

For The Sake of An Infallible Authority: An Analysis of Sectarian Approaches to The Belief In ‘ismah

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Abstract

This research analyses the notion of ‘ismah, believed to be a natural faculty of the prophets (and the Imams in Shi’ite case) that protects them from sin, even though they are capable of committing sin. The following questions have naturally played a central role in the formation and construction of the subject: is it possible for a human being to be infallible? Is it rational to believe that Allāh, the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe, would send forth a fallible or sinful man to guide mankind? As of yet the questions of just what *'ismah* really is and who exactly are the infallible ones have not been settled. With those questions in mind, this research seeks to provide a detailed sectarian analysis on the matter of the infallibility of prophets or imams. The views of classical scholars on the concept of ‘ismah will initially be examined, then Sunni and Shi’ite perspectives of the infallibility doctrine will be addressed in depth, as it appears to have been one of the essential religious teachings of both. Afterwards, selected Qur`anic passages (in which the prophets, specifically Adam and the Prophet Muħammad, are warned and ask for forgiveness) will be scrutinized not to discuss the question of whether the prophets are fallible or infallible, but to understand and decode the nature and concept of ‘ismah.

Keywords: 'Ismah, ma’sūm, infallible, the Prophets, the Imams.

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Mutlak Otoritenin Muhafazası Sorunsalı: İsmet İnancı Konusunda Mezhepsel Bir Analiz

Öz

Bu alıřma Peygamberlerin (řii inancında ise Peygamberlerin ve İmamların) hata ve günah işleme kapasitelerine sahip olmalarına rağmen insanların nezdinde değerlerini düşürecek her türlü yanlıştan korunmuş oldukları inancını vurgulayan ismet kavramını ele almaktadır. İsmet inancının teşekkülü ve inkiřâfında merkezi rolü olan soruları řu şekilde sıralamak mümkündür: Bir insanın günahsız ya da hatasız olması düşünülebilir mi? İnsanlığa rehberlik etmek için gönderilen Peygamberlerin günahkâr veya hatalı olmaları mevzubahis midir? İsmet inancı geçmişten günümüze tartışılabilen İslam dininin önemli inanç meselelerinden biri olmakla birlikte ne peygamberlerin ismetinin sınırları hususunda ne de kimlerin ilâhî korunmuşluđa mazhar olduđu mevzuunda İslâm âlimleri arasında ortak bir kanaat söz konusu değildir. Bu alıřma konuyu daha fazla sorunsallařtırma amacı gütmeyen peygamberlerin ve imamların ismeti konusunda ayrıntılı mezhepsel bir analiz ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. İlk etapta klasik kaynaklardaki ismet inancı hakkındaki görüşler incelenecek, akabinde Ehl-i Sünnet ve řia'nın (her ne kadar her ikisi de peygamberlerin ismeti inancını temel dinî bir öğreti olarak benimsemiř olsa da) birbirleriyle benzeřtikleri ve çatıřtikları noktalar derinlemesine ele alınacaktır. Son olarak peygamberlerin (özellikle Hz. Âdem ve Hz. Muhammed'in) ilâhî ikaza muhatap olduđu ve bađıřlanma diledikleri ayetler eřliđinde ismet kavramının mahiyeti ve bu kavrama yüklenen misyonun bahsi edilecek olan ayetler ile ne derece uygunluk arz ettiđi sorunsalı irdelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İsmet, mâsum, hatasız, peygamberler, imamlar.

İشكالية (مسألة) حماية التحكم المطلق: تحليل مذهبي حول معتقد العصمة

خلاصة

نتناول مفهوم العصمة والذي يؤكد الاعتقاد لدى الناس بأن (الأنبياء و الأئمة بحسب المذهب الشيعي)) رغم امتلاكهم العصمة أنهم منزهون بكافة الأشكال من ارتكاب الأخطاء والذنوب التي تحط من قيمتهم. يمكننا أن نرتب الأسئلة التي تأخذ الدور الرئيس في تشكيل واتساع معتقد العصمة. هل من الممكن التكفير أنه يوجد انسان دون أخطاء ودون ذنوب؟ هل موضوع البحث أن الأنبياء الذين أرسلوا لتوجيه الانسانية كان لديهم ذنوب وأخطاء؟ مع كون معتقد العصمة من الماضي وحتى يومنا أحد مسائل الاعتقادات الدينية الإسلامية المهمة والمثيرة للجدل فموضوع البحث ليس حول حدود عصمة الأنبياء ولا القناعات المشتركة لدى علماء المسلمين حول من نال العصمة الالهية. هدف البحث وضع تحليل بالتفاصيل المذهبية لموضوع عصمة الأنبياء و الأئمة دون أن يكون هدفنا تعقيد المسألة في المرحلة الأولى سيتم تدقيق الآراء التي في المصادر التقليدية حول معتقد العصمة ثم سيتم دراسة نقاط التشابه و الاختلاف بشكل عميق ما بين أهل السنة و الشيعة (مع كون ما مدى تبني مفهوم عصمة الأنبياء كأحد تعاليم الأركان الدينية) و في النهاية سنتم مناقشة ماهية مفهوم العصمة و ما هي الرسالة المحمّلة للمفهوم من خلال الآيات التي سنبحث و التي ترافق فيها اطاعة الأنبياء (خاصة سيدنا آدم و محمد عليهما السلام) للإنذار الالهي و رجائهم بالمغفرة و التدقيق في مدى ملاءمتها مع الإشكالية (المسألة) المطروحة

الكلمات المفتاحية: العصمة، معصوم، منزه عن الخطأ، الأنبياء، الأئمة.

A. Introduction

Belief in the prophets, who were sent to convey Allāh's message to humanity, is one of the pillars of Islam. As they are responsible for delivering Allāh's words to mankind and they are recognized as ultimate role models, they are expected to be trustworthy in their words and acts. In this respect, the Qur`ān states that “*there was indeed the best model for you in the messenger of Allāh.*”¹ Due to being tasked with such a mission they are believed to have special attributes distinguishing them from the rest of humanity. Possessing the attribute ‘*ismah*² is a distinctive qualification and a natural faculty of the prophets (and the Imams in the Shi‘ite case) that protects them from sin, even though they have the capacity for committing sin.³ It has become one of the primary religious doctrines of both the Sunni and Shi‘ite faith. Even though the ‘*ismah* of the prophets is acknowledged by the mainstream Muslim community, a firm definition of it has not been determined. Nor has the matter of who exactly are the infallible ones been settled. In terms of the infallibility of prophets, two main arguments are suggested: first, the attribute of ‘*ismah* is a prerequisite for prophets; second, despite the prophets’ protection from commission of sin, it is still possible for them to make a mistake.⁴

How does the matter of ‘*ismah* correspond to the teaching of the Qur`ān? Since, in the Qur`ān, the prophets are defined neither as angels nor as divine, how can we speak of the absolute infallibility of a human being? The Qur`ān considers prophets to be wholly human and thus subject to the limitations of human nature, which by instinct is prone to error. “*O Prophet, say to them I am only a man, like you*”⁵. It is said that they have been chosen from among their own clan. “*As a matter of fact, it is the great favor of Allāh to the believers that He has raised up in their midst from among themselves.*”⁶ The Qur`ān also states that the prophets will be interrogated like the rest of humanity. “*Thus (on*

¹ Abū al-‘Ala al-Mawdūdī, “Tafhīm al-Qur`ān”, Accessed: 31.01.2020; al-Aḥzāb 33/21. <http://www.englishtafsir.com/Quran/33/index.html>.

