

# The Muhammadan Attributes

(*Ash-Shamā'il al-Muḥammadiyya*)

Mostafa al-Badawi



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MIHRĀB AT-TAHAJJUD: THE MIHRĀB IN THE PROPHET'S MOSQUE, BEHIND THE CHAMBER SURROUNDING HIS GRAVE ﷺ, WHERE HE USED TO PRAY HIS TAHAJJUD PRAYERS.

THE *shamā'il* literature describing the Prophet's appearance, character, and behavior is profuse and has always been granted major importance in Islam, for it serves two most important functions: inwardly, it increases love in the heart and attachment to the Prophet ﷺ (God's peace and blessings upon him), while outwardly it provides the details of the model for his community to emulate in their quest for perfection. This literature brings the Prophet's personality to life, allowing one to form a mental picture of him, thus complementing the *sīra* (biographical) narratives. His companions had such reverence for him and stood in such awe of his presence that

only Abū Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Alī were ever seen making eye contact with him during a conversation or in a gathering. Thus, although many thousands of them had seen him repeatedly, listened to him, and gone on expeditions with him, very few were able to describe his physical appearance and demeanor. As Mohamed Zakariya mentions in his article on the *ḥilya* in *Seasons Journal*,<sup>1</sup> we have 'Alī's brief description of the Prophet ﷺ, that of Hind ibn abī Hāla (who was Lady Khadija's son from a previous husband), and that of the Bedouin woman Umm Ma'bad, who had shown hospitality to the Prophet ﷺ and his company in her desert tent during the course of their emigration from Mecca to

Medina; before recognizing him as a divine envoy, she observed him long enough so that when her husband later returned, she was able to give him a detailed description of the Prophet ﷺ. Others described brief glimpses of various features or attributes.

The Prophet’s actions and utterances, on the other hand, were well remembered, related in profusion, and compiled into hundreds of thousands of hadiths. What, then, is the difference between *ḥilya* and *shamā’il*? Most dictionaries and scholars consider *shamā’il* to be the plural of *shimāl*, though Imam as-Suyūfī says it is the plural of *sham’al*. Both words mean “attribute, quality, trait of character, or attitude”; thus, a man of noble *shamā’il* is a man of noble character. However, the *muḥaddithūn* (scholars of hadith) and other Muslim authors use the term to include everything that is personal to the Prophet ﷺ, including his appearance, clothes, demeanor, pattern of behavior, and traits. It is therefore clear that the two terms are closely related, *shamā’il* being simply of broader scope than *ḥilya*.

Muslims eagerly seek a clear mental image of the Prophet ﷺ, who is considered the highest and most perfect of all created beings; loving him is an essential basis of faith, for God says,

*If your fathers, sons, brothers, spouses, clans, money you earn, and commerce that you fear may slacken, and dwellings that are pleasing to you*

*are dearer to you than God and His Messenger and fighting in His way, then wait until God brings about His decision, and God guides not corrupt people.*<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the Prophet ﷺ himself said, “None of you shall have believed until I become dearer to him than his children, parents, and all other people.” He added to that, on another occasion, “more than oneself.” For this reason, forming a vivid mental image of the Prophet ﷺ is perceived as essential to reinforcing love and emotional attachment to him. The more one is aware of his qualities of perfection, of his being the greatest manifestation of divine mercy to the world, the more profound one’s love and the more powerful one’s motivation to follow him. Does not God also say, “*You have in the Messenger of God a good example for he who hopes in God and the Last Day*”?<sup>3</sup> In order to transform this motivation into behavior, one must have knowledge of how the Prophet ﷺ acted toward other people, dealt with particular situations, conceived of life in this world, and arranged his priorities. Learning and disseminating this knowledge is in itself a way to draw nearer to God and His Prophet ﷺ and to serve the community. God is pleased to hear the praises of His most beloved servant sung, to hear people extol and thank Him for having created him so beautifully and for sending him to them to inform them of the perfect beauty of their Creator.



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“God is Beautiful,” said the Prophet ﷺ, “and He loves beauty.” It is in the nature of the unspoiled soul to love beauty and be attracted to it, for the soul remembers its origin in the spiritual world of perfect lights, in the divine presence. Since the beauty and perfection of the Prophet ﷺ is unsurpassable, the human soul is irresistibly drawn toward him on being reminded of him. One’s nearness to or remoteness from God corresponds to the degree of one’s love or lack thereof for the Prophet ﷺ. Similarly, one’s rank in Paradise corresponds to the depth of one’s love for the Prophet ﷺ. It is love that brings about emulation: “Say: If you love God, follow me and God will love you.”<sup>4</sup>

Reading the *shamā’il* reinforces faith and certainty, increases reverence and respect for the Prophet ﷺ, for the revealed Book that he was sent, and for his sacred law. When God sent His final invitation to mankind to recognize Him as sole Master of the universe and pay homage to Him accordingly by submitting to His will, He made both the Message and the Messenger ﷺ proofs of the veracity of the invitation. The essence of the Message—that God is one and absolute and that therefore no other may ever share His power and authority—is self-evident and needs no proof. However, because the human mind is likely to be clouded by numerous misconceptions and swayed by short-term self-interests and passions, God’s infinite compassion required that this quintessential message be elaborated in a revealed Book that approaches the mind from all possible angles, and that the miraculous nature of the Book itself, as well as its preservation as a miracle across the ages, constitute proof of its veracity. Furthermore, the perfect nature of the Prophet ﷺ—his outward beauty, his inward beauty of character, the wisdom so evident in his acts and utterances, and the hundreds of miracles he produced—should close the cycle of proofs demanded by the existing variety of mentalities and temperaments.

