الَّتِي مَلَأْتَ أَرْكَانَ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ

And [I ask You] by Your names, which have filled the foundations of all things.

God's impact can be seen in all things. This aspect is so important that even after tens of thousands of years and even after the rapid development of science and technology, we human beings cannot claim we know everything about even the smallest creature of God. I do not think anyone would dare to claim they know everything about the smallest thing created by God. His creation is so sophisticated that no one can know everything about it, except God Himself.

Among these creatures, when we compare them with one another, some are more honoured and have more significance. The Qur'an mentions them and characterises them as *mukram* (honoured and dignified) or *karim* (great and honourable).

### **Angels are described as *mukramun***

Sometimes God refers to the angels and describes them as *mukramun*:

وَقَالُوا اتَّخَذَ الرَّحْمَنُ وَلَدًا سُبْحَانَهُ بَلْ عِبَادٌ مُّكْرَمُونَ لَا يَسْبِقُونَهُ بِالْقَوْلِ وَهُمْ بِأَمْرِهِ  
يَعْمَلُونَ

*They say, "The All-beneficent has taken offsprings." Immaculate is He! Rather they are [His] honoured servants. They do not venture to speak ahead of Him, and they act by His command.' (21:26-27)*

This verse emphasises that the angels are not God or any kind of deity. They are servants and have been created. However, they are special servants, and are honoured. Angels are pure and clean from any impurity. To explain further, He says:

لَا يَسْبِقُونَهُ بِالْقَوْلِ وَهُمْ بِأَمْرِهِ يَعْمَلُونَ

*They do not venture to speak ahead of Him, and they act by His command. (21:27)*

The angels, because they are at the service of the absolute truth, are *'ibad mukramun* (honoured servants). If we also want to reach their level of being honoured and dignified then we must also obey God, and we should not behave as those who want to gain dignity and honour by disobeying Him.

### **Advice of Imam Hasan al-Mujtaba (a)**

It is narrated that at the end of the life of Imam Hasan, a person called Junadah ibn Abi Sufyan asked Imam for some advice. The Imam, in the last hours of his life, offers some advice; hence we should treat this as very special and important, because the Imam would have wanted to say something in such a way that it would be sufficient for the listener, and yet comprehensive, and would not require any further clarification, as he would not have the opportunity to see the Imam again. The Imam said:

وَ إِذَا أَرَدْتَ عِزًّا بِلَا عَشِيرَةٍ وَ هَيْبَةً بِلَا سُلْطَانٍ فَأَخْرُجْ مِنْ ذُلِّ مَعْصِيَةِ اللَّهِ  
إِلَى عِزِّ طَاعَةِ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَ جَلَّ

If you want to have honour without a big tribe/family to support you, and awe without a kingdom, then exit the state of humiliation of disobedience and enter into the honour of obedience to God.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Kifāyat al-Athar*, vol. 1, p. 226. A similar hadith is quoted from Imam Ali (a) as well. For example, Shaykh al-Tusi in his *al-Amali* through his chain of narration quotes Imam Ali (a) saying:

من أراد عزاً بلا عشيرة، وهيبه من غير سلطان، وغنى من غير مال، وطاعة من غير بذل، فليتحول من ذل معصية الله إلى عز طاعته، فإنه يجد ذلك كله.

These are two very interesting principles: 1) people disobey God and earn humiliation, and 2) the obedient ones are honoured.

The Imam says that a person does not require a group, party, tribe, a kingdom, or even a government with ministers and an army in order to be honoured and dignified. It is possible to have all of these and yet still not be respected. Obedience to God is the key to honour.

The angels do not perform anything in excess of what God wants and do nothing less than He expects.

### **Another group of honoured angels**

In the story of Prophet Abraham, the Qur'an again mentions that angels are referred to as *mukramun*:

هَلْ أَتَاكَ حَدِيثُ ضَيْفِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ الْمُكْرَمِينَ

*Did you receive the story of Abraham's honoured guests?  
(51:24)*

Those angels that visited Prophet Ibrahim were *mukram* and enjoyed high respect.

### **Prophets are *mukram***

The prophets of God are also introduced as those with *karamah* and respect. God refers to Prophet Moses in the following way:

وَلَقَدْ فَتَنَّا قَوْمَ فِرْعَوْنَ وَجَاءَهُمْ رَسُولٌ كَرِيمٌ

*Certainly We tried the people of Pharaoh before them,  
when a noble apostle came to them. (44:17)*

This verse clearly shows that the messenger who came to the people of Pharaoh was *karim*: he possessed honour and dignity. Moses was indeed a great personality.