² ‘*Ismah* is one of the five prophetic attributes. The other four are: *sidq* (truthfulness), *amanah* (trustworthiness), *fathanah* (intelligence), *tabligh* (conveying the message of Allah).

³ Muḥammad ibn Mukarram Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, (Beirut: al-Matba‘at al-Kutub, 1990), 12/403.

⁴ Abū’l-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad Ibn Khumayr al-Sibtī, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā’ ‘ammā nasaba ilayhim khuthālat al-aghbiyā’*, ed. Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Jalīl al-Zabībī, (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2003), 14.

⁵ Fuṣṣilat 41/6.

⁶ Āl ‘Imrān 3/164.

the Day of Judgment) We will most certainly call to account all those to whom We sent Our messengers, and We will also ask the Messengers. Then We Ourselves will recount to them with knowledge (all their doings); for We were not absent from them."⁷ How could we interpret this and similar Qur`ānic passages when had a certain belief about the infallibility of prophets?

The derivatives of the term 'ismah appears in the Qur`ān thirteen times with a number of different meanings including protection,⁸ guarding from the mischievous deeds of the people,⁹ holding fast to Allāh¹⁰ or modesty¹¹ none of which discusses the infallibility of prophets. Nowhere does there appear a single verse unanimously accepted as divine proof of the belief in 'ismah of prophets. Thus, Muslim scholars appeal to different Qur`ānic passages to support their view of 'ismah. That is probably why, as will be discussed further, some scholars have come to argue that the origin of 'ismah cannot be linked to the Qur`ān. It rather has been naturally formalized with the death of the Prophet Muḥammad to sanctify his office and the Imams in the Shi'ite.¹²

The belief in 'ismah not only protects the prophets from committing sin and error, but also lends legitimacy to their absolute authority and intensifies their reliability. That is probably why, in the Islamic tradition, not only the prophets, but some other Muslim figures are regarded as *ma'ṣūm* (infallible). In the case of the Shi'ite faith, the imams were regarded as equal to the prophets in the matter of 'ismah. The evidence for the infallibility of prophets is regarded as applicable to the Imams.¹³ Moreover, a number of *tariqas* (mystic groups) have viewed their Sufi *shaykhs* as fairly protected from committing sin.¹⁴

⁷ al-A'raf 7/6-7.

⁸ al-Mā'ida 5/67; Hūd 11/43; al-Aḥzāb 33/17.

⁹ al-Mā'ida 5/67.

¹⁰ Āl 'Imrān 3/101; al-Nisā' 4/146-175; al-Hajj 22/78.

¹¹ Yūsuf 12/32.

¹² Fazlur Rahman, *İslam*, trans. Mehmet Dağ-Mehmet Aydın, (Ankara: Ankara Okulu Yayınları, 2004), 123-124; Wilferd Madelung, 'Ismah', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, (Leiden: 1960), 3/182.

¹³ Alī ibn Ḥusayn Sharif al-Murtadā, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā'*, (Beirut: Dār al-Adwa', 1989), 233-235; Aisah Mohamed, "Şia'nın İmamette İsmet Doktrininin Eleştirisi", trans. Ömer Aydın, *İstanbul Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 8 (2003), 231.

¹⁴ Mehmet Bulut, *Ehli Sünnet ve Şia'da İsmet İnanç*, (İstanbul: Risale Yayınları, 1991), 136.

B. The Notion of ‘ismah and an Analysis of The Views of The Scholars

The term ‘ismah has been derived from the Arabic trilateral root of a-s-m (ع-ص-م), meaning to hold, harbor, endure, depend, and honesty;¹⁵ and yet, in Islamic theology, it came to mean infallibility and the protection of the prophets from committing sin. Despite a prophet’s capacity as a human for falling into sin and mistake, due to ‘ismah they are able to stay away from sin.¹⁶ It is a natural and divine faculty of prophethood that dignifies their status and protects them from unfortunate tendencies while keeping them pure. To Sunnis, it is a special standing of the prophets.¹⁷

A varied range of Qur`anic passages have been considered as the root for the factuality of ‘ismah. Fakhr al-Dīn ar-Rāzī refers to the following verse as a divine evidence of ‘ismah;¹⁸

They were men of great power and insight. We had chosen them because of a pure quality the remembrance of the abode of the Hereafter. Indeed, they are, in Our sight, included among the chosen, the righteous.¹⁹

Another passage that he indicates to support his view of ‘ismah is as follows:

And, o Muḥammad, (it has always been so with) every messenger and prophet We sent before you that whenever he had a desire, Satan tried to interfere with his desire, But Allāh eradicates the mischiefs worked by Satan and confirms His Revelations, for Allāh is all-knowing, all-wise.²⁰

To Rāzī, the prophets are protected from consciously committing sin and error. When Satan intends to interfere in their doings — and for sure, he tries — he will be precluded by Allāh.²¹ However, this Qur`anic passage talks about a protection from Satan’s interference into the prophets’ doings. It is essential to highlight that this verse is peculiar to conveying the divine message. So that while it draws attention to the infallible nature of the Qur`ān, is not exactly relevant to the ‘ismah of prophets. Rāzī relies on the aforementioned passage

¹⁵ Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 12/403-408.

¹⁶ Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 12/403.

¹⁷ Abū al-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad Rāqhib al-İşfahānī, *al-Mufradāt fi qharib al-al-Qur`ān*, ed. Muḥammad Khalil al-‘Aytānī, (Beirut: Dār al-Ma’rifah, 1999), 570.

¹⁸ Fakhr al-Dīn ar-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, volume 25, ed. M. Muhyiddin Abdulhamid, (Cairo: 1934-62), 217.

¹⁹ Şād 38/45-47.

²⁰ al-Hajj 22/52.