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The Prophet ﷺ should be shared with people of other faiths today, and providing them access to the *shamā’il* tradition means allowing them to experience the personal charm, profound wisdom, all-embracing compassion, and perfect character of the Messenger ﷺ. The *shamā’il* tradition complements the image of the Prophet ﷺ often projected in historical studies and highlights the fine balance he struck between the attributes of beauty and those of rigorous justice demanded by his functions as statesman, judge, and warrior. It also helps correct the misconceptions of the Prophet ﷺ produced and perpetuated over the centuries by medieval Europeans who perceived him as an enemy.

*Shamā’il* literature is extensive; while an essential part of the *sīra* of the Prophet ﷺ, the very abundance of detailed information known about the Prophet ﷺ allowed the *shamā’il* to become established as a separate literature. The most famous compilation is that of Imam Tirmidhī, and several commentaries have been written on it. Also famous and widely read are the sections on *shamā’il* in Ghazālī’s *Ihya’ ‘ulūm ad-dīn*, Ibn al-Qayyim’s *Zād al-ma‘ād*, Qadī ‘Iyād’s *Ash-Shifā’*, and Quṣṭullānī’s *Al-Mawāhib al-lāduniyyā* as well as the relevant section in as-Suyūṭī’s *al-Jāmi‘ aṣ-ṣaghīr*. More recent scholars have also written on the *shamā’il*. Shaykh Yūsuf an-Nabahānī’s *Wasā’il al-wuṣūl li-shamā’il ar-rasūl* is one of the most comprehensive and readable accounts.<sup>5</sup> More recently, Shaykh al-Laḥjī, who died only a few years ago in Mecca, authored a scholarly commentary on

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the *shamā'īl* in four large volumes.

Shaykh an-Nabahānī begins *Wasā'il al-wuṣūl* with the Prophet's lineage and follows it with his numerous names. The Shaykh then gives a detailed physical description of the Prophet ﷺ as well as a description of everything he wore and used; of how he sat, ate, drank, slept, talked, laughed, wept, prayed, fasted, and recited the Qur'an; and of his character and behavior toward others. The author follows this description with 313 of the Prophet's most comprehensive utterances. The last section of the book includes the manner in which he used to treat certain illnesses, his death, and visions of him that people have had in their dreams. This book concludes with fifty prophetic supplications. Most of what follows in this paper is taken from this book as well as from Shaykh al-Lahjī's commentary.

The Prophet ﷺ came from a long line of divine prophets and saints, including Noah, Abraham, and Ishmael ؑ. He informed his companions of the nobility of his lineage, saying, "God selected Ishmael from the Children of Abraham, then selected Banī Kināna from the Children of Ishmael, then selected Quraysh from Banī Kināna, then selected Banī Hāshim from Quraysh, then selected me from Banī Hāshim." He also said, "I was raised from the best of each succeeding generation of the Children of Adam, until I came from the generation I came from." And he said, "God created creation and brought me forth from the best among them, the best of each generation. Then He chose the best among tribes and made me from the best tribe. Then He chose the best among families and made me from the best family. Therefore, I am

the best in my self and the best in lineage." He also informed them that his Lord had made him the supreme human being when he said, "I am the master of the Children of Adam on Resurrection Day." Since all human beings, from Adam until the end of time, shall be gathered on Resurrection Day, being the master on that day means taking precedence over all of mankind, including all other divine envoys. The Prophet ﷺ also said, "I am the most honorable of the Children of Adam in the sight of my Lord, and this is not to boast." Despite these claims, the Prophet ﷺ was always a model of humility, especially with the weak, poor, and needy. When the Lady Qayla, who was to be one of his companions, first set eyes on him, he was in the mosque, sitting as he often did, squatting on his heels. There was such humility in his posture, this man who was said to be a divine envoy, that she was seized with terror. Without turning toward her, he said, "*Yā miskīna!* 'Alayki as-sakīna!' (O poor woman! Tranquility upon you!) His words assuaged her immediately. On another occasion, a man who was approaching to greet him was so awed that the man was seized with trembling. The Prophet ﷺ calmed him down, saying, "Easy; I am but the son of a woman from Quraysh who used to eat dried meat."

The Prophet's names, as compiled by scholars over the centuries, run into the hundreds. However, the principal ones are those by which God addresses him in the Qur'an as well as those the Prophet ﷺ informed us of himself. The Qur'an addresses him as Muḥammad, Aḥmad, Messenger, Light, Enwrapped One, Covered One, Seal of the Prophets, *Ṭā-Hā*, *Yā-Sīn*, Reminder, Unlettered One, and Mercy to the Worlds. Five more names come in a single verse, "*O Prophet! We have sent you as a Witness, a Bringer of Good News, and a Warner, and a Summoner to God by His leave, and a Light-giving Lamp.*"<sup>6</sup> The Qur'an also says, "*There has come to you a Messenger from among yourselves, grievous to whom is your suffering, concerned for you, to the believers*

*gentle and compassionate.*”<sup>7</sup> The Prophet ﷺ said, “I have five names: I am Muḥammad, and I am Aḥmad, and I am the Eraser with whom God erases disbelief, and I am the Gatherer toward whom people shall be gathered, and I am the Successor.” And, he said, “I am Muḥammad, and I am Aḥmad, and I am the Prophet of Mercy and the Prophet of Repentance, and I am the Follower, and I am the Musterer and the Prophet of Epic Battles.” The Follower is he who follows in the footsteps of previous divine envoys, perpetu-

The likeness of myself and the other prophets is that of a man who has built a house, well-built and beautiful, but missing a brick in one of its corners. People walked around the house, wondering, asking, “Will you not place this brick?” I am this brick and I am the Seal of the Prophets.

