Forum

Between Creed and Qur'ān:
Shi'ite Views of *'Iṣmah* in Light of Qur'ān (48:1–2)

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Islam's main document, the Qur'ān, is perceived as the foundation for the religion's creedal ideas. Throughout the ages, however, Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*), like its counterpart endeavors in other established religions, has become subject to circularity. This means basically that while faith-based scholars may declare that their exegeses are based upon reading scripture qua scripture, their interpretations are often conditioned by creedal constructs imposed upon the text. One such issue in Islam revolves around *'iṣmah*, the concept of prophetic inerrancy.

A prophet, in the Islamic worldview, is not simply someone who delivers God's message, but one who is also tasked with being an exemplar. Since the holder of such an office must have impeccable conduct, as well as proficiency in teaching and explaining what God wants for the faith community, it might be assumed that a doctrine of prophetic inerrancy was a logical inevitability. There is a general agreement between Sunnis and Shī'ahs—primarily by rational analysis—on the issue of the Prophet (ṢAAS) being inerrant from major and minor sins. The concept is not clearly spelled out in the Qur'ān, and based on their differences in creedal perception, the two groups, while agreeing on a core idea, differ on certain details.

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Literal readings of some verses of the Qur'ān seem to refute the idea of *'iṣmah*, and it is in the interpretation/refraction of such verses that the hermeneutic prowess of exegetes comes to light. This paper will examine two major issues: the concept of *'iṣmah* and its evolution, focusing primarily on the Shī'ite understanding, and the exegeses of select Shī'ite scholars on the approach to the opening verses of *Surat al-Fatḥ* (Qur'ān 48:1–2), with special emphasis on the interpretation of the twentieth-century luminary, 'Allāmah Muḥammad Husayn Ṭabaṭabā'ī (d. 1981). These verses may be literally translated thus:

> Verily we have granted you a clear victory so that God might forgive you for the sins you have committed and those that will come later, so that He might complete his bounty upon you and guide you to the Straight Path.

'Iṣmah

'Iṣmah is derived from *aṣama*, defined in *Lisānal-'Arab* as "prevention" , with the meaning illustrated by the expression "`iṣmatu llāhi 'abdahū" – indicating God's preventing his servant from that which ruins/destroys him.[1] In an explanatory footnote to his translated work *A Shīite Creed*, Asaf Fyzee, by consulting several dictionaries, notes that *'iṣmatu'l ambiyā* is God's protection of the prophets, imbuing them with a defense against perdition, the faculty of avoiding acts of disobedience, while still leaving them with possession of the power to commit them.[2] The foregoing two meanings are supported by the Qur'ānic usage of the word that appears in thirteen cases in its various forms – Qur'ān 3:101; Qur'ān 3:103; Qur'ān 4:146; Qur'ān 4:175; Qur'ān 5:67; Qur'ān 10:27; Qur'ān 11:43 (twice): Qur'ān 12:32; Qur'ān 22:78; Qur'ān 33:17: Qur'ān 40:33; and Qur'ān 60:10. In Qur'ān 5:67, the translation here is to protect, as in "God will protect you from the people." Even in cases where the verb form lends itself to translations that might be seemingly far from having to do with protection, a deeper examination of the root and context shows that the meaning is still there. Such an example is provided in Qur'ān 3:103: "And hold fast (*w'ataṣimū*) to the rope of God together and do not separate." As Muḥammad 'Alī al-Shawkānī explains in his famous *tafsīr*, "*i`taṣama bihī*" means to cling to something that if, in doing so, one protects himself from something else.[3] The rest of the verse illustrates the meaning: to adhere as a group in obedience to God as a protection against separation into factions and groups.

There is no clear dating as to when the concept first surfaced. Fazlur Rahman claims that up to about 150/767, there was little trace of any for-

mal doctrine of prophetic infallibility, although a notion of the Prophet's absolute authority was undoubtedly assumed.[4] A. J. Wensinck, translating *'iṣmah* as "impeccability" declares, without providing any proof, that the dogma as it pertains to prophets was probably first formulated in the middle of the tenth century AC.[5] In a rather strange critique of early Muslim attitudes toward the Prophet, he assumes – again without providing any proof – that the concept "arose out of the growing worship of Muḥammad."[6]

M. M. Bravmann, the renowned philologist and scholar on the early period of Islam, considers the oldest recorded instance of the idea in a speech attributed to Abū Bakr, the Companion who became the first Caliph, delivered on the day following the Prophet's death. Citing from the speech as reported in al-Ṭabarī's al-Tārīkh, he focuses on the part "God has elected Muḥammad above all other human beings, and has protected him from moral weaknesses ('aṣamahu min-al-āfāt)."[7] He then traces the concept to pre-Islamic provenance, citing from Jahiliyyah poetry to show the idea of freedom from moral weaknesses and stumblings was present among the Arabs. Islam, he propounds, simply developed the idea into a grace from God as opposed to it being a quasi-biological trait.[8]

