The Ismah of Prophets and Shi'ite Imams and Its Effects on the Understanding of Verses and Religious Hadiths from Qutb al-din Ravandi’s Perspective

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Abstract

Of the principles of shi'ite belief is the defense of Ismah of the prophets and shi'ite Imams and every shi'ite Scholar based on the topic of their work has argued for this principle. The basis of the principle is their being immune from sin and mistakes in domains of practice and belief. Like other shi'ite scholars, Qutb al-din Ravandi believed this and it is reflected in his interpretation of some verses and explanation of some hadiths. This is especially important when it comes to explaining and interpreting verses which can imply sin or mistakes on the side of prophets and shi'ite Imams(p.b.u.them). The current research intends to discover his manner of dealing with this group of verses and hadiths. This finally concludes that dealing with this kind of verses and hadiths, Ravandi takes them for Tark al-aola (leaving the more important for important) or a way of teaching their followers, and emphasizing the allegorical language of those verses and hadiths as well as just and logical justification of them he washes the illusion of sin and mistake off their faces.

Keywords: Ismah, prophets and shi'ite Imams, verses and hadiths, Qutb al-din Ravandi.

1 This article has been adapted from a PHD Thesis of Science Quran and Hadith at Islamic Azad University of Central Tehran Branch.
Introduction

Belief in Ismah of prophets and shiite Imams (p.b.u.them) that is one of the subcategories of prophecy has always been a serious issue among shiite Mutakallimun. Shiite kalam during the life span of shiite Imams used to have a narrative hue and since then textualism and philosophical rationalism are the approaches shiite mutakallimun have assumed in kalam issues. This indicates the trajectory of the development of shiite kalam since the beginning of Long Occultation (long absence of shiite Messiah, Imam Mahdi). Al-Shaykh al-Saduq and Al-Shaykh Al-Mufid and Khaje Nasir Toosi have been founders and preeminent characters of textualism and rationalism in Kalam. Since the time of authorship of kalam books independently from Short Occultation (Short Disappearance), as a subcategory of prophecy, the issue of Ismah of prophets has been dealt with in all shiite kalam works. For instance, Seyed Morteza Alam Al-Hoda has got an independent book titled “Tanzih Al-Anbia” and Al-Shaykh Al-Mufid has “Tashih Eteqadat Al-Imamyah” in which they have discussed the issue of Ismah. Of the recent scholars is Allamah Majlesi who in chapter four of Ketab Al-Nabovah in his Bahar Al-Anwar has included “The Ismah of Prophets and Explanation of Illusion of Mistakes and Lapses on their Side”. There are sixteen hadiths in the book that considering the explanations all verify Ismah. Before mentioning the hadiths, quoting Al-Shaykh al-Saduq he writes:

We believe in the infallibility of the prophets (Majlesi, Behar Al-Anwar, 1983)

Likewise, all shiite scholars arguing for Ismah, first define it and produce the reasons for the Ismah of prophets and shiite Imams and then mention some examples of Quran verses that cause the illusion of sin on the side of prophets. They all have interpreted the verses on the basis of belief in Ismah. Like other shiite scholars Qutb Al-din Ravandi, thinking the same way in the explanation of some verses and hadiths undertakes to interpret and gloss them and thus tries to purge any sin of impurity off their holy being.

In the current research after introducing Ismah from Ravandi’s perspective and comparing his to that of other scholars and discussing the meaning of Tark al-aola (leaving the more important for important) we discuss the framework of Ismah of prophets and shiite Imams from his point of view. We do all this to make preparation for understanding Ravandi’s view on the hadiths that create the illusion of sin on the side of prophets and finally we will investigate his way of dealing with such verses and hadiths.

Ismah from Qutb al-din Ravandi’s Viewpoint

Qutb Ravandi’s definition of prophets’ sin is: opposition to order and the order is either to do the wajib (religious duty) or mustahabb (recommended) (Ravandi, Ziya' Al-Shahab fi Sharh Shahab Al-Akhbar, 2010, p. 54).