He also said, “The most God-fearing, and he who knows God best among you is I.” And he said, “I was not sent but as a teacher.” Before Islam, he was already known among the



KOHL STICKS OF THE PROPHET ﷺ,  
AND [RIGHT] THE KOHL STICKS  
IN THEIR CASKET



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MOSTAFA AL-BADAWI

ating their pattern. The Musterer is he behind whom mankind shall be gathered on Resurrection Day. The Prophet of Epic Battles is he who has fought such battles himself and whose followers have fought and are yet to fight heroic battles, the last one being against the *Dajjāl* (Antichrist). He is also the Prophet whose sacred law includes legislation for war. Since he is the Prophet of the End of Time, his community is destined to live in a world torn by constant conflicts and ever-increasing violence. Thus, his community requires instruction on when and how to wage war. In another hadith, the Prophet ﷺ confirms that he is the Seal of the Prophets:

Quraysh as the Trustworthy. They knew him never to have lied or betrayed anyone in his life and even when they became mortal enemies because of his insistence on the unity of God, they never accused him of any such thing.

The Prophet ﷺ was of medium height, broad-shouldered and strongly built, with fleshy hands and feet. His head was large, his face full but not round, his cheeks flat, his eyebrows long and arching, close but not joined together. His eyes were large and black; there was some redness around the pupils, and his eyelashes were long and abundant. His nose was fine and aquiline, his mouth generous, and his teeth regular, with his front teeth

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being slightly apart. His beard was black and profuse, always carefully combed and perfumed. He walked with a powerful stride, as if going downhill, so that when he walked at a normal pace, his companions found difficulty keeping up with him. When no more than two or three companions accompanied him, he walked between them, but when the group grew larger, he walked behind them, saying, "Leave my back to the angels." His eyesight retained its acuity till the end of his life, and because he also saw with the inward eye of the spirit, he could say to his companions, as they stood in line before the ritual prayer, "Straighten your ranks, for I can see you behind me just as I can see you in front of me." He also saw as clearly at nighttime as he did in daylight. He used kohl in both eyes every night before he slept. His hair was black, abundant, slightly wavy, and usually came down to the level of his earlobes. Occasionally, he left it to reach his shoulders. According to a hadith in Tirmidhī, he trimmed his beard in length and on the sides. He trimmed his moustache very short. Near the end of his life, no more than seventeen gray hairs were to be seen in his hair and beard. Every Friday, before going out to the prayer, he cut his nails and trimmed his moustache. When he shaved his head in Mecca after *ʿumra*, he distributed his hair among his companions, who were delighted to receive such a blessed gift. Khālīd ibn al-Walīd, the valiant commander who never lost a battle, had his share of the Prophet's hair sewn into the cap he wore under his war helmet. The cap fell off his head one day in battle, and he was

seen charging the enemy lines on his own more than once trying to retrieve it. Some of the companions reprimanded him for what they thought was recklessness, but once they learned the reason behind his actions, they could only approve.

The Prophet's skin was very soft and naturally fragrant. Whenever he shook hands with someone or patted a child on the head, as he frequently did, the fragrance remained on that person for the rest of the day. Wherever he walked in the alleys of Medina, the same fragrance remained hanging in the air long after he had gone. His sweat was also naturally perfumed. He sometimes took his siesta at Umm Sulaym's house. Having noticed how profusely he sweated in the summer, she gathered his sweat in a flask, and when he asked her what she was doing, she answered that she intended to use it as perfume and anoint the children with it for *baraka* (blessings). He said, "You have done right." Nevertheless, because he was an example for his community, he used perfume regularly; he rubbed it into his hair and beard, and he never refused it when it was offered to him. Two other things that he never turned down nor permitted his companions to refuse were milk and a cushion to place behind his back. He avoided eating onions and garlic, explaining that he conversed with angels. He discouraged others from eating these two foods before entering the mosque for the congregational prayer so as not to offend those around them.

As for the Prophet's voice, it was mellow and very pleasing to the ear, especially when he recited the Qur'an. His voice also had a miraculous quality that made it carry far beyond the range of human voices. Once on a Friday, after he sat at the pulpit, he said to the people in the mosque, "Sit down." ʿAbdallāh ibn Rawāḥa, who was a few houses away from the mosque, hastening down the Banī Ghānm alley on his way to the prayer, heard it and immediately sat down where he was. On another occasion, the Prophet ﷺ sat on his she-camel in Mina

during the course of the Farewell Pilgrimage and spoke to his companions—he was heard by every single one of them, even those who were in their tents scattered all over the valley. At other times, when he gave his sermon in the Medina mosque, the women would hear him clearly, even from inside their houses. However, most of the time, he preferred to keep this supernatural quality hidden, and he would have some of his companions relay his words to the crowd so as to reach those who were standing at some distance.

