

Infallibility

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In the Name of God; the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful

This article discusses the issues of infallibility and 'Isma in relation to Prophets and angels, with specific emphasis on the role of free will. It then goes on to look at the differences between the Islamic view of infallibility, as compared to Christianity and Judaism. This discussion then evolves into one of belief, with a discussion on the roots of human life and the circumstances surrounding it. We conclude with a detailed look at the concept of infallibility in Islam, outlining the main reasons for the beliefs held by Muslims of different schools of thought.

Etymology of al-'Isma

Al-'Isma: Al-'Isma is the Arabic root of the term under discussion which literally means taking hold of something; abstaining.

In the story of Prophet Noah, with reference to this literal meaning he proclaims to his son:

...لَا عَاصِمَ الْيَوْمَ مِنْ أَمْرِ اللَّهِ...

“There is no protector today from the punishment of God” (Surah Al-Hud, 11:43)

We know that whenever there is a protector there will naturally be a protected one as well.

Al-'Isma also means a bracelet. Thus, wrist in Arabic is called; Al-mi'sam.

Infallibility

By definition, the term fallible means capable of making an error. As such, the term infallible, where 'in' means not, means incapable of error or mistakes. By contrast, al-'Isma (of the Prophets) means that God has protected them by virtue of their pure soul, and by helping them with resistance, tranquility and blessings, thus making them Ma'soum. In reference to the Prophet of Islam, the Qur'an says:

وَاللَّهُ يَعْصِمُكَ مِنَ النَّاسِ

....God will protect you from people... (5:67)

Due to the nature of their creation, angels are incapable of committing sin, because they lack the human desires and the power of choice. This act can best be described by using the following analogies. A human who is born blind is incapable of having a lustful look simply because he lacks the ability (in this case, eyesight) to do so.

Being incapable of committing this sin makes the blind person infallible in this regard, but not Ma'soum, as they have no discretion or choice in the matter. Similarly, an infant is incapable of committing adultery because his potency is not yet developed. Incapacity in this sense is not a virtue. An infant is not worthy of praise for its chastity. We only admire the one who, although was capable of indulging in the sin, was able to control and protect himself against it.

Prophets, like any other human, by virtue enjoy the blessing of freewill, and hence are potentially capable of committing a sin. By applying the term al-'Isma to the Prophet, we do not mean that they are infallible or incapable of making a mistake (as in the case of angels). Rather, they are capable of indulging in the sin, but are able to control and protect themselves against it. This reasoning is part of the solution to the argument posed by our Christian brethren, when they ask 'how can a human be infallible?'. Despite the fact that, ironically, Catholics believe in the infallibility of the Pope.

Nonetheless, as the term 'infallibility' is widely used I shall also provisionally use the term for the translation of 'al-'Isma' until I suggest a more accurate translation.

As stated, by definition, 'infallibility' in Islam does not mean incapability of committing sin or erring (such as in the realm of angels). Infallibility in this sense is not a virtue and is in conflict with the human nature of free will. Hosham, the student of Imam Sadiq (as) in theology says,

"I asked Imam Sadiq (as) about the meaning of 'infallibility' in the realm of humans and he replied:

'The Infallible means he who by the will of God abstains absolutely from all that is forbidden. Indeed Allah the almighty said: Whoever holds firmly to Allah, then he is indeed guided to the Right Path.'"

Therefore 'infallibility' in the realm of humankind means the infallible person enjoys a divine inspiration, by which he voluntarily yet absolutely protects himself against any sin or error. Thus, practically, it is impossible for a Ma'soum to commit a sin or make a mistake.

A very liberal example for understanding the infallibility is when you adapt a good habit as your second nature. For instance, it's become very natural for you to refrain from drinking human urine. It is your insight and certain knowledge about the harmfulness of the urine that not only protects you from drinking it, but even to hear about it sounds disgusting. Thus if you enjoy the insight into, for example, the harms of drinking alcohol, the same behavior will be observed.

'Isma, Justice, and Infallibility

The 'Isma of a prophet is different from the justice of a pious man as it is different from the infallibility of angels.