'Iṣmah, among both Sunnis and Shī'ahs, evolved in terms of its dimensions. The early Shī'ite theologian Hisham b. al-Ḥakam (d. 175/795–6) restricted the concept to the imāms only, opining that the prophets might disobey Divine commands and then be corrected by later revelation.[9] Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Bābawayh al-Qummī (d. 381/991), more famously known as Ibn Bābūya or Shaykh Ṣadūq, allowed for attributed *'iṣmah* to the prophets, apostles, imāms, and angels – stating that the entire group is infallible, purified from all defilement (*danas*), and commission of any sin, whether it be minor or major.[10] He went as far as saying that any person denying such infallibility to them is a disbeliever.[11] Emile Tyan, an orientalist who provided the entry on *'iṣmah* in the second edition of Brill's *Encyclopedia of Islam* claims that Ibn Bābawayh allowed for inadvertency (*sahw*) on the part of the prophets so that they might show their humanness, an allegation for which I have not yet found any clear proof.[12] Indeed, Ibn Bābawayh's placement of the prophets, messengers, angels and imāms in the same category seems to reject any idea of inadvertency. He goes so far as to say that not only are all four categories infallible at all times, but characterized by completeness, perfection, and knowledge from their very beginning to the end of their lives – and never described by any form of imperfection, disobedience, or ignorance.[13]

Ibn Bābawayh's positioning of the angels and prophets on the same level seemed to negate the idea of any choice for both parties. As such, his

student, Abu ʿAbd Allah Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Nuʾmān al-ʾUkbarī al-Baghdādī (413/1022)—more famous as *al-Shaykh al-Mufīd*—in his *Taṣḥīḥ ʿItiqadat al-Imāmiyah*, a corrective response to *Risālat al-Iʿtiqādāt* explained that *ʿiṣmah* does not negate the ability to commit sin, nor does it, in and of itself, compel the one upon whom it is endowed to do good only.[14] It is rather a grace that God bestows upon His servant, knowing that it does not impact upon the servant's ability to commit sin.[15]

Al-Shaykh al-Mufīd held that in general, prophets are inerrant from major and minor sins both before their investiture with the prophethood, as well as after it. Before such investiture, however, rational analysis does not negate the possibility that they may have unintentionally committed some minor sins that are not disgraceful. He attributes this summation to the general body of Shīʿite scholars.[16] Muḥammad is unique, however, al-Mufīd argues, in that he is of those who never disobeyed God from the time of his creation until his death – or commit any sin, intentionally, unintentionally or out of forgetfulness.[17] He attributes this to the Qurʾān, citing the verse from *Surat al- Najm* to silence those who adduce verses from the Qurʾān to negate *ʿiṣmah*: "Your Companion (Muḥammad) is not misguided, nor is he deluded" (Qurʾān 53:2). He also notes that transmitted reports state that the Prophet (and the imāms) were those who were tasked with making God's will and commands known to humans, from the times that their minds were complete to their death and that even before their age of responsibility, they were never in a state of incompleteness or ignorance, in the same matrix as Jesus and John the Baptist.[18] Since this idea is rational, and since there is no reason to doubt the reports, al-Mufīd stated that what we may declare with certainty is that during the office of prophethood (and Imāmate), they are complete in knowledge, and infallibility, and that we may withhold taking a position on their state before such office – although we can declare with certainty too that infallibility became a necessary trait once God completed the formation of their intellectual ability, and such infallibility lasted up to their time of death.[19]

Al-Mufīd's student, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 426/1044) dealt with the issue of *ʿiṣmah* in his *Tanzīh al-Anbiyā waʾl Aʾimmah*, summing up the different positions of his time.[20] According to him the main positions are as follows:

1. The Imāmiyya Shīʿahs: prophets do not commit any major or minor sin, neither before nor after their investiture with prophethood.

2. A group of the Ahl al-Ḥadith and the Hashwiya: prophets may commit major sins before their investiture. There are subgroups among them holding various ideas regarding such sins: some of them allow such sins even during prophethood except for

prevarication in that which has to do with the delivery of their message. Others allow such sins on condition that they are kept secret and not disclosed.

3. The Mu'tazilites: major and those minor sins that are disgraceful are not committed by the prophets, neither before nor during their prophethood. In any stage, however, they may commit sins that are not-disgraceful (*ghayr mustakhaffah*). There is difference, however, on the commission of these minor sins: some hold that prophets may willingly commit these sins, while others opine that prophets do not commit that which they know to be a sin, but rather out of inadvertency.[21]

Having thus outlined the various positions, al-Murtaḍā pointed out that, in the final analysis, the perceived difference between the Imāmiyya Shī'ahs and the Mu'tazilites over the issue of minor sins might be meaningless since the Mu'tazilites only allow for such sins that will not warrant punishment, but simply result in a reduction of reward. This, in essence, is the same as the Shī'ite position that rejects the idea of prophets committing sin, meaning their doing any action that will be liable to punishment from God.[22]

