

IḤYĀ° AL-NABĪY YAḤYĀ

(THE REVIVAL OF THE PROPHET YAHYA)

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The Quran mentions the prophets as having special names and qualities. For example, Prophet Muhammad is called the Seal of the Prophets (Q. 33:40) and a mercy for the worlds (Q. 21:107). Abraham is called Imam (Q. 2:124), the friend of God (Q. 4:125), a model to the world (Q. 16:120), one who is forbearing and repentant (Q. 11:74), a monotheist (Q. 16:123). Isaac is also given the quality of an Imam (Q. 21:73) who has power of vision (Q. 38:45). Aaron is called a minister (Q. 20:29); he is blessed with eloquence (Q. 28:34) and he is sent with signs and manifest authority (Q. 23:45). David is called a vicegerent on the earth (Q. 38:26) who has power and wisdom (Q. 2:251); a man of strength (Q. 38:17). Solomon is a king (Q. 38:35); he is taught the speech of birds and is bestowed with all things (Q. 27:16). Joseph is a ruler (Q. 12:88) and one who interprets dreams and visions (Q. 12:21), a man of truth (Q. 12:46), concealed as a treasure (Q. 12:19). Jacob is also called Imam (Q. 21:73). He is given the power of vision (Q. 38:45). Jesus is called the Messiah (Q. 3:45). He spoke in the cradle (Q. 3:46) and is a sign to humanity and a mercy from God (Q. 19:21).

These are all prophets whose lives are familiar to us. What about the Prophet Yahya? What have we been taught about this prophet who has been overlooked and misrepresented. One reason he has been overlooked is because there are five words used in the Quran to describe Prophet Yahya that have been misinterpreted in translations of the Quran.

The first is the word *ḥaṣūr* which is usually translated “chaste.” My research shows that the Arabic word *ḥaṣūr* does not mean “chaste” with regard to Yahya; rather, it means “a concealer [of secrets].” Why the mistake in translation and commentary? As there was no extensive information given in the Quran about the life of Prophet Yahya nor in the Tradition (*Ḥadīth*), the commentators then turned to Christian tradition and simply repeated what they found there.

Nonetheless, the commentators of the Quran have placed considerable emphasis on this word. Al-Tabari interprets the word *ḥaṣūr* to mean one who abstains from sexual intercourse with women. He then reports a Tradition on the authority of Said ibn al-Musayyab which has Prophet Muhammad saying the following: “Everyone of the sons of Adam shall come on the Day of Resurrection with a sin (of sexual impropriety) except Yahya bin Zechariah.’ Then, picking up a tiny straw, he continued, ‘this is because his generative organ was no bigger then this straw (implying that he was impotent).”

Does this mean that even the prophets outside of Yahya will be raised up with this sin of sexual impropriety? How can we accept that this was said by such a modest human being, comparing a straw to another prophet's generative organ? Was Yahya impotent? One commentator, Ibn Kathir, a renowned Islamic scholar, rejects this view and adds, “This would be a defect and a blemish unworthy of prophets.” He then mentions that it was not that he had no sexual relations with women, but that he had no illegal sexual

relations with them. Indeed, the whole discussion is unseemly. It is known that prophets of God are immune from major sins, so this statement makes no sense at all when interpreting the word, *ḥaṣūr*. In addition, I would like to mention the fact that in his commentary, Ibn Kathir says he (Yahya) probably married and had children. He said this on the basis of what was related in the Quran of the prayer of Zachariah.

There are at least three reasons why interpreting *ḥaṣūr* in this context as “chaste” is a misinterpretation: First of all, there is another word in the Quran for “chaste” and that is *muḥṣin*. As God used a different word with *ḥaṣūr*, it must mean something different. Secondly, God says in the Quran that Islam did not bring monasticism but that it was something that they (the Christians) invented. (Q. 57:27) Also, *And verily We sent messengers (to mankind) before thee, and We appointed for them wives and offspring, and it was not given to any messenger that he should bring a portent save by God’s leave. For everything there is a time prescribed.* (Q. 13:38) This is definitely not a recommendation for monasticism. Furthermore, we find in the Traditions that the Prophet said that there is no monasticism in Islam. Therefore, God would not have sent a Prophet who was celibate. In addition, it is contrary the exhortation in the Torah to “go forth and multiply.” Thirdly, Yahya’s father, Zechariah prayed for a protector who would provide descendants (*dhurriyah*) for his family. *There Zachariah called to his Lord; he said: My Lord! Bestow on me good offspring from Thy presence; truly Thou art hearing supplication.* (Q. 3:38) God gave him Yahya. God would not have sent a son to Zechariah who would not carry on the line of Jacob’s descendants because then God would not have answered the prayer of Zechariah.

