

Home > An Enlightening Commentary into the Light of the Holy Qur'an vol. 8 > The Highly Adventurous Life of 'Ibrahim, the Iconoclastic Prophet > The Highly-esteemed Position of 'Ibrahim in the Qur'an

The Highly Adventurous Life of 'Ibrahim, the Iconoclastic Prophet

This Surah is the only one which is named after 'Ibrahim.

However, the biography of 'Ibrahim is not covered only in this Surah.

On the other hand, as there are mentions of this great Divine prophet on various occasions in other Suras, we considered it appropriate to discuss the highly-esteemed biography of this champion of monotheism in a concise manner at the end of this Surah so that we shall be able to interpret and comment on the various verses which we come across in the future, as they require command of this prophet's life.

We hope that this short discussion provides sufficient awareness for our dear readers and we shall be able to provide them with useful references.

One can distinguish the life of 'Ibrahim into three distinct periods:

- 1- The Era prior to his prophetic Mission;
- 2- The Era of his prophetic Mission and his Campaign against the worshippers of idols in Babylon;
- 3- The Exodus Era from Babylon and his struggles and efforts in the Lands of Egypt, Palestine, and Mecca.

The Birthplace and Childhood of 'Ibrahim

'Ibrahim was born in the land of Babylon which was an amazing land of the world and which had a powerful and, at the same time, an oppressive and a tyrannical government which was in full control of it. (Some historians have regarded his birthplace in "Ur", a city in the land of Babylon.

The Highly Adventurous Life of 'Ibrahim (a. s.)

'Ibrahim was born at the time when, Nimrod–ibn–Kan'an, that oppressive and cruel king, was ruling Babylon and he used to present himself as the great god of Babylon. Certainly, the people of Babylon did not possess only this sole idol to worship, but, in the meantime, they had fabricated idols out of the various materials and used to worship them.

The dominant government of that land used to encourage vigorously the worshipping of idols as it considered the job as an effective means for stupefying and inciting hallucinations in people and regarded any kind of insult to the idols as a great crime and an unforgivable one.

Historians have recounted an amazing story about the birth of 'Ibrahim, a summary of which is as follows:

Astrologers had predicted and had foretold that a person could be born who would stand up to the undivided and invincible power and authority of Nimrod. Then Nimrod sought to obstruct such a baby from being born, and once it was born, he did utmost to have him killed. Nonetheless, none of his plans was effective and the baby was born.

The mother of the baby tried her best and brought her child up in a cave near her birthplace so much so that she spent 13 years of her life in that place. And in such a situation, eventually, the child was brought up far from the scrutiny of the agents of Nimrod.

He attained the age of puberty, and decided to leave that hiding–place forever, in order to go among the people, and explain the lessons of monotheism to the people which he had received with inspirations from within himself supplemented by his mental studies.

Campaigns Against Various Groups of Idol–worshippers

At the time when the people of Babylon were worshipping such self–made idols, further, they were also worshipping such celestial beings as the sun, the moon and the stars.

'Ibrahim decided to awaken their dormant conscience by means of logic and clear and evident reasoning methods, thus drawing the dark curtains of the wrong suggestions down from the face of their clean inherent nature, so as to enable their enlightening nature to shine, in order that they might take several steps alongside of the path of monotheism.

'Ibrahim had done a great deal of studies concerning the creation of the universe, the skies and the earth as well as the power which was dominating and governing them and their amazing hierarchy, thus the light of certainty was being shed on his entire existence¹.

Logical Campaign Against the Idol-worshippers

At first, Abraham faced the worshippers of the stars, especially against those who used to worship Venus, which appears in the sky immediately after sunset, shining to the west of the horizon. They engaged in bowing and worshipping it.

Abraham shouted,

“This is my Lord.”

This he did either wonderfully, using a positive interrogation with a negative sense to stress the issue, or he used this way of expression to provide an introduction for the demonstration of their mistakes, or just for the sake of reinforcing of harmony with the opposite side in order to bring them in line.

