

# THE IMAM'S INFALLIBILITY ('IṢMAH) AND RESPONSES TO CRITICISMS

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The Twelfth Imam's infallibility ('iṣmah), as a constituent of the Imami School, has been criticized and denied in the last centuries. The present article, adopting a critical and analytic approach, treats the subject by defining imamate, infallibility, its origin, and its causes and proceeds to prove infallibility based on Qur'anic, narrative, and rational arguments. The second section critically discusses various doubts cast upon the Imams' infallibility.

**KEYWORDS:** Imamis; Imamate; Infallibility ('iṣmah); Finality of Prophethood (*Khātamiyyah*).

## INTRODUCTION

### 1. Definition of Imamate

From the Imami perspective, transcending election and worldly leadership, imamate is a divine command, a religious issue, and only next to prophethood (*nubuwwah*) in that except for receiving divine revelation, the Imam is endowed with prophetic powers (Ṣadūq, 1418/1997, p. 27; Ṭūsī, Naṣīr al-Dīn, 1405/1984, pp. 426, 457). The Imam, similar to the Prophet, is endowed with religious authority, governance, justice administration, and creative and legislative guardianship (*wilāyah al-takwīniyyah wa 'l-tashrī'iyyah*). An investigation of definitions of imamate from the Sunni and Shia perspectives, in particular investigating the requirements of imamate, is indicative of the essential differences between the two schools which will be outlined and touched upon below.

- 1.1. Imamate, a Sacred and Divine Issue. Owing to its being only next to prophethood and the obligation of clarifying the divinely revealed religion, imamate is a sacred issue requiring particular qualities; as a result, the Imam is designated by God and the Prophet, rather than by people.

- 1.2. A restricted consideration as well as a comprehensive consideration of the position and powers of the Imam and his qualifications, i.e., knowledge and infallibility, necessitate defining imamate as a sacred issue, in that it requires possession of particular qualifications by the Imam, e.g., infallibility, direct knowledge from God (*'ilm al-ladunni*) and revelation from God (Ṣadūq, 1414/1993, vol. 5, p. 96; Ṭūsī, 1394/1973, p. 74; Ḥillī, 1985, p. 204).
- 1.3. Rational Necessity of Imamate. Owing to their belief in the rational good and bad (*ḥusn wa qubḥ al-'aqlī*), the Imamīs and some of the Mu'tazilīs maintain that the Imam is necessarily designated by God, in that considering the society's need for the Imam and the rational principles, e.g., the principle of grace (*lutf*), requires that there should be an Imam in the society and the Imam is divinely designated (al-Ḥimṣī al-Rāzī 1412/1991, vol. 2, p. 248; Ḥillī, 1985, p. 202; Miqdād 1405/1984, p. 327).
2. Definition and True Meaning of Infallibility (*Iṣmah*). *Iṣmah*, derived from *'-ṣ-m*, denotes cord; cling; preserve, hold, keep; resist (Ṭūsī, Naṣīr al-Dīn, n.d., p. 365; idem, 1405/1984, p. 369; Miqdād, 1405/1984). Muslim thinkers, in expounding the true meaning of *'iṣmah*, have touched upon the following.
  - 2.1. Divine Grace. The most frequently used sense, it implies attaining to the exalted rank of infallibility by divine grace and the following four qualifications (Ṭūsī, Naṣīr al-Dīn, n.d., p. 365; Ṭūsī, Naṣīr al-Dīn, 1405/1984, p. 369; Miqdād, 1405/1984): a. the disposition (*malakah*) of turning away from committing sins and turning towards chastity (*'iffah*); b. knowledge of the infallible of the punishment of committing sins and the rewards of obedience to God; c. consolidation (*tathbīt*) of knowledge by divine revelation; d. wariness of violating divine commands (Ḥillī, 1985, p. 195; Ṭūsī, 1405/1984, p. 369; Mufīd, 1414/1993, p. 37; Lāhijī, 1985, p. 90).
  - 2.2. Rational Faculty. Infallibility, according to another approach, is considered as the perfection of human rational faculty (*quwwah al-'āqilah*). Man is endowed with three faculties – irascible (*ghaḍabī*), concupiscible (*shahawī*), and rational (*'aqlī*) each of which demand and desire certain objects; however, the human rational faculty is able to control the other two faculties and restrain them from going to the extremes such that they submit to the rational faculty (Ṭūsī, 1404/1983, p. 369).