Infallibility

Angels are incapable of committing a sin and hence are infallible by definition. As a matter of fact, sins cannot be related to, or denoted from, the angels. They lack the desire and hence they do not have freedom of choice to be countable for their acts.

غَلَاظُ شِدَادٍ لَا يَعْصُونَ اللَّهَ مَا أَمَرَهُمْ وَيَفْعَلُونَ مَا يُؤْمَرُونَ

“They disobey not the Commands they receive from Allah, but do that which they are commanded.” (66:6)

Thus, when angels arrived at Prophet Abraham (as) and he served them with a roasted calf, they abstained from it due to the lack of desire and the need for food.

I will give an example, so that you may grasp the concept of the infallibility of angels. Humans and animals have a stomach, and hence it is true to say this person or animal is hungry or satisfied. They also have the sense of seeing, and hence it is correct to say this person is blind or seeing. But we cannot relate those attitudes to inanimate objects. For instance, it is incorrect to say this pen or that desk is hungry or thirsty or is blind or seeing. A piece of rock or wood does not have the sense of seeing to relate those attitudes to it. Similarly, avoidance of sin is not a virtue by those who do not have the capability of committing it. Angels by nature are incapable of committing any sin and error, as they lack freewill. Thus, they are infallible and incapable of committing sins or making any mistakes.

Justice

If an ordinary human acquires the knowledge of knowing good and evil, and they have faith in it, then he or she will develop a pure nature by which they will usually abstain from sins and perform good. A person with this nature is called by definition 'just'. There is however always a possibility for a just person to commit a sin or make a mistake if his whim and desire overtake his pure nature. The reason for this possibility of sin will be examined under the heading of 'The Source of 'Isma'.

Isma of the Prophets and the Imams (peace be on them all) is that although by nature they enjoy all human desires and freedom of choice and hence theoretically they can sin if they so wish, in practice it is impossible for them to sin or make a mistake due to the divine knowledge and blessings they enjoy. Thus, prophets are different from the angels in that they have human desires, though their desires are

under their full control and hence impossible to transgress, as they are different from the 'just' people. They are different from 'just' people in that God the Almighty protected His Prophets by equipping them with the divine knowledge and blessings that makes it in practice impossible for them to commit a sin or make a mistake. Further discussion on this type of knowledge will come under the heading of 'the Source of 'Isma'.

Divine Religions and 'Isma of the Prophets

In general, all religions are unanimous that the Prophets who are favored by Divine communications and privileged of being chosen by Providence to be 'the Messengers of God' are distinguished from the ordinary men.

They are also quite unanimous that God would not reveal His message to anyone that is unworthy of such distinction. Thus, it is necessary that the prophets distinguished themselves in every kind of virtue, that they set to their fellow men an example of purity in thought, loftiness in speech, and nobility in action.

Infallibility in the Judo-Christian Tradition

In general, both the Jewish and Christian theologians regard the authors of the Bible as being inspired, making their books infallible. However, they do not believe in the infallibility of the Prophets. M. Friedländer in 'The Jewish Religion' asserts:

"The prophet remained a human being. He was like every other person, exposed to the temptation to sin and liable to error. The sins and errors of prophets are recorded in order to save us from despair where we are conscious of our sinfulness and to show us the way to repentance. This is illustrated especially in the history of prophet Jonah (Younos). The records of the sins of prophets serve as a warning that we should not consider any man as perfect or deify him."

Christian theologians on the other hand only regard Jesus Christ as infallible, not because he was a prophet but due to their wrong concept of the deity of Jesus. Moreover, since 1870 Papal infallibility was also decreed in Catholicism. According to Catholic doctrine, the Pope is infallible in matters of doctrine, faith and morals. The Ecumenical Council at the Vatican decreed papal infallibility on July 18th, 1870. Papal infallibility is a dogma that the Pope cannot, when acting in his official character of supreme pontiff, err in defining a doctrine of Christian faith or rule of morals, to be held by the church. They believe that 'in order to preserve the Church in the purity of the faith handed on by the apostles, Christ who is truth willed to confer on her a share in his own infallibility^{[1](#)}'

A Common Mistake

There are many stories mentioned in the Bible that sound appalling to the Muslims. Lot, as mentioned in the Old Testament, was so heavily intoxicated that he (God forbid) gets involved in the act of incest with his own two daughters! (Gen. 19:30– 37). According to the Bible he practiced usury (Gen.), separates himself from Abraham, and his God and says: “I have no desire either in Abraham or in his God” (Gen. R. X li.).