²¹ Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 23/54-55.

that clearly mentions the Qur`ān as the revealed infallible word of Allāh to support his view of the infallibility of prophets. To him, the prophets and the messengers must have possessed an impeccable character for revelation. Therefore, they are protected from falling into sinful act. They are men but they are men of an extremely high moral, spiritual, and intellectual standard.²²

The scholars of Islam, apart from the sect of Karrāmīyah, a Ḥanafī-Murji`ī sect, agree that the prophets are protected in conveying the revelation.²³ Similarly Mu`tazilah, accepts the likeliness of minor mistakes committed by the prophets, states that the `ismah of prophets is essential for them to be successful in conveying the message of God to mankind. It is unlikely to expect from the messengers to forget the message, stumble in narrating it to the community, hide some part of it, or falsify it.²⁴

The matter of `ismah, to Māturīdi, has been declared and supported by the Qur`ān. A number of Qur`ānic passages have been discussed as proofs of the divine protection of prophets:²⁵

Nay, O Muḥammad, by your Lord, they can never become Believers until they accept you as judge for the decision of the disputes between them, and then surrender to your decision with entire submission without feeling the least resentment in their hearts.²⁶

Another verse used to support the infallibility of prophets is:

It does not behoove a believing man and a believing woman that when Allāh and His Messenger have given their decision in a matter, they should exercise an option in that matter of theirs; and whoever disobeys Allāh and His Prophet, has indeed strayed into manifest error.²⁷

The following passage is also proposed as a divine protection of prophets from falling into mistakes: “*It was just possible that you might have inclined a little towards them, if We had not given you strength.*”²⁸ The `ismah of prophets, said Māturīdi, neither forces them into submission nor relieves them of the tendency to fall into error. It is a gift of Allāh to motivate them to do a favor

²² Fakhr al-Dīn ar-Rāzī, *‘Ismat al-anbiyā’*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1988), 26-27.

²³ Veysi Ünverdi, “Mu`tezile`de Peygamberlerin İsmeti”, *Din Bilimleri Akademik Araştırma Dergisi*, 15/1 (2015): 82.

²⁴ Madelung, “Ismah”, 182.

²⁵ Abū Maṣūir Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Māturīdi, *Ta`wilat al-Qur`ān*, (İstanbul: Hacı Selimağa Kütüphanesi), folio 427a.

²⁶ al-Nisā` 4/65.

²⁷ al-Aḥzāb 33/36.

²⁸ al-Isrā` 17/73-74.

while preventing them from doing evil, yet ‘ismah does not mean that the prophets are deprived of free will. It is essential for the divine trial.²⁹ A similar approach has been expressed in some of the current works, according to which the prophets are not deprived of the ability to commit a sin or make a mistake; they are, however, guarded by Allāh from falling into disfavor with the community.³⁰

Even though above-mentioned Qur’anic passages have been suggested (by both of the scholars, Rāzī and Māturīdi) as proof of the ‘ismah of prophets, none of those verses are firmly and clearly talking about the infallibility of prophets. Neither of the verses include the derivatives of the term ‘ismah, nor do they mention the infallibility of prophets as believed today. That is why scholars tend to use different verses to advocate the notion of ‘ismah. As far as it is known the first Muslim scholar who suggested that the prophets are protected from committing sin was Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 150-767). He does not use the term ‘ismah, but instead mentions the notion of *tanazzuh*, meaning purity from vice.³¹ It shows that, in the early Islamic era, the matter of ‘ismah was not as formalized as it is today. Similarly Ibn Hishām states that at the beginning of the Islamic era; however, Muḥammad’s absolute authority was recognized, the belief of his infallibility of making mistake is hardly ever mentioned.³²

Fazlur Rahman, a leading modernist Muslim scholar, debates that the belief in ‘ismah was formalized in the period following the death of Muḥammad. During his lifetime, when Muḥammad consulted with *ṣaḥāba* (companions of the Prophet Muḥammad) on the matters of daily life, his decisions were at times objected. Despite the fact that the Qur’ān criticizes him for some certain reasons,³³ his religious authority was absolute to the whole Muslim community. This authority was itself sufficient when he was alive. Yet such authority died out with his death and turned into a belief of infallibility. It means that while all of his statements and decisions were reliable when he was alive; and yet, his infallibility was not a subject of debate. With his death not

²⁹ Māturīdi, *Ta’wilat al-Qur’ān*, folio 525a.

³⁰ Ali Galip Gezgin, *Kur’ān’da Hz. Peygamber’e Yapılan Uyarılar*, (Isparta: Fakülte Kitabevi, 2003), 102.

³¹ Bayram Ayhan, *Kur’ān-ı Kerīm’e Göre Peygamberlerin İsmeti*, (İstanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Master’s Thesis, 2008), 60.

³² ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-nabawiyya*, ed. Mustafa as-Saqqā, Ibrahim al-Abyari, Abdulhafiz Shalabi, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2004), 341.

³³ al-Tawba 9/43; ‘Abasa 80/1.

only are his sayings and doings viewed as unfailing, but he has also been recognized as an infallible prophet. Such a belief, to a certain extent, relies on the fact that making a mistake under any circumstances whatsoever cannot be expected from a person who receives revelation.³⁴ In a similar vein, W. Madelung, a scholar of the history of Islam, argues that with the loss of the Prophet Muḥammad and thus the loss of an absolute authority, the dogma of ‘ismah was invented to fill the absence of a divine leader.³⁵ He further claims that, Shi‘ites approached and adopted the doctrine of ‘ismah even before Sunnis. The infallibility of imams first became the primary subject of the debate of ‘ismah, while later on the central focus shifted to the infallibility of prophets.³⁶

C. Sunnis Versus Shi‘ites: Sectarian Discourses on The Matter of ‘ismah

1. Sunni Perspective of the Doctrine of ‘ismah

Overall Muslims acknowledge prophets as the prototypical example for human beings as they are chosen by God to convey the divine message. That is why, through time, a number of characteristics have become requisite attributes of the prophets: ‘ismah (infallibility), *sidq* (truthfulness), *amanah* (trustworthiness), *fathanah* (intelligence), and *tabligh* (conveying the message of Allāh). The fact that the prophets cannot be regarded as fallible and sinful is the leading and primary cause of the formation of ‘ismah, if not the only one. Though there are a number of aspects debated within the scope of ‘ismah that take a part in development of the ‘ismah doctrine: First, it is discussed whether the prophets became subject to divine protection before or after their mission. Second, the dimension of the sin or mistake has been discussed as major and minor. And last one is about the nature of the sin that has been categorized into four groups: a sin or a mistake done consciously (*‘amdan*), unconsciously (*sahwan*), forgetfully (*nisyan*), or in error (*khata*).³⁷ It is further discussed whether the prophets are infallible in their faith, in their words, in their deeds, or in their judgment.³⁸

³⁴ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 123-124.

³⁵ Madelung, “Ismah”, 182.

³⁶ Madelung, “Ismah”, 182.