Assessment. The various definitions of infallibility may be categorized, in general, into divine grace (*lutf*) and divinely granted success (*tawfīq*); rational faculty (*quwwah 'aqliyya*) or the disposition of the soul (*malakah al-nafsāniyyah*). The former has mainly been used by theologians who emphasize, in some way or another, its being a divine favor, but the latter is used in the main by philosophers and theologians with a philosophical turn of mind, emphasizing that infallibility is, first and foremost, willed and sought by the infallible who tries to perfect his self and develop his rational faculty, the result of which is attaining to the exalted rank of infallibility through divine grace and divinely granted success. Shaykh al-Mufīd likens infallibility to a drowning man who clings to some cord or strand and thereby saves his life. Similar to a drowning man, first and foremost, has to strive for clinging to some cord, one striving for attaining infallibility has to grasp divine grace and success and thereby delivers himself from the abyss of sins. The two sides of infallibility need to be considered in producing a definition of it which may become a possibility by

combining the first three approaches, i.e., grace, the rational faculty, the disposition of the soul. Accordingly, infallibility lies in safeguarding against committing sins which is achieved by the rational faculty and disposition of the soul thanks to divine grace.

### 3. ORIGIN AND CAUSES OF INFALLIBILITY

A question arises now that the concept and potentiality of infallibility have been clarified: Why the infallible do not commit sins? In other words, what constitute(s) the safeguarding of the infallible against committing sins? Theologians have produced a variety of responses in the last centuries (Ṭūsī, 1405/1984, p. 369; Ḥillī, n.d., p. 365) which will be outlined below.

- 3.1. Early theologians maintain that attainment of the exalted rank of infallibility is the result of the following four causes: 1. Possessing the faculty of turning away from committing sins and turning towards chastity; 2. Knowledge and awareness of the punishment, the manner of safeguarding against committing sins, and the rewards of obedience to God; 3. Consolidation of knowledge by divine revelation; 4. Divine injunction as to maintaining chastity and reprimands in this world for abandoning the preferable (*tark al-ūlā*).
- 3.2. Awareness and Discernment (*Shu'ūr*). Some thinkers hold that infallibility originate from the particular knowledge and awareness of the infallible of the results and consequences of preferable and reprehensible acts (Muṭahharī, 1988, p. 174; Ḥusaynī Ṭihrānī, 1984, vol. 1, p. 80; Subḥānī, 1423/2002, vol. 3, p. 159; Ma'rifat, 2011, p. 19). Knowledge of the rewards of performing preferable acts and the abhorrent consequences of committing sins. Such knowledge drives us towards safeguarding against committing sins and attaining infallibility (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1417/1996, vol. 5, p. 79, see also vol. 2, p. 138; vol. 11, p. 162).
- 3.3. Will and Selection. Some other thinkers hold that the major cause in attaining infallibility is the will accompanied by knowledge and discernment of the nature of the things and the fact that will, devoid of knowledge and awareness, may not succeed in achieving infallibility, since not being equipped with knowledge, one may lose sight of ultimate perfection and fail to achieve one's goal (Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, 1997, p. 119).
- 3.4. Granting the Holy Spirit. Some scholars maintain that the Infallible's infallibility originates from the 'Spirit' (*Rūḥ*) or the 'Holy Spirit' (*Rūḥ al-Qudus*), bestowing which to the Prophets and Imams has been mentioned in a number of the verses of the Holy Qur'an, e.g. "And thus We have revealed to you a 'Spirit' of Our command [i.e., the Qur'an]. You did not know what is the Book or [what is] faith..." (42:52). A variety of *riwāyahs* elucidating the meaning implied by 'Spirit', mentioning which will fall beyond the scope of the present article, but it may be mentioned in passing that their common denominator is that the Prophet and Imams are aided by the 'Spirit' ("And he is informed, he is safeguarded, and he is with the Imams whom they succeed,"<sup>2</sup> Kulaynī, 1988, p. 273).
- 3.5. Combination of Natural, Human, and Divine Causes (The Adopted View). Each of the previous four views emphasized an origin and aspect of infallibility, but their

shortcoming lies in excluding other aspects. To compensate for the defect, we may investigate different aspects of infallibility and learn that it is not solely the outcome of natural causes, e.g., environment, family, and heredity, and the origin of infallibility may not be restricted to knowledge, will, and potentiality of the infallible or claim that infallibility is only the result of being granted the divine grace and favor, since adopting an exclusivist view of each of the three causes will lead to ignoring the undeniable roles played other causes. Accordingly, an inclusivist view of infallibility requires an investigation of the said three causes, each of which include different components.

#### 4. PROOFS OF THE IMAM'S INFALLIBILITY

- 4.1. Qur'anic proofs. Four blessed verses have been selected to prove the Imam's infallibility.
- 4.1.1. Imamate Transcending Prophethood. The true nature of imamate does not simply lie in governance and trial of Abraham following years of prophethood and caliphate, but imamate is higher in rank than prophethood, a point which clarified by the Prophet Abraham's inquiry, "[Remember] when Abraham was tested by his Lord with [certain] commandments, which he fulfilled. Allah said, 'I will certainly make you into a role model for the people.' Abraham asked, 'What about my offspring?' Allah replied, 'My covenant is not extended to the wrongdoers'" (2:124).