David’s adultery with Bath–Sheba after he indirectly assassinated her husband is mentioned in the Bible (II Sam 11:4) and that incident encouraged his eldest son Ammon to deal wickedly with his beautiful stepsister, Tamar; where upon he was slain by Absalom, her full brother.

Solomon the second son of Bath–Sheba by David is mentioned to have 700 official wives and 300 concubines (I King 11:3).

Muslim scholars generally condemn all these fabricated stories and regard them as the best examples of alterations in the Bible. They wonder how people could possibly accuse the messengers of God with such horrible stories.

The fact is that people like Lot, David, and Solomon from the Judo–Christian tradition, and in the biblical viewpoint were not prophets. Lot according to the Bible was just the nephew of Abraham and he and his family, save his wife, were rescued from the punishment in the city of Sodom, because Lot did not betray his uncle Abraham by reporting him to the Pharaoh. Nowhere in the bible is he mentioned as a prophet. In fact, according to the Bible, the Rabbis generally represent Lot in an unfavorable light.

David and Solomon were also only regarded as Kings of Israel, not prophets. Thus, they are usually referred to as King David and King Solomon. The Bible mentions the name of a prophet who lived in the reign of David called ‘Nathan’ (II Sam.7:4) who rebukes David because of his sin with Bath–Sheba. King David is however; regarded as the ‘chosen one of God’ in Rabbinical literature, not because he was a prophet, but due to victories he won for the Israelis. According to the Jewish theologians the authors of Psalms, Proverbs, Ruth and all of the Hagiographa were not prophets, though they believe they were inspired.

Thus, King David and Solomon in the Judo–Christian tradition were like some of the Muslim rulers and kings who have been supportive to their nations and hence have been praised by their nations irrespective of their personal lives.

Therefore, although the Bible relates some sins to the prophets, and hence the Jewish theologians do not regard them infallible, technically speaking, on their principle they never relate an incest or adultery to any person that they consider to be a prophet.

Islamically, we believe that Lot, David, and Solomon (peace be upon them) were all prophets, and hence

the Biblical records have two problems: First, they are not introduced in the Bible as prophets, and second, the accusations related to them.

Is mankind sinful by nature?

The notion of the liability of all men including the prophets to sin and error in Judo-Christian theology is driven from the concept of the original sin related to Adam and Eve, and inherited genetically to all mankind. The Old Testament unqualifiedly declared man's native impulse to be evil. (Gen. 6,5;8, 21)

The crucifixion of Jesus in Christian doctrine is a ramification of human sinful nature. Thus, when you converse with them they sometimes ask you what your vice is, as if it is taken for granted that everyone must have vice or else they are not human.

Their argument can be formulated as follows:

- All humans by nature are sinful and exposed to the temptation to sin.
- Prophets are humans.
- Therefore, Prophets are sinful and exposed to sins.

The thorough discussion about the human nature with regards to sin must be discussed in the philosophy of ethics. Nonetheless, in a nutshell from the Islamic perspective, man is created pure and without any sinful nature. Man by nature only recognizes and enjoys the good. Evil is against his nature. Thus, 'good' in the Qur'an is referred to as 'al-Ma'roof' meaning something known and recognized by human's nature, whereas, 'bad' and 'evil' is introduced as 'al-Monkar' meaning something which is unknown and strange for the human soul. This concept is brilliantly illustrated in the following story:

Waabeseh ibn Ma'bad al-Asadi, one of the companions of the Prophet of Islam (saw) narrates:

"I went to the messenger of God to ask him about virtue (al-Birr) and vice (al-Ithm). Before I started, the Prophet (peace be on him and his progeny) said to me: 'O Wabeseh! Do you want to ask your question or you want me to answer it?'

'Please answer it then, O Messenger of God', I surprisingly replied.

The Prophet said: 'You came to ask me about 'virtue' and 'vice', is it not?'

'Yes, O Messenger of God', I replied.

