

# Good News

*And give good news to those who do good (to others)*

–Holy Quran 22:37

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## The Significance of the Story of ‘Adam’ in the Holy Quran

By Ebrahim Mohamed

In this article I would like to unearth and share what I understand to be the significance of the narrative of ‘Adam’ from a Quranic perspective. In doing so, I will refer to relevant verses, mostly from Chapter 2 of the Holy Quran entitled, *The Cow* that are pertinent to the topic.

### BACKGROUND

In the verses we will come across reference to our ‘Lord’ or *Rabb* which describes His attribute as the One Who brings about the evolution of every created thing and takes it through various stages to perfection.

We will also come across the mention of ‘angels’; ‘Adam and his wife’; a ‘garden’; a ‘forbidden tree’; the ‘devil’ (*iblis*); the acquisition of ‘knowledge’ and the development of human ‘intellect’; ‘revelation’, and ‘Divine guidance’.

Also, before we can begin to make sense of the Quranic narrative, we have to understand that according to the Holy Quran Almighty God is the Supreme Originator and Creator of all the worlds; that He has no beginning and no end and was neither created and there is none like unto Him. Everything else that exists such as the heavens and the earth, mankind, the angels, and the devil etc. were created by Him for a specific purpose on earth. We should also know that God communicates with

man by means of revelation. We should also know that the Holy Quran mentions (3:7 refers) that it consists of verses that are clear and direct that form the basis of the Book and verses that are in the form of parables, metaphors, allegories, that need interpretation in line with the direct verses.

We must also know that the angels are ethereal beings created of light with no will of their own. They serve as God's messengers responsible for the execution of His Will as commanded by Him. We also need to know that the devil (sometimes referred to as *shaytaan*, *iblis* or *jinn* in the Quran) is not an angel. It is a spirit created of fire that plays a role that is opposite to that of the angels. We should also know that Adam and his wife in the Quranic narrative do not refer to some primordial human couple but symbolize the entire human race, male and female. Also we need to know that the *Garden* spoken of in these verses does not refer to the heavenly Garden of the next life; but

symbolizes an 'earthly paradise' of complete peace and happiness; and we need to understand that the *forbidden tree* symbolizes all forms of evil. With this background understanding, we can now approach these verses individually to see what moral lessons they contain for mankind:

### **1. God placing a Ruler in the Earth**

'And when thy Lord said to the angels, I am going to place a ruler in the earth, they said: Wilt Thou place in it such as make mischief in it and shed blood? And we celebrate Thy praise and extol Thy holiness. He said: Surely I know what you know not.' – (2:30)

Here the Holy Quran, with the use of *dramatic dialogue* between God and the angels, effectively expresses God's Will with regard to the creation of man. The dialogue does not mean that God literally consulted the angels for He creates what He pleases and do not need to

consult anyone in the process, least of all His own creation.

God is telling us that He intends to create a being far greater than the angels that will be granted such attributes that will afford him the potential to bring the forces of nature under his control which will place him in a position of dominance over the rest of creation on earth. He will also be granted a ‘free will’ to choose, between *good* and *evil* and will be given unique faculties that will enable him to acquire knowledge and develop his intellect. He will also be given divine guidance through revelation from God.

With such power at his disposal, he will acquire the title of ‘**Ruler**’ on earth. The verse thus shows the high place that man was destined to hold in the whole of creation. One can say the whole character and nature of man is briefly written in this one verse.

However, the question whether he will be one that creates mischief and sheds blood is addressed with

reference to the fact that God Who created him knows his hidden potential which the angels do not know; and that is man might be the greatest killer on this earth but he also has the capacity to turn the gifts of God to their best use.

Whilst the angels speak of the former i.e. the darker side of humanity, God knows the brighter side and that is that there will always be those who will conquer evil. The prophets of God and their true followers are good examples of this. Their struggles and final victories over the forces of evil are repeatedly mentioned in the Holy Quran as an indication of the ultimate good in man that will always come out tops despite the hopelessness of the situation.