By the fourteenth century, the points of disagreement between the Shī'ite scholars had been ironed out, and the famous Ḥasan b. Yūsuf, more popularly known as 'Allāmah al-Hillī (d. 726/1326) perhaps provided the most comprehensive traditional Shī'ite view on *'iṣmah*. Noting that this is not something that is from the individual's own potential, he expounded thus:

> (I)mmunity to sin is a hidden kindness (*lutf*) which Allah, the most high shows to (the Prophet) on whom He has laid the task (*mukallaf*) that he may have no incentive to forsake obedience and to commit sin (*ma'ṣiya*), although he has the power (*qudra*) to do so. For if it were not so, one could have no confidence in his word. Then the value of his prophetic mission would be nullified and that is impossible.[23]

The commentator of al-Hillī's *Al-Bāb al-Ḥādī Ashar*, Miqdād al-Hillī (d. 826/1423) was careful to differentiate this position from that of al-Ṣadūq's (provided earlier in this paper, and putting angels and prophets in the same category), by appending to al-Hillī's text that:

> Know that a person immune to sin (ma'ṣūm) shares with others in the kindnesses which bring men nearer to Allah. And in addition to that, because of the nature of his soul (*malakat nafsāniyya*), he enjoys a special form of kindness which Allah bestows upon him so that because of that, he does not choose to forsake obedience and to commit sin, although he has the ability to do so. (An angel does not have that ability. . . .) [24]

It would seem too that, with the passage of time, scholars started pos-
tulating about some ancillary qualities for the prophets and their *'iṣmah*.
Naṣīr al-Dīn at-Ṭusī (d. 672/1274) specified that a prophet must possess
'iṣmah so that people might have confidence in his ministry, and that he
must also have completeness of intellect, quick-wittedness, and intelli-
gence.[25] He should not be characterized by fearfulness, harshness, lack of
proper speech, or anything that is a defect, lack of attention, nor should he
eat in the street or commit similar indiscretions.[26] He should be free from
any imputation of lowliness of birth or harlotry on the part of his parents.[27]
Muḥammad Riḍā al-Muzaffar, a contemporary Shī'ite scholar, added to
the foregoing qualifications for *'iṣmah* , that the prophet should be noted
for bravery, diplomacy, sagacity, and patience, and that he should not even
laugh aloud or do anything that is unacceptable to public opinion.[28]

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzalī (d. 505/1111), the Ash'arite theologian, pro-
vides us with a twelfth-century Sunni perspective:

> There are certain impossibilities that logic dictates regarding prophets,
> such as any ignorance about God, not delivering the message of
> God, suppressing the knowledge of that which is vital for guidance,
> prevarication, error, and mistakes in that which they are delivering,
> shortcomings in their mission, and ignorance about the details of
> the Sharia that they have been ordered to proclaim and promulgate.
> As far as the temptation of sin in that which pertains to a prophet
> himself only and that which has no connection to his ministry, the
> intellect does not necessitate the idea of *'iṣmah* but rests rather upon
> a necessary understanding from the divine mandate (*tawqīfi*). There
> is consensus regarding prophetic *'iṣmah* from major sins, as well as
> from that which demeans and belittles their standing from immoralities,
> such as fornication, theft and homosexuality. A group has rejected the
> possibility of them committing minor transgressions saying that sin, in
> every manifestation, is a major thing. This therefore necessitates their
> inerrancy in this regard. The truth is that there are such things as minor
> sins, and those are expiated by the five daily prayers. . . ."[29]

Throughout history, it would seem that there has been a convergence
of ideas among Sunnis and Shī'ah on the issue, except for the difference
regarding forgetfulness and inadvertency. Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī
(d. 1988) perhaps best summed up a Sunni viewpoint that is not dissimilar
to the standard Shī'ite doctrine when he wrote that:

> Muslim scholars have agreed on the *'iṣmah* of all the prophets, for it
> is not seeming that there should arise from anyone of them a major
> sin, neither before nor after their prophethood. Nor can a minor sin
> arise from anyone of them, since that would devalue his honor and

his role as exemplar. They have committed errors for which God has reprimanded them, directing them to the solution, but these errors were not connected to matters of religion or character, in which any mistake would be serious blemish. Rather such affairs are in the category of minor mistakes that arise from personal and mundane issues. . . . If the prophets perceive something as a sin that requires repentance, such repentance is not from what we see as sinful errors or what we would commit from out of malicious intent.[30]

In all of the discourse thus far – except for Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī who considered the issue as one of necessary understanding of the divine mandate, and al-Mufīd, who adduced verses of the Qur'ān in support of the doctrine – all of the other commentators seem to work on the premise of *'iṣmah* being a matter reached by rational analysis. This is where the thought of ʿAllāmah Ṭabaṭabāʾī stands out as unique – for, bringing all the different disciplines of knowledge at his disposal to bear on the issue – he maintained that it was adduced from a proper reading of the Qur'ān, citing several verses to support his view.