The Prophet's speech was uniquely eloquent, profound and clear so that most of those who heard it were likely to remember it. He said, "I have been given comprehensiveness of speech." No man ever expressed himself so clearly in fewer words. This gift is what makes those familiar with the utterances of the Prophet ﷺ recognize them as his speech immediately upon hearing them and it is why they are able to distinguish his words from forged hadiths, even before examining the chains of transmission. The Prophet ﷺ often repeated what he said three times to make sure that he had been understood. He normally spoke little, and his silences were long; he kept his discourses brief and far between. Whenever he sat with his companions, he shared in whatever the conversation was about. They discussed worldly affairs, food, marriage, and poetry. Never was backbiting, slander, or lewd speech allowed in his presence. However, in more formal gatherings, or when they expected to hear his discourse, his companions became very still, kept their gazes down, and maintained total silence.

The knowledge that was taught by this unlettered Arab man, brought up in Mecca and the surrounding desert, was of such astounding depth, breadth, and profusion that it incomparably surpasses that of any other human being in history. God says, "*And He taught you what you knew not, and the favor of God upon you is immense.*"<sup>78</sup> The Prophet ﷺ him-

self said on various occasions that he had been given knowledge of all that is between the heavens and the earth, East and West, and the first and the last generations. He once said, "All things were shown to me, and I knew." 'Umar said that once the Prophet ﷺ began to tell them about creation from its very beginning, then went on describing what is to happen to this world and its people, until he told them how the blessed were to be admitted to the Garden and the wretched to the Fire. Abū Zayd al-Anṣārī said,

The Messenger of God—may God's blessings and peace be upon him and his family—led us in the morning prayer, then climbed the pulpit and spoke to us until it was time for the noon prayer. He then climbed down, prayed the noon prayer, climbed up again, and continued speaking until it was time for the afternoon prayer. He then climbed down, prayed the afternoon prayer, and climbed up again, and spoke until the sun set. He informed us of what had been and what was yet to be. The most knowledgeable of us is he who remembers best.

The Prophet ﷺ knew in detail the history of previous divine envoys and communities, of all previous scriptures, and of the cosmic laws governing the cycles of time and history, as well as the intimate details of what was to happen to the human race until the end of time. He had penetrating insights into human psychology; understood to perfection the functioning of men and women of all ages, origins, education, and social conditions, even idol-worshippers and deviant individuals; and offered realistic solutions to their problems and conflicts. He was an expert politician, offered medical advice when required, and exhibited great strategic and tactical expertise when leading his men into battle. He understood other languages, such as Aramaic, Hebrew, Abyssinian, and Persian, although he never allowed this faculty to appear save when strictly necessary. He also understood the lan-



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A ONE-HUNDRED-YEAR-OLD PHOTOGRAPH OF THE WELL OF ARĪS, IN FRONT OF THE QUBĀ' MOSQUE. AFTER ʿUTHMĀN DROPPED THE PROPHET'S RING INTO IT, THE WELL BECAME KNOWN AS "THE WELL OF THE RING" (BI'R AL-KHĀTĀM). THE WELL WAS DESTROYED IN RECENT YEARS.

guage of animals.

When he was angry, the Prophet's face turned red and a vein swelled between his eyebrows. Personal offence never provoked his anger; on the contrary, he invariably remained affable with those who offended him. It was only when divine injunctions were flouted that nothing stood before his anger. At such moments, only ʿAlī would dare speak to him.

When pleased, the Prophet's face lit up like the full moon. He seldom laughed but was usually seen smiling. His companions also seldom laughed in his presence but often smiled. On rare occasions, he broke into a smile so broad that his molar teeth appeared. This for him was the equivalent of hearty laughter.

The Prophet ﷺ wept as he smiled: silently. Tears streamed down his cheeks. Sometimes a sound like that of a boiling pot could be heard from his chest. A messenger once came to the Prophet ﷺ from one of his daughters, to inform him that her son was dying and to request his presence. He told the messenger to return and tell her, "To God belongs what he takes and what He has given. To everything is its appointed term. Let her be patient and expect her wage to fall upon God." However, she sent the messenger back to her father, begging him to come. Thereupon, he rose to his feet, and together with some of his companions walked to his daughter's house. As soon as

he entered the house, he was given the boy, who was gasping for breath. The Prophet ﷺ wept. Sa'd ibn ʿUbāda asked, "Do you weep?" He replied, "Of all His servants, God shows compassion to those who are compassionate."

Whenever he sneezed, the Prophet ﷺ covered his mouth with his hand or his robe, trying to make the sneeze as noiseless as possible. Then he said, "*Al-ḥamdu lillāh!*" He was never seen yawning, and he disliked observing it in others.

The Prophet ﷺ wore coarse clothes and made do with whatever clothing was available; he liked them to be white and clean, and seldom kept more than one of each kind of clothing, so that, more often than not, he had only one robe, one cloak, and one pair of sandals. Occasionally, he was seen wearing clothes with green stripes or a cloak with red stripes. He wore the *jubba*, which is a full-length garment with sleeves reaching to the wrists, opened at the front from top to bottom, and worn on top of other clothes.

The Prophet ﷺ wore a small, white, padded cap underneath his turban, but sometimes he wore the cap on its own without a turban. His turban was usually white, sometimes black, and rarely other colors. He usually allowed the end of his turban to hang on his back between his shoulder blades. Often, he would pass the turban under his chin, much as the North African

Malikis do to this day.