³⁷ Rāzī, *‘Ismat al-anbiyā’*, 26-27; Ibn Khumayr, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā’*, 14-16.

³⁸ Mohammed Suhailem al-Hudawi, “Infallibility of Prophets and Imams in the Doctrines of Ahl al-Sunnah and al-Shī‘ah al-Imāmiyyah al-Ithnā ‘Ashariyyah”, *Sunni and Shia at the Crossroad: Rethinking Its History, Thoughts and Practices*, ed. Yamamoto Naoki,

There is no consensus within Sunni scholars regarding the matter of ‘ismah as to how and to what extent the prophets are infallible. There rather appears a range of different approaches on the subject, but the scholars of the Sunni branch of Islam are in agreement in terms of a protection of the messengers in conveying the message of Allāh.³⁹ For example Ibn Taymīyah, Sunni theologian and Ḥanbalī jurist, supports the doctrine of ‘ismah in terms of transmitting what the prophets are responsible for, he is, though critical of the ‘ismah belief. That is because, to him, Allāh is the only infallible one. People are ascribing one of Allāh’s attributes to human kind through talking about an absolute infallibility of prophets or imams.⁴⁰

Besides, majority of Sunni scholars suggest similar arguments concerning the matter of *kufṛ* (denial of the Truth) or *shirk* (worshipping anything besides God), as neither can be attributed to the prophets. Some even relate commission of the major sins with the denial of the Truth (*kufṛ*). Accordingly, the prophets are not expected to fall into infidelity, as a cardinal sin cannot be attributed to them.⁴¹ Some agree with the previous approach, but still accept the possibility of making minor sins and mistakes in their daily life.⁴² They refer to the Qur`ān in which the prophets ask for forgiveness for what they have done.⁴³ Some of those who accept the possibility of mistakes done by the prophets argue that it is not made consciously or intentionally, but by obliviousness. So to them, the prophets might inadvertently have committed mistake or even sin.⁴⁴

On the other hand, for more conservative scholars it is unacceptable to regard a prophet as someone who errs like any other ordinary human being.⁴⁵ To them, each prophet and messenger is protected both from major and minor sin and error. It is further suggested that the prophets must have possessed an impeccable character for revelation.⁴⁶ As a matter of fact, some Sunni scholars

Maysuda Kazunori, Yusak Nailil Muna, and Futatsuyama Tatsuro, (Center for On-Site Education and Research, Integrated Area Studies Unit, Center for the Promotion of Interdisciplinary Education and Research, Kyoto University, 2015), 90.

³⁹ As discussed earlier, the Qur`ān, mentions of a divinely protection of itself. al-Hajj 22/52.

⁴⁰ For further analysis on the view of Ibn Taymīyah, see Binyamin Abrahamov, “Ibn Taymiyya and the Doctrine of ‘Ismah”, *The Bulletin of the Henry Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies*, 12/3-4 (1993): 21-30.

⁴¹ Abū al-Yusr al-Bazdawi, *Usūl ad-Dīn*, ed. H.P. Linss, (Cairo: 1963), 171.

⁴² Ibn Khumayr, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā’*, 14.

⁴³ Ṭā Hā 20/120-121; al-Qaṣaṣ 28/15; Şād 38/2.

⁴⁴ al-Bazdawi, *Usūl ad-Dīn*, 170.

⁴⁵ Ibn Khumayr, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā’*, 18.

⁴⁶ Rāzī, *İsmat al-anbiyā’*, 26-27.

refuse the possibility of the prophet's forgetfulness and obliviousness. They interpret each single verse to pure the prophets from any kind of sin or fault.⁴⁷ The proposed explanation for the Qur`anic passages in which Allāh warns his messengers is that the prophets are not warned retroactively because they ignored the absolute (*fard*) or obligatory command (*wājib*), but are warned preemptively to take the recommended action (*mubāh*), something which does not require punishment due to the prophet's exercise of free will on the basis of logical choice. Through such warnings Allāh educates and enlightens His prophets.⁴⁸ It is also suggested that a warning from Allāh is a grace from Him as it leads the prophets to be pure and stay away from malign doings.⁴⁹

2. Shi'ite Understanding of the Doctrine of 'Ismah

The 'ismah belief has become one of the established doctrines of mainstream Shi'ism. Shi'ites have come to believe that each prophet and messenger of Allāh, with no exception, is infallible even before their mission as they are born with definitive prophetic features. In other words the prophets are considered to be absolutely infallible in all means, not even a minor sin can be expected from the messengers of Allāh including before and after their mission. If a mistake is made, it would be because of their forgetfulness and unawareness.⁵⁰ Shi'ites' view of 'ismah has targeted the approach of legitimizing probability of mistakes (and in some cases sin) with the hands of the prophets, in which Shi'ites hold on to the idea that the prophets are pure, and no kind of mistake and sin can be linked to them.⁵¹ The saying of al-Tuṣī is a pointed indicator of the Shi'ite understanding of 'ismah, "*the prophets are protected from minor and grave sin, before and after their mission. Neither an intentional nor an oblivious mistake can be expected from them.*"⁵²

The nature of infallibility assigned to the imams is similar to that of the prophets.⁵³ The verse "*Allāh only intends to remove uncleanness from you, o people of the prophet's household, and purify you completely*"⁵⁴ is one of those

⁴⁷ Rāzī, *Ismat al-anbiyā'*, 26-27; Ibn Khumayr, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā'*, 21.

⁴⁸ Ibn Khumayr, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā'*, 14-15.

⁴⁹ Ibn Khumayr, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā'*, 15.

⁵⁰ Sharif al-Murtadā, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā'*, 15-16.

⁵¹ Sharif al-Murtadā, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā'*, 17.

⁵² Abrahamov, "Ibn Taymiyya and the Doctrine of 'Ismah", 26.

⁵³ Sharif al-Murtadā, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā'*, 233-235; Mohamed, "Şia'nın İmamette İsmet Doktrininin Eleştirisi", 231.