However, when it set, he remarked:

“I do not like those the setting ones.”²

And when the moon split the widely-open horizon, inciting the moon-worshippers to begin their worship, joining them he shouted:

“This is my Lord!” But when it set, he said: ‘If my Lord does not guide me I shall surely be of the people gone astray’.

When the sun split the darkness of night, shedding its golden rays over the mountains and plains, the sun-worshippers went on with their prayers.

Then, Abraham said:

“This is my Lord; this is the greatest! But when it set, he said: ‘O’ my people! Surely I am quit of that you associate (with Allah)’.

All these have got falls. They are at the mercy of change and are as puppets at the hands of creation and they have no feelings and will power of their own much less that they should be deemed as creator and administrator of this world:

“Verily I have turned my face (myself wholly) toward Him Who created the heavens and the earth, being upright, and I am not of the idolaters.”³

‘Ibrahim left behind this stage of his campaign against the idol-worshippers in the most efficient way and could awaken some, while seeking to make others at least skeptic. He was soon subject of rumour in that region as to whom he might be who can affect masses of people’s hearts, leaving such an impact on them with such an explicit and straightforward logic.

Dialogue with 'Azar

Abraham got engaged in a conversation with his uncle at another stage, and by using explicit and far-reaching speech coupled with affection and, at times, with warnings regarding idol-worshipping, told him: Why do you worship something which can not hear, can not see, and can not solve any problems you have?

If you follow me, I shall lead you in the right path. I am scared that soon you may face the Divine punishment if you follow the Satan.

Even, at the time when his uncle threatened him to stone him to death when he was admonishing him, he used the sentence

“Peace be upon you! Saying: I shall ask my Lord to forgive you”⁴,

and he tried to find a way through his stone like heart.

The Prophetic Mission of 'Ibrahim

As for the age when Abraham attained to the position of the prophetic mission, we have no access to clear evidence. However, we can conclude from Surah Maryam, that he had attained to the rank of his prophetic mission when he engaged in the dialogue with his uncle, for we read in this Surah addressing the prophet (S):

“And mention in the Book; verily he was a truthful man, a prophet.”

“When he said to his father (i.e. his uncle): ‘O my father! Why do you worship that which neither hears nor sees, nor does avail you in aught?’”⁵

We know that this adventure took place before an extensive entanglement with the idol-worshippers and his being was about to be burned by them. If we add what some historians have written saying that Abraham was only 16 years of age when setting of him a flame took place, it becomes clear that he was appointed to achieve his great mission even as early as his adolescence.

Practical Campaigns Against the Idol-worshippers

Anyway, 'Ibrahim's involvement with the idol-worshippers reached greater proportions day by day which, eventually, terminated in breaking of all the idols of temple of Babylon except the great idol.

Dialogue with the Oppressive Ruler

The affairs regarding the opposition and campaign of Abraham (as) with the idols finally reached Nimrod. He summoned him so as to silence him by the way of advising, or by warning, or by threatening him. He, who was very advert in sophisticating, asked Abraham if he did not worship the idols, who was then his Lord?

He answered the same one whose life and death are in His own hands:

“...My Lord is He Who gives life and causes to die.’...”

He shouted: O you unaware person! This is in my hands! Do you not see how I command the offender who is to be executed to be freed, and how I stop his execution or I order the execution of the prisoner who is not convicted to be executed?

‘Ibrahim, who was advert in giving extraordinary sharp answers, seeking assistance from his prophetic power, told him: It is not but the matters of death and life which are in His hands; all of the affairs of the world of existence are at His command.

Do you not see how the sun rises from the east every morning by His order and sets in the west? If you rule the entire world of existence, reverse the process, so that the sun rises in the west and sets in the east. Nimrod was so astonished that he lost his ability to talk to him.

Undoubtedly, ‘Ibrahim knew that Nimrod was playing with words as regards having power of life and death. However, his skill in reasoning did not permit the enemy side to win him over in his argument. Thus he abdicated that soon and stuck to a different method in which he got the enemy caught.