It is perhaps fitting at this stage to provide a brief biographical sketch of the ʿAllāmah, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabaṭabāʾī (d. 1981) was one of, if not the most learned, Shīʿite scholars of the last century. Although more widely known by the title of ʿAllāmah, he was also recognized as a philosopher, an exegete and, above all, an ayatollah.[31] As Professor Sayyid Husayn Nasr (Georgetown University), notes, "Allāmah Ṭabaṭabāʾī has the distinction of being a master of both the Sharia and esoteric sciences, while at the same time being an outstanding Islamic philosopher/theosopher."[32] ʿAllāmah was the author of several works in both Persian and Arabic, the most famous of which is probably his voluminous exegesis, *al-Mīzān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*.

The exalted rank that *al-Mīzān* occupies is perhaps best evidenced in Professor Mahmoud Ayoub's project to provide a translated collection of exegeses that explains the Qur'ān as Muslims understand it.[33] From the hundreds of exegetical works that were available, he chose only a few – among them, *al-Mīzān*. As Professor Ayoub notes, *al-Mīzān* "is meant to speak to the young intellectuals of the Shiʾi Muslim Community and often approaches the verses of the Qur'ān from philosophical, sociological and traditional viewpoints. It reflects the wide and profound learning of one of the most respected recent religious scholars of the Shīʿī community."[34] This ability to draw on several different perspectives was the reason why Professor Sayyid Husayn Nasr chose him to author a book that was designed to explain the Shīʿite worldview to Westerners, translated into English as *Shi'a*, a work that has seen several editions.[35]

While working within the confines of the traditional Islamic *hawza*, ʿAllāmah Ṭabaṭabāʾī was certainly aware of the world outside of the seminary – as evidenced by his refutation of Marxism on the basis of Islamic philosophy, and his published responses to Western philosophical concepts, discussed with the French Islamicist and philosopher, Henri Corbin, between 1958–1977.[36] A university has been named after him in Iran, and his works are still widely sought, since he is recognized not only as a scholar of Shiʾism but of Islam as a whole.[37]

In his book *Shiah dar Islam* (rendered into English as *Shia* by Professor Sayyid Husayn Nasr), ʿAllāmah Ṭabaṭabāʾī explains *ʿiṣmah* thus:

> A prophet of God must possess the quality of inerrancy. In receiving the revelation from God, in guarding it and in making possible its reaching the people, he must be free from error. He must not commit sin (*maʿṣīya*). The reception of revelation, its preservation and its propagation are three principles of ontological guidance; and error in existence itself is meaningless. Furthermore, sin and opposition to the claims of the religious call and its propagation are impossible in a prophet for they would be against the original religious mission; they would destroy the confidence of the people, their reliance upon the truth and the validity of the call. As a result they would destroy the purpose of the religious call itself.[38]

Having thus adumbrated the doctrine in a manner that is agreed upon by both the Sunni and Shīʿah perspectives, ʿAllāmah Ṭabaṭabāʾī added a dimension for scriptural provenance that the scholars cited thus far did not seem to have explored:

> God, the Exalted, refers in His word to the inerrancy of the prophets, saying, "And we chose them and guided them unto a straight path." (Qurʾān 6:87)

And also:

> He is the Knower of the Unseen, and He revealeth unto none His secret save unto every messenger whom He hath chosen, and then He maketh a guard to go before him and a guard behind him, that he may know they have indeed conveyed the messages of their Lord. (Qurʾān 72:26–28)

In *al-Mīzān,* he cited several more verses to support his idea that support for *ʿiṣmah* need not only rely on rational proof, but upon scripture as well. He wrote a lengthy excursus on prophetic protection against sin, based on Qurʾān 2:213:

> Humankind was one single nation; God sent Messengers with glad tidings and warnings; and with them He sent the Book in truth to judge

between people in matters wherein they differed; but the People of the Book after the clear Signs came to them did not differ among themselves except through contumacy. God by His Grace guided the believers to the truth concerning that wherein they differed. He guides whom He will to a path that is straight.[39]

If, according to 'Allāmah Ṭabaṭabā'ī, God has tasked prophets with the duty of warning humankind, and has aided them with revelation, then the prophets must clearly explain what is right belief, and action. Since God cannot be misguided nor does He forget (Qur'ān 2:53), then the vehicle of such revelations – that is, the prophets – must be free from error too. In like manner, supportive exegeses are provided for several other verses, among them:

> And He provides for him from (sources) he never could imagine. And if anyone puts his trust in God sufficient is (God) for him. For God will surely accomplish His purpose: verily for all things has God appointed a due proportion. (Qur'ān 65:3)

> The man in Egypt who bought him said to his wife: "Make his stay (among us) honorable: maybe he will bring us much good or we shall adopt him as a son." Thus did We establish Joseph in the land that We might teach him the interpretation of stories (and events). And God hath full power and control over His affairs; but most among humankind know it not. (Qur'ān 12:21)