Accordingly, imamate is higher in rank than that of prophethood, bestowal of which to anyone would be an impossibility. Infallibility is a prerequisite for prophethood and imamate which is higher in rank than prophethood is *a fortiori* (*bi-ṭarīq al-ūlā*) a prerequisite for the Imam. The other line of argument is the reference to 'the wrong doers (*al-zālimīn*) in the verse 2:124, in that wrong doers are not qualified for serving as the Imam. The form *al-zālimīn* is the plural form of *zālim* preceded by *al-*, implying generalization, i.e., it encompasses all wrong doers of any type committing any kind of wrong doing (*ẓulm*), including performing any act on individual or societal levels to which the term wrong doing may be applied. On the other hand, committing sins is the first level of doing wrong to oneself and violating the divine laws and rights. Therefore, anyone lacking infallibility may potentially do wrong on individual and societal levels and the blessed verse in question makes an explicit reference to not granting the exalted rank of imamate to any wrong dower which necessarily entails that the Imam should be infallible, rather than a wrong doer (Kulaynī, 1984, vol. 1, pp. 175, 199). In other words, in terms of doing wrong people may fall into four categories: 1. Doing wrong in the past and future; 2. Doing wrong only in the past but being infallible in future; 3. Doing wrong only in future but being infallible in the past; 4. Absolute infallibility, i.e., not doing wrong in the past and future.

Now, a question arises: For which category did Prophet Abraham prayed to God to grant the high rank of imamate? It goes without saying that it could not have been for individuals falling into the first and the third categories since such request would have been irrelevant. The second category is also excluded in the blessed verse, and there remains but the fourth,

which is supported by the Imamis, i.e., the Twelver Shia (Jawādī Āmulī, 2000, vol. 2, p. 568, vol. 6, p. 470; Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1417/1996, vol. 1, p. 274).

4.1.2. Unconditional obedience to God and His infallible Prophet, whose commands and injunctions are undeniably to the benefit of mankind and they are far from committing errors and mistakes and causing corruption and damage, is a rational concept and teaching; however, commanding people to be unconditionally obedient to anyone not endowed by infallibility is unquestionably irrational, since they may err and cause corruption and harm. On the other hand, God Almighty commands believers, in the blessed verse “O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you”<sup>3</sup> (4:59), to unconditionally obey three authorities – God, the Messenger, and those in authority. The second person imperative form *aṭī'ū* (obey) explicitly addresses believers and calls them to obey ‘the Messenger’ (*al-rasūl*) and ‘those in authority’ (*uli -l-amr*), specifying that unconditional obedience to the latter is on a par with obeying the former, since the verse calls to unconditional and unwavering obedience and there is no exception to it. The form *uli -l-amr* denotes ‘those in authority’, even though the divine command is not applicable to unconditional obedience to any individual in authority, irrespective of wrong doing and justice. Accordingly, ‘those in authority’ in the blessed verse is exclusively applicable to infallible leaders, i.e., the twelve Shia Imams, since the Sunnis deny the infallibility of their caliphs. The true referent of ‘those in authority’ in the verse is the Shia Imam.

4.1.3. Divine Will to Purify the Ahl al-Bayt. The blessed verse “Allah only intends to keep [the causes of] evil away from you and purify you completely, O members of the [Prophet’s] family!”<sup>4</sup>

It is narrated from the Prophet on the authority of his wife, Umm Salamah (d. 680), that following the revelation of the blessed verse, he called ‘Alī, al-Ḥasan, al-Ḥusayn, and Fāṭimah, placed his cloak (*kisā'*) on them, saying, “O God, these are my *Ahl al-Bayt* (lit. ‘the people of my house’) and my closest family members; remove defilement from them and purify them completely”<sup>5</sup> (Ibn Shahrāshūb, 1379/1959, vol. 2, p. 226).

4.1.4. Application of Infallibility to ‘Sincere Worshipers.’ It is said in the Holy Qur’an that Satan and his hosts (*junūd*) not exceed the boundary of ‘sincere worship’, beyond which satanic temptations and devilry find their way. He may only find his way into corruptibility, since he may but resort to falsify the truth and where there is no room for falsification, disinformation, and illusion stays impenetrable. The argument is substantiated by blessed verses, e.g., “... except those among them who are Your sincere worshippers”<sup>6</sup> (38:83).

4.2. Narrative Evidence. The Imam’s infallibility is explicitly and implicitly emphasized in narrative evidence, a few instances of which follow in categories.

4.2.1. Purified and Infallible Imam. “Obey ‘Alī, since he is purified, infallible, neither has he been led astray nor is he a wrong doer (Ṣadūq, 1984, p. 352); “I, ‘Alī, al-Ḥasan, al-Ḥusayn, and nine descendants of al-Ḥusayn are purified and infallible (Ṣadūq, 1403/1982, p. 139).