The Prophet ﷺ wore a silver ring on his ring finger, usually on the right side, but sometimes on the left; sometimes he turned the stone inward, towards his palm. In the early years of his prophecy, he wore a gold ring on his right hand. When the companions followed suit, he felt they were in danger of being affected with pride or self-admiration, so he climbed his pulpit and threw the ring away, saying that he would never again wear such a ring, and then he forbade his male companions to ever do so as well. They immediately took off the rings. On more than one occasion, he forbade men from wearing silk or gold, saying, “I am a slave, and I dress like a slave.”

In the seventh year of the Hegira, when it became imperative that the Prophet ﷺ write to foreign rulers who accepted only letters that were sealed, he had a silver ring made with which he sealed the letters. His exquisite courtesy did not allow him to write his name above that of his Lord, and so his ring was engraved with “Muḥammad” on the bottom line, “messenger of” on the middle, and “Allah” on the uppermost. This is the ring that was used by Abū Bakr once he assumed the caliphate, and he left it with a companion named Mu‘ayyib, one of those who had fought at Badr. Mu‘ayyib kept the ring for successive caliphs, producing it whenever they needed to seal their correspondence. Sometimes they took it from him and wore it for *baraka*. On one such occasion, it fell from ‘Uthmān’s hand into the well of Arīs, near the mosque of Qubā’, in the sixth year of his caliphate and was never retrieved. Many great imams have pointed out how the loss of the Prophet’s ring heralded an acute escalation in the sedition and discord that beset the second half of ‘Uthmān’s caliphate.

The Prophet ﷺ and his wives were so poor that they lived for weeks on only dates and water. ‘Ā’isha said that the Prophet ﷺ seldom asked for food and that when they brought

him something, he ate, always accepting whatever was brought. She also said, “We, the family of Muḥammad, used to live through a whole month without lighting a fire. It was just dates and water.” Once when Fāṭima brought her father a loaf of bread that she had baked, he said, “You know, this is the first food to enter your father’s mouth in three days.”

On another occasion, the Prophet ﷺ met Abū Bakr outside his house at a time of the day when he rarely went out.

The Prophet ﷺ asked him, “What brings you here, Abū Bakr?”

He answered, “I have come to meet the Messenger of God, look at his face, and greet him.”

Then ‘Umar appeared. “What brings you here, ‘Umar?” the Prophet ﷺ asked him.

“Hunger, O Messenger of God,” he replied.

The Prophet ﷺ said, “I too am feeling it.” They then walked to the house of Abul-Haytham ibn at-Tayhan, a man of the Anṣār who owned many palms and sheep. They found only his wife.

“Where is your companion?” they asked.

“He went to draw some sweet water for us,” she replied.

It was not long before he appeared, carrying a full water-skin. He was overjoyed to see the Prophet ﷺ and hugged him, saying, “My father and mother be your ransom!”

Then, he took them into his garden, spread a rug for them to sit, brought a cluster of dates, and placed it before them. The Prophet ﷺ asked, “Why did you not choose the softer ones?”

He replied, “O Messenger of God, I desired for you to choose for yourselves, whether you prefer ripe or dry ones.”

They ate from the dates and drank from the water; then the Prophet ﷺ said, “By He in whose Hand my soul lies, these are of the blessings you shall be asked to account for on Judgment Day: cool shade, tasty soft dates, and cool water.”<sup>9</sup>

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pare a meal, the Prophet ﷺ said, “Do not slaughter a milk animal.” So, Abul-Haytham killed and cooked a small goat.

Once they had eaten, the Prophet ﷺ asked him, “Do you have a servant?”

“No,” he answered.

“Come to us when we have captives,” the Prophet ﷺ said.

Eventually, two captives were brought to Medina, and remembering what he had been told, Abul-Haytham came to the Prophet ﷺ saying, “O Messenger of God! Choose for me.”

The Prophet ﷺ said, “An adviser must be trustworthy; take this one, for I have seen him pray. Look after him well.”

When Abul-Haytham returned home and informed his wife of what the Prophet ﷺ had told him, she said, “You will not have fulfilled his command to treat him well unless you free him.”

He responded, “Then he is free.”

Another practice of the Prophet ﷺ is that he ate with his right hand, using three fingers. He ate from the portion of the dish that was in front of him, advising others to do so as well, except when he ate dates, choosing whichever date he wished from the plate. He also drank with his right hand, drawing in the water slowly, in three sips, breathing away from the cup after each sip; he usually sat down when he drank; but when he drank from the well of Zamzam, he drank standing up. After drinking water, he said, “May God be praised and thanked, who made it sweet and limpid by His

mercy and did not make it salty and bitter by our sins.”

The Prophet ﷺ was offered the keys to the treasures of this world and to be made king, but he refused, saying that he would rather be a slave—not a king. He used to sleep a little after the evening prayer (*‘ishā*). He laid on his right side, laid his right cheek on his hand, and then recited invocations until he fell asleep. When he rose, he brushed his teeth with the *siwāk*,<sup>10</sup> made his ablutions, and stood in prayer, beginning with two short *rak‘as*.<sup>11</sup> His night prayers (*tahajjud*)<sup>12</sup> usually consisted of eight very long *rak‘as*, during which he recited some of the longest *sūras* (chapters) of the Qur’an, prolonging his bows and prostrations to match the length of his recitations. Then, he closed his night prayers with the three *rak‘as* of *witr*<sup>13</sup> and slept again for a short while.