In this definition prophets’ opposition to wajib and mustahabb is considered a sin while usually for other people opposition to mustahabb affairs is not considered a sin.
He accepts Ismah of prophets through rational reasons, thus he maintains: “when it is proved rationally that it is wajib for prophets to be immune from sin and mistake, they will not do anything wicked and we if they want do anything wicked and unacceptable, that will be Harm and forbidden.” (Ravandi, Al-Kharaj va Al-Haraej, 1989, p. 413).

However, in a different work he introduces his rational reasons: “As prophets have come from God, wisdom’s judgment is that they must be far from sins. This non-engagement in sins is an asset endowed upon them by God so that people can be attracted towards them and listen to and practice their orders.” (Ravandi, Ziya’ Al-Shahab fi Sharh Shahab Al-Akhbar, 2010, p. 530)

Considering all that was said it can be concluded that he believes in Ismah of prophets providing they don’t oppose the order to do the wajib and mustahabb. Of course, not opposing the order to do the mustahabb also means prophets don’t do anything makruh (offensive), either; why as doing mustahabb is desirable, not doing it is not punishable. On the other side, leaving makruh deeds is desirable and its commitment like not doing mustahabb is not subject to retribution (Shahid Avval, 1992, p. 137). Thus, mustahabb acts and evading makruh can only result in intimacy with God and this intimacy if necessary for prophets since they are immaculate and chaste and must be spiritually superior to others in society.

Ravandi, continuing the argument, in his definition of Ismah and commenting on starting sermon of Zia al-Shahab writes: “ which means the blessing God has granted to prophets and they, too, under God, out of will and not deterministically avoid committing sins. Indeed God’s blessing means closeness to God’s Providence and this is different from seeking shelter with God. The reason is that there is no filth in closeness to Heavens to be cleansed by God from them; as if to say that for the life after death to start, a resurrection and a reference is required. So means purity (that is as there wouldn’t be a life after death without a resurrection and reference, without God’s grace and blessing, there wouldn’t be any Ismah and purity. In other words, God’s grace is a prerequisite for Ismah and purity without which that couldn’t exist.) (Ravandi, 2010, p54).

There are some points in Qutb al-din Ravandi’s definition of Ismah. First, Ismah is a kind of blessing from God. Second, prophets and shiite Imams avoid sins at their own will and it is not a compulsory and deterministic issue. Consequently, owing to their good deeds they have been qualified to receive God’s grace and blessing in the first place and then they have avoided sins at their own will. Third, Ravandi considers God’s grace as a prerequisite for fulfillment of Ismah so as if it wasn’t for God’s grace, no one could achieve Ismah. If someone ever reaches the position, he deserves to enjoy a special position in God’s Providence.

The fourth point in Ravandi’s view is the influence of the infallibles’ words and their acceptance by people: “indeed all the words coming from their mouth are from a heart that has been enforced by the angel of Ismah and is able to distinguish Halam from Haram, so it leave no room for their rejection by people.” (Ibid, pp 56 and 57)
AS mentioned earlier Qutb Ravandi has introduced Ismah as a blessing from God as well as a voluntary avoidance of sins. Other shiite scholars believe the same way; Al-Shaykh Al-Mofid defines Ismah as: “Ismah is the blessing that God grants upon the qualified person and it forbids him from committing sins and disobedience while he is able to leave the wajib and do the haram.” (Mofid, 1993, p. 37).

In the same token, Khaje Nasire Toosi believes: “Ismah is a blessing from God so as with the blessing there would be nothing to invite him to leave the wajib and do the haram while he has the ability to leave the wajib and commit sin.” (Hamood, 2000, p. 423).

It is clear that first and second definitions are respectively indicative of voluntary nature of Ismah and it does not mean that after God’s blessing is granted upon them by angel of Ismah, its becomes compulsory, on the contrary it is totally voluntary. In fact, the voluntary nature of Ismah creates a special position and respect for them in the heart of people while anything compulsory would not be considered a virtue.

“Failure to Do the Better” from Qutb Ravandi’s Viewpoint

Considering the high position of prophets with God and mankind and considering the issue of Ismah that is one of the special qualifications and characteristics of those great people, one questionable issue for people has been the issue of “failure to do the better” on the side of prophets. The question is, how is it possible to be chosen by God and enjoy Ismah and at the same time to be affected by these unreasonable acts. On the one hand, believing in this principle can impact our view of those chosen by God; since believing that prophets used to commit failure to do the better can lower their position even – considering their sensitive position- lower than ordinary people, Islamic thinkers have had various ideas about the meaning of failure to do the better in their kalam and hadith books and exegeses. They include:


Regardless of existence of confusion in the definitions presented, the researcher believes that failure to do the better means present choice, the choice that considering the situation is the best possible one while compared to the other act this one is preferable.