⁵⁴ al-Ahṣāb 33/33.

passages narrated as a divine proof of the 'ismah of imams.⁵⁵ Ibn Ishāq al-Kulaynī (255/869 – 328/940), a Shi'ite *ḥadīth* collector, in his famous book *al-Kāfī*,⁵⁶ states that:

Imams, however are not *nabi*, are the person who has been given revelation; their *maqam* (position) is the same with the prophet's. The matter of revelation, as the prophets hear the sayings of the angels, distances the Imams from the prophets due to their incapacity of seeing the angels. Imams are away from doing mistakes and committing sins. The Holy Spirit that transferred from the Prophet Muḥammad to the Imams is the main source of the infallibility of Imams.⁵⁷

Believing in the infallibility of imams along with the prophets is one of the primary doctrinal differences between Sunnis and Shi'ites. While for Sunnis, the prophets were the only human beings regarded as infallible, in the Shi'ite faith, 'Alī and the following eleven imams are almost viewed equal to the prophets in the matter of 'ismah.⁵⁸ In opposition to Sunnis, Shi'ites did not recognize the legitimacy of the first three Caliphs, and to them, the Caliphate begins with 'Alī, the first imam, and ends with the major occultation of the Twelfth Imam in 941 AD. The Office of the Caliphate has been commemorated as the Office of the "Imamate."⁵⁹ And thus 'Alī and the imams one after another are believed to be assigned to the Office of the Imamate by way of divine order, to which Allāh would not leave the community without a guide. The imams are considered to be the only rightful sources for the instruction of Islamic teachings as they are the *afdāl al-nās* (the best of the people) and *ma'ṣūm* (infallible).⁶⁰ In other words, in the Shi'ite tradition, imams are the divinely designated successors to the Prophet Muḥammad as they are assigned powers similar to the prophets. They are not considered to have received prophetic revelation, but they are believed to have received *ilhām* (inspiration) from Allāh.⁶¹

Due to the fact that the imams are acknowledged as both religious and sociopolitical leaders of the Muslim community, to the Shi'ites, the belief in the

⁵⁵ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 155.

⁵⁶ An important Shi'ite *ḥadīth* collection.

⁵⁷ Muḥammad b. Ya`qub Ibn Ishāq al-Kulaynī, *al-Uṣūl min al-Kāfī*, ed. 'Alī Akbar Ghaffārī & Muḥammad al-Ākhundī, (Tahran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, 1388), 1/271.

⁵⁸ Sharif al-Murtadā, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā'*, 182.

⁵⁹ Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, trans. David Streight, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 83.

⁶⁰ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 153.

⁶¹ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 149.

‘ismah of imams becomes inevitable.⁶² Along with the Twelve Imams, the Prophet Muḥammad and his daughter Fāṭimah al-Zahrah are classified as the “Fourteen Impeccable”. Fāṭimah appears to have been the only woman who is neither a prophet nor an imam, but who is infallible and protected from falling into sin and error. Relatedly the *ḥadīth*, “Fāṭimah is part of me, whoever makes her angry makes me angry” is cited to support the ‘ismah of Fāṭimah.⁶³ Fāṭimah is not only respected because she is the only living daughter of Muḥammad, but also because she is the wife of ‘Alī, and the imams are direct descendants of the two. The debate regarding the ‘ismah as to who can and cannot be infallible goes on even with the *ghayba* (major occultation in 329/941) of the Twelfth Imam. With the absence of an infallible Imam it became a challenging matter to determine whether the Shi‘ite *mujtahids* (religious judges) are infallible or not. Even though by the seventeenth century, they are regarded to be *ma‘ṣūm* (infallible) due to the fact that they are recognized as the representatives of the Imams. Afterwards the assertion of the infallibility of *mujtahids* was left through accepting the sayings of them to be binding in their own time and holding them responsible for what they say and do.⁶⁴

Similar to the Twelver Shi‘ism, the Ismā‘īlī Shi‘ism considers the Imams to be infallible. The hereditary lineage of the Imamate, however, continues in a different direction: it begins with ‘Alī, transfers from ‘Alī to Ḥusayn, and continues until the living forty-ninth imam, Prince Karim Aga Khan. The order is the same with Twelver Shi‘ism until the sixth imam, at which point instead of continuing with Musa al-Kāzīm, the office of the Imamate continues with Ismā‘īl, the son of Ja‘far al-Šādiq (d. 148/765), the sixth imam.⁶⁵ The Nuṣayrī-‘Alawīs, a Muslim Shi‘ite sect; however, with its central religious doctrine is quite different both from the Twelvers and the Ismā‘īlīs,⁶⁶ and regards its

⁶² Sharif al-Murtadā, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā’*, 233-235.

⁶³ Shams al-Dīn Kirmānī, *Sharḥ al-Kirmānī ‘alā Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, (Beirut: Dar al Kitāb ‘Alī Ilmiyyah, 2010), 12/ 5.

⁶⁴ Heinz Halm, *Shi‘ism*, trans. Janet Watson and Marian Hill, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 54, 65-67, 89-96; Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi‘ism*, 89-90.

⁶⁵ For further information, see Halm, *Shi‘ism*, 160-168.

⁶⁶ Ibn Nuṣayr, the founder of the sect, with the death of Ḥasan al-Askarī, the eleventh imam, claimed to be this Imam’s *bab* (intimate messenger). He further asserted that he received rescripts and letters from the vanished imam during the minor occultation that proves his holiness. Detailed information on the Nuṣayrī-‘Alawīs, see Yaron Friedman, *The Nuṣayrī-‘Alawīs: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria*, (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2009), 5-15.

Imams to be infallible.⁶⁷ The Zaydīs differ from the Twelvers in that they acknowledge Zayd b. ‘Alī, the grandson of Ḥusayn as an imam instead of Muḥammad al-Bāqir, the fifth imam of the Twelver Shia, and neither regard the imams as infallible nor expect them to be able to perform miracles.⁶⁸

D. The prophets are not angels: Warning of the Qur`ān

Innocence is attributed to angels, creatures who do not possess free will and are pure servants of the Creator. The question of why men, not angels, are chosen to convey revelations plays a particular role in the analysis of ‘ismah. This issue, to the *mushriks* (polytheists), has become an essential argument to challenge the authority of Muḥammad’s prophecy. To the question the Qur`ān poses, “*Did Allāh send a human being as His messenger?*”⁶⁹ the Qur`ān responds, “*O Prophet, say to them I am only a man, like you.*”⁷⁰ The Qur`ān describes the prophets as eating food,⁷¹ having wives and children,⁷² and unless it is Allāh’s will, as neither able to bring benefits nor dispel evil⁷³ and as dying when their time comes.⁷⁴ These qualities do not meet with the expectations of the *mushriks*, as they hold on to the idea that a prophet ought to perform extraordinary miracles. To such an argument, God says, “*Had angels settled on the Earth and moved about in peace, We would certainly have sent an angel as a Messenger to them.*”⁷⁵ That is how a prophet could be a real guide to human beings, and only that way could it be fair to mankind.⁷⁶ Therefore, not only are the prophets human beings, but also they are men of their own community. While prophets are not like angels, but instead are ordinary human beings like the rest of humanity,⁷⁷ their ability to receive Allāh’s message is itself a sufficient factor to set them apart from the rest of their species.

⁶⁷ Edward E Salisbury, “The Book of Sulaimān’s First Ripe Fruit, Disclosing the Mysteries of the Nusairian Religion”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 8 (1866), 285.

⁶⁸ Halm, *Shi‘ism*, 203.