4.2.2. Imam, the Criterion of Distinguishing the Truth and the Companion of Truth. As narrated in a number of *riwāyahs*, instead of specifying the Imams’ infallibility,

the referents, e.g., ‘Alī, are mentioned and mention is made of him as the criterion of distinguishing the truth, his being a companion of truth and the truth being his companion, his being the companion of the Qur’an and the latter being his companion, and his being the standard of discerning the truth and falsehood. “Alī is with the truth and the truth is with ‘Alī, and they never part until the pond on the Day of Resurrection” (Baghdādī, 1417/1996, vol. 14, p. 321; Ibn ‘Asākir, 1995, vol. 42, p. 449). “Alī is with the truth and the truth is with ‘Alī. O Lord, keep the truth with him at all times” (Ibn ‘Asākir, 1995, vol. 42, p. 448; Ibn Kathīr, 1419/1998, vol. 7, p. 361). Making a reference to the latter, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī says, “One who follows ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib in his religion, he will guide him and serve as his guide; and it is narrated from the Prophet (SAW)” (Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, 1415/1994, vol. 1, p. 210). The following *riwāyahs* also emphasize ‘Alī’s companionship of the Qur’an and the Qur’an being his companion.

- 4.2.3. The Imam being the Companion of the Qur’an and vice versa. “Alī is with the Qur’an and the Qur’an is with him. They will not part until he will be led to the Pond” (Ṭabarānī, 1415/1994, vol. 5, p. 135); “Alī is with the truth and the Qur’an and they are with him and they will not part until he will be led to the Pond” (Juwaynī Khurāsānī, 1398/1977, vol. 1, p. 177).
- 4.2.4. ‘Alī as the Authority of Discerning the Truth from Falsehood. In a number of *riwāyahs* the Prophet called ‘Alī (AS) the greatest sincere friend and the standard for the *ummah* of distinguishing truth from falsehood, “And this is the greatest of sincere friends and this is the standard of this ummah wherewith the truth and falsehood may be discerned” (Ibn ‘Asākir, 1995, vol. 42, p. 8368); “He is the greatest devoted friend and he is the standard for this ummah wherewith the truth and falsehood can be discerned, and he is the leader (*ya’sūb*) of the believers” (Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, 1963, vol. 13, p. 228).
- 4.2.5. Followers of the Imam will not be led astray (*Ḥadīth al-Thaqalayn* and the *Ḥadīth al-Safīnah*). Another hadith proving the Imams’ infallibility is the *Ḥadīth of Thaqalayn* in which the Prophet (SAW) calls believers to follow the two gems, i.e., the Qur’an and his progeny, i.e., the Ahl al-Bayt. He is narrated as saying, “As long as you cling to them, you will not be led astray” (“I leave among you two treasures, which if you cling to them, you shall not be led into error,”<sup>7</sup> Kulaynī, 1988, vol. 3, p. 423). The argument regarding the deliverance of the followers of the Ahl al-Bayt and drowning and being led astray by those who turn away from it, is similarly reiterated in the hadith known as *Ṣafīnah*, “Verily, my Ahl al-Bayt is like Noah’s Ark, whoever embarks it, will be saved, and whoever turns away from it, will drown” (Ṭabarānī, 1415/1994, vol. 5, p. 306; Ālūsī, 1405/1984, vol. 25, p. 32); “Obey ‘Alī as he is purified and infallible, he is not led astray and he is not a wrong doer” (Ṣadūq, 1984, p. 352). The *riwāyahs* emphasize obedience to ‘Alī because of his purity and infallibility which will result in not being led astray and not being drowned in wrong doing and misfortune.

