

The Case of Prophet Ibrahim (a.s.)

There are some verses in the Qur'an that apparently attribute sins and wrong doings to Prophet Ibrahim (a.s.). We shall look at the three most important such examples.

Chapter 6 (al-An'am) verses 75–80

[Remember] when Ibrahim said to his uncle, Azar, "Do you take idols for gods? Surely I see you and your people in manifest error." Thus We were showing Ibrahim the kingdom of the heavens and the earth so that he might be of (al-muqinin) those who are sure [of their faith].

So when the night outspread over Ibrahim, he saw a star; he said, "This is my Lord." But when the star set [in the morning,] he said, "[This cannot be my Lord because it has passed away,] I do not like the transitory [gods]."

[On the next night,] when he saw the moon rising, he said, "This is my Lord." But when the moon set he said, "If my Lord had not guided me, then I shall surely be of (adh-dhaliyn) the people who have gone astray."

[In the morning,] when Ibrahim saw the sun rising, he said, "This must be my Lord [because] this is greater [than the star and the moon!]" But when the sun set, he said, "O my people, surely I am free from what you associate [with Allah.] I have sincerely turned myself to Him who originated the heavens and the earth, and I am not one of the polytheists."

Many historians of religion take Ibrahim as the founder of the monotheistic idea. This definitely goes against the Islamic view that monotheism was the original faith of mankind from the days of Adam (a.s.), and that later on people became polytheists.

The Qur'anic statements quoted above have been used as a proof of the evolutionary phases in Ibrahim from polytheism to monotheism. This is, obviously, an incorrect reading of the Qur'an.

1. This entire passage quoted above actually shows that Prophet Ibrahim was actively engaged in

combating idol – and nature–worshipping. Reading the whole passage does not raise any problem about the *'ismah* of Prophet Ibrahim. He did not raise the possibility of the star, the moon and the sun being gods as a fact; it was raised only as a part of his method of disproving such a possibility. In debates, it is quite common to initially accept the view of your opponent in order to lead him to your own view.

If you read the first part of the passage where Ibrahim is disputing with his own uncle¹ against idol–worshipping and also Allah's statement that “We were showing...so that he might be of those who are sure [of their faith],” it shows that he was a true believer before he engaged in debate with the idol– and nature–worshippers.

2. Even the passage where he says, “***If my Lord had not guided me, then I shall surely be of the people who have gone astray,***” is a conditional statement. It says “if” and “then”. And since the first part did not take place, therefore the second part is not relevant.

Chapter 21 (al-Anbiya') verses 62–63

In pursuant of his mission against idol–worshipping, Ibrahim one day smashed all the all idols of the temple except the big one. Then the Qur'an says:

[The idol–worshippers] said, “Who has done this to our gods? He surely must be one of the unjust people.” [Some of them] said, “We have heard a youth speaking [ill] of them, and he is known as Ibrahim.”...

[When Ibrahim was brought to the king,] he said, “Rather it was this their leader that has done it— ask the [smashed idols] if they can speak.”

The objection against *'ismah* is that if Ibrahim was *ma'sum*, how could he lie? Again, if we look at the entire passage, we see that Ibrahim wanted to make his people realize that idols are not worth worshipping—if they cannot defend themselves or even talk, then how can they help you.

Secondly, Ibrâhîm's answer is conditional: “...if they can speak.” Ibrâhîm's answer was rhetorical and intended to force the people to think. This becomes clearer from the following verse: 21:65–66

...They said, “You know that the idols do not speak.” Ibrahim said, “Well then, do you worship, besides Allah, [the idols] that neither benefit you in any way nor harm you.”

Chapter 2 (al-Baqarah) Verse 260

And [remember] when Ibrahim said, “My Lord! Show me how You give life to the dead.” Allah said, “What, do you not believe [in resurrection]?” He answered, “Certainly [I believe, I am asking this] so that my heart may be at ease.”

Allah said, “Take four of the birds....”

Some people use this incident as a proof that Ibrahim did not believe in resurrection. This is absolutely incorrect. The question and answer are themselves very obvious that he believed. “Certainly [I believe].”

Then why did he ask for a demonstration of resurrection?

Firstly, Ibrahim surely believed in God's power of giving life to dead. However, this was a belief based on the revelation of Allah just as we believe in it based on the information reached to us through the prophets and the Imams.

Secondly, Ibrahim wanted to elevate the level of his belief from “information” to “demonstration”. According to traditions, one day Ibrahim saw a dead fish, half in the water, the other half outside the water. He also saw that sea creatures were eating away one half of the fish and land animals were eating away the other half. This incident made Ibrahim wonder about the issue of resurrection. We are using the word “wonder” not “doubt”. This is when he had the desire of seeing a demonstration of Allah's power of resurrection, and this also explains the way Allah asked him to kill and mix the parts of the four birds.

In conclusion, Ibrahim believed in resurrection before as well as after this event. The difference is that his belief prior to this event was based on the information about the future revealed to him by God; whereas after this event, his belief in resurrection was based on visual demonstration done by him with Allah's permission. This is similar to a Muslim who has been to hajj: before his journey, he believed that the Ka'bah existed; but the basis of his belief changed after his journey—now he has seen the Ka'bah with his own eyes.

1. The Qur'an uses the word “ab” for Azar who was an idol-worshipper. He was not father of Ibrahim; he was his uncle. Look at the following verse where he eventually disassociates himself from Azar: 9:114. On the other hand, we see that Ibrahim, at the last stage of his life, prays for his “walid,” a word that is used for the real father. See verse 14:41.

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