The Exodus of ‘Ibrahim

At long last, the government of Nimrod, who felt that the youth was organizing a dangerous campaign threatening his despotic rule, by his clear logic and his expressive powerful tongue decided to put an end to the life of ‘Ibrahim by aggrandizement of the fanatical ignorance of the idol-worshippers.

He feared that the eloquent language and powerful thinking coupled with his sound logic would awaken the oppressed masses, and finally break up the chains of his exploitations.

He then organized certain ceremonies (which will be discussed later, in Surah ‘Anbiya) to burn him alive in an inferno of fire which was prepared by the help of the ignorance of the masses and the crime of the dominant system, in order to be delivered from him for ever.

However, as the fire was put off by the command of Allah and Abraham was saved from that scenario intact, Nimrod’s system started trembling in such a way that Nimrod lost his morale, as Abraham was no

more an adventurous young man who was planting seeds of discord the labeling which Nimrod had addressed him with.

Abraham was then regarded as a Divine leader and a brave champion who could by himself and single-handedly invade his powerful enemies and overcome them all.

It was for this reason that Nimrod and his courtiers, who used to suck the blood of the poor people like leeches, decided to stand up against Abraham with all their powers to guarantee the safety of their regime and fight him to the end.

On the other hand, Abraham had secured his share from that group. That is, those who had receptive hearts had believed in him.

He found it more convenient to depart from the land of Babylon along with his companions and the population of the faithful and to spread the call of Allah to the people of Damascus, Palestine, and Egypt, the land of the Pharaohs. He could propagate the truth of monotheism in those regions and call numerous people to become faithful to the worshipping of Allah, the only One.

The Last Stage of the Prophetic Mission of 'Ibrahim

'Ibrahim spent a whole life-time campaigning against worshipping the idols in all its forms especially the 'worshipping of man' and could enlighten the ones who were ready with the light of monotheism and provide them with a new life, thus liberating numerous groups from the chains of the despots.

Now it was time to enter the last stage of Allah's worshipping and servitude to Him and offering Him whatever he possessed with utmost sincerity, so that to pass successfully all the great Divine trials with a great leap forward in spiritual matters which would culminate in his 'Imamate' and leader-ship' of men.

Simultaneous with this matter, he erected the pillars of the House of monotheism, 'the House of Ka'bah' and turned it into a unique center for worshipping Allah. This he did to call all the believers to this great conference near this huge and fantastic as well as splendid 'house of monotheism'.

His adventures about the jealousy of Sara, his first wife, with 'Hajar', the slave whom he had accepted as his wife and had given birth to a son called Ishmael, caused him to take the mother and infant child and depart them from the land of Palestine to the arid desert of Mecca, within those rugged mountains.

Upon Allah's command, they went to a land where not even a drop of water was to be found, in order to pass a great test.

The discovery of the spring Zamzam, and the arrival of the tribe Jarham, who asked the permission of Hajar to dwell in that region, has got a lengthy history along with others, all of which led to the development of that land.

‘Ibrahim had asked Allah to make that area into a well-developed city and an affluent one, and attract the attention of the people on that spot where his family was residing.⁷

It is interesting to note that some historians have cited that when Abraham was locating the baby Ishmael and Hajar in the land of Mecca and wanted to return, calling him Hajar asked ‘Ibrahim as to who had commanded him to take them to a land where no vegetation was found and no milk-providing animals existed, and not a single drop of water was to be found, all of which took place with no storage of food and no companions.

‘Ibrahim answered her in a concise statement:

“My Lord Who has commanded me so!”

As soon as Hajar heard this response, she said:

“Now that such is the case, Allah will never leave us alone”.

Abraham repeatedly came from Palestine to Mecca to visit Ishmael and it was in the course of one of such trips during which he performed the Hajj pilgrimage rituals.