### 4.3. RATIONAL ARGUMENTS.

- 4.3.1. The Treasure of Imamate Requiring Infallibility and Direct Knowledge from God. connectedness or unconnectedness of imamate and infallibility is dependent on the approach to imamate, in that when it is simply applied to caliphate and governance (the Sunni perspective) or at most to the interpretation of religion, infallibility is not a requirement for imamate; however, when imamate implies the exalted rank, in the Qur'anic terms, higher than prophethood, the two are inseparable. Such presupposition is supported by verse 2:124, “[Remember] when Abraham was tested by his Lord with [certain] commandments, which he fulfilled. Allah said, ‘I will certainly make you into a role model for the people.’ Abraham asked, ‘What about my offspring?’ Allah replied, ‘My covenant is not extended to the wrongdoers’” in which reference is made to granting the position of imamate to Abraham (AS) in his last years when he had been divinely designated a Prophet. It is also worthy of note that following the divine trial He was granted the exalted rank of imamate which explicitly indicates that such rank is higher than that of prophethood. Having attained to the rank of imamate by divine will, he prays to God to extend it to his offspring, but his prayer is not answered owing to wrong doings attributed to Abraham’s descendants that bears testimony to the fact that imamate and wrong doing are mutually exclusive and the Imam should be infallible. From a rational viewpoint, the Imam’s soul has been purified through self-purification and attaining perfection and commendable qualities has attached himself to ‘the world of the unseen’ (*ālam al-ghayb*) and ‘the realm of dominion’ (*ālam al-malakūt*). Having gained knowledge of every truth, including the evil consequences of committing sins deliberately, and having attained intuitive knowledge, he has actually become infallible and he is safeguarded against error and oblivion.
- 4.3.2. Interpretation and Preservation of *Sharia*. Following the passing of the last Prophet as the recipient of divine revelation, the divinely reveal religion may not be abandoned without an infallible interpreter, since people vary in their interpretations and they are not infallible. Therefore, there should be a standard whereby different interpretations and readings may be evaluated and truth and untruth may be distinguished. The divinely revealed religion, without the presence of an infallible individual, may be subject to distortion and deviation in time and it would stand against the goal of designation of Prophets and the principle of the final prophethood (*khātimīyyah*). The argument is supported by *riwāyahs* (Ṣadūq, 1395/1975, vol. 1, pp. 221, 224).
- 4.3.3. Divine Unconditional Command to Obey Those in Authority. Granted that the Imam is subject to error, oblivion, and committing sins, it would be incumbent on the umma to stand against him and forbid his maleficence. Nonetheless, in the blessed verse, “O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you”<sup>8</sup> (4:59), obliges believers to unconditionally obey God, the Messenger, and those in authority, such that obedience to ‘those in authority’ follows obedience to God and His Messenger. Now, granted impermissibility of standing against wrongdoing, a

infallible Imam would enjoin committing sins and forbid obedience to God and people are supposed to follow him!

- 4.3.4. Fallibility, a Contradiction to the *Raison d'Être* of Designation of the Imam. The Imam is designated to be unconditionally followed and obeyed by the ummah, since he is the particularly divine Argument for the people and sustaining imamate and ummah essentially lies in unconditional obedience. If the Imam and leader of the society happens to be fallible, the umma will not unconditionally obey him and it will stand against the *raison d'être* of designation of the Imam.

## 5. DISPROVING THE IMAM'S INFALLIBILITY

- 5.1. The Doubt of Denying the Possibility of Infallibility for an Individual Possessing Will. One of the significant questions regarding infallibility is the possibility of its being granted to an individual in possession of will, an individual whose soul belongs to matter and different bestial drives. A number of contemporary Sunni researchers (Amīn, n.d., pp. 229-230; Ḥanafī, n.d., vol. 4, p. 211) and orientalist (Ronaldson, 1410/1989, p. 329), having raised the question of sensuality (*naḥsāniyya*) and bestial instincts, on the one side, and the principle of human freedom and will, on the other, argue that infallibility stands in contradiction to human innate disposition (*fiṭrah*) and nature (*ṭabī'ah*) and disprove the possibility of infallibility and granting it to the Prophets and Imams (Amīn, n.d., vol. 3, p. 229).

Assessment. A critical criticism of disproving the possibility of infallibility may touch upon the following.

6.1.1. Unconnectedness of Instincts to Committing Sins and Errors. Those disproving the possibility of infallibility have confused the perfect cause (*'illah al-tāmmah*) and the origination, i.e., the imperfect cause (*'illah al-nāqishah*), of drives. They ignored that bestial instincts may serve as the origins and grounds of committing sins, but they are not the perfect causes of committing sins.

6.1.2. Rational Drives. Those disproving infallibility interpreted bestial instincts as evidence for fallibility; however, it was mentioned above that firstly, an instinct or drive is the origin, rather than a cause, and if we ignore this attempt at disproving infallibility, we may criticize it by making a reference to the rational faculty whereby we may rationally investigate and assess long-term benefits and interests and thus refrain from committing sins and turn towards infallibility. The arguments raised against contradiction between infallibility and its causes and stimuli thus stand in contradiction and lead to refutation of impossibility infallibility.

6.1.3. Divinely Granted Success and Grace. Last but not least, although infallibility and its different aspects seem to be impossible or next to impossible to the minds infested with pollutions, but considering that the infallible are divinely chosen and they are divinely granted bounties and favors at all times, and even if they happen to be subject to error, they are always granted divine favors in different ways, as it will be touched upon below, and they will be thus safeguarded against committing sins and errors. Therefore, those denying



the possibility of infallibility failed to attend to the other side of infallibility, i.e., divine favor and grace. Now let us turn towards the origin and causes of infallibility aiming to explicate further the quality of infallibility and the possibility of its occurrence.

5.2. Disproving the Contradiction of the Imam's Infallibility with the Finality of Prophethood. Shah Walī of Delhi argues that the Imam's infallibility would stand in contradiction to the principle and finality of prophethood which will be touched upon below. In this respect, Surūsh writes, "There is no individual following the passing of the Prophet of Islam (SAW) whose character, in religious terms, safeguards him against verity of words and admirability of behavior (Surūsh, 1997, p. 134).

