

Infallibility

In Shia School of Thought

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Introduction

In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

Grace be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds

Peace be upon Mohammad and his inerratic Family

The issue of the infallibility of the Prophets and Imams is a major one that will be discussed below thoroughly. It is the most important controversial debate upon which the validity of Prophethood, Islam and divine Imamate is based. We adhere to the rational notion that it is an illogical act to follow one who claims that he is the messenger or representative of God, yet he is erratic and lacks immunity from falling into mistakes. With this point of view, the issue of infallibility is considered as one of the most important Imamate characteristics that need to be proven through valid arguments and supported by accepted evidence. It is also important for us to explore it thoroughly to clear the doubts and suspicions prevailing nowadays and promoted by some pseudo scholars, so that people are enlightened and the consensus of the Muslims is restored.

Infallibility Overview

The Shia Ithna'shari School of Thought has been capable of proving the importance of infallibility and stipulating it as a prerequisite qualification for the appointment of the Prophet as well as the Imam. These proofs are accurately derived from Quran, Narrations and logic¹.

Infallibility is therefore a quality inherent to the appointment of the Prophet or the Imam. Hence, it is impossible to know the infallible person in the absence of the divine authority pertaining to his appointment. So, infallibility is a hidden psychological ability known to Almighty Allah alone, which no one of the people can identify and/or know to whom this trait is attributed without the direct divine authority's appointment and clarification.

¹ Refer to Author's Book: Inerrancy: Its Truth and Evidence.

Definition of Nubuwa

Nubuwa or Prophethood is the position given to selected individuals who are chosen and purified by Allah swt to be his messengers to the mankind. The divine role of the prophet is quite clear as well as the need for his infallibility as the guide to mankind and the representative of Allah on Earth. Hence, Allah clearly states the status of Prophet Mohammad (saww) in this regard. For instance, the following is some evidence from the holy Quran that the Sunnah is part of the revelation and that the Prophet is infallible, especially given the fact that all Muslims include the words, actions and reactions of the Prophet as part of the Sunnah:

"مَا ضَلَّ صَاحِبُكُمْ وَمَا غَوَى . وَمَا يَنْطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَى . إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَى."²

" مَنْ يُطِيعِ الرَّسُولَ فَقَدْ أَطَاعَ اللَّهَ."³

These verses are translated as follows:

*"Your Companion [Mohammad] is neither astray nor misled, nor does he say (aught) of (his own) Desire. It is no less than inspiration sent down to him."*⁴

² Quran, al-Najm, 2-4.

³ Quran, al-Nisa, 80.

⁴ Quran, 53: 2-4.

“He who obeys the Messenger, obeys Allah.”⁵

Consequently, the Imams were added to the Prophet through many verses in Quran; such as:

” إِنَّمَا وَلِيُّكُمُ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَهُمْ رَاكِعُونَ ”⁶

“The authority upon you is none but Allah and His Messenger and Those who have believed – Those who establish the prayer and give charity while they are bowing”⁷

Here the authority of Allah, His Prophet and the Imams is clearly stated as one upon all believers. This is not to state that the Prophet or Imams have Godly features, Astaghfurullah; but it is to illustrate that obeying them is like obeying Allah as they only act through the knowledge given to them by Allah and are protected by His Almighty from committing any mistakes. The lengthy discussion in this regard is beyond the aim of this book, which is to present a brief overview of the Shia School’s definition of Ismah (Infallibility) and discussing it in depth.

Let us first define the position of the Imam then continue on this topic of infallibility as the two seem to be interrelated.

⁵ Quran, 4: 80.

⁶ Quran, al-Maedah, 55.

⁷ Quran, 5: 55.

Definition of Imamate

The word ‘imam’ is literally used by the public to refer to ‘the spiritual leader’ of Muslims in a certain locality, time or thought. However, the Islamic definition of this word goes beyond this basic look to actually include overall authority over Islam and Muslim Nation (Umma).

Shia Definition

The Shia Ithna’shari School of Thought defines the Imam to be the person who administers by originality the general affairs of life and religion in this life⁸. The term originality is referred to the administration of the Imam because he has the status of Imama. This status is directly conferred on him by Almighty Allah not even by a Prophet or Messenger. Allah (s.w.t) alone has the power on his creatures and He can delegate these powers upon whom He wishes. This definition of Imam is the most precise and accurate one, which has been unanimously agreed upon by Shia scholars.⁹

⁸ Al-Hilli, al-Alfain, p 12.

⁹ Al-Ansari, Inerrancy, p 11.