## 2. Man’s Intellectual Development

**‘And He taught Adam all the names,** then presented them to the angels; He said: Tell Me the names of those if you are truthful.’ – (2:31)

‘They said: Glory be to Thee! We have no knowledge but

that which Thou have taught us. Surely Thou art the Knowing, the Wise.’ – (2:32)  
 ‘He said: O Adam, inform them of their names. So when he informed them of their names, He said: Did I not say to you that I know what is unseen in the heavens and the earth? And I know what you manifest and what you hide.’  
 – (2:33)

God teaches Adam by means of revelation and by granting him intellectual capacity to think, reflect, and understand things. The Holy Quran says:

‘And it is not vouchsafed (i.e. granted) to a mortal that Allah should speak to him, except by revelation (*wahy*) or from behind a veil (i.e. by means of true dreams, visions), or by sending a messenger and revealing by His permission what He pleases. Surely He is High, Wise.’ – 42:51

Three degrees of revelation are mentioned here. The first two is available to all mortals whereas the last one is exclusive to prophets only. The most common form of revelation called *wahy* means a ‘hasty suggestion or a bright idea which is conveyed to the human mind’ or to the heart of the inspired one. This truth which the Holy Quran revealed to us through the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) 1400 years ago, is now being supported by modern day scientists such as Albert Einstein who remarked: ‘Ideas come from God.’

So what does it mean that Adam was taught all the names which he was then asked to present to the angels? The angels do not have the intellectual capacity that is granted to man. They only know the commandments of God they are instructed to execute. By ‘inform them of their names’ here refer to man’s ability to communicate by means of speech and the ability to

use his faculties to probe, study and identify aspects of the creation and name them in order to understand its nature and put it to good use. It is not confined merely to naming things for purpose of identification but much more than that. It refers to man's ability to acquire knowledge of the various sciences that originated from the knowledge revealed to him by the Almighty, the Originator and Ultimate Source of all knowledge.

Therefore the knowledge, referred to here as 'the names of all things', include sciences such as arithmetic, geometry, algebra, physics, chemistry, astronomy, cosmology, biology, physiology, medicine, archaeology, etc. that he acquired over the generations and are still in the process of acquiring.

Since this is how God created man, He, and not the angels, knew beforehand the wonderful capabilities inherent in man and what he was able to achieve and thus He tells the angels 'Surely I know

what you know not' and that is that man's hidden faculties will, over time, come to the fore and he will uncover hidden secrets of the heavens and the earth, secrets which only God knew until He revealed it to man.

The angels on the other hand do not have the ability, like man, to explore and find out things for themselves. Their knowledge is limited to what God commands them. Thus they say: 'We have no knowledge but that which Thou hast taught us.' They are only given knowledge of that which is necessary for fulfilling their specialist duties assigned to them and nothing else. Therefore God commands man to inform the angels of these various branches of knowledge that He taught him.

The question is how does man inform the angels? He does so by employing the services of the angels in his execution of his acquired knowledge. For example man has subjected the angel in charge of the

forces of electrons through his research and divinely inspired knowledge in such a remarkable way that he has been able to produce all the wonderful things like, computers, satellites, cell phones, radios and televisions etc. The science of robotics is in its infant stage but who knows what still lies ahead in this field and what other inventions still lies ahead? Man can only do all these things with the help of the angels who are now exposed to this knowledge as they serve man in the execution of it. This is what is meant by man informing the angels.