⁶⁹ al-Isrā’ 17/94.

⁷⁰ Fuṣṣilat 41/6.

⁷¹ al-Furqān 25/20.

⁷² al-Ra’d 13/38.

⁷³ Yūnus 10/49.

⁷⁴ Āl ‘Imrān 3/144; al-Isrā’ 17/90-92.

⁷⁵ al-Isrā’ 17/95.

⁷⁶ Abū al-‘Ala Mawdūdī, *Tafhīm al-Qur`ān*, (İstanbul: 1986), 4/345.

⁷⁷ al-Kahf 18/110.

A number of prophets including Adam,⁷⁸ Noah,⁷⁹ Abraham,⁸⁰ Mūsā,⁸¹ Yunus,⁸² Dāwud,⁸³ Sulaymān,⁸⁴ and Muḥammad⁸⁵ warned and asked for forgiveness for their own faults. It is quite obvious that those verses in which Allāh either mentions his prophets' disobedience or their faults contradict the representation of the notion 'ismah as it is constructed in Islamic theology. To answer the question of if the prophets are innocent and infallible, then how and why they have been the recipients of the warnings of Allāh, it is essential to examine some of those warnings. For the limit of this work, we will only deal with the verses linked to the Prophet Adam and the Prophet Muḥammad, recognized as the first and the last prophets (*khātām an-Nabīyyīn*).

1. The Prophet Adam: How did Iblis seduce him?

The angels bowed before the Prophet Adam⁸⁶ as the first human being⁸⁷ and the first prophet,⁸⁸ — all except for one, *Iblis* (Satan), who refused to join those who bowed⁸⁹ arguing, “*it does not behoove me to bow down before this man whom you have created from dried clay of rotten earth.*”⁹⁰ Soon thereafter Iblis was cursed and dismissed from the Paradise,⁹¹ and Adam was warned that Iblis could be a threat to him and his wife.⁹² Despite Allāh's firm warning regarding Iblis, both Adam and his wife fell into Iblis's trap, and ate the fruit of the forbidden tree.⁹³ It appears to be important to narrate the entire passage of the Qur`ān describing this case to understand the event better:

We gave a command to Adam before this, but he forgot it, and We did not find firmness of purpose in him: Recall to mind the time when We said to the angels: “Bow yourself to Adam;” they all bowed down except Iblis, who refused. At this, We said to Adam, “He is an enemy to you and your wife. Be on your guard lest he

⁷⁸ Ṭā Hā 20/115-121.

⁷⁹ Hūd 11/45-46.

⁸⁰ al-Şāffāt 37/88-90; al-Anbiyā' 21/63.

⁸¹ al-Qaşaş 28/15-16.

⁸² Yūnus 10/98.

⁸³ Şād 38/21-25.

⁸⁴ Şād 38/30-35.

⁸⁵ al-Duḥā 93/7; al-Anfāl 8/67-69; Abasa 80/1-10; al-Kahf 18/23-24.

⁸⁶ Āl 'Imrān 3/33; al-Baqarah 2/30.

⁸⁷ al-Baqarah 2/30.

⁸⁸ Āl 'Imrān 3/33.

⁸⁹ al-Ḥijr 15/30.

⁹⁰ al-Ḥijr 15/33.

⁹¹ al-Ḥijr 15/34-35.

⁹² Ṭā Hā 20/117.

⁹³ Ṭā Hā 20/121.

should have you expelled from the garden and you find yourself in great distress. For here you have a few faculties: you neither starve nor remain naked nor suffer from thirst nor from sun.” But Iblis seduced him, saying “O Adam, should I show you the tree which gives eternal life and everlasting kingdom?”⁹⁴ At last, both of them (Adam and his wife) ate of the fruit (of the forbidden tree). As a result, the nakedness of each appeared before the other, and they began to cover themselves up with leaves from the garden. Adam disobeyed his Lord and went astray from the right way. Afterwards his Lord chose him and accepted his repentance and gave him guidance.⁹⁵

Related to this case, the Qur`ān also states that;

Satan tempted them so that he might reveal to them their shameful parts, which had been hidden from each other. He said to them, “your Lord has forbidden you to go near this tree lest you should become angels or become immortals.” He swore an oath and assured them, “I am your true well-wisher.” Thus he beguiled them and gradually molded them to his design. So, when they tasted the fruit of the tree, their shameful parts became visible to each other and they began to cover themselves with the leaves of the garden. Then their Lord called out to them, saying, “Did I not forbid you to go near this tree, and warn you that Satan was your open enemy?” Both of them at once replied, “O Lord, we have wronged ourselves gravely; if you do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we shall be totally ruined.” Allāh commanded, “go down, you are enemies to each other; the earth shall be a dwelling place for you for a fixed term and there you will get your livelihood.” He added, “there you shall live and there you shall die and from there you shall be brought forth at last.”⁹⁶ At that time Adam learned appropriate words from his Lord and repented, and his Lord accepted his repentance, for He is very Relenting and very Merciful.⁹⁷

To Māturīdi, neither Adam nor his wife were aware of the prohibition. The fact that they desired to eat from that tree does not make them a believer of Iblis. If that was the case, then their punishment would have been worse.⁹⁸ Ibn Ḥazm, on the other hand, draws particular attention to the matter of the dimension of mistake. It is, according to him, not a sin but a minor mistake that the husband and the wife violated a *mandūb* (recommended religious notice) act.⁹⁹ So that, at the end, God answered Adam’s prayer and accepted his repentance through guiding him.¹⁰⁰

Rāzī, at first, analyzes the matter depending on the question of whether the case was done before or after Adam was given the prophecy, but we do not

⁹⁴ Ṭā Hā 20/115-120.

⁹⁵ Ṭā Hā 20/115-122.

⁹⁶ al-A`rāf 7/20-25.

⁹⁷ al-Baqara 2/37.

⁹⁸ Māturīdi, *Ta`wilat al-Qur`ān*, folio 10b.