Sunni Definition

Overall, other Muslim schools of thought define the Imam as the person who administers the general affairs of life and religion on behalf of Prophet Mohammad¹⁰. An Imam is one who is elected by human beings on the basis of consultation (Shura) and consensus (Ijmaa). This view deals with the Imam as an erratic leader who can make mistakes. However, all his mistakes are then claimed to be justified on the basis of him being rewarded even when he errs.¹¹

Discussion of Imamate

We could easily notice the difference between the two definitions upon careful consideration of each.

The general Muslim view is that the imam is just another leader to overlook the Muslim affairs. In other words, this position is a none heavenly matter that everyone can gain

¹⁰ Al-Qoshachi, al-Sharh, Definition of the Imama.

¹¹ Al-Ansari, Imama and Governance in Islam.

either through popular methods or by force. Hence, some scholars became Imams as well as rulers.

However, the Shia is of the view that the Umma cannot interfere in the appointment of Imam because the issue of Imama does not fall within the realm of their authority. This was proven by our scholars through their writings. One of the essential preconditions for Imam is to be inerratic. Otherwise, all his words and actions as well as orders cannot act as a guide neither a proof from God. Therefore, infallibility or inerrancy is a hidden matter known only to the Almighty Allah, who bestows it upon whoever He wills.

Infallibility and Imamate

The issue of infallibility or inerrancy comes at play here and a few questions arise. Most important one is discussed below.

Which one comes first, Imama or inerrancy?

Some state that Imamate comes first, while others disagree with this notion stressing on inerrancy as a determining factor for the appointment of the Imam. The distinction between the two approaches is a very clear one.

Those who want to prove the inerrancy of Prophets, Messengers and Imams by implementing the first approach have to do that through rational thinking then they can deepen their inference by the extracted evidence. Likewise, those who want to prove inerrancy through the second method, which confines the proof of inerrancy to an imam, must look for the Quranic authority then apply their rational thinking to enhance their research.

It can be stated overall logically that one needs to know the Prophets and Imams before knowing their status. Hence, Prophecy and Imama which is proved through the ability to perform miracles should precede inerrancy; then the inerrancy of the Imam is proved after his appointment. This seems to be the proper and safer method of proving the inerrancy of the Imams and Prophets.^{12, 13}

Who is the Infallible Imam of our time then?

Imam Mahdi is the final Twelfth rightful Successor of the Prophet who has disappeared during the current time, although his influence still exists through the scholars and jurists of the Shia Faith; but no one claims infallibility or any sort of super natural abilities for them beyond knowledge and piety that they achieve through their efforts and commitment to the cause.

It follows, then, that the final Imam has disappeared and there is no physical trace of him, then if any one claims the status of Imama in these current circumstances, it becomes a

¹² Al-Ansari, Imama and Governance in Islam, p 26.

¹³ Al-Risala Centre, Prophet's Succession, between Consultation and Script.

mandatory act for him to prove his claim by showing some miracles. Only then he is said to be Imam and his inerrancy is proved. However in the case of realising the Imam, his mere appointment by the Messenger would indicate his inerratic position. Inerrancy is a hidden ability beyond the knowledge of the people. It can only be mentioned about someone by the Messenger. Therefore, it is only proven through Quran and traditions of the Inerratic such as the Prophet or anyone whose inerrancy has been proved by the Quran.

This brief account shall proceed with the actual definition of the concept of inerrancy as to be clear and precise about the meaning and the implementation of this meaning in real life.

Definition of Infallibility

The literal definition of infallibility or inerrancy focuses on ‘prevention’¹⁴, or deterrence¹⁵.

The legal definition of inerrancy is the amiability and gentleness granted to the creature by Allah, the Almighty, where it could prevent them from committing sins and deters them from abstaining from being subordinate. From this point of view, it was said that the inerrancy does not mean that the Almighty would compel the inerrant not to commit any sins. It is the utmost success; as described by some scholars.¹⁶

Benignity and inerrancy are considered as the strongest pleas against falling into sins and going against the norms of religion. This does not mean that God protects the inerrant through direct intervention. Rather, it means that God will bestow a benignity that will lead him to not committing sin although he is able physically to do it.¹⁷ Inerrancy is thus a kind of benignity endowed by the Almighty upon whom he

¹⁴ Al-Misbah al-Moneer, sec 417, To make inerratic.

¹⁵ Al-Sihah Selections, sec 437, To make inerratic.

¹⁶ Al-Mufeed, Convictions Quotations, vol 10, p 37.