Qutb al-din Ravandi uses the story of eating the forbidden fruit to define failure to do the better:
“You should know that Adam fell from heaven due to leaving the mustahabb. So how can sinful man hope to return to heaven?” (Ravandi, Lab Al-Bab, 2010, vol. 1, p107)

So Ravandi believes that what Adam did was a sort of failure to do the better and he was punished for not doing the preferable; before presenting this definition he writes: “Adam left heaven for failure to do the better.” (Ibid, vol. 1, p106). So he defines failure to the better as failure to do the preferable.

The framework of Ismah of prophets and imams from Ravandi’s viewpoint

Ravandi does not take the limits of Ismah of prophets and shiite Imams equal. He believes that prophets are immune from all kinds of minor and major sins and even mistakes, however, they are not clean from failure to do the better while shiite imams are not only immune from all kinds of sins and mistakes, they are also immune from commitment of failure to do the better.

The reason he does not take prophets immune from failure to do better is that, for instance, in the story of eating the forbidden fruit by Adam, he takes Adam’s act as failure to do the better and writes: “and God put Adam Caliph on the earth, after living in heaven while there was no difficult duty for him to do, but when Adam committed the failure to do the better by eating the forbidden fruit, God’s decision about him changed and his religious duty became more difficult.” (Ravandi, Menhaj Al-Bara'at fi Sharh Nahj Al-Balaqa, 1986, vol. 1, p407)

In the story of David’s judgment in verse 24 of surah of “Sad”, Ravandi writes: “David’s repentance was get closer to God after committing a failure to do the better; it was not due to commitment of a sin. (Ravandi, Lab Al-Bab, 2010, vol. 2, p226)

As we can see so far, Ravandi does not put failure to do the better past prophets, but he believes in their Ismah from sins and mistakes. Explaining the verses and hadiths which create the illusion of commitment of sin on the side of prophets, he defends their purity.

First example; Commenting on a hadith from prophet Muhammed (p.b.u.h) that reads: “Forgive my sins” (Ravandi, 2010, p520), and to defend Ismah of prophets rationally and narratively he tries to solve the problem by dealing with the meaning of the statement: “This kind of pray from the Prophet is meant to be worship and humbleness and is not because of sin and with this the prophet does not want to get rid of burden of sins or to wash the filth left from them. On the contrary it kind of statement from prophet is meant to teach his people how to repent and get relief from sins. And the reason why we said prophets are not allowed to be in the position of sin and commit sins is that when an omniscient God sends a messenger, he removes anything detestable for people from them and sins and the repetition of sins are a source of hatred and detestation. (Ibid)

Second example; Ravandi and Imam Ali’s statement: “I don’t consider myself too superior to be make mistakes and I do not think I am immune from them, unless go protects me from them” (Nahjo al-balaqha, sermon 216).
Defending Ismah of imams and prophets, Ravandi takes Adam’s statement in Al- A’rafi surah as an attempt to get closer to God (Ravandi, 1986, vol. 2, p357) and not as a repentance from a sin.

Third example; commenting on verse 143 of Al-A’rafi surah and to defend Ismah of Moses, Ravandi writes: “Beware that God grants prophets their requests. Some people think that Moses asked God to reveal Himself to him and He denied him the request; however, it is not right; since Moses is well aware of the fact that one cannot perceive God via senses. So the request was not for himself. It was make for his people (Ravandi, 2010, vol. 1. P403).

In so doing, he relieves the doubt of ascribing the request to Moses by attributing it to his people because prophets know better than to think God is visible via eyesight.