> "That he may know that they have (truly) brought and delivered the Messages of their Lord: and He surrounds (all the mysteries) that are with them and takes account of every single thing." (Qur'ān 72:28)

> "We descend not but by command of thy Lord: to Him belongs what is before us and what is behind us and what is between: and your Lord never forgets." (Qur'ān 19:64)

The verses all reveal a common theme: that the prophets are protected and in the observance of their office, there can be no mistakes or errors since that would certainly cause a problem regarding their role as guid-ers.[40] Interestingly, however, Ṭabaṭabā'ī seems to part company with the normative contemporary Shī'ite doctrine in taking no position on the ab-solute protection. On mistakes unrelated to the reception of revelation or its interpretation and delivery, as might occur for example, in the sensory perception (*al ḥawās wa idrākātihā*), he states that such a matter is outside of the area of discussion.[41] It would seem that since, for 'Allāmah, the hu-manness of the prophets is an essential quality, the theoretical possibility of fallibility outside of their prophetic office could not be denied – but that

to engage in a discussion of the issue would be to engage in conjecture that could have no final answer. In this manner, he seems to take a middle position between the normative Sunni and Shī'ite perspectives.

Yet, however, regardless of the position that any exegete might take regarding *'iṣmah*, and the issue of minor mistakes, the literal reading of Qur'ān 48:2, with particular use of the expression "*mā taqaddama min dhanbika wa mā ta'akhara*" is indeed problematic, for the word *dhanb* is generally translated as an offense, a wrong, a disobedience[42] – all of which, when attributed to a prophet, certainly clash with any idea of protection from sin. The importance of the verse to our discussion is indicated by Al-Mufīd's reference to it in his *Awa'il*, wherein he states, after noting the Shī'ite position, that "as for those who deny this concept based on the verse '*liyaghfira laka llāhu mā taqaddama min dhanbika wa mā ta'akhara*' and similar material from the Qur'ān, relying on them as an argument against our position, the interpretation is against what they wrongly assume. . . ."[43]

The exegeses that follow have been chosen for their high standing in the Shī'ah community, and represent the different stages in Shī'ite *tafsīr* tradition – starting from the work of 'Alī b. Ibrahīm al-Qummī (d. 328/939), one of the most famous Shī'ite ḥadīth collectors, and representing the second stratum after the period of Shī'ite imāms, all the way down to the modern period, represented by *al-Mīzān*.[44] Alī b. Ibrahīm al-Qummī deals with the matter in the briefest manner, citing a ḥadīth thus: "From Muḥammad b. Ja'far: I asked Abū ʿAbd Allah regarding this verse: 'Verily we have granted you a clear victory so that God might forgive you for the sins you have committed and those that will come later'. He responded: 'He did not commit any sin, nor did he have any inkling toward sinning, but God harnessed the sins of his Shias to him and then forgave them for him (i.e. the Prophet).'"[45]

Representing the third stratum of commentators is Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭusī (d. 460/1067), (also known as Shaykh al-Tā'ifah), author of *al-Tibyān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, one of the most studied works of Shī'ite exegesis. He provides a lengthy discussion on the relevant verses, starting with one of his explanations: that the forgiveness in Qur'ān 48:1–2 is as a blessing over the jihād that the Prophet had to wage in order to liberate Mecca. He then cites the following explanations for *dhanb*, in the context of the verse, and dismisses them as simply not allowable, based on the idea of *'iṣmah* :

1. The sins that the prophet committed before his investiture and those that followed.

2. The sins that the prophet committed before the Victory and those that followed.

3. The reference is to those sins that occurred as well as those that did not, as a promise that, were they to be committed, they would be forgiven.

4. The sins that were committed by Adam and those that followed his time.[46]

He then discusses the interpretation that sins are in reference to minor transgressions, mistakenly committed, also dismissing this idea as unsound, since it has been established that no such actions could emanate from a prophet. And if a minor transgression were to be committed out of error, it is forgiven, according to those who hold such a view, and it therefore does not warrant penalty. If this is the case then, how can God forgive the prophet for something that, were God to take him to task for it, He would be committing an act of injustice?[47]

Al-Ṭusī then offers two explanations, the first of which is that the sins are those of the Muslim community, and that such sins would be forgiven by the prophet's intercession and because of his high status with God. The sins are attributed to the prophet, in the same manner as the Qur'ān states "Ask the village" (Qur'ān 12:82). Here the connotation is to ask the people of the village, but despite this omission, and the "village" appearing as the object, the meaning is still clear. In a similar manner too, the Qur'ān states "and when your Lord comes" (Qur'ān 89:22), when in fact Al-Ṭusī maintains that the meaning is when the order of your Lord comes—and thus, the actual possessive is omitted, while the connotation still remains.[48]

