

The Allegorical Verses of the Holy Qur'an about the Ismah of the Prophets

By: Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi

After explaining the meaning and importance of 'ismah for the prophets and messengers of Allah which is also supported by the Qur'anic verses we quoted above, some people become confused when they come across verses which give an impression that Adam and other prophets committed some sins.

This confusion will only be clear if we realize that the Qur'anic verses, according to the Qur'an itself, are of two types: He is the one who sent upon you the book: some of its verses are clear (muhkamât)—these are the basis of the Book, while others are allegorical (mutashâbihât).

“As for those in whose hearts is perversity, they follow the allegorical verses, seeking to mislead and seeking to give (their own) interpretation. None know their (i.e., allegorical verses') interpretation except Allah and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge...” (3:7)

Those who do not differentiate between the clear and the allegorical verses will surely get confused when they apparently find two conflicting messages from the verses of the Qur'an. The issue of 'ismah is one of those issues in which people have become victim of confusion.

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The situation, at this stage of our discussion, is as follows:

- 1) Our earlier discussion concluded that the divine guides must be immaculate and above reproach.
- 2) Many verses of the Qur'an support this view, as mentioned above.
- 3) But there are some verses of the Qur'an that apparently attribute sins and wrongdoings to some prophets.

What should be done?

We must accept those verses that are supported by our reason as the clear (muhkamât) verses. And the other verses should be considered allegorical (mutashâbihât) and their true meaning must be sought in the light of the muhkamât, the teachings of the Prophet, and the Imams of Ahlul Bayt who are the twin of the Qur'an by virtue of the famous saying of the Prophet that “I am leaving two precious things among you [for guidance]: the Book of Allah and my Ahlu 'l-bayt.”[9]

In the next lesson, we will study those verses and see how can we interpret them and, at the same time, hold on to our belief in the infallibility of the prophets.

Notes:

[9] Ibn Hajar al-Makki, as-Sawa'iqu 'l-Muhriqah, chapter 11, section 1.

The Case of Adam (a.s.)

It will help us greatly if we, first of all, study the verses of the Qur'an about the creation of Adam, his stay in Paradise, and his coming to the earth.

Chapter 2 (al-Baqarah) verses 30-39: The Creation

When your Lord said to the angels, “I am going to place a vicegerent on the earth,” the angels said, “Will You place on the earth the one who shall act wickedly in it and shed blood; whereas we sing Your praise and glorify You?” Allah said, “Surely I know what you do not know.”

And [after creating Adam] Allah taught Adam all the names. Then He presented those to the angels and said, “Tell me the names of these if you are true [in what your assumption that you are more superior than Adam].” They said, “Glory be to You! We have no knowledge except what You have taught us. You are surely the All-Knowing, the Wise.” [Then] He said, “O Adam! Tell them the names of those [persons].” When Adam told them those names, Allah said [to the angels], “Didn't I say to you that I know the unseen things of the heavens and the earth, and I know what you manifest and what you hide.”

And [remember] when We said to the angels, “Prostrate before Adam.” All of them prostrated except Iblis, who refused and was haughty, and [thus] he became one of the unbelievers.

In Paradise:

[After creating Hawwa], We said, “O Adam, Dwell you and your wife in the Garden and eat

from it [freely] as many [things] as you wish; but do not approach this tree, otherwise you will become one of the "alimeen **الظالمين**."

But the Shaytan made them slip (**أَزَلَهُمَا**) from that [Garden by luring them to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree] and thus got them out from the state [of felicity] in which they had been.

So We said [to Adam, Hawwa, and the Shaytan that, "All of you] get down [from the Garden to the earth] some of you being the enemies of the other, and there is on the earth your abode and the necessities [of life] for a [fixed period of] time." [Adam felt ashamed and intended to ask Allah's forgiveness.] So Adam learnt some words from his Lord, and Allah turned to him mercifully (**تَابَ عَلَيْهِ**). Surely He is the Most-Forgiving, the Merciful. We said, "All of you get down from the Garden. [Once you are on the earth], a guidance will certainly come to you from Me: whosoever follows My guidance, there will be no fear for them nor shall they grieve. But those who disbelieve and reject Our revelation, they are the inmates of the Fire, in it they shall abide."

Chapter 7 (al-A'râf) verses 19-25

[Allah said,] "O Adam! Dwell you and your wife in the Garden and eat from wherever you wish; but do not approach this tree, otherwise you will become one of the "alimeen **الظالمين**."

Then the Shaytan instilled temptation into them so as to reveal to them their private parts that were hidden from them. He said, "Your Lord has only prohibited you from this tree lest you both become rulers, or lest you become immortals." [To ensure that his temptation will work, the Shaytan] swore to them both that, "Truly, I am a sincere adviser for you." Thus he misled them by delusion.