Granted, some of the Quran verses are on the face against Ismah of prophets but we should not forget that based on hadiths these verses are ‘mutashabeh’ or similar (not having easy understandable and literal meanings)verses; that is why Imam Reza in reply to al-Ma’mun who interpreted verses on the basis of their face value said: “Woe betide thee, fear God! Don’t ascribe original sins to prophets and don’t interpret God’s book based on your whims as God says: “And construal of them – mutashabeh or similar verses – is not but for God and the knowledgeable”, and one should be cautious in interpretation and take some apparent principles like Ismah into consideration. (Majlesi, 103, vol. 11, p72)

Qutb al-din Ravandi nevertheless thinks Ismah of shiite Imams is superior to that of prophets and he has indicated that on different occasions. For instance, in “Al-Kharaj va Al-Haraej “ comparing Ismah of Ahl al-beit to greatness of prophets he maintains: “God has praised them for past prophets and has boasted about them to arch angels; because they have committed no lapse or treachery while all people except them have had many mistake and errors. (Ravandi, 1989, vol. 2, p884)

On the basis of this hadith, he acknowledges the superiority of Ismah and ranking of Islam Prophet and immaculate shiite Imams to those of other prophets. The statement “no lapse or treachery has come from them”(Ibid) denotes the superiority since these terms are not used in his other works at all about other prophets. What is more, “God has praised them for other prophets” (Ibid) indicates that Islam Prophet and shiite Imams are of higher position with God as God talking to other prophets has praised them.

The notion that some prophets in addition to superiority to other people are also superior to some other prophets is congruent with Quran viewpoint. Some verses of Quran do not take prophets’ degree equally and God has put some superior in rank to others: “And we put Ishmael, Elisha and Jonah and Lot superior to others”. (Al-An’a’m, 86). Some other verses also speak about difference in position of prophets: “We put some prophets superior to others. From them there was one God talked with and raised some of them in rank; and we gave Jesus, the son of Mary, clear reasons and verified him by means of Holy Spirit” (Al-Baqara, 253)
About Ismah of shiite Imams and their superiority in rank to other prophets Qutb al-din Ravandi also believes that in addition to their Ismah, their Imamah also is granted upon them by God (Ravandi, 1986, vol. 1, p141) and this means that Ravandi’s belief about choosing of Imam Ali to Imamah is like belief of Imamiyyah: “So there is no haven from the fact that there should be immaculate wardens chosen by God for people to manage their affairs”. (Ibid, vol. 2, p290)

He also writes: From Adam to Islam Prophet there have always been immaculate wardens and imams chosen by God to preside over people and whenever a star set, another rose. (Ibid, vol. 1, p85)

From Ravandi’s argument that God had praised Imams and boasted about them to arch angels and like prophet God has chosen them, it can be concluded that Qutb al-din Ravandi believes that Imamah has higher position and dignity than prophecy.

The ways Ravandi deals with verses and hadiths emanating the illusion of sin on the side of prophets and shiite Imams

Now that Ravandi’s views about Ismah of prophets and shiite Imams as well as limits and quality of their Ismah have been discussed, we investigate Ravandi’s ways of dealing with verses and hadiths apparently indicating that prophets have sinned.

A) Taking for worship, humility or teaching

Qutb al-din Ravandi believes some of these verses and hadiths imply a kind of teaching to people or worship and humbleness on the side of infallibles and thus he interprets them in a way that doubts about Ismah of the infallibles are soothed. For instance, commenting on a hadith from Holy Prophet who said: “Oh God! Accept my repentance and wash my sins away and grant my wishes” (Ravandi, 2010, p527), Ravandi writes:

This kind of pray from Holy Prophet is meant to be worship or humbleness and does mean he has committed sin and he wants to soothe the burden or wash the filth of sin off himself. Prophet’s statement is meant to teach his people how to repent and find peace through humbleness. (Ibid)

In shiite hadiths and especially prays, there are many prays considered to be from the infallibles in which the speaker introduces himself as a sinner and asks God for mercy and forgiveness (Hamiri, 113, p166; Ibn-Hayyoun, 2006, vol. 1, p135; Ibn Qulawayh, 135, p 224). For instance, Imam Sadeq (p.b.u.h) prays: “forgive for me the sins that descended disaster and forgive for me the sins that haste toward ruin (Kulayni, 1987, vol. 2, p590).

Or in a different pray Prophet says: “Oh God! Forgive me for the sins no one but you can forgive (Barghi, 1992, vol. 2, p 352).
Dealing with such hadiths shiite exegetes do not take them at face value and construe them so as not to violate their Ismah. Qutb al-din Ravandi, too, believing in Ismah of prophets and Imams undertakes to construe the hadiths.