It was by the command of Allah that he took his son, who was in his teens as an extraordinary faithful and clean individual, to the sacrificing spot and got ready to sacrifice him, who was the best he had to offer Allah by his own hands.

When this most important trial was staged in its best form and he (as) went through all the processes to the end, Allah accepted the sacrifice and preserved Ishmael for him, sending him a sheep to replace his sacrifice⁸.

Ultimately, after all the trials and out of all tests, ‘Ibrahim attained the highest rank which a perfect man can ever reach and thus received promotion and as the blissful Qur’an implies that Allah tried ‘Ibrahim with certain words and he got through with them all, after which He told him that he was appointed as the leader and ‘Imam’.

Transported with joy, ‘Ibrahim asked that this position be awarded to some of his children as well. His call was accepted but on condition that He would not bestow such a position on those who had been oppressors or had committed any atrocities.

The holy Qur’an says:

“And (remember) when his Lord tested Abraham with words (of command) which he fulfilled, He said: ‘Verily I have appointed you an Imam (leader) for mankind.” (Abraham) pleaded: ‘And of my offspring (as well)?’ He (Allah) said: ‘My covenant does not incline the unjust.’”

The Highly-esteemed Position of 'Ibrahim in the Qur'an

A study of the holy verses of the Qur'an reveals the fact that Allah has appointed a very highly-esteemed position to Abraham, a rank which has been accorded to no other prophet. One can draw his conclusions as to this matter by considering the following expressions:

1- Allah has made mention of 'Ibrahim as a '**nation**' and praises his personality as a nation as well. 9

2- Allah has accorded the position of 'Divine friend' to him.

"...And Allah took Abraham as a friend."¹⁰

It is interesting to note that in some quotations we read as to the commentary of this verse that: Such a high position was bestowed on Abraham for he never asked anyone anything, and he never despaired anyone who requested him something¹¹.

3- He was from among:

the good ones: (Surah Sad, No. 38 verse 47),

the righteous ones: (Surah An-Nahl, No. 16, verse 123),

the content ones: (Surah An-Nahl, No. 16, verse 125),

the truthful ones: (Surah Maryam, No. 19, verse 41),

the forbearing ones: (Surah At-Taubah, No. 9, verse 114),

and the keepers of promises: (Surah An-Najm, No. 53, verse 37)

4- Abraham was very hospitable: (Surah Ath-Thariyat, No. 51, verses 24-27);

as one finds in some quotations, he is referred to as:

'The father or the lord of the guests'¹²

5- He was unique in trusting Allah, as far as he relied on no one but on Allah in everything and under all circumstances.

He would ask Him as to whatever he wanted, and he referred only to Him.¹³

The story of the angel's proposals for his deliverance when the obstinate nation wanted to throw him into the fire and his lack of acceptance has been recorded in history books. He used to say:

"I am needy all over, but I am in need of assistance from the Creator, not from those who themselves

are the created ones. 14

6- He was unique in bravery and courage and he used to stand up against the challenging fanaticism of the idol-worshippers single-handedly, and would leave no room for the slightest fear and terror.

He used their idols as subjects of his ridicule and turned their temples into ruins, and addressed Nimrod and his guards with a unique courage, each of which has been mentioned in several of the verses of the Qur'an.

7- Ibrahim had an extraordinary powerful logic. He used concise, firm, and reasonable language while addressing his seduced opponents. By his explicitly sound logic, he would bring these obstinate enemies down to earth, never losing ground to them.

He never became angry as a result of their intensive rudeness. Contrarily, he used to face them in cold blood which reflected his elevated spirit.

He used to hand them their condemnation papers with his solemn words and deeds which have been covered in the story of dispute of Abraham with Nimrod and with his uncle and with the court trial of Babylon when they wanted to condemn him for his theistic belief and for breaking up of the idols.