Attributes like infallibility, direct knowledge from God, and the principle of designation, have been considered by some scholars as beyond human potentialities and argue that refutation of those attributes are compatible with the principle of finality of prophethood (Kadiwar, 2006, p. 96).

Assessment. The following may be considered in a critical assessment of the above.

6.2.1. Groundlessness of Exclusive Attribution of Infallibility to the Prophets. Firstly, the exalted position of infallibility is a divinely granted favor along with the pure soul of the infallible individual and the position is a prerequisite for prophethood, but granting it is not tantamount to disproving such attribute in other individuals and claiming that it is exclusively granted to the Prophets. Supporters of such disapproval have confounded the two, in that they have falsely maintained that infallibility, similar to divine revelation, is exclusively bestowed on the Prophets, whereas, firstly, they need to prove the exclusiveness of infallibility to prophethood and thus prove that generalizing infallibility to non-Prophets, e.g., the Ahl al-Bayt of the Prophet of Islam (SAW) is incompatible with prophethood. Further, a number of *riwāyahs* narrated by Sunni and Shia narrators, and also some verses of the Holy Qur'an are indicative of the infallibility of the Ahl al-Bayt which will be touched upon below.

6.2.2. Infallibility, a Requirement for the Essence of Imamate. It was mentioned above under the rational arguments for the Imam's infallibility that it is not an acquired attribute, but it is actually a creative and essential attribute of the Imam's character, as supported by narrative evidence as well.

6.2.3. Rational Arguments Regarding the Necessity of the Existence of the Infallible. It was mentioned above under rational arguments that divine designation of the last Prophet of the divinely revealed religion requires the existence of an infallible Imam to defend the religion and safeguard it against a variety of distortions and unwarranted innovations.

6.2.4. Narrative and Qur'anic Arguments Supporting the Imams' Infallibility. A number of the verses and also some *riwāyahs* support the Imams' infallibility and such evidence was touched upon above under Narrative and Qur'anic Arguments.

6.2.5. Supporting Infallibility by Some Sunni Scholars. A true researcher needs to rely fairly on narrative and rational arguments. Some fair-minded Sunni scholars have thus attended to the rational and narrative grounds for infallibility and believed in the Imams' infallibility and considered it compatible with the finality of prophethood (Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, 1963, vol. 6, p. 276). Believing in Imam 'Alī's (AS) infallibility, Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd reports

that Abū Muḥammad ibn Mattawayh believed in the Imam's infallibility, as it had been mentioned in his *al-Kifāyah*.

Ibn al-ʿArabī, the distinguished mystic of the Islamic world, also believed in the infallibility of the Prophet of Islam (SAW) and his Ahl al-Bayt (Ibn al-ʿArabī, n. d., vol. 1, Chapter 27, p. 196). The point of significance is that he does not say that the Ahl al-Bayt are purified (*muṭahharūn*), but he says that they are the 'essence of purity' (*ʿayn al-ṭahārah*; *ibid*). Relying on the Prophetic hadith regarding Salmān, i.e., "Salmān is from us, from the Ahl al-Bayt" (*Salmānu min-nā ahl al-bayt*; Ibn Hishām, 1421/2000, vol. 1, p. 70; Ṭabarī, 1424/2003, vol. 2, p. 568) and thus considers him to be infallible (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *ibid*).

5.3. Doubt Regarding the Denial of the Imams' Infallibility in the *Riwāyahs* and Prayers. The doubts raised by the early Sunni scholars and some contemporary (Burqaī, 1421/2000, p. 21; Kātib, 1998, pp. 51, 80) ones is disproving the Imams infallibility by arguing that they did not portray themselves as infallible. A treatment of some relevant *riwāyahs* and a critique of the denial will follow

"Do not turn away from telling the truth or fair consultation, since I am not above committing errors and being safeguarded against my misdeed" (Sharīf al-Raḍī, 1987, Sermon 207, p. 687). Reference is made also to Imam 'Alī's prayers wherein he says, "O Lord, forgive me [my sins] that You are more knowledgeable than me [regarding them]. If I turn to them once more, turn to me with forgiveness. O Lord, forgive me, if I promised myself to not err and failed to keep my promise. O Lord, forgive me if I approached you [by words] but then my heart turned against it. O Lord, forgive me for any defamatory gestures by eyes and eyebrows made by me, inappropriate words, desires of the heart, and errors of the tongue (*ibid*, Sermon 77, p. 176).

Assessment. The following points require attention in criticizing the said doubt.

6.3.1. Disproving the Verses and the *Riwāyahs* Supporting Infallibility. The narrative and rational arguments supporting the Imam's infallibility was touched upon above. According to those reliable arguments, the Imam needs to be infallible, and Imam 'Alī's (AS) infallibility is explicitly indicated the verses and *riwāyahs*. As a result, we need to explain and clarify the evidence which is seemingly incompatible to infallibility.