So he undertakes to justify and interpret Prophet’s hadith logically so as to do away with the apparent illusion that Holy Prophet, like other people had committed sins and asked for forgiveness from God. He, then, construes the pray as an occasion of worship and humbleness not as a pray for God to lift the burden of sins or wash the consequent filth away from his soul. He also takes the pray as an instance of teaching his people how a sinful servant of God can supplicate for mercy and forgiveness.

Ravandi’s effort to push impurity away from prophets and shiite Imams are its roots in his belief in their Ismah so he, based on the same belief undertakes to interpret hadiths against their face value.

B) Correct and logical justification

In some cases, Ravandi explicates the verses and hadiths in an acceptable and logical way on the basis of belief in Ismah of prophets and shiite Imams. This method had been common among other exegetes of Ahlolbeit hadiths before Ravand like Seyyed Morteza (Seyyed Morteza, 1998, p. 114) and Alshaykh Al-Tabarsi (Tabarsi, 1993, vol. 7, p55) and after Ravandi, scholars like Allamah Majlesi (Majlesi, Bita, p 19) have applied the same method in interpretation of this group of verses and hadiths.

One example is Seyed Mo[rteza who interpreting verse 43 of surah of Tawba writes: the verse is apparently about expostulation because these words are use to expostulate and reprove someone, but our answer is that the statement “Allah forgives You” does not imply commitment of a sin or reconsideration of a retribution and does not matter if the statement is taken for praise or accompaniment. Since some of us sometimes addressing the other says: didn’t you see that God showed mercy on you and forgave you?, while he does not mean forgiveness of sins. But sometimes the addressee is not aware of the sin he may commit, so the purpose of the statement lies in the way of addressing and that is used out of habit to praise or humiliate the addressee (Seyyed Morteza, 1998).

In the statement, Seyed Murteza tries to interpret the verse for the reader via the justification that is based on Arabic grammar and language so as it causes no harm to Ismah of Prophet of Islam.

Another example is Mula Saleh Mazandarani who explicating Imam Sadeq’s hadith who said: “Oh the compassionate and merciful God! Forgive for me the sins that change the blessings.” (Kulayni, 1987, vol. 2, p589) writes: “the word “sins” as used here is implemented to express regret and repentance so that others are warned not to commit sins like that(Mazandarani, 2003, vol. 10, p 423). According to the statement, Mola Saleh Mazandarani thinks Imams are immune from sins but he this form of pray to warn others not to sin.
Likewise, Qutb al-din Ravandi explicating a pray from Holy Prophet who said: “Oh God! Grant piety to my ego and purify it” (Ravandi, 2010, p526) writes: “Oh God! Grant upon me a share of piety so that I can get free from whims and temptations. [And this] means grant me so much blessing that I can reach piety. [in this hadith] piety has been added to ego to show that piety has come from within not from the effect of and act from God’s although that is a God’s grace. Therefore, he supplicates for God’s grace on the way to piety and then he requests Ismah from whims and temptations: “and purify (my) ego in the future”. Then he says: “whatever God has done in the past to purify his ego from sins and disobedience is because of God’s governance and Walayah.” (Ibid, p527)

Qutb al-din Ravandi believes that Prophet’s request that his ego be purified by God is because of keeping him away from temptations and impurity and Prophet wants to indicate that being away from sins is a blessing from god that must be first requested of God by man and then he must ask for Ismah from temptations and whims from God. Thus, Prophet’s pray means that he first asks for piety from God and then Ismah and it does not mean being purged from sins and Prophet’s intention is Ismah that comes from God.

C) Taking for failure to do the better

In the same token, Qutb al-din Ravandi dealing with verses that cause the illusion of sin or error from prophets or shiite Imams take them for failure to do the better. For instance, he explicating verse 24 of surah of “Sad” writes: “the statement of “Your brother has surely Wronged you ” means that if the issue is as you say, you have committed oppression. “inspired” here means “knowing” like the verse “he knew that would never return”, and it has been said that “inspired” is famous knowledge which is against certainty. “so he asked Forgiveness” means that David repented for the sake of closeness to God and he was not sinful for that but it was merely for failure to do the better (Randi, 2010, vol. 2, p266).