The Prophet then stroked his chest with his hand and said:

'Vice is what your heart doesn't accept. Virtue is what your heart rests on. If people give you any other opinion on this, you ask your own heart for its (natural and healthy) verdict.'"

The Prophet's answer is the most natural and logical way of addressing this theological question. As a healthy human I trust you admit the fact that any time you do something good, you naturally enjoy it and feel proud of yourself. Whereas, when you even think about committing a sin, you feel uncomfortable and wish not to.

In short, the Islamic perspective is that it is natural not to desire to commit a sin, and hence every human enjoys certain levels of infallibility. If 'vice' is part of human nature, then all the moral teachings of the Prophet are a call to change human nature. Thus, one needs to be psychologically abnormal to follow any of the moral values. The infallibility of the Prophets by contrast proves that man (though a perfect man) can become immune from all types of sins and all various satanic temptations.

'Isma in the Realm of Islam

The learned scholar of the 11th century A.H, Mohammad Baqir Majlesi, demonstrates the best classification of the opinions in regards to the infallibility of the prophets. He writes in his Encyclopedia of 'Beharul-Anwaar':

"The infallibility of the Prophets could be in:

1. The matter of their faith
2. The matter of preaching
3. The matter of explaining the Statutes
4. Their behavior and characters."

The first and the last possibilities are also divided into their lives prior to, and after their prophetic mission. Moreover, the sins or errors that they could be protected against are either mortal sins or minor sins. Similarly, the errors are either intangible errors (where it is better not to commit them), or tangible errors (which should not happen). All of them may also have either happened intentionally or by mistake. Therefore, there are 8 possible opinions on the infallibility of the Prophets amongst the Muslim scholars.

With the exception of the second and the third categories, there are different opinions amongst Muslim scholars about the 'Isma of the Prophets. The root of the variety of the opinions is based on whether the Ayaat, which is the basis of the topic, is apparent or ambiguous and must therefore be based on intellectual proofs.

As for the 'Isma of the 12 Imams and Fatima al-Zahra (as), Sunni scholars don't believe in it. I shall discuss the 'Isma of the Imams (as) under a separate topic. Shia Muslims, whose beliefs stem from the teachings of the Ahlul-Bayt (peace be on them), are unanimous in the belief that the Prophets, the Twelve Imams, and the Daughter of the Prophet of Islam, Lady Fatima (as), from birth to death are protected (Ma'soum) from all types of sins and tangible errors. The only part that remains is intangible errors known as 'Tarkel-Oula' as well as their mistakes in their external senses or what is related to their

worldly personal gain or loss.

Proofs of 'Isma

The proofs for the 'Isma of the Prophets are either based on rationality, or on verses from the Qur'an and Hadiths.

The following are rational proofs for the 'Isma of the Prophets.

1. Trust

The purpose of dispatching the prophets is to guide people to the right path by following the divine commands. This aim will only be gained if people have full trust in the truth of the messenger. If it were possible for him to make a mistake or sin, then he would naturally lose the trust of his people. It would be a sound argument to a messenger who is not immune from sin or error to always doubt the truth about his message, lest this particular teaching is one of the examples in which he has made a mistake. Thus, the Prophet of Islam was known to Arabia in the pre-Islamic era as Mohammad, the Trustworthy. When for the first time he wanted to publicly announce his message, he stood up on a piece of rock and asked all those infidels of Mecca: "O people! If I inform you that your enemy has ambushed behind this mountain, would you believe me?" They all cried: "Yes! Indeed we never heard any lie from you." He then informed them about his mission.

2. Self-Contradiction

A messenger of God is sent to guide and enjoin people to do good, and forbid them from evil. If a prophet is allowed to commit a sin, then it is by far permissible for others to commit sins too. Several years ago, I was invited to give a lecture for 10 nights in one of the towns in the Northern part of Iran. One evening after the lecture and the congregational prayers, a farmer came to me and very honestly and bluntly said: "Sheikh! If it is permissible for you to leave a recommended rite during prayers, is it permissible for us to miss a compulsory one". I noticed that during the prayers I had missed the recommended act of putting my hands on the floor before my knees. Although I had an excuse, it taught me a lesson on the natural expectations of people. If this was the expectation of an ordinary young scholar, imagine what the expectation of a messenger of God would be.