The Prophet ﷺ stood in prayer at night for so long that his feet became swollen. When asked why he felt obliged to do this when God had already told him in the Qur’an that He had forgiven him both his past and future sins, the Prophet ﷺ answered, “Should I not then be a thankful slave?” It is evident that his night prayers were intensely pleasurable to him—what greater delight can there be than communing with one’s Lord; contemplating the glory of His Lights, Names, and Attributes; witnessing the unveiling of the infinite dimensions of each verse of the Qur’an; and, at times, witnessing the Garden and what it contains? There was certainly no question of the Prophet’s “sins” being “forgiven,” as he was infallible and inerrant, so what sins could he possibly have committed? However, there are subtle secrets between the Absolute and His beloved slave, that God, to emphasize the gulf between the Lord and the slave, may very well speak of as “sins.”

The Prophet ﷺ always made it clear that he was a mere human being and was never to be worshipped as the Christians worship Jesus ﷺ. Muslims have always known that there is no common measure possible between the



PHOTO COURTESY OF TOPKAPI PALACE MUSEUM

THE SANDAL OF THE PROPHET ﷺ PRESERVED IN THE TOPKAPI PALACE MUSEUM, ISTANBUL

Absolute and the relative, however perfect a relative being may be. Both the Qur'an and the Prophet ﷺ also make it clear that the similarity between prophets and other human beings is mainly in outward form and quite relative. When the Qur'an says, "Say, *I am but a human being like you, to whom revelation comes,*"<sup>14</sup> this means that the difference between the Prophet ﷺ and other human beings is that he was prepared to receive the Eternal Word of God. Without such preparation, no human being can sustain revelation, for even mountains if exposed to such light would be annihilated: "*Were We to reveal this Qur'an to a mountain, you would see it humble, split asunder from the fear of God*"; "*when his Lord revealed Himself to the mountain, He turned it into dust, and Moses fell down unconscious.*"<sup>15</sup>

When the angel of revelation descended upon his heart, the Prophet ﷺ became so heavy that his she-camel had to kneel down when he was riding upon her. Once, when he

was resting his head on 'Ali's lap, the latter felt that his thigh would break from the sheer weight of the Prophet's head when revelation came. Beads of sweat appeared on the Prophet's forehead, he seemed to lose consciousness, and his breathing became labored. When the angel departed, the Prophet ﷺ reverted to his normal self within seconds and recited to 'Ali the Qur'anic verses that had been revealed to him. It was much easier for the Prophet ﷺ to receive revelation when Gabriel came in the form of man, usually in that of the exceptionally handsome companion, Dihya al-Kalbī.

There were other differences between the Prophet ﷺ and other human beings. For example, seeing the Prophet ﷺ fasting for several days without breaking his fast, his companions tried to do so as well; however, when he learned of this, the Prophet ﷺ forbade them from emulating him in this and explained to them, "I am not made like one of

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THE ELDER FIRST.

you; I sleep near my Lord; He feeds me and gives me to drink.” He also said, “I see what you do not and hear what you do not.” The result of such God-given aptitude is that the Prophet’s consciousness was incomparably different from ours. He expressed part of that truth when he said, “My eyes sleep, but my heart does not sleep.”

The Prophet ﷺ often slept on a rough mat spread on the ground; sometimes he slept on a leather mattress filled with palm fibers; he also had a bed made of palm fronds. On two or more occasions, one of his close companions entered his quarters and saw how the mat had marked the Prophet’s skin; he was so distraught to see the Prophet ﷺ in such condition—he for whom every single one of his companions was willing to sacrifice his life, family, and possessions—that he wept, exclaiming how painful it was to see the Prophet ﷺ like this when Chosroes, the King of Persia, and Heraclius, the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople, were living in luxury, sleeping on the softest feathers, dressing in the finest silk. The Prophet ﷺ responded, “Will it not satisfy you that they are given this world and we the next?”

Whenever he met other people, the Prophet ﷺ was invariably the first to greet them with *salām* (peace). When he passed by a group of people sitting by the roadside, he greeted them first, saying that the passerby should greet those sitting down first, as should the younger greet the elder first. He also greet-

ed with *salām* any women or children that he met. Whenever someone called him, he answered, “*Labbayk!*” This means, “Here I am, at your call!” Whenever someone shook his hand, he was never the first to withdraw it, but always let the other person withdraw his first. When someone wished to speak to him privately, the Prophet ﷺ always allowed him to speak without interruption, until he felt he had said all that he needed to say and was ready to terminate the conversation. The Prophet ﷺ gave his full attention to each person present in turn so that anyone who sat with him always felt he was the most important person in his eyes. He patted children on the head, sat them on his lap, and prayed for them to grow up into pious adults. He allowed his grandchildren, Hasan and Husayn, to ride on his back, saying, “How good a mount is yours!” Anas ibn Mālik, who entered the Prophet’s service when he was eight years old and served the Prophet ﷺ for ten years, said that the Prophet ﷺ never once reprimanded him, no matter what he did. Anas also said,

The Messenger of God ﷺ said, “My son! If you can begin your day in the morning and end it in the evening keeping your heart free of rancor toward anyone, then do so. My son! This is of my Sunna, and he who keeps my Sunna alive is one who loves me, and he who loves me shall be with me in the Garden.”