¹⁷ Shubbar, The Truthfulness, vol 1, p 91.

knows deserves it. It is neither a deterrent against committing bad deeds, nor compels the inerratic to come out with good deeds. It is the ability which is bestowed by the Almighty upon a devotee to not be affected by sin. It is enjoyed by the elites only, who are in turn chosen only by God, as He states:

"إِنَّ الَّذِينَ سَبَقَتْ لَهُمْ مِنَّا الْحُسْنَىٰ" ¹⁸

"Verily for those whom the good has preceded from us." ¹⁹

And also:

"وَلَقَدْ اخْتَرْنَاَهُمْ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ عَلَىٰ الْعَالَمِينَ" ²⁰

"and we choose them over the two worlds with knowledge." ²¹

Further:

"وَإِنَّهُمْ عِندَنَا لَمِنَ الْمُصْطَفَيْنَ الْأَخْيَارِ" ²²

"and they are for us, verily of the chosen and the best." ²³

Please note that inerrancy is a kind of benignity endowed by the Creator upon his chosen devotees, prevented them from erring and committing sins.

¹⁸ Quran, al-Anbya, 101.

¹⁹ Quran, 21: 101.

²⁰ Quran, al-Dukhan, 32.

²¹ Quran, 44: 32.

²² Quran, Saad, 47.

²³ Quran, 38: 47.

Linguistically, inerrancy refers to prevention, but the dialectics have used the term to mean that someone has abstained from doing mistake by their choice.

Al-Muhageq al-Tousi in his book, al-Tagreed, has mentioned that inerrancy does not contravene with ‘choice’. This term was explained by Sheikh al-Hilli who said that there is a disagreement of views about how far the inerratic is able to err.

Some other scholars state that the one who was bestowed by infallibility is endowed with a physical and psychological privilege that prevent them from committing sins. While Hassan al-Basri and others claim that inerrancy is the ability to perform obedience and inability to err or to fall in sins. Those who have not detached ‘ability’ from ‘inerrancy’ have defined inerrancy as some kind of benignity bestowed by the Almighty Allah to one of His devotees whom He knows would not commit sins. Others have defined it as the psychological ability that deters them from falling into sin.

So far, the investigations led us to the following four definitions of the term inerrancy:

1. A benignity done by Allah to His devotee so that he/she would be immune from falling into mistakes.
2. A favour done to the devotee to prevent him/her from committing sins.
3. A deterrent psychological ability.
4. A benignity that does not necessitate abstaining from abiding and/or committing sins.

The unity in the meaning of the first three (first, second and third) definitions is obvious despite terminological disparity. All the four definitions would be the same in case by the third definition they mean that the benignity given by Allah to the devotee will empower him psychologically. As per the second definition, the reason behind this benignity is the knowledge as per the second definition this third definition asserts this knowledge. The fourth definition also refers to the knowledge of the devotee. Thus all the definitions do emphasise the element of the extent of knowledge of the devotee. The first definition, which requires a deterrent quality, also calls for the precondition of knowledge so that benignity is granted.

All this has led Sayed Tabatabaei to believe that nothing is behind inerrancy rather than having a special knowledge.²⁴ But the first definition defers from the rest of them as will be discussed later. They have referred to inerrancy in the first definition as a psychological ability that would prevent the devotee from committing sins. But that would include the unique people also because the rank of justice would be confirming this definition. Although some scholars are of the opinion that justice is indeed one aspect of the ranks of inerrancy.

One should notice that refraining from virtues means committing sins too. Then it would be proper to say that inerrancy is extended to mean an ability that prevents the devotee from not only committing sins but also deterring them against forgetfulness and mistake as well as leaving the best action at all times. This notion of inerrancy is even mentioned in the Quran in the verse:

" اللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ حَيْثُ يَجْعَلُ رِسَالَتَهُ"²⁵

*“Allah knows best with whom to place His message”*²⁶

²⁴ Al-Tabatabaei, al-Mizan Commentary on the Quran, vol 5, p 78-80.

²⁵ Quran, al-Anaam, 124.

This verse can well be an indication to this meaning.

At this instant, we can either define inerrancy as a quality or condition or we can describe it as a psychic or ability. One can chose any of these expressions because all of them indicate the meaning of quality. Those who defined it as benignity have touched the real meaning as long as inerrancy and its truth is something unseen to us. It may be described as a psychic that we do not know its limits and total dimensions though. We firmly know, however, that inerrancy is a divine benignity. This notion is used to achieve the following aims:

1. to avoid misinterpretation.
2. to know that inerrancy can be that ability that calls for prevention, or can be the prevention from that ability, or can be both.