Concentrate on the following verses which have been dealt with in Surah Al-'Anbiya:

When the judges asked him as to whether it was he who had done all those offences to their gods, breaking up of all their small and big idols, he answered:

"...surely (some doer) has done it; the chief of them is this, therefore ask them, if they can speak."¹⁵

This he said to corner them in an awful deadlock out of which they could not escape.

He placed his opponents in an awful situation by declaring this single sentence. For, if they answered that their idols were dumb and deaf and unable to speak, they would be feeling ashamed for such of mute and irresponsible god.

If they accepted that they were able to speak, they should ask and hear the answer from them. It was on this occasion that their dormant conscience was aroused and discovered themselves.

They would hear words from within themselves which shouted that they were oppressors, selfish and tyrants. That is, you are having neither any mercy on yourselves nor do you show any mercy on the community to which you belong.

Anyway, they had necessarily had to provide an answer.

Thus, they uttered these words while being humiliated with to utmost that:

“You well know that these idols cannot speak.”

It was at this moment that the pounding words of Abraham struck them like thunderbolt.

He shouted:

“Woe unto you for worshipping any one but Allah. O’ brainless people! Fie on you and on what you serve besides Allah; What! Do you not understand?”¹⁶

Ultimately, as they did not find the power to stand up against the strong logic of ‘Ibrahim in them, as is the case with all oppressors, they took to the logic of force and declared that he should be burned alive.

To fulfill their aim, they utilized the blind fanaticism of the worshippers of the idols and hastened to call them to help their gods.

“Burn him and help your gods, if you are going to do (anything)’.”¹⁷

This was an example of the explicit, reasonable, and decisive logic of ‘Ibrahim.

8– It is interesting to note that the Qur’an considers this as one of the sources of pride for the Muslims to be adherents of ‘Ibrahim. And it was he who called them by the name of ‘Muslims’.¹⁸ Even, in order to encourage Muslims, the Qur’an calls to their minds that they must imitate ‘Ibrahim and his companions for achieving some of the important objectives.¹⁹

9– The rituals of the Hajj pilgrimage, with all its splendour, have been initiated by ‘Ibrahim and upon Allah’s command. Therefore, the name of ‘Ibrahim and the memory of ‘Ibrahim have been associated with Hajj.²⁰

And man is reminded of this Divine prophet at any moment and with every part of the splendid ceremonies of Hajj, so that he feels the grandeur of this man in the bottom of his heart. In principle, the performance of the Hajj rituals is meaningless without the name of Abraham.

10– The personality of ‘Ibrahim was so elevated that every group sought to consider him as one of their own. The Jews and the Christians each stressed their relationship with him.

The Holy Qur’an, answering them, however, insisted that he (s.w.t.) was only a Muslim and a true monotheist. That is, he was subservient to all of Allah’s commandments and submissive to Him; he never thought of anyone but Him and he never would take any steps except in the path shown by Him.

21

1. Surah Al-‘An‘ am, No. 6, verse 76

2. Surah Al-‘An‘ am, No. 6, verse 76

3. Ibid, verses 77–79

4. Surah Maryam, No. 19, verse 47
5. Ibid, verses 41–42
6. Surah Al-Baqarah, No. 2, verse 258
7. Surah ‘Ibrahim, No. 14, verses 31–37
8. Surah As-Safat, No. 37, verses 104 to 107
9. Surah An-Nahl, No. 16, verse 120
10. Surah An-Nisa, No. 4, verse 125
11. Safinat-ul-Bihar, vol. 1. p. 74.
12. Safinat-ul-Bihar, vol. 1. p. 74
13. Surah Ash-Shu‘ara, No. 26 verses 78 to 82
14. Kamil-ibn-Athir, vol. 1, p. 99
15. Surah Al-‘Anbiya, No. 21, verse 63
16. Ibid, verse 67
17. Ibid, verse 68
18. Surah Al-Hajj, No. 22, verse 78
19. Surah Mumtahanah, No. 60, verse 4
20. Surah Al-Hajj, No. 22, verse 27
21. Surah ‘Al-i-‘Imran, No. 3, verse 67

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