The Prophet ﷺ forbade people to report unseemly behavior from others, saying, “Let none of you report things to me concerning my companions, for I like to come out to you with no displeasure in me for anyone.” When, despite this, he learned something displeasing about someone, he never mentioned the person’s name but made it a public admonishment and lesson, saying, “Why do certain people do this or say that?”

At home, the Prophet ﷺ helped his wives doing their chores, milked his goat, repaired his sandals, cleaned the house, patched his robes, fed his camel, helped knead dough, and

sat eating with his servants, saying, “He who is reluctant to follow my Sunna is not of me.” He also said, “The best among you are the best to their wives, and I am the best of you to my wives.”

The Prophet ﷺ shared with his companions whatever chores they were doing. When they gathered firewood, carried bricks, and dug a trench, he did so along with them, and when they took turns riding the camels on the way to Badr because they had too few animals, he took turns and walked part of the way, as did the rest of them.

Ibn Mas‘ūd was in charge of the Prophet’s sandals, pillow, *siwāk*, and ablution water. Whenever the Prophet ﷺ rose to his feet, Ibn Mas‘ūd gave him his sandals to wear. The Prophet ﷺ put them on his right foot first, and when he took them off, he took off the left sandal first. Whenever he took them off to sit down, Ibn Mas‘ūd took them from him and carried them, passing his forearm into the laces. The Prophet ﷺ sometimes prayed wearing his sandals, as long as they were clean. He also wore the *khuff* (soft leather shoe going up to the ankle) at times.

The Prophet ﷺ said, “I was sent to perfect nobility of character.” ‘Ā’isha said, “His character was the Qur’an. He was pleased with that which it praises and displeased with that which it dispraises.” As the Word of God, the Qur’an calls itself the Formidable (or Tremendous) Book. In full conformity with it by his nature, the Prophet ﷺ exhibited to perfection the human capacity to manifest the divine Names and Attributes. This is why his Lord says to him in the Qur’an, “*You are of a formidable (or tremendous) character.*”<sup>16</sup>

Whenever the Prophet ﷺ sent some of his companions to carry the message of Islam to other people, he instructed his companions to behave as he did, to make Islam easy for the people and not difficult, to promise them goodness, and never to speak or act in a manner that would repel them from accepting the message.

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Zayd ibn Sanā’ was a Jewish rabbi who used to say, “I have recognized in Muḥammad all the signs of prophethood save two: that his clemency takes precedence over his severity, and that the harsher one is with him, the more clement he becomes.” He decided to test the Prophet ﷺ for these two signs. The Prophet ﷺ had borrowed from Zayd some food and agreed to repay him by a certain date; Zayd did not wait for the time agreed upon but went to the Prophet ﷺ, pulled him rudely by his clothes, and spoke to him harshly, saying, “You children of ‘Abdal-Muṭṭalib are dilatory.”

Upon hearing this, ‘Umar rebuffed him angrily, but the Prophet ﷺ continued to smile and then addressed ‘Umar: “Both he and I are in need of other than that, O ‘Umar—bid me to repay him graciously, and bid him to demand what is his graciously.” The Prophet ﷺ added, “It is yet three days to term,” and he ordered ‘Umar to repay Zayd and increase him twenty measures for having frightened him.

Having witnessed his two remaining signs, Zayd accepted Islam, testifying that there is no god but the One (which is nothing new for a Jew), and added, with certainty, that Muḥammad is God’s Messenger.

Another companion, Fuḍāla ibn ‘Amr, recounted how, before he accepted Islam, he had been so angry with the Prophet ﷺ that in the days following the Prophet’s conquest of Mecca, he had resolved to kill the Prophet ﷺ, even as he was going round the House. As Fuḍāla drew nearer to him, the Prophet ﷺ

asked, “Is it Fuḍāla?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“What have you been saying to yourself?” the Prophet ﷺ asked him.

“Nothing,” he replied.

The Prophet ﷺ laughed, asked forgiveness for him, and then placed his palm on Fuḍāla’s chest.

Later, Fuḍāla said, “My heart was pacified. By God! By the time he took his hand away, he had become dearer to me than the rest of God’s creation.”

During the Battle of Uḥud the Prophet ﷺ was wounded in the face and bled profusely; his front tooth was broken, and he was relentlessly attacked by many pagans who had sworn to kill him or die. His companions asked him to invoke God’s wrath against them, but he answered, “I was not sent as one who curses but as a summoner and a mercy. O God! Guide my people, for they do not know.” He could not have cursed them, since it would have meant cutting them off from divine mercy and condemning them to Hell. He, to whom God says in the Qur’an, “*We have not sent you but as mercy to the worlds,*”<sup>17</sup> was anxious that despite everything God would guide them to faith and salvation.

After the Prophet ﷺ entered Mecca as a conqueror, brought before him were those people who had persecuted him and his companions; slandered him with accusations of being a liar, a sorcerer, or a madman; forced him to emigrate from his hometown; plotted to assassinate him; and tried to kill him and his companions in battle on several occasions. The Prophet ﷺ asked them, “What do you think I intend to do with you?”

They replied, “You are a noble brother and a noble nephew.”

He said, “Go; you are free.”

The Qur’an describes him thus: “*It was by the mercy of God that you were gentle with them. Had you been stern and hard-hearted, they would surely have dispersed from around you. So pardon them and ask forgiveness for them, and consult them in the conduct*

*of affairs. When you are resolved, put your trust in God, for God loves those that trust Him.*”<sup>18</sup>

The Prophet’s confidence in God was complete. Despite the many attempts on his life, when God revealed to him, “*God shall protect you from the people,*”<sup>19</sup> the Prophet ﷺ dismissed his watchman and allowed no one to stand guard at his door in Medina or at his tent when he traveled.

