

# Exploration of the terms Nabî and Rasûl

By Wahiduddin

Retrieved from: [http://wahiduddin.net/words/nabi\\_rasul.htm](http://wahiduddin.net/words/nabi_rasul.htm)

This page delves into the Arabic meanings of the terms nabî and rasûl, especially as used by the Sufis, and includes commentary by contemporary sources such as Bawa Mahaiyadeen and Inayat Khan to help explore the depth of meaning and connotation of these words.... but, in the end, you'll have to make your own decision as to what the terms nabî and rasûl mean to you.

There has been longstanding disagreement among Muslim scholars on the differences and similarities of these two words, and consequently there has been no universal agreement on the exact meanings, connotations or differences of these two words. Nonetheless, within various spiritual sects and mystical traditions, the terms nabî and rasûl often have very specific meanings, regardless of what the scholars and dictionaries may say.

For example, some say that the nabî can bring messages, but that only the rasûl can bring new Divine Law... some say that the rasûl is of much higher rank than the nabî.... some say that the rasûl is the only one who can see and talk with angels while he is awake.... while others insist that there is no significant difference between the two words.

Interestingly, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad are all called nabî in the Qur'an, which suggests that there was very little, if any, distinction in perceived rank at the time that the Qur'an was written.

O Prophet [nabî]! Truly We have sent thee as a Witness a Bearer of Glad Tidings and a Warner (33:45) ... (referring to Muhammad as nabî)

He said: "I am indeed a servant of Allah: He hath given me revelation and made me a prophet [nabî]; (19:30) ...(referring to Jesus as nabî)

And remember We took from the Prophets [nabî] their Covenant as (We did) from thee: from Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus the son of Mary: We took from them a solemn Covenant: (33:7) ... (speaking of Moses, Abraham, Jesus and Mohammad as nabî)

Yet it is clear that there must have been some distinction between rasûl and nabî as is suggested by the following verses from the Qur'an where rasûl and nabî are both used together, implying that they have somewhat different meanings:

Also mention in the Book (the story of) Moses: for he was specially chosen and he was an apostle [rasûl] (and) a prophet [nabî]. (19:51)

Also mention in the Book (the story of) Ismail: He was (strictly) true to what he promised and he was an apostle [rasûl] (and) a prophet [nabî]. (19:54)

Never did We send an apostle [rasûl] or a prophet [nabî] before thee but when he framed a desire Satan threw some (vanity) into his desire: but Allah will cancel anything (vain) that Satan throws in and Allah will confirm (and establish) His Signs: for Allah is full of knowledge and wisdom: (22:52)

And the issue is not at all clarified by typical usages in the Qur'an of the term rasûl:

What kept men back from Belief when Guidance came to them was nothing but this: they said "Has Allah sent a man (like us) to be (His) Apostle [rasûl]?" (17:94)

To every people (was sent) an Apostle [rasûl]: when their Apostle [rasûl] comes (before them) the matter will be judged between them with justice and they will not be wronged. (10:47)

We did send apostles [rasûl] before thee and appointed for them wives and children: and it was never the part of an apostle [rasûl] to bring a Sign except as Allah permitted (or commanded). For each period is a Book (revealed). (13:38)

But never came an apostle [rasûl] to them but they mocked him. (15:11)

And there came to them an Apostle [rasûl] from among themselves but they falsely rejected him; so the wrath seized them even in the midst of their iniquities. (16:113)

So, let's move on to the classical Arabic definitions (as were in use at the time that the Qur'an was written), along with some contemporary thoughts on the meanings by Bawa Mahaiyadeen and Inayat Khan:

## **al-Nabî**

### **Classical Arabic definitions:**

One to whom God gives information. One to whom God reveals secrets of the future. One to whom God reveals that he is His prophet. One who discloses hidden matters. One who reveals information from on high.

One who has the gift of prophecy. One who acquaints or informs mankind. One who is acquainted or informed of matters of God and of things unseen. One who presents a clear or evident way that conducts to God.

### **From the Arabic root n-b-a' which developed the following meanings:**

to give important news, information, announcement  
to inform, tell or acquaint someone  
to have the gift of prophecy  
to have the office of prophet  
to be an evident, clear or conspicuous way

to be high, lofty, exalted  
to come forth, to go forth

The ancient roots of nabî point toward the emanation of all ideas of divine inspiration and prophecy under the guidance of divine power, leading to the idea of one who is called by divine power to announce the message of divine will, or one who is called to be a prophet.