⁹⁹ *Mandūb* is an act in which whoever does it will be rewarded and yet if it is not done the person will not be punished for not doing it.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī, *Kitāb al-Fasl fi’l-Milal al-ahwā’ wa-l-niḥal*, (Bagdad:1321), 4.

know for sure whether Adam was a prophet or not when Iblis seduced him. However, to protect the authenticity of ‘ismah, some scholars state that when Adam disobeyed his Lord he was not yet an infallible prophet. Rāzī then, like Ibn Ḥazm, points out the legal status of the matter in which he discusses if it was a *fard* (a required religious duty), *wājib* (an obligatory religious act commanded by Allāh), or a *mandūb* (a recommended act). Here his view of analyzing the case draws apart from Ibn Ḥazm’s. He does not even interpret the fault of Adam as a mistake. That is because to him, a mistake of a prophet is not in question. He also states that God’s acceptance of repentance would occur even if it was a cardinal sin.¹⁰¹

It is also suggested that Adam forgot Allāh’s advice and command.¹⁰² The following passage has been referred to as a proof of such argument: “We gave a command to Adam before this, but he forgot it, and We did not find firmness of purpose in him.”¹⁰³ Unlike the rest of the aforementioned scholars, Ṭabarī, highlights the importance of one thing, Adam realizes his mistake and right after which he asks for forgiveness, and more importantly does not insist he was right in his mistake.¹⁰⁴

The Shi‘ite perspective of this incident of Adam is not different from that of Sunnis. Similarly some Shi‘ite scholars pay attention to the legal case of Allāh’s order in *fiqh* as if Adam disobeyed to abide by a *mandūb* (a recommend act) or was it a *fard* (a religious duty commanded by Allāh). It is suggested that Adam left to do a suggested word, not a required religious decree.¹⁰⁵ Further, it is argued that Adam’s dismissal from heaven should not be seen as a punishment.¹⁰⁶

Even though, there appears to have been a number of approaches in examining the story of Adam, it is obvious that this issue has not been categorically theorized and uncovered apart from the influence of the concept of ‘ismah. Most scholars do not draw particular attention to the content of the story, but rather aim to prove the authenticity of the notion of ‘ismah. When the

¹⁰¹ Rāzī, *‘Ismat al-anbiyā’*, 36-39.

¹⁰² Ibn Khumayr, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā’*, 14.

¹⁰³ Ṭā Hā 20/115.

¹⁰⁴ Abū Ja’far Muḥammad Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, (Beirut: Dār ihya al-turath al-Arabi), 16/258.

¹⁰⁵ Sharif al-Murtadā, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā’*, 24-25.

¹⁰⁶ Sharif al-Murtadā, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā’*, 28.

story is examined, it could be said that the first essential matter is that Allāh warns Adam about Iblis and his sneaky plan. Allāh further forbids him from eating a fruit of that particular tree. Despite Allāh's warning, Adam follows Iblis's words, and as a result, Allāh punishes him and his wife by expelling them from the Garden. The way Allāh describes Adam's fault is too severe as it is stated in the verse: "Adam disobeyed his Lord and went astray from the right way."¹⁰⁷ Right after Adam realized his fault, he then turned to Allāh and begged for forgiveness. And more importantly he did not insist on his mistake. The other important point that needs to be highlighted is that Adam was pardoned and punishment was no longer in question.

2. The Prophet Moḥammad: why and how did Allāh warn His beloved prophet?

The Prophet Muḥammad, as narrated in the Qur`ān had become subjected to Allāh's warning and slating. He once was warned for not saying the phrase "*Insha`Allāh*", meaning if Allāh wills. It is said that "*Never say about any matter, I will do this tomorrow (for you cannot do anything) except that Allāh wills it. If ever you inadvertently utter anything like this, you should at once remember your Lord and say, I hope that my Lord will guide me.*"¹⁰⁸ This verse is said to have been revealed to warn the Prophet Muḥammad to say, "if Allāh wills" when he once forgot to say it. Instead he said, "*Tomorrow I will absolutely inform the answer of your question*". It is believed that to warn His prophet about the fact that he would only know the answer if Allāh informs him, he was made to wait for the answer for a long time and eventually was warned with the aforesaid verse. Regarding this case, the Prophet Muḥammad is believed to make an unconscious mistake. He surely hoped that his Lord would definitely instruct him.¹⁰⁹ Ṭabarī, on the other hand, does not deal with if it was an honest mistake or not. Nor he cares to pure Muḥammad from his doing. Rather he emphasizes the importance of the consequence of divine warning, as a result of which, the Prophet Muḥammad became more cautious.¹¹⁰

Another warning directed to the Prophet Muḥammad is related to his adopted son Zayd ibn Ḥāritha and his cousin Zainab bint Jahsh. Khadīja

¹⁰⁷ Ṭā Hā 20/122.

¹⁰⁸ al-Kahf 18/23-24.

¹⁰⁹ Mahmud ibn Abdullah Alūsī, *Rūh al-ma`ānī fī tafsīr al-Qur`ān al-azim wa as-sab` al-mathanī*, (Beirut: Dār Iḥya al-Turath al-Arabi), 15/247.

¹¹⁰ Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 15/264.

bestowed Zayd to Prophet Muḥammad. The prophet adopted him and renamed him Zayd ibn Muḥammad until the following Qur`ānic passage was revealed to him, “*Call your adopted sons after their fathers’ names.*”¹¹¹ With the suggestion of Muḥammad, Zayd married Zainab, but their temperaments did not suit one another, and eventually they wanted to get a divorce. When Zaid came to the Prophet Muḥammad to complain about his marriage and to inform him about his desire for a divorce, the Prophet Muḥammad advised him to keep his wife and fear Allāh.¹¹² Then, the Prophet was warned:

You were at that time keeping hidden in your heart that which Allāh intended to reveal: you were fearing the people, whereas Allāh has a greater right that you should fear Him. So, when Zaid had fulfilled his desire of her, We married (the divorced woman) to you so that there remains no hindrance for the believers in regard to the wives of their adopted sons when they have fulfilled their desire of them. And Allāh’s Command had to be carried out.¹¹³

Relatedly, a number of scholars from the past to the present assert that Muḥammad was hiding his love for Zainab. On the other hand, most Muslim scholars while criticizing this claim, assert that Muḥammad was informed about Zayd’s desire for a divorce, and further that he knew that when the divorce took place, he would be married to her by a divine order. He was worried about marrying her because he feared what people would say about him marrying his adopted son’s ex-wife.¹¹⁴ To people who tease Muḥammad for marrying his adopted son’s divorced wife, Allāh said “*(O people) Muḥammad is not the father of any of your men, but he is the messenger of Allāh and the last of the prophets and Allāh is the knower of everything.*”¹¹⁵ With respect to the notion of ‘ismah, Rāzī states that in this narrative, neither does there appear to be any kind of mistake nor a discussion about forgiveness of the Prophet Muḥammad. Similar to his previous approach of the aforementioned narratives about Adam, he suggests that the Prophet Muḥammad left to perform a *mandūb* (a recommended act). He, therefore, was not required to ask for forgiveness.¹¹⁶ Even though some scholars acknowledge Allāh’s reprimand of his messenger,¹¹⁷ in terms of the legal status of the matter, they agree with Rāzī that the Prophet

¹¹¹ al-Aḥzāb 33/4-5.

¹¹² al-Aḥzāb 33/37.

¹¹³ al-Aḥzāb 33/37.