The Prophet ﷺ was fearless. However, being the Prophet of Compassion, he was exceedingly averse to violence and said to his impetuous companions, “Never wish to meet the enemy but ask God for safety. However, should it happen that you meet them, beware of running away.” Whenever the battle reached its fiercest, he was always at the front line. ‘Alī said, referring to the Day of Badr, “Whenever the fighting became fierce, we took refuge behind the Messenger of God.”

On the Day of Ḥunayn, a surprise attack by the enemy led the Muslim army to retreat in disarray. The Prophet ﷺ was left on his own, on his mule, and the only two who had stayed with him were his uncle ‘Abbās and his cousin Abū Sufyān ibn al-Ḥārith, one holding the bridle, the other the stirrup. Nevertheless, the Prophet ﷺ stood his ground, declaring, “I am the Prophet, no doubt! I am the son of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib!” Then he charged the enemy. ‘Abbās, who had a big voice, called the companions who soon rallied around the Prophet ﷺ. The fighting was hard, the enemy numerous and well-equipped. The Prophet ﷺ took a handful of gravel, as he had done before on the Day of Badr, and threw it at the enemy, saying, “Befouled be the faces!” The day was won, and an immense booty became his to dispose of. On that day, he gave Ṣafwān ibn Umayya an entire valley full of sheep. Ṣafwān had accepted Islam outwardly after the conquest of Mecca but had held an enduring grudge against the Prophet ﷺ and the companions for killing his father, uncle, and cousin at Badr; he ran back to his people exclaiming, “O people! Accept Islam! This is a man who gives

away like one who has no fear whatsoever of poverty”; Şafwān understood that anyone willing to give away so much so easily cannot be an ordinary human being. In fact, the Prophet ﷺ was known to make sure all the money in his house had been given away every night before turning in. Jābir said, “Never did the Prophet ﷺ say no when asked for something.”

We know with certainty that when we visit the Prophet ﷺ in Medina, he still receives us with his well-known warmth and affability and that when we ask him to intercede with his Lord on our behalf, he will never say no. We come to ask him to ask God to forgive our sins and shortcomings, accept our works and devotions, fulfill our needs, and give us the best of this world and the next. Thus does God command us to do when He says, “*If, when they wrong themselves, they come to you and ask forgiveness of God, and the Messenger asks forgiveness for them, they would surely find God Relenting, Compassionate.*”<sup>20</sup> And he, our leader and master, ever concerned for us, anxious for our welfare, never refuses our requests, for he is ever beseeching his Lord on our behalf to grant us what we ask for. He is well aware of our imperfections that may cause God to refuse our requests, but he is also confident in his Lord’s promise to satisfy him: “*And your Lord will give you until you are satisfied.*”<sup>21</sup> When this verse was revealed to him, the Prophet ﷺ said, “I shall never be satisfied so long as one of my community remains in the Fire.” What is more, he has informed us—may God’s blessings and peace be upon him—that he will continue to intercede on our behalf, even without us asking him to do so. He said to his companions, “My life is good for you; you act in certain manners, and the rulings for them come to you; and my death is good for you; your deeds shall be shown to me; whenever what I see is good, I shall thank God, and whenever what I see is other than that, I shall ask forgiveness for you.”

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mohamad Zakariya, “The Hilye of the Prophet Muhammad,” *Seasons Journal* 1, no. 2 (2004): 13–22.

<sup>2</sup> Qur’an 9:24.

<sup>3</sup> Qur’an 7:158.

<sup>4</sup> Qur’an 3:31.

<sup>5</sup> Shaykh an-Nabahānī was born in northern Palestine in 1265 AH, studied at al-Azhar University in Cairo, assumed the function of qadi in Beirut for many years, and authored a large number of books, all but one about the Prophet ﷺ. He died and was buried in Beirut in 1350 AH.

<sup>6</sup> Qur’an 33:45.

<sup>7</sup> Qur’an 9:128.

<sup>8</sup> Qur’an 4:113.

<sup>9</sup> Chapter 102 of the Qur’an says, “*You remain distracted by competition for the world until you visit the graves. But no! You shall come to know. Again, no! You shall come to know. No! If you knew the truth with certainty, you will indeed see Hell. You will indeed see it with certain vision; then on that day, you will be questioned about the blessings [that you had enjoyed].*”

<sup>10</sup> *Siwāk* is a chew-stick obtained from particular trees.—Editor.

<sup>11</sup> A *rak‘a* is a one cycle in the Islamic prayer—Editor.

<sup>12</sup> The *tahajjud* prayers are additional prayers that may be performed at night after praying the obligatory evening prayer (*‘ishā’*).—Editor.

<sup>13</sup> The *witr* prayer is prayed after completing the evening prayer and any additional nightly prayers one may wish to perform.—Editor.

<sup>14</sup> Qur’an 18:110.

<sup>15</sup> Qur’an 59: 21, 7:143.

<sup>16</sup> Qur’an 68:4.

<sup>17</sup> Qur’an 21:107.

<sup>18</sup> Qur’an 3:159.

<sup>19</sup> Qur’an 5:67.

<sup>20</sup> Qur’an 4:64.

<sup>21</sup> Qur’an 93:5.