The second explanation is that God wants to forgive the tribe of the Prophet for their transgressions against him in barring him from Mecca in the year of Hudaibiyya, and to cover up that disgrace by the conquest that would follow, thus making it a part of his jihād for the city. The word *sin* may be attributed to the perpetrator or to the victim – and in the case of Qur'ān 48:1–2, the attribution is to the victim.[49]

Abū ʿAlī al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabarsī (d. 548/1153) was a disciple of al-Ṭūsī and presents his teacher's exegesis almost verbatim in his *Majmaʿ al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*. While not opting for any one interpretation as the only correct one, he does point out that, based on the traditions from the imāms who testified that the prophet never sinned or had any desire to sin, the attribution of the Muslim community's transgressions to the Prophet is plausible.[50] He adds some other explanations, among them, that the meaning of *dhanb* is the eschewal of that which is praiseworthy. This, he continues, seems possible in the case of the Prophet, since it is known that he does not go against the obligatory imperatives. In his case, it would be correct to deem such abandonment as a sin when one considers the Prophet's

high status, although, were it to be done by other than him, it would not be seen as a transgression. Another interpretation is that the verses were addressed as a laudation to the Prophet, in the manner of glad tidings, along the same mode in which one says "May God forgive you." This, however, is rather farfetched since the norm is that such is mentioned as a form of supplication, not as a praiseworthy statement.[51]

Mulla Muḥsin Fayḍ al-Kāshānī (d. 1091/1680) represents the fourth stratum with his al-Ṣāfī.[52] He cites from all of the foregoing exegeses, preferring the explanation of attributing the sins of others to the Prophet, but extending the coverage to go beyond the Muslim community, since, after his message, 'there is no umma but that it is under the shari'ah of Muḥammad," a testament to the universality of the Prophet's message.

In all of the preceding summaries of the various exegeses, despite their creativity, there is an element of the farfetched in terms of what is to be logically deduced from any reading of scripture – basically that unless accompanied by some conditioner, the words are to be taken at their appearance, as in the linguistic axiom "*al aṣl fi'l kalām al-ḥaqiqah*" (the basic rule in speech is literalness).[53] Following is a functional translation of 'Allāmah Ṭabaṭabā'ī 's *tafsir* of the verses:

> The *lam* (ل) in "*liyaghfira*" is a causative prefix, explaining what seems apparent from the words, that the goal of this clear victory is to forgive those sins that have been committed before and those that will follow. It is obvious however that there is no connection between the victory and forgiveness of sin, and that there is no logical meaning therefore to connect the cause to forgiveness. To escape this problematic dubiousness of the literal understanding, some of them have said that the prefatory lam (ل) is one of oath, and that the full expression is actually "*liyaghfiranna*"—but that the nunated suffix of emphasis was dropped, and that which preceded it was denoted by a "*fat-ha*" to denote that there was an omission. This position is an erroneous one, with no citation to provide textual evidence of such usage.[54]

So too is the perspective of those who, in seeking to escape their problem of a literal understanding, claim that the reason is that there is a collection of bounties: there is the forgiveness, and that which is attached to it in terms of parsing, such as the completion of bounty, guidance, and glorious victory – and this, therefore, does not negate that the forgiveness of sin, in and of itself, and is part of the reason for the victory. This is absurd and absolutely preposterous, because the forgiveness of sin is neither the reason or part of the reason for victory, and there is absolutely no room for conjecture about such a connection. In summary then, this type of problem that arises from such a literal reading is the best evidence that the word *dhanb*

in the verse cannot be interpreted in the well-known connotation – that is, the contravention of that which is good, which is to commit a transgression against a commandment.[55]

In like manner, too, the term *maghfirah* cannot be understood in the well-known meaning of the absolving of punishment for the already explained contravention of that which is good. *Dhanb*, when its usage in the language is examined, reveals that its meaning is that action that necessitates a negative consequence, and *maghfirah* is the covering or protection of something. The two foregoing meanings that contemporarily appear so obvious to us in common usage – that is, sin and forgiveness are thus as a result of our restricting the understanding in a juristic context.[56]

The Prophet's preaching against and defiance of disbelief and idolatry before the hijrah, and his perseverance in such activity, along with the resultant wars and battles with the disbelievers and polytheists after the hijrah were all actions that had negative consequences with those disbelievers and polytheists. They would not have forgiven him these actions as long as they had any clout and power. They would not have forgotten the toppling of their community, and the destruction of their rites and practices, nor revenge for those of their stalwarts who were killed, unless they were healed of their lust for vengeance, the desire to ruin his name and the obliterate all trace of him were it not that God had blessed him with this victory – that is, the conquest of Mecca as well as the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, which ended with the entry to Mecca. God took away their power, extinguished their animosity, and thus protected the Prophet, securing him from whatever negative repercussions would have surfaced from them.