6.3.2. Imam 'Alī's (AS) words quoted above are indicative of a universal, rather than an individual, principle. If we read the sermon in its entirety, we will learn that when he was delivering the sermon in the Battle of Ṣiffīn for his companions, an individual started praising the Imam and his admiration verged on the side of flattery. Averse to such laudations, the Imam uttered the above quoted sentences to say explicitly that instead of indulging in admiring rulers, people need to tell the truth, suggest rational and true solutions, and present fair counsels, since the ruler is in need of such suggestions. It goes without saying that since the Imam was in command but he did not consider himself above others, he pointed at himself in saying that he is not needless of counsels and safeguarded against committing mistakes. In fact, he intended to emphasize the vice of indulging in admiring those in power and encourage authorities to consult with people. However, the Imam was not prone to err, and as a result, he was needless of consultation. He explicitly emphasized his infallibility and needlessness of taking counsel because of his perfect and comprehensive knowledge of different aspects of issues and the relevant *riwāyahs* will be mentioned below.

### 6.3.3. The Possibility of Committing Errors without Help from God

Opponents of infallibility, i.e., proponents of the view according to which the Imams are not safeguarded against committing errors and sins, need to produce arguments based on *riwāyahs* in which committing errors and sins by the Imams be explicitly stated; nonetheless, Imam ‘Alī’s sermon in the *Nahj al-Balāghah* is simply indicative of the Imam’s human potentiality and nature, in that if it is left to itself, it may originate committing sins and errors. The words ‘by itself’ (*fī nafsihi*) in “I am not above committing errors” (*fa-innī lastu fī nafsī bi-fawq-i an akhta’a*) is the perfect evidence supporting the argument. However, whether the Imam’s soul and nature is still in such constitution (*shākilah*) is a question whose answer is to be found in the following sentence. The Imam explicitly emphasizes that his soul possesses such constitution as a human being, but divine grace has been bestowed on him and he is thereby safeguarded against committing errors. “Unless God keeps me from my self” (*allā an yakfī Allahu min nafsī*) is the exception concerning the human nature of the Imam, in that he is exempted from the possibility of committing errors. It is unfortunate that those who disprove infallibility have resorted to omitting the exception and have turned towards falsification and fallacy (*mughālahah*).

6.3.4. Further quotes of the Imam which are indicative of infallibility. It was mentioned above that the said sermon is simply indicative of the nature and possibility of committing errors, rather than its occurrence, and it was said further that the possibility is also refuted by another saying of the Imam. The Imam has stated elsewhere, which will be mentioned below, that he is infallible and safeguarded against committing errors. In the said sermon, the Imam requests his companions to provide him with counsels, but he states elsewhere that he is basically needless of counsels, since he is safeguarded against ignorance and error. For instance, in response to Ṭalḥah’s and Zubayr’s reproaches and complaints as to the Imam’s not taking counsel with them, he says, “What right have I denied you? In what way have I sought priority over you? What was the claim brought to me by a Muslim which I failed to understand and trod the path of error? I was needless of taking counsels with you and my Muslim brethren. If I had been unable to find a solution to the problem, I would have stated explicitly and I would not have turned away from you and others in finding solutions” (ibid, Sermon 196, p. 656).

The Imam, concerning his certitude regarding his knowledge of truth and when Ṭalḥah and Zubayr had lost their lives, says, “I never doubted the truth when it was shown to me... One who believes in the existence of water does not feel thirsty” (ibid, Sermon 4).

Regarding infallibility and being safeguarded against telling untruth and being led into error, he said, “I never told untruth, and nobody told me the untruth [i.e., the Prophet told me the truth]. I did not lead anybody into error, nor was I led into error” (ibid, Aphorism 176).

5.4. The Doubt Regarding the Imam’s Confession in the Prayers to Having Committed Sins. One of the false arguments disproving the Imams’ infallibility is the claim according to which the Imams, in a number of prayers and supplications, confessed having committed sins.

## ASSESSMENT.

6.4.1. Attending to the language of Religion and Prayers (Mystic Interpretation). It goes without saying that the language of religion, particularly that of the Qur'an, is not essentially different from the common parlance, in that it includes metaphorical expressions, didactic sayings, and instances of hyperbole (*mubālaghah*), but, at the same time, it includes profound and exalted meanings not to be found in common parlance. The language of prayers is a more particular language which constitutes the reality of language and the intermediary whereby the supplicants communicate with God, the object of worship, and the sacred and metaphysical realm. Supplicants see themselves in front the Creator, the infinite Originator of Existence, and that they are at every moment totally dependent on the sacred being. They thus find themselves to be like drops of water facing an ocean and know that it is their obligation to worship and obey the emanating object of worship. Each and every step that they take in this direction is a step closer to the satisfaction of the beloved and the object of worship and find success and triumph in such wayfaring. However, any act or moment that leads them away from their ultimate goal and the object of worship is but a sin and loss which are not to be compensated, even if such sin and loss may not be considered as disobedience to God within the framework of *sharia*. They not only turn away from sins and reprehensible acts, but they even turn away from permitted acts to perform obligatory and supererogatory acts, simply focusing on attaining to their ultimate goal and joining the divine, boundless ocean, mystically termed 'annihilation' (*fanā*).