We are not concerned about the difference between them because there is no use of it.

It is very important to mention what the noble scholar, Sayed al-Tabatabaei, wrote in his research under the title (Speech

²⁶ Quran, 6: 124.

about the Definition of Inerrancy). He comments on the Quranic verse:

" وَلَوْلَا فَضْلُ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكَ وَرَحْمَتُهُ لَهَمَّت طَّائِفَةٌ مِّنْهُمْ أَنْ يُضِلُّوكَ وَمَا يُضِلُّونَ إِلَّا أَنفُسَهُمْ وَمَا يَضُرُّونَكَ مِنْ شَيْءٍ وَأَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَعَلَّمَكَ مَا لَمْ تَكُن تَعْلَمُ وَكَانَ فَضْلُ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكَ عَظِيمًا " ²⁷

“But for the grace of Allah upon you (Mohammad), and His mercy, a party of them had resolved to mislead you, but they will mislead only themselves and they will hurt you not at all. Allah reveals unto you the Scripture and wisdom, and teaches you that which you knew not. The grace of Allah towards you has been infinite.” ²⁸

The clear thing from this verse is that inerrancy was realised on this basis of a knowledge that prevents the devotee from erring or committing sins. In other words, it is a knowledge preventing one from being misled. All the behaviours like courage, chastity and generosity are a practical picture preventing the devotee from going opposite direction. That opposing direction includes traits such as cowardness, heedlessness, laziness, greediness and extravagance. This

²⁷ Quran, al-Nisa, 113.

²⁸ Quran, 4: 113.

would show that the power of inerrancy is a scientific and sentimental undefeated reason. This knowledge differs from all acquired kinds of science.”²⁹

He continues to say: “It has become clear that this divine grant which we term as a power of inerrancy differs from the rest of science, because it is not defeated by any other sentimental power. It is the defeating power for all the sentiments that is why it prevents its owner from mistakes and from being misled. This definition is the correct and accurate one. Knowledge is something with which inerrancy has been realised.”³⁰

It has to be argued here that inerrancy differs from knowledge. Knowledge no doubt has a major influence on inerrancy. That is why the Almighty states:

” إِنَّمَا يَخْشَى اللَّهَ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ الْعُلَمَاءُ ”³¹

“Among His servants only the scholars fear Allah”³²

²⁹Al-Tabatabaei, al-Mizan Commentary on the Quran, vol 5, p 78.

³⁰Al-Tabatabaei, al-Mizan Commentary on the Quran, vol 5, p 80.

³¹ Quran, Fater, 28.

³² Quran, 35: 28.

Even this fear which is considered as the early stage of inerrancy does originate from knowledge. That is why fear of Allah as the verse reveals was confined to those who have knowledge.

This approach is perfect and undisputable. However, the following expression is confusing and not clear where he notes that inerrancy “is a knowledge preventing from being misled.” This might not depict clearly what we have quoted but after that he said: “This would show that the power of inerrancy is a scientific and sentimental undefeated reason.”

Here Allamah Tabatabaei clearly defines the power of inerrancy as an undefeated scientific power and reason. Then at last he says “a power of inerrancy differs from the rest of science, because it is not defeated by any other sentimental power.” He further added in another statement that “The divine inerrancy is a scientific and psychological talent that prevents the devotee against false belief and against bad deeds.”³³

³³ Al-Tabatabaei, al-Mizan Commentary on the Quran, vol 16, p 312.

There are a few arguable points here:

First: As can be clearly seen, the end of his statement contradicts its beginning. There he said that inerrancy is realised through knowledge, while at the end he said that inerrancy is the same as knowledge.

Second: How could we consider the cause as the outcome? Knowledge is the reason behind inerrancy thus is the outcome is knowledge. Inerrancy can only be knowledge and not vice versa. How did he define inerrancy as knowledge?

Third: He himself (God bless his soul) defined the quality in the beginning of his research as “an indivisible and does not have an identical relation.” Quality was primarily divided into four classes: one class of them is the psychological qualities such as knowledge, willingness, courage, and hope. So where does inerrancy fit?

One may solve this conflict by stating the there is no contradiction because he first referred the reason of inerrancy to the revelation of the Holy Book and the knowledge, which

are the reason of acquiring the power of inerrancy. That is why the concept of inerrancy according to him, compromises this defeating knowledge which differs from the rest of science; because it attains perfection. As far as concern the second contradiction, one can reason that knowledge and the power of inerrancy are equal because the soul of the inerratic is prepared to receive this knowledge. Allah, the Almighty will not descend this powerful knowledge upon anyone of his devotees unless he is fully prepared to receive it and strong enough to accommodate it. This knowledge is nothing more than the power of inerrancy. Therefore, there is a unity between the cause and the causative.