3. Misleading

People are expected to listen to and obey the messenger of God in all his teachings and preachings. If it is permissible for him to make a mistake or commit a sin, then he could mislead people. For instance, he tells them to look at him and learn how to perform their ablution. Then when he is making his own ablution he suddenly performs it a wrong way, and he had told people to follow him. Thus, people learn their ablution other than the way that God wills.

If, however, he realizes that he made a mistake and informs people about his mistake and asks them to follow the new way of performing ablution, firstly people have already lost their trust in him and secondly the possibility of making a mistake for the second time is still there. As a matter of fact, a mistake of a prophet is more problematic than an ordinary scholar. Because as for the scholar there is a source to which people can refer and find out whether their scholar was right or not, but in the case of the prophet he is supposedly the main and the only source available to people.

4. Only Ma'soum can represent God

When you choose someone to represent you in a matter it is a matter of common sense that you choose someone whose qualities you trust in the matters that he is representing you. Thus, nearly all historians and the interpreters of the Qur'an narrated that the Prophet of Islam (S) selected and dispatched only Imam Ali (as) to represent him in delivering the first Ayat of Chapter 9 of the holy Qur'an to the infidels of Mecca. His reason for that selection was 'None shall deliver this save one who is from me and I am from him'.

Prophets are the messengers of God and His representative to mankind. Thus, God will not select the sinful people or those who are prone to sins or mistake to deliver the divine message. It is also impossible for sinful people to be able to become the recipient of a revelation, as this requires a thorough purification.

5. The Source of 'Isma

The main proof for the 'Isma of the Prophets lies under an investigation of the source of their 'Isma. We need to study the type of internal factors that Prophets enjoyed, which made them absolutely immune against all sins and mistakes.

Basically there are two main factors involved when we commit a sin or make a mistake. Either we are ignorant about the sin and the mistake, or our knowledge is not strong enough to the level of 'faith' to overcome our whim and desire and hence in spite of the knowledge, the desire overcomes the intellect. Thus, behind every committed sin there is either ignorance or a justification.

As such, to a certain degree and on different issues healthy humans and people of different faiths are immune from sins and errors. For instance, as healthy humans we are all naturally immune from drinking human urine knowingly and voluntarily. We are also immune from drinking a fatal poison or dropping ourselves from the top of a five-story building. Similarly, if you are a committed Muslim you are also immune, and in other words Ma'soum, from drinking intoxicants. Even if you are forced to drink it, there is a big chance that your body would naturally reject it and you would vomit it all out. In short, there are many examples in our day to day lives where we are protected from making a mistake or committing a sin.

There are also different degrees of knowledge. The knowledge of ordinary people is an acquired

knowledge, which can be both wrong and uncertain. This type of knowledge to its highest level makes the knower just and pious. Nevertheless, there is always a possibility that either his knowledge is a compound ignorance or his knowledge will be overtaken by his whim and desire and hence he is prone to commit a sin. The secret of the 'Isma of the Prophets ought to be sought in their type of knowledge.

The knowledge of the prophets is not a normal acquired knowledge that may or may not be according to reality. Their knowledge is a divine gift, which gives them an access to observe the truth and the reality as it is. The difference between the knowledge of the Prophets and the ordinary people is well demonstrated in the Simile of the Cave presented by Plato or the ancient Parable of the blind men and elephant. Prophets are those who escaped the cave in the first or had a candle in hand in the latter.

Let me explain this a little further. We know that God has given different people different talents and innate ability. This natural endowment makes them enjoy a superior quality that others lack. It seems that an artist in calligraphy is born a calligrapher, in so much as a poet is born with a poetry talent. We don't play dice to decide whether or not to become a physician or a musician. Even if one chooses a subject solely because it was his last option, unless he or she has the talent for it, they will not succeed. Thus, God, due to His wisdom, has bestowed different talents to different people. There is also no doubt that the more the person employs his talent, the more developed it will become.

God the Almighty has bestowed a divine knowledge upon the Prophets from their birth to fulfill His mission in the future. Prophecy is the innate talent of the Prophets. Thus, Prophet Jesus from the cradle announced his Prophecy.