So when they tasted [the fruit of] the tree, their private parts became manifest to them, and both of them started to cover themselves with the leaves of the Garden. Their Lord called out to them, "Did I not prohibit both of you from this tree and say to you that the Shaytan is your open enemy?"

They said, "Our Lord! We have been unjust to ourselves (**ظَلَمْنَا أَنْفُسَنَا**); and if You do not forgive us and have mercy on us, we shall surely be among the losers."

Allah said, "Get down [to the earth], some of you being the enemies of the others; and there is on the earth your abode and necessities [of life] for a time." He said, "Therein you shall live, therein you shall die, and from it you shall be raised [again]."

Chapter 20 (Ta Ha) verses 116-126

And [remember] when We said to the angels, "Prostrate before Adam," all of them prostrated except Iblis who refused and was haughty.

Therefore, We said, "O Adam! this [Shaytan] is an enemy to you and your wife. So do not let him expel you from the Garden, otherwise you will be uncomfortable (**تَشْقَى**): in it [i.e., the Garden] you shall neither be hungry nor naked, and you shall neither be thirsty therein nor struck by the sun's rays."

But the Shaytan instilled temptation to him by saying, "O Adam! Shall I guide you to the tree of immortality and a kingdom which will not decline?" When [they] both ate of that tree, their private parts became manifest to them and both of them started to cover themselves with the leaves of the Garden. Adam disobeyed (**عَصَى**) his Lord, and so he erred (**غَوَى**). Then his Lord chose him, and then He turned to him and guided him.

[Then] Allah said [to Shaytan and Adam], "You both get down from this [Garden], some of you being the enemies of the other. [On the earth], a guidance will certainly come to you from Me, and then whosoever follows My guidance, he shall not go astray nor will he be unhappy. But whosoever turns away from My reminder, then he shall surely have a wretched life and we shall resurrect him blind."

Review of Adam's Story

1. According to the experts of Islamic jurisprudence, the orders given by Allah are of two types:

- Al-amr al-mawlawi, a legislative command. Such orders must be implemented; and, if someone disobeys such a command, then he is committing a sin and is liable to be punished. For example, the command to "say the daily prayers" or "do not eat the pork" is of such nature. Neglecting the daily prayers or eating of the pork is a sin and Allah can rightly punish the sinner.
- Al-amr al-irshadi, an advisory command. Such orders are of advisory nature; their purpose is to inform the people about its consequences. However, if someone disobeys such an order, then he is not committing a sin; of course, he will have to face the consequences of not following the advice. For example, the command to "say bismillah when you slaughter the chicken" is of advisory nature. Now, if someone slaughters the chicken and neglects the

saying of “bismillah,” then has he committed a sin? No, he has not committed a sin nor is he liable for a punishment for not saying the “bismillah” at that time. However, he will lose the right to eat that chicken; that chicken cannot be eaten by a Muslim. Another example: a person comes to his doctor complaining of cough. The doctor advises his patient to drink a certain medicine, a cough syrup. Now if the patient ignores that advice, then he is not committing a sin or a crime; but he will surely suffer the consequence — his illness will be prolonged and his health might deteriorate.

Conclusion: not all commands of Allah are of obligatory or prohibitive nature. The advice given to Adam and Hawwa was not of the legislative nature. It was not that that particular tree and its fruit themselves were forbidden. The prohibition of going near that tree and eating its fruit was al-amr al-irshadi. And going against such an order is not a sin; at most, the doer will have to face the consequences of ignoring that advice. In case of Adam and his wife, the consequence they faced was cancellation of their tenure as guests of Allah in the Paradise and its comforts. Remember that they were not supposed to stay in the Paradise forever; they were created for the earth, and their stay in the Paradise was meant to be temporary.

2. The Garden/Paradise is not the place for test and trial. It is this earth on which human beings have been destined to go through test and trial by obeying the commands of Allah. The concept of sinning in case of human beings is connected to the worldly life.

In the story of Adam itself, Allah makes this point clear when He orders Adam to go to the earth—He said, “You both get down from this [Garden], some of you being the enemies of the other. [On the earth], a guidance will certainly come to you from Me, and then whosoever follows My guidance, he shall not go astray nor will he be unhappy. But whosoever turns away from My reminder, then he shall surely have a wretched life and we shall resurrect him blind.” (20:126)

The order given to Adam in Heaven is not same as the orders given to human beings in this world—it is disobedience of the orders given on this earth that constitutes sin.

Finally, the Shaytan himself knows that he does not have the power to mislead the prophets, the messengers, and those who are graced with purity by Almighty Himself. When he was given respite by Allah, he declared the following: “So I swear by Your Might (O Lord) that I will surely mislead them all together except the devoted servants of Your's from among them.” (38:82-3; 15:39-40) And Allah responds to him by saying, “...As for my servants, you have no power over them except those who follow you from among the misled people...” (15:41) The Satan himself knew the limitation of his influence upon the chosen servants of Allah in this world.

