

And God Speaks to Muhammad

By Abdul Hamid Okine. New York: Vantage Press, 1998, 212pp.

The author of this book, a graduate in theology and philosophy, gives an unusual and interesting analysis of the conveying of God's message to humankind and its final conveyor, the Prophet Muhammad. He focuses on the Prophet as a person, and how, like previous prophets, he was chosen by God at an appropriate time. Readers are not taken chronologically through the Prophet's life; instead, the author examines aspects of the conveying of God's guidance and, in particular, the relationship between God and His messenger. Examples of situations in the Prophet's life are carefully compared with similar situations in the lives of earlier prophets that are described in the Qur'an and Islamic traditions, as well as in the traditional writings of the Jews and Christians, such as the Old and New Testaments and the Torah. The result is a rich combination of psychology, philosophy, history, and geography in seven chapters, the first five of which begin with a quotation from the Qur'an, providing the main theme of that chapter.

Communication between God and Muhammad takes various forms, depending on the circumstances: advice, warning, comfort, or explanation. The verb "speak" can be interpreted in different ways. As revelation, it is reserved for God's chosen prophets. However, God also "speaks" to the general population

by means of signs, such as "memorable historical events," natural phenomena, and the verses of the Qur'an relayed by the Prophet Muhammad. These signs can be seen, heard, or felt by everyone.

The essential aim of the communication between God and His prophets is relaying His guidance to the human race according to its changing needs throughout history. The final stage is the revelation of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad, and its purpose is the "spiritual transformation" of humankind.

From the very beginning of the book, readers are reminded of the attributes of God (His Glory, Perfection, Power, Mercy, Wisdom, etc.), as well as of the continuity of the prophets, the universality of God's message, and the fact that Muhammad is the Seal of the prophets and God's servant.

The evidence is in "the message of the Miraj," with which the book opens, as it is a wonderful example of God's "personal interest in human affairs." After ten years of verbal and physical persecution, graphically described, and the tragic loss of both his beloved wife and uncle, the Prophet Muhammad was taken on a miraculous journey, first to the "farthest temple" of Solomon in Jerusalem and then up to heaven. The author examines the reports by different traditions of the amazing events of that night and compares the interpretation of the Miraj with that of the ascension of Jesus. He concludes the account with the puzzling questions: "Did Muhammad see his Lord?" (p. 22) and "Can God be seen?" (p. 25), and admits that "the traditions are not conclusive in this matter" (p. 22). However, readers are left with some thought-provoking examples.

What qualities does a prophet need? From the analysis of the Prophet Muhammad's life and that of the earlier prophets, it is clear that patience, forbearance, wisdom, and moral and physical strength are essential to cope with the awkward questions, continual rejection, persecution, and hardships of every kind that they had to face. The book's second chapter discusses the preparation for such a mission: "The deep significance of prophethood is that no one can rise to this dignity by his own efforts. It is when God intends to reform men that He raises amongst them a prophet" (p. 27). Prophets are known to have been blessed with wisdom and God's favor from an early age (p. 40). Examples of this are given in the author's description of the birth and upbringing of Jesus and Muhammad. This chapter also includes a very interesting account of the origins of Makkah and the Ka'bah and ends with the Prophet Muhammad's lineage.

The proof of the existence of God and of the authenticity of His message and His messenger are the constant demands of doubting listeners: "Messenger of God ([the title] given to Muhammad by Gabriel) implies that the promulgation by the messenger should itself be the evidence of the Truth" (p. 22), and it "impresses on us the fact that God is the source and goal of all things" (p. 123).

The Qur'an, however, contained arguments relating to the proof of Muhammad's prophethood.

The "distinguishing feature" of Muhammad was that he was *ummi* (illiterate) and in that sense he was free from any bias or attachment to particular beliefs or schools of thought. This fact "proves that the Qur'an is a sign from God, carrying an inspired message that 'everyone could test then, and everyone can test now'" (p. 86). It "also gives a clue to the universal message of Muhammad" (p. 90), namely "to convey the message to all those [Jewish and Christian] communities residing in Arabia that God's Revelation [is] for the benefit of all men" (p. 90).

Muhammad's inspired knowledge and innate wisdom are well illustrated in the detailed accounts — "as if he were an eyewitness" (p. 142) — of Joseph, the Companions of the Cave and Zul-Qarnain, as well as the prophets Noah, Hud, Salih, Abraham, Lot, Moses, and Jesus. The author describes with care the historical, geographical, and social settings in each case and compares the variations in the biblical and Islamic traditions: "These stories not only remove the doubts and give [the] right interpretation in order to reveal the Prophet's knowledge, but also tell us about the ways of God and His dealing with mankind" (p. 110).