A great figure like 'Alī (AS) who is the chief of the knowledgeable and the mystics and is the noblest of divine creatures only next to the Prophet (SAW) devotes his entire existence to attaining to the ultimate goal and the divine and infinite perfection. Any act, movement, or word that may keep him from attaining to his goal or hamper his wayfaring or cause him to stop (e.g., performing permitted acts) is considered by the Imam as committing errors and sins. Therefore, the Imam seeks forgiveness in the language of prayer and supplication and thus seeking forgiveness in his prayers and supplications, e.g., *Kumayl* and *Ṣabāḥ*, is but in the language of prayers and seeking divine forgiveness for reprehensible acts, rather than sins within the framework of *sharia*, in mystical terms as befitting the 'perfect man'.

6.4.2. Didactic and Educative Interpretation. It must be taken into account that in their prayers and supplications, the Imams sought to teach others the manner of saying prayers and supplications and thereby communicating with God. They intended to teach sinners indirectly that confessing their sins and remember them so that they may purify their hearts and tread the path of light.

6.4.3. Refutation of the Doubt by Referring to the Prophet's (SAW) Prayers and Supplications. If the opponents of the Imam's infallibility continue to resort to the outer aspect of the prayers narrated from the Imams and attempts to prove their fallibility, we respond by the Prophet's prayers wherein he supplicates to God to forgive sins, for instance, "You are All-Generous and I am the miser. You are forgiving and I am the sinner" (Kaf'amī, 1405/1984, p. 286). In his 'Deliverer (*Mujīr*) Prayer', the Prophet (SAW) reiterates "Deliver us from the Fire" ninety times (Kaf'amī, 1418/1997, p. 362) and in the 'Great Armor (*Jawshan al-Kabīr*) Prayer' he reiterates "Help, help. Deliver us from the Fire" (Kaf'amī, 1405/1984, *Jawshan al-Kabīr*, p. 247) a hundred times.

5.5. The Doubt of Infallibility as an Innovation by Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam. It is also claimed that the attribute of Infallibility was first suggested by Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam, and thereafter, it turned into a Shia article of faith (Mudarrisī Ṭabāṭabā’ī, 1995, pp. 14, 39). The disproving author attributing the innovation of the attribute to Hishām has quoted the article ‘*Iṣma* [by Madelung] in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (1997, p. 182) in which reference is made to Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī’s *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*. The author is supposed to provide accurate documentation by making a reference to a reliable source, rather than to an anti-Shia one wherein Hishām has been unfairly criticized. If we consult al-Ash‘arī’s *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn* (p. 48), we find that he says that Hishām believed in infallibility, rather than saying that ‘he first suggested the attribute.’

Conclusion. It has been argued and proved that considering the Imami definition of imamate as a divine and sacred issue and only next to prophethood in terms of significance, the Imams’ (AS) infallibility, similar to that of the Prophet (SAW) is a requirement which may be proved based on the verses of the Qur’an, the *riwāyahs* narrated from the Prophet and the Ahl al-Bayt and also human reason. Proving the rational possibility of infallibility for a man in possession of will and also considering its narrative and rational arguments, the weakness of the doubts cast on infallibility by a number of Sunni scholars, orientalist, and some Shia contemporary thinkers bear witness to the fact that infallibility, first and foremost, is a possibility compatible with the principle of finality of prophethood as well as the emphasis laid on it in some verses of the Qur’an, some *riwāyahs* narrated from the Prophet (SAW) and the Imams (AS). Further, when we notice certain issues seemingly incompatible with the principle of infallibility, even in the *riwāyahs* and prayers and supplications, e.g., confessing sins and errors, they may be clarified and explained by attending to the language of religion and prayers (mystical interpretation) and also didactic and educative interpretations.

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## NOTES

1. Arabic text: و يخبره و يسدده و هو مع الائمة من بعده
2. Arabic text: يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولَى الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ
3. Arabic text: إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا
4. Arabic text: اللَّهُمَّ هَؤُلَاءِ أَهْلُ بَيْتِي وَ خَاصَّتِي فَأَذْهِبْ عَنْهُمْ الرِّجْسَ وَ طَهِّرْهُمْ تَطْهِيرًا
5. Arabic text: إِلَّا عِبَادَكَ مِنْهُمُ الْمُخْلَصِينَ
6. Arabic text: انى تارك فيكم التقلين كتاب الله و عترتي و ما ان تمسكنم لن تضلوا
7. Arabic text: يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولَى الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