This talent or mysterious power is referred to in many Ahadith as 'the Holy Spirit' (Ruhul-Qudus), which is the means of their knowledge that makes no mistake in showing the reality.

وَأَتَيْنَا عِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ الْبَيِّنَاتِ وَأَيَّدْنَاهُ بِرُوحِ الْقُدُسِ

“And We gave Isa (Jesus), the son of Mary, clear Signs, and supported him with the Holy Spirit (Ruhul-Qudus).” (2:87)

رَفِيعُ الدَّرَجَاتِ ذُو الْعَرْشِ يُلْقِي الرُّوحَ مِنْ أَمْرِهِ عَلَى مَنْ يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ لِيُنْذِرَ يَوْمَ التَّلَاقِ

“He (Allah) sends the Ruh (Spirit) by His Command to any of His slaves He wills.” (, 40: 15)

Although the Holy Spirit in its highest degrees is only to Ma'soum, ordinary people are not deprived of it depending on their sincerity and piety. For instance, when Hassaan Ibn Thabet said a poem about the significance of al-Ghadeer, the Prophet of Islam (S) promised him:

“So far as you are defending us, the Holy Spirit will be with you.”

Similarly, when De'bel Ibn Khozaei read his poem about the Household of the Prophet (S), Imam Redha (as) reminded him:

"O Khozaei! The Holy Spirit spoke on your tongue."

An outstanding contemporary exegetist of the holy Qur'an, the late Allama Tabatabaei said God has blessed the Prophets with two types of knowledge. One is the revelation and the other is the gifted knowledge or 'The Holy Spirit'. His eminence under Ayah 113 of Chapter 4 of the holy Qur'an writes:

"What could be understood from various Ayaat (in spite of their seeming differences) is that by 'al-Inzal' (Sending down) it is meant for revelation of the Book and wisdom which is a kind of divine teaching to His Prophet.

However, what is referred to in the Ayat: **"And taught you what you knew not" (An-Nisa, 4: 113)**, is not just the knowledge of revelation and wisdom. For the circumstances of the Ayat is the judgment of the Prophet in day-to-day events and arguments that people would refer to his personal opinion and judgment. Although this judgment depends on revelation, it is not the revelation by itself.

Thus, the Ayaat is dealing with two types of knowledge: One of them is the teaching by revelation and sending the Archangel to the Prophet (S), and the other is teaching by a kind of throwing to the heart and a hidden inspiration without sending an angel. This understanding is confirmed by many Ahadith on the knowledge of the Prophet."

Imam Ali (as) in reference to this divine protection and inspiration of the Prophet of Islam (S) from his childhood says:

"From the time of his weaning (may God bless him and his pure progeny), Allah had put a mighty angel with him to take him along the path of high character and good behavior through day and night."

This divine knowledge and protection (similar to that of the talent) will increase and become stronger by endeavoring in divine trials, spiritual struggles, and worshipping. A number of Ahadith suggest that the knowledge of Ma'soum would increase every Thursday night.

On a chilly winter day Imam Sadiq (as) and his students were sitting around a brazier. One of the students of Imam Sadiq (as) asked the Imam how the Imams (as) were immune from any sin or mistake? Imam Sadiq (as) picked up a piece of burning charcoal with a pair of tongs and offered it to the man to have a bite! The man, while petrified and stunned, asked what the Imam mean by it? Imam Sadiq (as) replied: "our knowledge about (the reality of) sins is similar to your knowledge about this burning coal".

The holy Qur'an in describing the punishment of those who misappropriate the property of orphans says:

"Verily, those who unjustly eat up the property of orphans, they eat up only fire into their bellies,

and they will be burnt in the blazing Fire.” (An-Nisa, 4: 10)

A learned, just and pious man who knows about the above Ayah will avoid misusing the property of orphans as much as he can. However, there are situations that he may not be able to distinguish whether it is a just use or not, as there is always a chance that his knowledge may be overtaken by his desire and hence, he may commit a sin. But only those who can see the real image of usurping the property of others – eating up fire into their bellies – are 100% immune and protected from committing the sin of usurping others’ property. Similarly, the holy Qur’an in describing the real sin of those who talk ill behind people says:

“And spy not, neither backbite one another. Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would hate it.” (Al-Hujarat, 49: 12)

We are all aware of the fact that backbiting is a mortal sin in Islam. Nonetheless, depending on the level of our knowledge about the above Ayah we abstain from it.

