

The Literal Definition of *Nabī*.

This short paper aims to outline the literal discussions on the word *Nabī* (Prophet). It is hoped that such an analysis will enable us to understand the station of *nabuwwa* better in Islam and appreciate the true rank given by Allāh to His selected servants. The analysis has been taken primarily from *Ziā al-Qur'ān*, the commentary of the Qur'ān written by Ziā al-Ummah Pīr Muhammad Karam Shāh Sahib, may Allah descend His infinite mercy upon him.¹

There are three opinions regarding the origins of the word *Nabī*:

1. *Nabwa* (نبوة).
2. *Nabāwa* (نباوة).
3. *Naba'* (نبا).

Opinions One & Two.

The literal meaning of *nabwa* and *nabāwa* is 'exaltedness'. On this basis, a *Nabī* is so-called because he is lofty and exalted from other humans, because of his proximity to Allāh.

Opinion Three.

The third opinion – and the most trusted one as favoured by Allāma Jawharī and Farrā' – is that the word stems from *naba'*, which means 'news'. Allāma Afsahānī writes that *naba'* does not refer to ordinary news. Rather news is only considered *naba'* when it fulfills three attributes:

1. It is useful.
2. It is important and grand.
3. The listener benefits knowledge from it, which in its least form is 'overwhelming thought' (ظن غالب).

The Qur'ān affirms the usage of *naba'* to mean 'important news' in several places:

عم يتساءلون عن النبأ العظيم

'What are they asking one another? About the great news.' (78: 1-2).

¹ *Zia al-Qur'an*, Vol IV, Surah Ahzab. Verse One.

وَأَنْبِئُكُمْ بِمَا تَأْكُلُونَ و مَا تَدْخُرُونَ فِي بُيُوتِكُمْ

‘[And Jesus said] ‘I shall inform you of the news of what you eat and what you store in your houses.’ (3: 49).

On this basis, *Nabī* derives from *naba*’, to either mean:

- **The giver of important news.** Here, the word *Nabī* will give the meaning of the subject. Moreover, because it features on the template of *فَعِيل* rather than *فَاعِل*, it gives the meaning of a more permanent attribute (Allāh is described as the *سَمِيع* and not the *سَامِع* because he is *always* listening, not just sometimes). In other words, a prophet is one who gives important news on a continual basis.
- **The one provided with important news.** Here, the word *Nabī* will give the meaning of the object. In Arabic, *اسم مفعول* can sometimes appear on the template of *فَعِيل*, for example, the word *جريح* means ‘wounded’.

From this brief analysis, the following can be deduced:

- A Prophet does not give ordinary news, but news of worth and significance.
- Such news is thus news of the unseen (*غيب*). This is proven by the fact that when Allāh describes news of the unseen in the Qur’ān, he uses the word *naba*’. For instance:

ذَٰلِكَ مِنْ أَنْبَاءِ الْغَيْبِ نُوحِيهِ إِلَيْكَ

‘That is news of the unseen which We inspire you with.’ (3:44). (Note, *anbā*’ in the verse is the plural form of *naba*’).

It is on the literal basis of the word that Āla Hazrat Ahmad Razā Khān defines a *Nabī* as ‘someone who gives news of the unseen.’

- A Prophet delivers important news on a continuous, permanent basis.
- If it is assumed that the word *Nabī* gives the meaning of the object, then this affirms our belief that prophets do not know their knowledge independently, but through the means of Allāh.

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