The word *ḥaṣūr* is used only one time in the Quran and that is in regard to the Prophet Yahya. A major Arabic-English lexicon, that of Edward William Lane (Taj al-Arus) states that when *ḥaṣūr* is used alone, it means “concealer [of secrets].” In his translation, of Ibn al-Arabi’s Book of the Fabulous Gryphon, Elmore also translates the Arabic *ḥaṣūr* “as concealer [of secrets].” In the referenced passage, “chaste” would not have been appropriate (Q. Gerald T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time*, Brill 1999, P. 482)

The second word that has been misinterpreted is *walīy* (Q. 19:5) which in this verse and many others in the Quran means “protector” not “heir or successor.” In this specific case, Zechariah prays to his Lord: “And truly I have feared my defenders after me and my wife has been a barren woman. So bestow on me from that which proceeds from Thy Presence a protector (*walīy*).”

The third word that is misinterpreted is that of *fard* in (Q. 21:89): “And mention Zechariah when he cried out to his Lord: My Lord! Forsake me not unassisted (Q. *fard*) and Thou art the Best of the ones who inherit.” It is usually translated as “heir,” but the same reasoning applies as above. The word “unassisted” refers to the fact that Zechariah did not want to be left alone without any protector. He feared for those who would defend him and his honor after he died, that they would be left without a protector and thereby could not defend his honor.

The fourth misinterpreted word in relation to Prophet Yahya is *sayyid*. Prophet Yahya is referred to as a *sayyid*, chief in the Quran. The commentators have interpreted this to mean that he was a scholar of religious law, a wise man, a noble wise and pious man, and so forth. This was a prophet of God. Knowledge and wisdom were given to him by his Lord. The title given to Yahya by his Lord shows that Prophet Yahya is one who has authority over his people and not “noble” or “honorable” as this word is usually

translated. Honor and nobility are good qualities but they fail to indicate that Prophet Yahya is given a role of leadership by his Lord.

The fifth word is *ḥanān* which means “mercy,” which is part of the compound name Yu’hanan (in English “John”), meaning “God is Merciful.” The word *ḥanān* is used once in the Quran (Q. 19:13) and that is in reference to Prophet Yahya: “And continuous mercy from Us and purity...” This is singularly appropriate to the circumstances of the Prophet Yahya.

The names Yahya and Yuhanan are not the same as many assume. They have two entirely different roots. *Ḥanān* and the *ḥannah* both derive from the Semitic root *ḥ n n*. While the word *ḥannah* means “mercy or tenderness,” the root word for Yahya is *ḥ y y*. It means “life” or “he lives.” One does not need to be a linguist to see the obvious.

In addition, I would like also to mention that this name and attribute given to Prophet Yahya can also be found in Sabian literature. The Sabians are mentioned in the Quran in verses (Q. 2:62), (Q. 5:69) and (Q. 22:17). In their canonical prayer book we find Yahya Yuhanna. It has been known that it is the practice of the Sabians to have two names, a real name and a special name. According to the Sabians, this prophet’s real name was Yahya (Q. he lives) and his lay name was Yuhanna (Q. John).

Prophet Yahya is the only one given this name as the Quran clearly states: “O Zechariah! Truly We give thee the good tidings of a boy; his name will be Yahya (he who lives) and We assign it not as a namesake (*samīy*) for anyone before.”

Again, another word that we need to pay attention to is *samīy*. It is used twice in the Quran, once in reference to Yahya (Q. 19:7) “O Zechariah! Truly We give thee the good tidings of a boy; his name will be Yahya and We assign it not as a namesake (Q. *samiya*) for anyone before.” The other time it is used is in reference to God. “...Knowest thou any namesake (*samiya*) for Him [God]?” (Q. 19:65) In the famous Arabic lexicon *Lisan al-Arab*, the root *s m w* means “elevation or highness.”

See *The Sublime Quran* Pocket Size translated by Laleh Bakhtiar (2009) which incorporates the results of this research about the Prophet Yahya.