The meaning of *dhanb* – and God knows best – therefore, is the negative repercussions that the disbelievers and polytheists would have effected against the Prophet. As we find in Moses speech "They had an issue against me, and I was afraid that they would kill me (Qur'ān 26:14)." In the *āyah*, (Qur'ān 48:2), the *dhanb* (sin) that has occurred earlier refers to that which occurred in Mecca before the hijrah. God's assurance regarding the *dhanb* (sin) of the Prophet means God's safeguarding him by nullifying any negativity that would have surfaced from the Meccans, and by taking away their power, and causing the destruction of their dwellings. This is supported by what follows from "and complete his bounty upon you" up to "and God will assist you with tremendous help (Qur'ān 48:2–3)."

The exegetes have many different views on the *āyah*, among them are those who say "the meaning of *dhanb* is that which surfaced from him in terms of sins, and the understanding of what preceded and what ensued is in reference to those sins that were committed before prophethood and after it. It has also been said "What were committed before the victory and

after it. This understanding however is structured on the idea of prophets committing sin as logically acceptable. This, however, contradicts what is absolutely clear from the Quran, the Sunna, and logic regarding their inerrancy. Another obvious problem is that there is no connection between the victory and forgiveness in the context of the ayah. Among such indicators are that maghfirah, if it is forgiveness, and must apply to that which has occurred and not yet occurred of sins, means that there is forgiveness for that which has not transpired from sin, making the whole promise meaningless."[57]

The foregoing excerpt shows that 'Allāmah Ṭabaṭabā'ī was keenly aware of the impact of the verses on *'iṣmah*, and the shallowness of the traditional interpretations. He therefore chose to do the obvious and interpret *dhanb* in a manner that would be concordant with doctrine of prophetic inerrancy. Strangely, he did not provide any supporting evidence for his explanation of the extended meaning of *dhanb* – something that would have been truly unique, considering that throughout all the centuries of hermeneutic approaches, none had taught to provide a similar explanation, although the concept of "leaving aside the praiseworthy" comes close, and is acknowledged as such by Ṭabaṭabā'ī. Yet, however, the differences in definition of what is *'iṣmah*, and the presence of verses that are a hurdle to unquestioned acceptance, show that in Islam, as in other religions, the circular relation between scripture and creed makes it impossible to have any notion of a purely literal or univocal reading of texts.

Notes

1. Ibn Manẓūr. *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut, Lebanon: *Dār Iḥyā al-Turāth al-'Arabī*, 3ʳᵈ ed., n.d.), vol. 9, 245.

2. Ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī. *Risālat al- I'tiqādāt*, trans. by Asaf Fyzee, as Ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī, *A Shīite Creed: Being the Translation of Risālatu'–I'tiqādāt* (London, New York, Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1942), 99. Some scholars, seemingly in acknowledgement that *'iṣmah* is a special grace from God, translate the term as "protection." See for example, See Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur'ān and Its Interpreters*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984)*, vol. 2, 135, 156.

3. Muḥammad 'Alī al-Shawkānī, *Fatḥ al-Qadīr: Al-Jāmi' bayna fannay al-riwāyah wa'l dirāyah min 'ilm al-Tafsīr* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dār al-Fikr, 1993), vol. 1, 553.

4. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 69, 70.

5. A. J. Wensinck. *The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1965), 94, 218.

6. Ibid., 218.

7. M. M. Bravmann, "The Origin of the Principle of Ismah: Muḥammad's Immunity from Sin." *Le Muse'on* (88) 1975: 221–25.

8. Ibid.

9. Emil Tyan, S.v. "Isma," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. E. Van Donzel et al., (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1960), vol. 4, 182–84.

10.. Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Bābawayh. al-Qummī, *Risālat al- Iʿtiqādāt,* as part of *Silsilat Mu'allafāt al-Mufīd* (Beirut: Dār al-Mufīd, 1993), vol. 5, 96. See also al-Qummī, *A Shi'ite Creed*, 99–100.

11. Ibid.

12. Emil Tyan, S.v. "Isma," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. E. Van Donzel et al., (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1960), vol. 4, 182–84.

13. Al-Qummī, *Risālat al- Iʿtiqādāt*, 96.

14. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Nu'mān al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, *Tashih ʿItiqadat al-Imāmiyah,* as part of *Silsilat Mu'allafāt al-Mufīd*, (Beirut, Lebanon: Dār al Mufīd, 1993), vol. 5. 128.

15. Ibid.

16. Muḥammad b. al-Nu'mān al-Mufīd,. *Awā'il al-Maqālāt fi'l Madhāhib al-Mukhtārāt*. (Tabriz, Iran: Rizā'ī, 1330 /1912), 29–30.

17. Ibid.

18. Al-Mufīd, *Tashih ʿItiqadat al-Imāmiyah*, 130.

19. Ibid.

20. ʿAlī b. al-Ḥussain al-Musawī al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, *Tanzīh al-Anbiyā wa'l A'immah*, (Najaf, Iraq: al-Maṭba'at al-Ḥaydariyyah, 1352/1960), 2–3.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ḥasan b. Yūsuf al-Hillī, *Al-Bāb al-Ḥādī Ashar*, with commentary by Miqdād -i-Fā ḍil al-Hillī, trans. William McElwee Miller, (London: Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1958), 58. While I do not consider the translator's rendition of *lutf* as "hidden kindness" as appropriate, the protocol of citation requires that I leave the material as it is. I consider "grace" to more of a functional translation of *lutf*.