Does anyone other than the Prophets enjoy the Divinely Gifted Knowledge?

God the Almighty is merciful to all and hence every human can potentially enjoy the gifted knowledge. The difference, however, is due to the capacity of receivers. As a general rule, the Almighty God says:

“Whoever holds firmly (seeking 'Ismat) to Allah, then he is indeed guided to the Right Path.” (Ale-Imran, 3: 101)

Therefore, we believe apart from the Prophets, the 12 Successors of the Prophet of Islam also enjoy the highest level of this divine gifted knowledge or ‘The Holy Spirit’.

After the level of Ma’sumeen, other humans are also capable of gaining that ‘Holy Spirit’ each to their own level. The holy Qur’an confirms this type of divine inspiration and protection – to its own level – for other than the Prophets too. For instance, God the Almighty, with regards to the mother of Prophet Moses (peace be on him), says:

“And We inspired the mother of Moses: ‘Suckle him, but when you fear for him, then cast him into the river and fear not, nor grieve.’” (Al-Qasas, 28:7)

Despite this initial inspiration, when she saw her beloved son at the palace of Pharaoh her motherly emotion could have been erupted and would have disclosed her secret about Moses, had it not been the divine protection.

“She was very near to disclose his case, (i.e. the child is her son), had We not strengthened her heart, so that she might remain as one of the believers.” (Al-Qasas, 28: 10)

My teacher Ayatollah Madhaheri narrated the following story about his teacher the late Imam Khomeini.

“As usual early in the morning I went to the Salmasi Mosque in Qom to join the lecture of Seyyed Ruhollah. To our surprise, the Seyyed did not attend the lecture. As his eminence would hardly ever miss any lesson, a few of my friends and I decided to pay him a visit at home. In his house, we found the Seyyed sick in bed while he was feverish. After making some enquiry we found out that the previous night the Seyyed had heard that one of the students had gossiped about one of the Maraje’. The news had sounded so painful to him that it had even physically affected him with fever.”

Indeed, if a spiritual learned scholar like Imam Khomeini (may his soul rest in tranquility) can reach such a high level of protection, imagine where a Ma’soum can reach who is by God’s will equipped with the divine knowledge and can see the reality of the world as it is.

The holy Qur’an also confirms that the blessing of divine protection is open to all and is not limited to the Prophets even though they enjoy the highest degree of it. From the Islamic perspective whoever adheres to Allah and seeks His protection, will be protected and guided according to his/her degrees of adherence.

“And whoever holds firmly to Allah, then he is indeed guided to the Right Path.”

(Ale-Imran, 3:101)

The Holy Qur’an & the Divine Knowledge of the Prophets

The holy Qur’an in many instances confirms the fact that the knowledge of the Prophets was of a different nature and bestowed by Allah the Almighty to them. None of the Prophets ever learned anything from any ordinary scholar. God is their Teacher.

About Prophet Adam (as) the Qur’an says:

“And He (Allah) taught Adam all the Names” (Al-Baqarah, 2:31)

These Names that God is honoring Adam with that even the angels were ignorant of, was the knowledge of the reality of things, and not mere names of the objects.

About Prophet Moses (as) we recite in the Qur’an:

“And when he attained his full strength, and was perfect, We bestowed on him Hukm (solid truth) and Knowledge”. 28: 14. In reference to Prophets David and Solomon (peace be on them) God says: “And to each of them We gave Hukm (firm truth) and Knowledge.” (Al-Anbiya, 21:7)

The same is mentioned about Prophet Lot (as):

“And Lot We gave him Hukm (solid truth) and Knowledge.” (Al-Anbiya 21:74)

Allah the Almighty in reminding His favour to Prophet Jesus (as) says:

“and when I taught you the Book and Al-Hikmah (solid truth)...” (Al-Maidah, 5: 110)

Also Allah the Almighty in Chapter 6 of the holy Qur'an (Sura Al-An'am) after mentioning the name of 18 Prophets (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Noah, David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Zechariah, John, Jesus, Elias, Ishmael, Elisha, Jonah, and Lot) reveals their divine knowledge:

“They are those whom We gave the Book, Al-Hukm (solid truth) and Prophet-hood.” (Al-An'am, 6: 89)

Finally, about the Prophet of Islam (S) we recite:

“Allah has sent down to you the Book and the Al-Hikmah (solid truth) and taught you that which you knew not (in an ordinary way)” (An-Nisa, 4: 113)

In conclusion, the access of Prophets to the divine knowledge or solid truth (Hikmah) has empowered them to be fully protected against making any mistake or committing any sin.