### 3. Man's Moral Development

‘And when We said to the angels, Be submissive to Adam, they submitted, but *Iblis* i.e. the devil (did not). He refused and was proud, and he was one of the disbelievers.’ – 2:34

As already pointed out briefly above, man's harnessing the forces of nature is a manifestation of angels

submitting to him; these forces are the angels on the physical plane. However, on a spiritual plane, the angels bring divine inspiration and revelation to man. They inspire man to use all his God-given faculties in such a good way that it will benefit him and the rest of humanity. However, in order for man to develop morally he must make conscious decisions when choosing between what is right or wrong. God thus created a negative force called the devil to target man's weaknesses and tempt him to commit evil. Without this negative force man will not be able to manifest his moral strength. To illustrate the point; say a guilty person chooses to tell the truth knowing it will expose him, despite having an opportunity to lie, then only can he be called a 'truthful' person. However, if he had no choice and spoke the truth under duress, it cannot be said he displayed the moral quality of 'truthfulness'. In the same way a man or a woman can only claim

chastity if standing firm in the face of temptation.

#### 4. The Garden and the Forbidden Tree

‘And We said: O Adam, dwell thou and thy wife in the garden, and eat from it a plenteous (food) wherever you wish, and approach not this tree, lest you be of the unjust.’ – (2:35)

‘But the devil made them slip from it, and caused them to depart from the state in which they were. And We said: Go forth, some of you are the enemies of others. And there is for you in the earth and abode and a provision for a time.’ – (2:36)

Many mistake the garden mentioned here as the ‘heavenly’ paradise of the Hereafter which is promised to the righteous. The Holy Quran mentions two gardens:

‘And for him who fears to stand before his Lord are two Gardens - (55:46)’

The ‘garden’ mentioned in the narrative of Adam refers to the ‘earthly’ garden which symbolizes a state of peace of mind and happiness which the righteous experience here on earth for the Quran says in the beginning of this section: ‘I am going to place a ruler on the **earth**’ not to punish him but so that he can be happy and contented for this is what is meant by ‘dwell in the garden and eat a plenteous food,’ However, the earthly paradise as these verses indicate can be lost to man if he follows the promptings of the devil and causes mischief in the land and sheds blood. This will deprive him of the peace of mind intended for his sojourn on earth.

The Garden of the Hereafter, however, is eternal.

‘Nor will they be ejected from it.’ - (15:48)

Thus the ‘garden’ of this of this earth is the metaphorical ‘garden’ of peace and tranquillity which exists in the heart or mind of the faithful. Even in adversity such persons have a tranquil mind. All the worldly pleasures, such as gardens with streams, palaces, varieties of food and drink are of no avail if one’s heart is in a state of ‘hell’ i.e., he is consumed with the fire of his low desires. This happens when man eats from the ‘forbidden tree’ of evil. Trees are often used in the Holy Quran to describe by way of a parable good or evil. Thus the Holy Quran says:

‘And the parable of an evil word is an evil tree’ - (14:26).

Man is thus warned to stay away from evil which is ‘like’ a tree that carries poisonous fruit.

### 5. Divine Guidance

Because Almighty God knew that man on its own is unable to withstand the temptations of the devil without His help, man is given Divine revelation that provides him with the necessary ‘guidance’ to

overcome his weaknesses and help him guard against the evil that will rob him of his peace of mind. Such guidance comes in the form of revelation to His chosen Messengers. The Holy Quran points out:

‘And there is not a people but a warner has gone among them.’ – 35:24.

It is to this phenomenon that the Holy Quran refers when it says:

2:37 Then Adam (referring to the whole of humankind) received (revealed) words from his Lord, and He turned to him (mercifully). Surely He is Oft-returning (to mercy), the Merciful.

2:38 We said: Go forth from this (state) all. Surely there will come to you guidance from Me, then whoever follows My guidance, no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve.

2:39 And (as to) those who disbelieve in and reject Our

messages, they are the companions of the Fire; in it they will abide.

In summary, secular knowledge without divine guidance is not enough to save man from plunging himself into a state of hell on earth. We see too often these days that despite man's scientific and technological advances, they are responsible for large scale mischief and bloodshed. They have lost their souls in the process. Their only hope of survival is the rebirth of their humanity that can only come with obedience to Divine Laws by following the guidance God revealed to His Messengers.

**The Good News**

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