So, what is the inclusive definition of Infallibility then?

The most comprehensive definition can be as followed, which is similar to that of Sheikh al-Mufeed's: Inerrancy is a special benignity granted by God to one of his devotees so that he is deterred from doing sins. This benignity can be given on both special and general basis.

It is a special benignity because it is applicable to the Prophet alone so that he is immune against committing sins.

It is a general benignity because it turns the Prophet into a guiding person who leads the people to the right path, encouraging them to practice virtue and avoid vice.

A deeper look into the evidence brought forward by the Muslim scholars of other schools of thought about the existence of benignity may reveal to one that it is benignity for dealing with general people only. Moreover, looking further into their definition, it seems that benignity acquires its peculiarity where the public has no relation with it. Sheikh al-Mufeed explains this well by stating that if people then ask: is proving the infallibility of the Prophets and Messenger a prerequisite to their divine wisdom?

The answer would be that the proof of their infallibility is a sort of benignity; and benignity is divine wisdom prerequisite. Hence the infallibility of the Prophets is a condition which is required by divine wisdom.

Benignity is limited to the extent that it brings the devotee closer to the virtues and enables him to avoid practicing the vice.³⁴ That is why we say that it is a general benignity. On the other hand, if we want to include every inerratic being a Prophet or an angel, then we should add the term: (for the sake of private and general benignity) to the definition.³⁵

³⁴ Al-Mufeed. Theological Stories, vol 10, p 35.

³⁵ Al-Ansari, Inerrancy, 2nd Edition.

Rationale for Infallibility

There are four reasons behind granting this type of benignity, infallibility, to the devotees:

1. Special physical or psychological quality that would prevent him from committing sins.
2. To have full knowledge of benefits of good deeds and disadvantages of bad ones.
3. Assertion of this knowledge by the revelation or the divine aspiration.
4. Being accountable for not doing the best action.

Only when all these factors assemble together the person is said to be inerratic.³⁶

³⁶ Al-Hilli, *Tajreed al-Iteqad*, p 365.

Application of Infallibility

The briefest and best account of the application of infallibility has been presented by Sheikh al-Mudhaffar, who explains infallibility first then shows what is expected from the inerratic and includes all that in his description of the matter.

“We believe that all the prophets are infallible, and also that the twelve holy Imams (the progeny and successors to the Prophet of Islam) are infallible, but some non-Shia Muslims do not believe in the infallibility of the Prophets, let alone of the Imams. Infallibility means purity from all sins, both major and minor ones', and from mistakes and forgetfulness. It is necessary that a Prophet should not even do what is contrary to good manners: that is, he should not behave vulgarly, for example by eating in the street, by laughing aloud, or by doing anything which may be unacceptable to public opinion.

The reason for the necessity of the infallibility of a prophet is that if he commits a sin or mistake, is forgetful or something similar, we have to choose between two alternatives. Either we obey his sins and mistakes, in which case in the view of

Islam we do wrong. Or we must not obey his sins and mistakes, which too is wrong as this is contrary to the idea of Prophethood where obedience is necessary. Besides, if everything he says or does has the possibility of being either right or wrong then it is impossible for us to follow him. The result is that the benefit of his mission is lost. It becomes unnecessary and the Prophet becomes like ordinary people whose acts and speeches do not have the excellent worth that we seek. With the result that there will be no obedience and his actions will be unreliable. The same reason is adduced for the infallibility of the Imams, because we believe that the Imam is appointed by Allah as the Prophet's representative (khalifah) to guide mankind.”³⁷

³⁷Al -Mudhaffar, *Aqaed al-Imamia*, Editor al-Toraihi, p. 287.

Final Note

There are many Quranic verses, Prophetic traditions, historical details and rational arguments to prove the concept of infallibility or inerrancy and to whom it actually applies. These are beyond this brief account. One may refer to the other books of the Author such as:

- Inerrancy (two volumes),
- Tafseer Al-Kawthar,
- Imama and Governance in Islam,
- Attestation of the Imama of the Twelve,
- Praying for the Prophet and its Effects,
- End of Knowledge.

Other scholars of Shia School of Thought have also written intensively in this most important concept of Faith, which defines the core of the need for the presence of the Infallible Imam. May Allah hasten his reappearance and grant us all the privilege of being of his companions; Amen.

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