Imam Ali (as) with reference to the association of that type of knowledge with 'Isma says: “Hikmat (solid truth) is associated with 'Isma and Protection.”

Is 'Isma Contrary to Freewill?

The issue of freewill arises when the argument of 'Isma or divine protection is made. Opponents of the concept of divine protection of the Prophets usually argue that if 'Isma is a divine gift that immunises the receiver, then they lack freedom of choice. They argue that man's nature of freewill requires occasional transgression or else he is rather an animal or an angel, not a human.

Ahmed Amin (1878–1954), the Egyptian historian asserts that immunity from sin is an illusion. In his book 'Dhohal-Islam' (Morning of Islam), he writes:

“The virtue of man is not to be Ma'soum and divinely protected from sins. The virtue is that in spite of his ability to sin, in most of the instances he chooses the virtues and abstain from sins.”

We believe, first of all, that the notion of the necessity of sinning for humans is driven from the Judo-Christian concept of the original sin as discussed earlier and has no basis in Islam.

Secondly, 'Isma is contrary to free will in its English meaning of infallibility and incapability as in the case of the angels. As explained earlier the Prophets are in this sense fallible and capable of sinning.

Therefore, about Prophet Joseph – Yusuf (as) we recite in the Quran:

“And indeed she did desire him, and he would have inclined to her desire, had he not seen the

evidence of his Lord.” (Yusuf, 12:24)

In the same story the Quran narrates from the wife of the king who said to the women in the city:

“I did seek to seduce him, but he sought Protection (Isma from God).” (Yusuf, 12:32)

Therefore, if Prophet Yusuf (as) was incapable of committing adultery he would not have had the desire for it, nor would he need to seek divine protection.

The holy Quran also with regards to all the above-mentioned 18 Prophets says:

“If they had joined in worship others with Allah, all that they used to do would have been of no benefit to them.” (Al-An’am, 6:88)

The above and many other verses in the Quran clearly state the fact that the Prophets were all humans and enjoyed all humane desires and free will. Or else, they did not need to be warned about anything. What made the Prophets distinguished from others, however, was their absolute power of control and protection by the divine knowledge bestowed upon them, which made it voluntarily impossible for them to sin. For instance, thanks to God I have never, and with the will of God will never drink any alcohol in my entire life. Does this mean I lack the blessing of freedom of choice? Is absolute abstinence from a sin a vice or a virtue?

The fallacy of the argument of people like Ahmed Amin is their assumption that unless man transgresses he lacks the freedom of choice.

The fallacy of this argument is very obvious. Suppose you have a very compelling will and reason to avoid a particular sin such as drinking alcohol in the above example, does this mean you lack freewill or was it in fact your choice to decide not to sin at all?

Similarly, none of the Prophets were forced to abstain from a sin and hence theoretically, it was possible for them to sin and therefore, God is warning them too. Nonetheless, they – due to their knowledge about the reality of sins – chose not to sin at all and as a result it became practically impossible for them to sin.

Moreover, the knowledge no matter how strong it may be, does not force the knower to act upon something or to refrain from something else in the sense of removing his freewill. ‘Isma is a production of divine knowledge whereas freewill is the characteristic of an action. They belong to two different faculties.

For instance, as an adult you have full knowledge of the fatality of poisonous liquid and hence you will voluntarily refrain from it. In other words, it is impossible for you to drink it, although this impossibility is still your choice. That means, in theory, you can always choose to drink it.

In the same example, a child who has no knowledge about the danger of drinking poison will take it carelessly. Does it mean that the child enjoys the blessing of freewill and you lack it?

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