Much of chapter 3 examines the question of the satanic verses. It compares the argument of Orientalists, who reject revelation and believe the satanic verses to be true, with that of Muhammad Haykal, who considers the satanic verses to have been a fabrication advanced by hypocrites. The author states: "Revelation separates Good from Evil;" therefore Satan has no access to the "Divine Message entrusted to both the angel messenger and the human messenger" (p. 197). He also comments on the fact that "the resurrection of the story of the *Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie should rather serve as a warning to the Muslims not to neglect the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah" (p. 81).

The book also discusses the divisions that humans have created among themselves throughout history, despite the fact that Muhammad had "received guidance from the same source of knowledge" as the earlier prophets (p. 116). According to Okine, "it was the followers of the prophets who disturbed the fundamental principles laid down by the prophets by denouncing one another" (p. 117). "The creed of Islam means the establishment of a common religion to endorse and revive the truths contained in the Torah and the Gospel. Islam does not discriminate against any of the prophets; instead it is the wish of Islam that Jews and Christians should be more staunchly devoted to their prophets in order to realize the essential message of Islam" (p. 126). However, doubts are cast on the authenticity of the Bible, for example, its compilation and alter-

ations, and the belief in different sections by different groups of people (pp. 62, 91, 117, 127, and 158).

Chapter 6 begins by examining the proof that Muhammad was the Seal of the prophets. His coming was foretold by Moses and Jesus in Jewish traditions and the Gospel of Barnabas. Reference is also made to Abraham, who prayed to God for the security of Makkah and the protection of his descendants from infidelity: "Muhammad was the answer to Abraham's prayer" (p. 29). This chapter emphasizes not only the universality of Muhammad's message, but also the requirement to accept all the prophets and the belief in the One God and the way of life advocated by them.

The author goes on to describe the events of the years following Muhammad's receiving his mission of prophethood: the battles of Badr, Uhud, and the Trench, which were fought by the Muslims in self-defense against the increasing persecution by the pagans; and the triumph of Islam signified by the Treaty of Hdaybiyyah and the Prophet's peaceful return to Makkah. Readers are then taken to the end of the Prophet's life with his farewell address to his people in Makkah. Okine also gives a poignant yet matter-of-fact account of the Prophet's last hours: the Angel of Death knocks on the door and asks permission to enter; he explains the errand on which God has sent him, and the Prophet tells him that he (the Angel of Death) must "comply with the order of Allah" (p. 172). The chapter ends with a discussion of the Prophet's character and circumstances and compares them with those of previous prophets and the effect on their missions.

Chapter 7, the final chapter, has an unusual structure. The first part comprises a thought-provoking selection of the sayings of the Prophet, classified under basic headings such as Belief and Faith, and Social Conduct. The next section is headed Preface and is devoted to a detailed analysis of the attributes of God, particularly as used in the Qur'an, and the speech of God, its meanings, and the ways in which it is conveyed to mankind.

A book of this kind encourages lateral thinking about Islam and reminds readers of the importance of the messenger as well as the message. It would be suitable for both Muslims and non-Muslims interested in reading about the Prophet Muhammad from the aspect of his personality and his place in the history of prophecy.

However, to encourage the public to read about Islam, books must be readable and well-written in the sense of good grammar, spelling, punctuation, clear references, and accurate typesetting. A poorly laid out book is confusing to foreign readers and irritating to the others. Unfortunately, Okine's book is poor in this regard, which makes it difficult to appreciate its content. Indeed, there is much inconsistency in spelling (American spelling changes to British

spelling after a few pages), punctuation, use of capital letters and italic, and references to the Prophet's name (sometimes Muhamad, sometimes Mustafa). The grammar also needs some attention, especially the sequence of tenses and the use of the definite article. Although the Qur'anic quotations are clearly referenced, most of the other quotations are not — apart from the occasional full reference in the middle of the text. It would have been more helpful if every quotation had been indicated with a notemarker referring the reader to a footnote or endnote giving brief details of the work cited (the short-title system). All the works used in the book should then have been listed in full detail in a bibliography. If the publishers can tackle these problems, they will produce a useful book worthy of inclusion in the field of Islamic literature.

Sylvia J. Hunt
Scotland