Interpreting this verse, after logical justification and interpretation and taking it for David’s guess about his judgment, Ravandi indicates that after David realized that God had examined him, he repented for the failure to do the better and not for the sin he had committed. So his repentance was because of closeness to God and rise of his spirituality.

He also writing about sermon 91 of Nahj al-Balagha, known as “ghosts”, which is about Adam’s eating of forbidden fruit, indicates: “God put Adam in Heaven as the Caliph while there was no difficult religious duty there. However, eating from that tree he committed failure to do the better and as a result God’s decision about him changed and his religious duty became more difficult and God descended him onto the earth to live there as he has to (Ravandi, 1986, vol. 1, p407).

Of course, it is important to mention that failure to do the better committed by Adam goes back to the period he was not appointed a prophet (Saduq, 1999, vol. 1, p196) so it is not considered a sin for him.
D) Taking them as allegories12

This means that to do away with the charges of commitment of sin by prophets and shi’ite Imams coming from face of some verses, Qutb al-din Ravandi took what had happened to them as an allegory.

Ravandi has used this method only in the story of Jonah and explaining verses 87 and 88 of surah of Anbyyah after acknowledging the point that all prophets are immune from sins both deadly and minor, he writes: “Be aware that all prophets are infallible and commit no sins” (Ravandi, 2010, vol. 2, p 135) and since God wants to promote the degree of His prophet’s closeness to Himself, engages him with hardship (Ibid, p 136). Ravandi’s view about what happened to Jonah is that: “this statement is allegorical which means Jonah felt like we have no control over him and cannot make his religious duties and life more difficult (Ravandi, 2010, vol. 2, p138).

Thus, Ravandi believes that if we take the language allegorical, Jonah has not committed any crime because if we consider it allegorical, it will mean that: “Jonah was like a person who thought God has no power over him and cannot make his religious duty more difficult.” And this means that God is describing his feeling in appearance and the fact that any one seeing him would have thought that no one had power over him.

This kind of interpretation is one of Ravandi’s innovations and no one before him had ever interpreted the verse above as he has. However, after him scholars like Allamah Majlesi, interpreting the aforementioned verse use the same point (Majlesi, 1987, vol. 3, p 132; as well as Fakhr al-din Razi, 2000, vol. 22, p 180; (Zamkhashri, 1987, vol. 3, p 132).

Conclusion

Based on the points mentioned, the following is concluded: first, Qutb al-din Ravandi defines sin for prophets as opposition to the order to do the wajib and mustahabb. For other people, opposition to the mustahabb is not usually a sin while for the prophets not only opposition to the wajib, but also opposition to the mustahabb is a sin. Second, he finds Ismah a blessing and grace on the side of God and thinks prophets and shi’ite Imams evade sins at their own will and that is not something deterministic. So God’s grace and blessing is first granted upon them because of their good deeds and then they avoid sins at their own will. He also thinks God’s grace (tawfiq) is a prerequisite for the realization of Ismah and without it no one can ever reach Ismah. If on reaches Ismah, he/she deserves a special position from in God’s

2 By allegory we mean allegory in rhetoric which is likening two people or things in a state or another. This transfers the tenor, vehicle and ground of similarity in a sharper way. (Hashemi, 2004, p. 214)
Providence. Third, despite different definitions presented for “failure to do the better”, Qutb al-din Ravandi believed that failure to the better means leaving what is mustabb. Fourth, he does not think that Ismah of prophets and shiite Imams are of the same limits and believes that prophets are immune from all sorts of deadly as well as minor sins and even errors, but they are not immune from failure to do the better. Nevertheless, the Holy Prophet of Islam and shiite Imams in addition to Ismah from all sins and errors, are immune from committing failure to do the better, as well. Fifth, the ways Ravandi deals with verses and hadiths which apparently cause the illusion of sins on the side of prophets were investigated and it was discovered that he had used four method in the interpretation of the verses and hadiths: A) Taking for worship, humbleness or teaching B) correct and logical justification C) taking them for failure to do the better D) Considering them as allegories. Of these methods the last one is of his innovations not ever used before him.
References


* Nahj Al-Balaqe.


*The Holy Quran.*