إِنَّهُ لَقَوْلُ رَسُولٍ كَرِيمٍ

*It is indeed the speech of a noble apostle. (69:40)*

In this verse, God makes it clear that the verses of the Qur'an are the words transmitted by a messenger, and are not the words of a poet. A poet has no divine message, and he merely speaks of himself. Here, the apostle referred to is either angel Gabriel or Prophet Muhammad. The same phrase is repeated in another part of the Qur'an.<sup>9</sup>

### **The people of heaven are *mukram***

The Qur'an describes the inhabitants of heaven as follows:

وَمَا تُجْزَوْنَ إِلَّا مَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ إِلَّا عِبَادَ اللَّهِ الْمُخْلِصِينَ أُولَئِكَ لَهُمْ رِزْقٌ مَّعْلُومٌ  
فَوَاكِهُ وَهُمْ مُكْرَمُونَ فِي جَنَّاتِ النَّعِيمِ

*And you will be requited only for what you used to do – [all] except God's exclusive servants. For such there is a known provision – fruits – and they will be held in honour, in the gardens of bliss. (37:39-43)*

This passage refers to those that are *mukhlas* (purified); those who have special and distinct qualities, one of which is that they are not brought for judgement. Everyone else will be brought for judgement, but not the *mukhlasin*. They will not need judgement, for they are higher than the level of being questioned.

<sup>9</sup> 81:19.

Another distinction that the *mukhlasin* have is that their reward is not based on their actions. They are so close to God and are so loved and honoured, it is as if they have a blank cheque. Their reward is a much higher level of reward. For them, they are not asked what they have done and then they are given a proportionate reward like a salary; rather they are so loved by God that He treats them with special courtesy. They have a special sustenance decided by God and known to Him. The word employed—*ma'lum*—shows that their reward is something special. Sometimes, when you wish to host someone, you reserve something very special for your guests that is known only to the host. This is a special honour:

أُولَئِكَ فِي جَنَّاتٍ مُّكْرَمُونَ

*They will be in gardens, held in honour. (70:35)*

### Piety

Hence, the angels, messengers, and pure servants of God in heaven, are *mukram*. God also says that the people who are pious in this world also have a special level of *karamah*. This is because, in reality, these pious people are the same people as those in heaven. At the moment they are in this world, but their nature and quality are heavenly. Furthermore, those people that possess more *taqwa* (piety or God-wariness) are even more honoured:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَنْتَأَمُّوا لِلَّهِ عَلَيْهِمْ خَيْرٌ

*O mankind! Indeed We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify yourselves with one another. Indeed the noblest*

*of you in the sight of God is the most Godworthy among you. Indeed God is all-knowing, all-aware. (49:13)*

If people understood this then it would lead to a world free of conflict. Our Creator is the same, and our father and mother are the same, but unfortunately people forget this pact, and brothers and sisters in humanity fight each other.

God emphasises that He did not create us into different tribes and nations to fight, but rather to get to know each other. The different colours and ethnicities are there for us to better understand one another. If everyone had been the same, then it would have been difficult for us to recognise each other. We must use these differences as an opportunity to understand one another.

The verse emphasises that none of the worldly things give us any importance: aspects such as tribe, family, ethnicity are all insignificant. Our Creator will judge us on a different criterion. If you imagine a company that manufactures laptops or mobile phones, then the designer of these items is best placed to judge which one is the best of them. Our designer is God. He says that no one is better than another based on colour, ethnicity, or geography. In the sight of God, *the best and most honourable are those who are more pious.*

Everyone can be pious. We cannot decide our gender, colour, ethnicity, and status, and hence these are not important. But what we can control is really what is important, and that is piety (*taqwa*) and knowledge. The Qur'an affirms that people can rise in their ranks, based on piety and knowledge.

أَمْرٌ هُوَ قَانِتٌ أَنَاءَ اللَّيْلِ سَاجِدًا وَقَائِمًا يَحْذَرُ الآخِرَةَ وَيَرْجُو رَحْمَةَ رَبِّهِ قُلْ هَلْ  
يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

*Is he who supplicates in the watches of the night, prostrating and standing, apprehensive of the Hereafter and expecting the mercy of his Lord . . . ? Say, 'Are those who know equal to those who do not know?' Only those who possess intellect take admonition. (39:9)*

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

*O mankind! Indeed We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify yourselves with one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most Godwary among you. Indeed God is all-knowing, all-aware. (49:13)*

Therefore, the pious are honoured, and those with more piety are honoured even more. Of course, this is in addition to general honour that God has bestowed upon all human beings. The Qur'an says:

وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ

*Certainly We have honoured the Children of Adam.  
(17:70)*