### **Contemporary thought:**

In *The Religion of Islam* (pg 165), Muhammad Ali says:

A nabî is also called a rasûl, which means apostle or messenger. The two words are used interchangeably in the Qur'an, the same person sometimes being called nabî and sometimes rasûl; while occasionally both names are combined. The reason seems to be that the prophet has two capacities: he receives information from God, and he imparts his message to mankind. he is called nabî in the first, and rasûl in the second capacity, but there is one difference. The word rasûl has a wider significance, being applicable to every messenger in a literal sense; and the angels are called Divine Messengers [rasûl], because they are also bearers of the Divine messages when complying with His Will.

In *The Unity of Religious Ideas*, Inayat Khan says:

*Nabi* is one who begins to give the message... *Nabi* is the prophet who has not only come for a certain section of humanity. Although he may only live and move in a limited region of the world, yet what he brings has its influence upon the whole of humanity. It may not be fulfilled in his lifetime, but a day of fulfillment will come, even if it be centuries later, so that all he brought at last reaches the whole of humanity.

*Nabi* is the apostle, called in Sanskrit *Bodhisatva*, whose spirit reflects the Spirit of Guidance. His work is mainly the giving of the message in the form of warning, awakening, preaching, teaching, and inspiring those to whom he may be sent. He comes into the lives of those who are meant to be guided along the spiritual path. He is sent to nations when they are meant to change their conditions. He is sent to a community or race to give warnings. He is meant to be a reformer at the times when a reformer is needed. He elevates individuals and bears a divine message.

In *The Way of Illumination*, Inayat Khan says:

*Nabi* is the guide of a community, *Rasul* has a message for the whole of humanity, and each has a certain cycle of time for his message.

## **al-Rasûl**

### **Classical Arabic definitions:**

One who is an ambassador or envoy between God and His creatures. One who gives mankind information about God. One who is sent by God.

One who is sent by God with a message of great importance. One who is the bearer of a great message. One who is an apostle.

The well-respected classical dictionary of the Qur'an, the *Mufradat* of Raghib, indicates that "messengers" [rusul] as mentioned in Qur'an verse 23:51, being in the plural, means the Prophet Muhammad and his chief Companions. This is a significant point, since certainly not all of Muhammad's Companions were of any special or Divine rank. Indeed, the term is used frequently in the Qur'an to simply describe those who are simply followers or propagators of the Divine message.

**From the Arabic root r-s-l which developed the following meanings:**

to bring a message of great importance or great utility  
to impart knowledge of something  
to be an apostle or envoy  
to send forth a message or a letter  
to be given consecutive progressions of tidings  
to be given authority, dominion, superior power  
to be easy in pace, without haste, deliberate, gentle

The ancient roots of rasûl point toward that which is on the path toward salvation and permeated with an essence of renewal. The primitive root implies a straight line traced from one object to another to unite them.

**Contemporary thought:**

In *Asma' ul Husna* by Bawa Muhaiyadeen, the glossary listing says:

rasool - Apostle or messenger. One who has wisdom, faith in God, and good qualities. One who behaves with respect and dignity towards his fellow men. A rasool is one who has completely accepted only God and has rejected everything else. One who has accepted God's divine words, His qualities, His actions, and puts them into practice. Those who from time immemorial have been giving the divine laws of God to the people. Those who have such a connection with God have been called a prophet (nabi) or rasool. The name rasool has been given even to the angels. Rasool is also used as a name for Muhammad.

In *The Unity of Religious Ideas*, Inayat Khan says:

*Rasul* is the one who fulfills the message....*Rasul* is a term which denotes a more advanced degree, when the prophet has not only brought a message to the world, but has fulfilled his task during his lifetime through all the tests and trials that a prophet has to meet in life.

*Rasul* is the world-messenger, who comes for all people at the time of the world's need, and brings with him that inspiration, influence, and power which will harmonize humanity. He may be a king or a pauper; in whatever condition he comes, he will fulfill the purpose of his coming to earth. Answering the cry of humanity, he fulfills the purpose of his mission. The sign of *Rasul* is the crescent, which represents a responsive heart.

In *Philosophy, Psychology and Mysticism*, Inayat Khan says:

The *Rasul* is the soul through which God Himself has attained that which is the purpose of creation. In other words, the *Rasul* is the one who represents God's perfection through human limitation.

