

# The Quran and its Message

The articles on this website may be reproduced freely as long as the following source reference is provided:

Joseph A Islam [www.quransmessage.com](http://www.quransmessage.com)

سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

## THE LIMITS OF OBEYING A MESSENGER

*Joseph A Islam*

---

Copyright © 2009 Joseph A Islam: Article last modified 27<sup>th</sup> January 2012

Many Muslims quote the phrase "Ati-Ullaha Warasula' (Obey God and the Messenger) when referring to the unreserved obedience that must be given to a Prophet or Messenger. Quite often this phrase is used to justify all manner of actions, doctrines and practices from [Islamic secondary sources](#) which often have no support from the Quran. The latter point has been dealt with in another article, a link for which can be found in the section below entitled 'Final Thoughts'

There is no doubt from a Quranic study, that the Prophet of God needed to be obeyed for guidance (24:51), disputes, judgment, leadership etc (24:51, 4:59, 33:3, 49:14, 8:46, 8:1). This obedience was expected from the followers of all the messengers of God as the Quran categorically states (4:64)

### 004:064 (part)

**"We sent not a messenger, but to be obeyed, in accordance with the will of God..."**

However, the scope of the 'obedience' is never fully appreciated by many Muslims and is seldom spoken of.

The Quran gives a clear example of what 'pledge / oath / allegiance' (baya'a) one is expected to give to a prophet or messenger of God in their midst. An example for women is captured, but there is a very crucial part. I have highlighted the part with the Arabic cited after it.

### 060.012

O Prophet! When believing women come to you to take the oath of allegiance / pledge to you **(Arabic: yubayi'naka)** that they will not associate in worship any other thing whatsoever with God, that they will not steal, that they will not commit adultery (or fornication), that they will not kill their children, nor produce any lie that they have devised between their hands and feet, **and that they will not disobey you in any just matter (or what is right / good)**, then accept their allegiance and pray to God for forgiveness for them: for God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

The highlighted part in Arabic reads "**wa la (and not) ya'sinaka (they will disobey you) fi ma'rufin (the right)**" or in a more fluid expression:

**'that they will not disobey you in any just matter (or what is right / good)'**

**'ma'rufin'** in Arabic in this context clearly refers to anything which is fair, just, right, recognised and honourable.

This point is actually very significant as it **challenges** the common Muslim thinking that:

(a) A prophet or messenger should be obeyed in total submission, without reflection, in every matter **blindly** and without any question whatsoever (which in itself stands in some tension with the advice given in verse 17:36 - "**And do not follow that of which you have no knowledge. Indeed! the hearing and the sight and the heart - of each of these you will be questioned**"). This level of 'bayt' (allegiance) has often given unwarranted licence to many false prophets and cult leaders to take full advantage of their vulnerable followers.

(b) That a prophet or messenger **can never** make errors of judgment which clearly is not the case as shown in the Quranic references below.

**Examples:**

- 066:001** Prophet questioned for banning something which he should not have done.
- 080:001** The prophet frowned (abasa) and turned away. The complete narrative is an admonishment (80.11).
- 009:113** Praying for disbelievers when it was not fit for the Prophet to do so.
- 008:067-069** The Prophet should not have taken prisoners of war unless certain conditions had been met.

It is extremely difficult (if not impossible) to conclude whether the above examples are the only such incidents that occurred in the Prophet's ministry.

However, it is to be noted that such incidents are not exclusive to Prophet Muhammad<sup>(pbuh)</sup> but have also been captured for other messengers of God as examples.

One notes that albeit Prophet Moses's<sup>(pbuh)</sup> misjudgement when he killed a man can be convincingly argued for as one that occurred when he was astray (26:20; 28:15) and before his Prophethood, the messenger Jonah's<sup>(pbuh)</sup> example has been cited as one that occurred during his ministry.

Jonah<sup>(pbuh)</sup> fled from his people in anger and was condemned by God (37:141- mud'hadin). He was then forgiven for being one that glorified God (37:143) and cited as one given favour over 'alameen' in 6:86 (See article below regarding 'Alameen'). However, his particular actions were cited as one not to be emulated in 68.48.

The incident which underscores his gross misjudgement seems so significant that he is also referred to as 'Dhul Nun' (of the fish) in 21:87. A similar epithet, companion of the fish (sahibi-l-huti), is used to address him when his particular example is used as one not to be followed.

#### **068.048-50**

"So be patient for the Command of thy Lord, and do not be like the Companion of the Fish (Arabic: sahibi-l-huti), when he cried out in agony. Had not Grace from his Lord reached him, he would indeed have been cast off on the naked shore, in disgrace. But his Lord choose him and made him of the company of the righteous"

Therefore, the 'allegiance / pledge' to a Prophet is **up to the point that is considered fair, just and right and in line with what he is teaching from the Divine Book (Arabic: ma'rufin)**. Of course, a Prophet will never do anything which is intentionally bad (that which is not right / good). This is clear from the verses where God categorically states that He does not choose misleaders as his helpers (18:51).

#### **018:051 (Part)**

"... nor choose I misleaders for (My) helpers"

However, this does not rule out errors of judgment, examples of which have already been cited from the Quran above. Therefore, the ultimate responsibility **remains solely** with the individual to follow the best advice even when taking this advice from a messenger or prophet of God. Absolute perfection is only a trait of God.

#### **039:018**

"Those who listen to the Word (the Quran) and follow the **best meaning in it: those are the ones whom God has guided and those are the one's endowed with understanding (Arabic: Albabi)**

Of course, the Quran is absolutely clear that the Prophet's inspiration (the Quran itself) was protected. Furthermore, the Prophet remained the best example for his people (See related article below). However, even the Prophet of God was asked to participate in 'shura' (consultation) with his people in matters.

#### **003:159 (part)**

"So pardon them and ask forgiveness for them and consult (Arabic: watamiru) among yourselves"

---

## FINAL THOUGHTS

It is in some ways comforting to note that never has God demanded his servants to submit without question to anyone apart from Himself. Not even to the prophets or messengers.

One must always retain the faculties of critical thought, individual assessment and discernment.

The limit of obedience to a Prophet of God is 'ma'rufin' (up to the point what is considered right and just). If only so many 'followers' had questioned their 'religious guides / cult leaders / spiritual leaders' etc and judged their practices and preaching in the best manner and not blindly followed them, they may not have been potentially compromised.

The Quran clearly advances the scope with regards 'obeying' a prophet or a messenger.

### Related Articles:

- (1) [Obey Allah \(God\) and the Messenger](#)
- (2) [Blind Following](#)
- (3) [Ask Those That Have Knowledge](#)
- (4) [Following the Example of the Prophet - What is that Example?](#)
- (5) [Understanding the Quranic term 'Alameen'](#)

[Joseph Islam](#)

© 2010 Quransmessage.com All Rights Reserved