



# Human ‘Destiny’ Inscribed in the Preserved Tablet

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## Faith (Iman)

One day, the archangel Jibril came in the form of a human, sat in front of the noble Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) folding his legs and placed his palms on his thighs. In other words, he sat before the noble Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) in the manner of a student who sits with utmost respect and showing the best of etiquettes before his teacher. Then he asked, “O Muhammad! Inform me about faith (*iman*)?” The noble Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) replied, “With the certainty of your heart you are to believe in Allah (most high), His angels, His revealed books, His messengers and the Day of Judgement; and you are to have faith on the preordained destiny of good and bad.”<sup>1</sup> In this prophetic tradition, six integrals of faith (*arkan al-iman*) have been mentioned of which one is destiny (*taqdir*).

## Destiny (Taqdir)

Before the creation of the universe, Allah (most high), with his eternal knowledge, wrote every good and every bad. Whatever was to happen and whatever an individual, by his own choice and happiness, was to do; Allah (most high) according to his infinite knowledge wrote it in the Preserved Tablet (*lawh mahfuz*). This is referred to as destiny or fate (*taqdir* or *qada'*). However, it is not the case that whatever Allah (most high) has written that is what we have to do and that we are helpless and compelled to do just what He has written, not at all. Rather whatever we were about to do by our own intention, choice and desire, that is what Allah (most

high) has written. This is *taqdir*.

In order to simplify this complex issue, I am presenting the following incident relating to Sultan Mahmud Ghaznawi (d. 421 AH). It became well-known that Allah (most high) had granted Mahmud Ghaznawi such an insight and discernment (*firasat*) that he would know what was in another person's heart and mind. Truly, the noble Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, “Beware of the discernment of the believer, for he sees with the light of Allah (most high).”<sup>2</sup>

Two youngsters of that time desired to verify this miraculous quality and decided to meet with Mahmud Ghaznawi in his garden the following day after the mid-afternoon prayer (*'asr*). This garden was surrounded by huge walls and there were only four gates on four sides through which people could enter and exit. The two planned to question Mahmud Ghaznawi to inform them about which gate they were going to leave the garden. Naturally, he would state a specific gate, however, these two youngsters had planned to climb the tree near the western corner of the garden and exit by leaping over the wall. In this manner, this miracle would be proved to be false.

The next day, both the youngsters went to see Mahmud Ghaznawi in his garden. Mahmud Ghaznawi was walking around the garden with his ministers. Both of them questioned Mahmud Ghaznawi, “Could you tell us from which gate we will leave this garden?” Mahmud Ghaznawi replied, “If I say to you that you will exit from the northern gate, then in order to challenge me you will exit from

the southern gate and attempt to prove me wrong. Therefore, I will write the manner of your leaving on a piece of paper and I will give you that piece of paper. You take that piece of paper with you and leave as you choose. Once you have left the garden, you are to open the folded piece of paper and read what is written on it. We will meet you there outside the garden.” Eventually, Mahmud Ghaznawi wrote on the paper that they were to exit by climbing the tree near the western corner and leap over the wall. He handed the piece of paper to them. Both these youngsters in accordance with their plan climbed the tree and leaped over the wall. Once outside, they opened the folded piece of paper and found that Mahmud Ghaznawi had written exactly how they exited.

Now I have a question. Did this piece of paper force the two youngsters to climb the tree and leap over the wall or did they climb the tree and leap over the wall by their own free will and desire. Clearly, they left the garden using the tree on their own accord and this piece of paper did not influence their decision and course of action. In exactly the same way, concerning the future, Allah (most high) has written the *taqdir* and fate of every individual with his complete and perfect knowledge that such and such an individual at such and such a time will do such and such a thing. *Taqdir*, fate and destiny have no compelling power in this. The decision alone belongs to the individual person and he himself is responsible for the resulting reward or punishment for his action. Allah (most high), through his eternal knowledge, has simply recorded it in advance. Furthermore, the knowledge of Allah (most high) is so complete and perfect that in it there exists no possibility of error or mistake.<sup>3</sup>

### Disclosure of Taqdir

In some places within the holy Qur'an, Allah (most high) has disclosed *taqdir* and announced certain fates. On the outset it would seem as though a person is helpless and compelled. However, even in these instances, it is the person himself who acts through his own desire and accord. By attributing the actions to Himself, Allah (most high) has merely announced the fate in advance. For example, in verses six and seven of Surat al-Baqara (2) Allah (most high) says, “Verily, the ones who have chosen disbelief in Islam will not believe (in Allah), whether you warn them or not. Allah has sealed their hearts

and ears. And there is a veil on their eyes. And they will be subject to a great torment.”<sup>4</sup>

From this verse it appears to be the case that since Allah (most high) has already sealed their hearts and proclaimed the decree of them not accepting Islam, then how would it be possible for them to become believers? In reality the case can be compared to that of a patient whose doctor proclaims that the patient's illness is now incurable. Has the patient become incurable due to the doctor's declaration, or due to the illness entering its final stage? Clearly the patient had already become incurable due to the extent of his illness and the doctor merely informed the patient of his critical state. In the same manner, these specific non-Muslims had already decided that they were not going to accept Islam due to the extent of their prejudice. Allah (most high) merely informed us of their intentions and state.