In *The Smiling Forehead*, Inayat Khan says:

The Buddhistic term Nirvana means the stage where a person arrives at God-consciousness or all-consciousness. It is at this stage that a soul arrives. And why should not man have that privilege? If man has not that privilege, how can God have it? It is through man that God realizes His perfection. As man, God becomes conscious of His Godship, and it is in this gradual progress - to begin as a soul and to arrive at that realization which makes that soul a divine soul - that lies the purpose of life. The whole creation is purposed to bring about that realization. It is that realization which is recognized by the name *Rasul*.

In *The Way of Illumination*, Inayat Khan says:

*Nabi* is the guide of a community, *Rasul* has a message for the whole of humanity, and each has a certain cycle of time for his message.

The Sufi recognizes the Murshid in all beings of the world, and is ready to learn from young and old, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, without questioning from whom he learns. Then he begins to see the light of Risalat, the torch of truth which shines before him in every being and thing in the universe, thus he sees *Rasul*, his Divine Message Bearer, a living identity before him. Thus the Sufi sees the vision of God, the worshipped deity, in His immanence, manifest in nature, and life now becomes for him a perfect revelation both within and without.

## **So, What do they mean??**

Well... that's it... you've read the classical meanings, you've read how the words were used in the Qur'an, and you've read some contemporary thought on the names... so take a few calm, slow, deep breaths and meditate on what these words really mean for you in this moment and how you can use these magnificent ideas and ideals in your life.

---

## Appendix A

### Examples of usage in the Qur'an

Usage of the terms rasûl and nabî in the Qur'ân includes the following... which do not really clarify the difference between the meanings of nabî and rasûl.

#### **nabî:**

He [Jesus] said: "I am indeed a servant of Allah: He hath given me revelation and made me a prophet [nabî]; (19:30)

Also mention in the Book (the story of) Abraham: he was a man of Truth a prophet [nabî]. (19:41)

When he had turned away from them and from those whom they worshipped besides Allah We bestowed on him Isaac and Jacob and each one of them We made a prophet [nabî] (19:49)

And out of Our Mercy We gave him his brother Aaron (also) a prophet [nabi]. (19:53)

Also mention in the Book the case of Idris: he was a man of truth (and sincerity) (and) a prophet [nabi]: (19:56)

Those were some of the prophets [nabi] on whom Allah did bestow His Grace of the posterity of Adam and of those whom We carried (in the Ark) with Noah and of the posterity of Abraham and Israel of those whom We guided and chose; whenever the Signs of (Allah) Most Gracious were rehearsed to them they would fall down in prostrate adoration and in tears (19:58)

Hast thou not turned thy vision to the chiefs of the children of Israel after (the time of) Moses? They said to a Prophet [nabi] (that was) among them: "Appoint for us a king that we may fight in the cause of Allah." ... (2:246)

Thus have We made for every prophet [nabi] an enemy among the sinners: but enough is thy Lord to guide and to help. (25:31)

How many of the Prophets [nabi] fought (in Allah's way) and with them (fought) large bands of godly men? But they never lost heart if they met with disaster in Allah's way nor did they weaken (in will) nor give in. And Allah loves those who are firm and steadfast. (3:146)

No prophet [nabi] could (ever) be false to his trust. If any person is so false He shall on the Day of Judgment restore what he misappropriated; then shall every soul receive its due whatever it earned and none shall be dealt with unjustly. (3:161)

While he was standing in prayer in the chamber the angels called unto him: "Allah doth give thee glad tidings of Yahya (John) witnessing the truth of a Word from Allah and (be besides) noble chaste and a Prophet [nabi] of the (goodly) company of the righteous." (3:39)

Without doubt among men the nearest of kin to Abraham are those who follow him as are also this Apostle [nabi] and those who believe; and Allah is the Protector of those who have faith. (3:68)

O Prophet [nabi]! Fear Allah and hearken not to the Unbelievers and the Hypocrites: verily Allah is full of knowledge and wisdom. (33:1)

Behold! a party among them said: "Ye men of Yathrib! Ye cannot stand (the attack)! Therefore go back!" and a band of them ask for leave of the Prophet [nabi] saying "Truly our houses are bare and exposed" though they were not exposed: they intended nothing but to run away. (33:13)

O Prophet [nabi]! Truly We have sent thee as a Witness a Bearer of Glad Tidings and a Warner (33:45)

And remember We took from the Prophets [nabi] their Covenant as (We did) from thee: from Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus the son of Mary: We took from them a solemn Covenant: (33:7)

And We gave him the good news of Isaac a prophet [nabi] one of the Righteous. (37:112)

But how many were the prophets [nabi] We sent amongst the peoples of old? (43:6)