¹¹⁴ Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī al-Ansarī, *al-Jāmi’ li-ahkām al-Qur`ān*, (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabī, 1967), 14/191.

¹¹⁵ al-Aḥzāb 33/40.

¹¹⁶ Rāzī, *’Ismat al-anbiya’*, 128.

¹¹⁷ Ibn Khumayr, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā’*, 87.

Muḥammad was warned because he was careless in doing a recommended act.¹¹⁸

We, therefore, do not aim to discuss what Muḥammad kept hidden in his heart. It can neither be revealed without examining further narratives, nor is debating about it is relevant to the content of this research. Rather we find it important to emphasize the fact that as a result of the given revelation a new sociocultural law was legislated, according to which adopted children would no longer be regarded as equal to biological children in both religious and legal matters. Thereafter it became permissible to marry the ex-wife of an adopted son. This verse, in our way of thinking, not only reveals a new legislation but also manifests the human nature of Muḥammad as he feared of people in the matter of marrying Zainab, which is a natural human reaction.

The third and quite sensitive incident that needs to be addressed here is about a blind man, Abdullah ibn Umm Maktūm, who came to the Prophet Muḥammad for guidance when Muḥammad was in the middle of a speech with the high-ranking men of Quraish. Muḥammad was not happy with the interruption of his speech. He, therefore, frowned at the interrupting man and turned his back to him.¹¹⁹ Upon which the following revelation was conveyed:

He frowned and turned away his face because there came up to him the blind man and what would make you know that he might reform, or heed the admonition, and admonishing might profit him? As for him who is indifferent, to him you attend, though you would not be responsible if he did not reform. And the one who comes to you running, of his own will, and fears, from him you turn away. By no means! This is but an admonition. Let him who wills accept it.¹²⁰

It is suggested by some Muslim scholars that Muḥammad turned away not because the man was blind and poor, but because the blind man interrupted the Prophet Muḥammad's speech to the prominent wealthy people of Quraish. According to this view, Muḥammad neither intended to offend the man nor did he wish to displease him.¹²¹ Additionally Rāzī says that the blind man heard Muḥammad was talking to some other people, he approached the Prophet, and started asking questions in a row. Such an attitude stopped Muḥammad from continuing his speech, and besides it ruined his sermon to the unbelievers.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Ibn Khumayr, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā'*, 89.

¹¹⁹ Rāzī, *'Ismat al-anbiyā'*, 137-138.

¹²⁰ Abasa 80/1-12.

¹²¹ Muhittin Akgül, *Kur'ân-ı Kerîm'de Hz. Peygamber*, (İzmir: Işık yayınları, 1999), 240.

¹²² Rāzī, *'Ismat al-anbiyā'*, 137-138.

The approach of the traditionalist Shi'ite scholars resembles the general view of the Sunni oriented scholars. It is also proposed that Muḥammad, at that time, was striving to guide those high-ranking unbelievers of his people and was passionately conveying the principles of Islam. So that such an interruption of this talk displeased Muḥammad.¹²³ It is, on the other side, suggested that this divine warning, like the rest of the aforementioned cases, is regarded as a proof of the prophecy of Muḥammad. It is recognized as a firm response to those who claim that the Qur`ān is the words of Muḥammad. If the Qur`ān was the writing of Muḥammad, argued by a number of Muslim scholars, Muḥammad would not mention such verses in which he was acutely being criticized.¹²⁴

Why is it hard to tolerate the human side of the prophets? Why has an absolute perfection been expected from the messengers despite how Allāh describes them (as ordinary men)? For what reason do the scholars of Islam struggle to prove the infallibility of the prophets, and to pure the prophets from any kind of wrongdoings and they strenuously interpret each verse in which the prophets are warned and asked for forgiveness for their faults? How could we really say that the Prophet Muḥammad did not do wrong when Allāh says, “*He frowned and turned away his face because there came up to him the blind?*” This expression shows that Allāh was displeased with his messengers’ attitude. Instead of focusing on how Allāh addressed the matter, most scholars focus on whether the blind man was harmed or not in order to absolve Muḥammad of any mistake. In our view, with all due respect, even though Muḥammad’s reaction to the blind man’s interruption of his speech was not kindly, it was a natural human response. His reaction could be tolerated when keeping in mind his human nature as a result of which he is [instinctively] prone to error.

E. Conclusion

The question of how the prophets could be fallible or sinful — as they are expected to be free of all kinds of wrongdoing — dominated the ongoing discussion regarding the notion of *‘ismah*. This approach, in our view, is a core indicator of the fear and concern of the community which was left without a leader who was subject to divine power. The infallibility dogma, therefore, has been formed to fill the gap of an infallible authority that ensued with the death of the Prophet Muḥammad. We, as discussed above, neither happen to see the

¹²³ Sharif al-Murtadā, *Tanzīh al-anbiyā’*, 166.

¹²⁴ Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 22/19.

infallibility debate regarding the prophets when Muḥammad was alive, nor does there exist a particular verse firmly mentioning the *'ismah* of prophets. However, a divine protection of the Qur`ān was narrated as Allāh promises to protect His messages from the dangers of corruption.¹²⁵ That is why even though Muslim scholars, both Sunnis and Shi`ites, generally recognize *'ismah* as one of the definitive prophetic features, they do not agree on to what extent the prophets are infallible. Nor do they agree on the individuals who are believed to be the infallible ones. There rather appear a number of arguments that contradict one another. When the infallibility of prophets (human beings) is discussed, the infallibility of others naturally becomes a subject of the debate — as in the case of Shi`ism, the Imams are recognized as infallible guides and in some mystic groups, the saints (*awlīyā`*) are viewed as infallible apostles.

Our intention in this article is neither to condemn the prophets as sinful men nor to further problematize the issue as it already is, but we find it important to question the matter of why the infallibility of prophets is not a concern of the Qur`ān. Instead for what reason does the Qur`ān mention all the wrongdoings of the prophets? It might be due to the fact that mistakes or even sins imputed to the prophets also become exemplary models for mankind. It is unlikely to condemn a prophet or an ordinary human being as sinful for a mistake or a forgiven sin. If that was the case, none of those verses mentioning how prophets did wrong and asked for mercy would not be included in the Qur`ān. Given that, in our perspective, instead of tolerating the human nature of the prophets, ascribing infallibility to them neither helps us to comprehend the Qur`ānic passages in which the prophets are subjects of divine warning or punishment nor does it lead us to understand how an infallible man would be an exemplary model to a fallible community while their nature oppose one another. Taking into consideration of continuing debate on the infallibility matter, we have come to believe that the prophets, as the Qur`ān says are chosen from among the pure ones,¹²⁶ do not necessarily need to have a divine protection to stay away from malign deeds.

¹²⁵ al-Hijr 15/9.

¹²⁶ Şād 38/45-47.

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