Similarly, in Surat al-Lahab (III) the terrible fate of Abu Lahab and him dying in a state of disbelief in Islam has been disclosed, “Soon he will be cast into a blazing fire. And so will his wife, the firewood-carrier. With a rope of palm fibre around her neck.”<sup>5</sup> This small chapter of the Qur'an proclaimed that Abu Lahab shall die in disbelief of Islam and will burn in the fire of Hell. Though, he could have come to the noble Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), accepted Islam – even hypocritically – and then he could have challenged the prediction of the Qur'an concerning him and his fate. Since he could have said that he had become a Muslim contrary to the statement of the Qur'an and therefore proved the Qur'an wrong. Moreover, the Qur'an has specifically mentioned Abu Lahab and his wife, whereas, it has not mentioned other non-Muslims such as Khalid ibn Walid, 'Amr ibn al-'As, 'Ikrama ibn Abi Jahl, etc. since they accepted Islam later on. It is as though this chapter of the Qur'an challenged Abu Lahab openly that he will not alter the wrong path he was on and this challenge was not such that Abu Lahab had no power of decision-making or no free will in his matter. However, Allah (most high) knew that Abu Lahab will die in a state of disbelief in Islam and will not – even hypocritically – accept Islam.<sup>6</sup>

### Extreme Views concerning Taqdir

Though the issue concerning destiny and fate is important, it is nevertheless, still very fragile and

intricate. For this reason the noble Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) has discouraged unnecessary discussions about *taqdir*. In spite of this, certain people attempted to delve deep into the concept of *taqdir* and fate. As a result, they were led astray and became victims of extremeness and excessiveness. From amongst them, two prominent schools of thought erupted and they are known as *al-Jabariyya* (which is similar to fatalism or neo-fatalism) and *al-Qadariyya* (which is similar to free will theism):

### 1. Al-Jabariyya:

The basis of their doctrine is that an individual is compelled and constrained like a mere stone and has no free will of his own. Hence, whatever good or bad act Allah (most high) has written in his *taqdir* and fate, he is forced and obliged to do just that. This belief is contrary to Islam since Allah (most high) has granted every individual free will and the choice to perform good or bad. If humankind was not granted this free will and decision-making attribute, there would have been no need for prophethood and the sending of the noble prophets (peace be upon them) in order to instruct people unto righteousness. Therefore, Allah (most high) does not compel and force people to do either good or bad. Imam Jalal al-Din al-Rumi (d. 672 AH) has refuted this doctrine of the "compellers" by presenting the following example:

A person who subscribed to the doctrine of *al-Jabariyya* was once travelling and passed by a garden. He felt hungry and so he entered the garden and began eating its grapes. The owner of the garden happened to arrive, he caught this person eating from his garden and he asked him, "How dare you eat from my garden without my permission?" He replied, "Without the permission of Allah (most high) no leaf can come into motion. This is God's garden, I am God's servant and I am eating with God's permission and command. I have no choice. Go and ask Him as to why He is making me eat?" Upon this response, the owner had this person's hands and feet tied up and he began to beat him with sticks. Due to the beating, the person began to yell and cry, and shouted, "You are being cruel and tyrannical!" The owner responded, "Just like you I am also compelled and constrained. The sticks of God with God's permission are falling upon you." After this episode, the person repented from his wrongdoing and false

belief.

After quoting this incident, Imam Jalal al-Din al-Rumi states, "O human being! If you throw a stone at a dog, the dog will not attack the stone but will attack you. Since, he is aware that the stone is constrained and has no free will whereas you possess free will and can do as you please. O naïve human being! A dog can differentiate between you and a stone. If you cannot see this difference then you are far more foolish than a dog."<sup>7</sup>

### 2. Al-Qadariyya:

The basis of their doctrine is that an individual is all-powerful and all-authoritative and can do just as he pleases. This belief is also contrary to Islam since the all-powerful and the possessor of independent authority is only Allah (most high). 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (Allah be pleased with him) has refuted this doctrine of the "empowering" by presenting the following example:

One day a person came to him and stated that a human being is all-powerful and can do as he pleases. 'Ali replied, "Lift one of your legs up and stand on the other." The person did as instructed. Then 'Ali instructed, "Leave this leg raised and in addition lift your second leg up." The person spoke out, "If I try that I will fall to the floor." In response 'Ali stated, "It is just this much free will which humankind possesses that a person can only lift one leg up whilst standing. If he were all-powerful he would have raised both his legs whilst standing."<sup>8</sup>

### The Correct Belief concerning Taqdir

According to the *Ahl al-Sunna wa'l-Jama'a*, both aforementioned points of view are contrary to the teachings of Islam. In reality, humankind are not constrained like a stone nor possess independent authority like God. Rather, Allah (most high) has granted humankind the choice of either performing good or performing bad. Alongside this choice, He has also given humankind the gift of the intellect and the power of differentiation. For this reason, He sent the noble prophets (peace be upon them) so that humankind can recognise the good and the bad. Now it is up to every individual whether he chooses to do good, for which he will be rewarded, or do bad, for which he will be punished. Albeit, there are certain things in which humankind is helpless for example,

life and death, place of one's own birth, place of one's own death, physical appearance and features, *etc.* However, no individual will be interrogated or scrutinised concerning such things.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sahih Muslim*, Book of *al-Iman* (2), Chapter 1, Hadith 102.

<sup>2</sup> *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Book of *Tafsir al-Qur'an* (43), Chapter 16, Hadith 3419.

<sup>3</sup> Further reading: *Tafseer Imdad-ul-Karam*, volume 1, Surat al-Baqara (2), commentary on verse 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Qur'an*, Surat al-Baqara (2), verses 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> *Qur'an*, Surat al-Lahab (111), verses 3-5.

<sup>6</sup> Imam Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha'rawi, *Mu'jizat al-Rasul*, page 30.

<sup>7</sup> M I H Pirzada, *Islamic Beliefs*, page 68.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, page 69.