O ye who believe! raise not your voices above the voice of the Prophet [nabi] nor speak aloud to him in talk as ye may speak aloud to one another lest your deeds become vain and ye perceive not (49:2)

Likewise did We make for every Messenger [nabi] an enemy evil ones among men and Jinns inspiring each other with flowery discourses by way of deception. If thy Lord had so planned they would not have done it: so leave them and their inventions alone (6:112)

O Apostle [nabi]! sufficient unto thee is Allah (unto thee) and unto those who follow thee among the believers. (8:64)

### **rasûl and nabî:**

Also mention in the Book (the story of) Moses: for he was specially chosen and he was an apostle [rasul] (and) a prophet [nabi]. (19:51)

Also mention in the Book (the story of) Ismail: He was (strictly) true to what he promised and he was an apostle [rasul] (and) a prophet [nabi]. (19:54)

Never did We send an apostle [rasul] or a prophet [nabi] before thee but when he framed a desire Satan threw some (vanity) into his desire: but Allah will cancel anything (vain) that Satan throws in and Allah will confirm (and establish) His Signs: for Allah is full of knowledge and wisdom: (22:52)

"Those who follow the apostle [rasul] the unlettered prophet [nabi] whom they find mentioned in their own (Scriptures); in the law and the Gospel; for he commands them what is just and forbids them what is evil: he allows them as lawful what is good (and pure) and prohibits them from what is bad (and impure); He releases them from their heavy burdens and from the yokes that are upon them. So it is those who believe in him honor him help him and follow the light which is sent down with him it is they who will prosper." (7:157)

### **rasûl:**

To every people (was sent) an Apostle [rasul]: when their Apostle [rasul] comes (before them) the matter will be judged between them with justice and they will not be wronged. (10:47)

We did send apostles [rasul] before thee and appointed for them wives and children: and it was never the part of an apostle [rasul] to bring a Sign except as Allah permitted (or commanded). For each period is a Book (revealed). (13:38)

But never came an apostle [rasul] to them but they mocked him. (15:11)

And there came to them an Apostle from among themselves but they falsely rejected him; so the wrath seized them even in the midst of their iniquities. (16:113)

For We assuredly sent amongst every People an apostle [rasul] (with the Command) "Serve Allah and eschew Evil": of the people were some whom Allah guided and some on whom Error became inevitably (established). So travel through the earth and see what was the end of those who denied (the Truth) (16:36)

Who receiveth guidance receiveth it for his own benefit: who goeth astray doth so to his own loss: no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another: nor would We visit with Our Wrath until We had sent an apostle [rasul] (to give warning) (17:15)

What kept men back from Belief when Guidance came to them was nothing but this: they said "Has Allah sent a man (like us) to be (His) Apostle [rasul]?" (17:94)

Say "If there were settled on earth angels walking about in peace and quiet We should certainly have sent them down from the heavens an angel for an apostle [rasul]." (17:95)

He said: "Nay I am only a messenger [rasul] from thy Lord (to announce) to thee the gift of a holy son." (19:19)



And when came to them an Apostle [rasul] from Allah confirming what was with them a party of the people of the Book threw away the Book of Allah behind their backs as if (it had been something) they did not know! (2:101)

A similar (favor have ye already received) in that We have sent among you an Apostle [rasul] of your own rehearsing to you Our signs and sanctifying you and instructing you in Scripture and wisdom and in new Knowledge. (2:151)

The Apostle [rasul] believeth in what hath been revealed to him from his Lord as do the men of faith. Each one (of them) believeth in Allah, His angels, His books and His Apostles [rasul] "We make no distinction (they say) between one and another of His Apostles [rasul]." And they say: "We hear and we obey; (We seek) Thy forgiveness Our Lord and to Thee is the end of all journeys." (2:285)

We gave Moses the Book and followed him up with a succession of Apostles [rasul]; We gave Jesus the son of Mary clear (Signs) and strengthened him with the holy spirit. Is it that whenever there comes to you an Apostle [rasul] with what ye yourselves desire not ye are puffed up with pride? Some ye called impostors and others ye slay! (2:87)

Not an apostle did We send before thee without this inspiration sent by Us to him: that there is no god but I; therefore worship and serve Me. (21:25)

O ye apostles [rasul]! Enjoy (all) things good and pure and work righteousness: for I am well-acquainted with (all) that ye do (23:51)

..... and on and on.... there are over 200 uses of rasul in the Qur'an, but they do not provide any clear or consistent definition of the difference between nabi and rasul.

with love,  
wahiduddin