24. Ibid

25. Nasīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, *Tajrīd al-ʾI-tiqād*. Ed. ʿAbbās Muḥammad Sulaymān. (Alexandria, Egypt: Dār al-Ma'rifat al-Jāmi'īyya, 1996), 129.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Muḥammad Riḍā al-Muzaffar, *The Faith of Shia Islam*. (London and New York: The Muḥammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 1983), 25.

29. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī, *Al-Mustaṣfā min 'Ilm al-Uṣūl*, ed. Muḥammad Sulaymān al-Ashqar. (Beirut, Lebanon: Mu'assassat al-Risālah, 1997), vol, 2, 217.

30. Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī,. '*Aqīdat al-Muslim*, (Damascus, Syria: Dār al-Qalam, 1998), 188.

31. Muḥammad Husayn Ṭabaṭabā'ī, *Shia dar Islam,* translated as *Shia*, Publisher's Postword in *Shi'a*, trans. Sayyid Husayn Nasr, (Qom, Iran: Ansariyan Publications,1989), ii.

32. Muḥammad Husayn Ṭabaṭabā'ī, *Shia dar Islam,* translated as *Shia*, by Sayyid Husayn Nasr. (Qom, Iran: Ansariyan Publications, 1989). *Shi'a*, Foreword by Sayyid Husayn Nasr, 3–26.

33. Still a work under progress, this undertaking has seen two volumes published thus far. See Mahmoud Ayoub, , *The Qur'ān and Its Interpreters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, vol. 1, 1984; vol. 2, 1992).

34. Ayoub, *The Qur'ān and its Interpreters,* vol. 1,7.

35. Muḥammad Husayn Ṭabaṭabā'ī, *Shia dar Islam,* translated as *Shia*, Publisher's Postword in *Shi'a*, trans. Sayyid Husayn Nasr, (Qom, Iran: Ansariyan Publications,1989), 18–20.

36. S.v. "Muḥammad Husayn Ṭabaṭabā'ī," in *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John Esposito (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), vol. 4, 161–62.

37. Ibid.

38. Ṭabaṭabā'ī, *Shi'a,* 144–45.

39. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabaṭabā'ī,. *Al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, vol. 2, 113.

40. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabaṭabā'ī, *Al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. (Beirut, Lebanon: Mu'assassat al-'Ālamī l'il Maṭbu'āt, 1997), vol. 2, 136–44.

41. Ibid.

42. Hans Wehr, *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan (Beirut, Lebanon: Librairie du Liban, 1980), 312. I have translated as an offense, a crime, a sin, or a misdeed – all of which I have rendered in the Arabic as "بنذ" as *dhanb*, changing the *n* to a *b* in concordance with the laws of *tajwid* – in this instance following the concept of *iqlāb*. See Muḥammad Ṣādiq al-Qamhāwī, *Al-Burhān fī Tajwīd al Qur'ān* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dār al-Qur'ān al-Karīm 1404/1983), 14.

43. Muḥammad b. al-Nuʿmān al-Mufīd, *Awā'il al-Maqālāt f'il madhāhib al-mukhtārāt* (Tabriz, Iran: Rizā'ī, 1330 /1911), 30.

44. For a good explanation of such stratification, see Ayoub, *The Qur'ān and Its Interpreters*, vol. 1, 34–40.

45. Ab'ul Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Ibrāhim al-Qummī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī* (Beirut, Lebanon: Al-ʿĀlamī Publishing, 1991), vol. 2, 290.

46. Abū Jā'far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭusī, *Al-Tibyān fi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. (Beirut, Lebanon: Dār Iḥyā al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, n.d), vol. 9, 314–16.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid

49. Ibid

50. Abū ʿAlī al-Fadl b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabarsi,. *Majma' al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, (Beirut: Mu'assassat al-ʿĀlam' l'il Maṭbu'āt,1995), vol. 9, 182–85.

51. Ibid.

52. Al-Kāshānī, Muḥsin Fayḍ. *Tafsir al-Safi*, (Tehran, Iran: Manshurāt Maktabat al-Ṣadr, n.d.), vol. 5, 33–37.

53. See Muḥammad al-Būrnū, *Al-Wajīz fī Īḍāḥ Qawa'id al-Fiqhiyya al-Kulliyah*, (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Maktabat al-Maʿārif, 1989), 260.

54. Ṭabaṭabā'ī, *Al-Mizān*, vol. 18, 258–61.

55. Ibid., vol. 18, 257.

56. Ibid., vol. 18, 260.

57. Ibid., vol. 18, 260–61.