3. Those who believe that Adam committed a sin, describe the eating of the forbidden fruit as the “sin” and Adam's expulsion from the heaven as the “punishment”. However, this relationship between the sin and its punishment is not valid because of two reasons:

Firstly, Adam was destined to come to the earth anyway. Allah had declared even before creating Adam that “I want to place a vicegerent on the earth.” So coming of Adam to the earth is not a punishment; whether or not he ate the forbidden fruit, Adam would have come to the earth anyway. So that was not a punishment.

Secondly, if coming of Adam to the earth was a “punishment” of eating the forbidden fruit, then he should have been returned to the paradise after Allah “forgave” him. Forgiveness means “canceling the punishment”—Adam should have been taken back to the paradise. This did not happen, which proves that Adam's coming to the earth was not a “punishment”; and eating was not a “sin”.

4. What about the words in the story Adam that imply that he committed sin?

After studying the issue of 'ismah from the Qur'anic point of view, if we come across such words we have to interpret them in a way that they are in harmony with the other verses of the Qur'an. Now let us look at three such words that have occurred in the story of Adam.

First: the word “الظالمين” is from “ظلم”. This word has four meanings: (a) to put something in a wrong place; (b) to oppress; (c) to make haste; and (d) to come to harm.[10]

We see that the last two meanings of the word are in harmony with what we explained about 'ismah. For example, verse 2:35 would read like this: We said, “O Adam, Dwell you and your wife in the Garden and eat from it [freely] as many [things] as you wish; but do not approach this tree, otherwise you will be one of those who put themselves into harm.”

Here, “harm” would mean facing the difficulties of the earthly life and losing the comforts of the heaven.

or

“...otherwise, you will be one of those who make haste.” Here, “making haste” would mean that they were eventually to go to the earth but by eating from the forbidden tree they hastened their departure to a place where they will lose the comforts of the Garden.

This meaning of the word **الظالمين** *al-ẓālimīn* is supported by the next verse that says that the Shaytan “got them out from the state [of comfort] in which they had been.” Also the verse 20:117 supports this interpretation: “O Adam! this [Shaytan] is an enemy to you and your wife. So do not let him expel you from the Garden, otherwise you will be uncomfortable: in it [i.e., the Garden] you shall neither be hungry nor naked, and you shall neither be thirsty therein nor struck by the sun’s rays.” In other words, here food, clothing and shelter are readily provided for you; you will lose these comforts on the earth. Here everything is provided but there you will have to work for yourselves.

Second: the word **عَصَى** means “disobeyed”. This does not necessarily imply sin because disobedience can be attributed to two types of commands: al-amr al-mawlawi (a legislative command) or al-amr al-irshadi (an advisory command). If a person goes against the advisory command, then he has “disobeyed” but not “sinned”. We have already explained that commands of Allah do not always have the force of obligation or prohibition. And, by keeping in mind those verses which prove the 'ismah, we have no choice but to interpret this word as “disobeyed the advisory command”.

Third: Similarly, the word **عَوَى** means “he erred”. But this does not necessarily mean sin. It can easily be applied to at-tarku 'l-awla which is possible for a prophet to do. At-tarku 'l-awla (**ترك الأولى**) means “leaving the more appropriate behaviour”. “Adam erred” would mean that even if the command of Allah did not carry the force of legislative prohibition, still Adam should have obeyed it. In disregarding the advisory command of Allah, Adam is guilty not of a sin but of not living up to the appropriate behaviour which is expected from a prophet or messenger of God.

5. If Adam did not commit a sin, then why does Allah talk about repentance for Adam and forgiveness from Himself, and uses so strong words as

عصى and **الظالمين** etc?

Firstly, When a prophet like Adam commits at-tarku 'l-awla, it is quite appropriate for him to ask Allah for pardon—not necessarily for a sin but for an inappropriate behaviour. So “repenting” does not necessarily mean that Adam must have committed a sin; it is quite appropriate rather advisable even after committing at-tarku 'l-awla.

Secondly, the use of harsh words by Allah in describing the story of Adam is acceptable by keeping in mind the status of Adam. Although Adam did not commit a sin, it was improper for him to adopt an inappropriate behaviour. The people with high ranks are expected to live by the standard that is higher than that of the normal human beings. As the saying goes: the virtuous deeds of the pious are considered 'sins' by those who are nearest to God — hasanâtu 'l-abrâr sayyi'âtu 'l-muqarrabin.

Notes:

[10] See al-Munjid, the famous Arabic dictionary that gives following meanings to ad-dulm:

الجور، وضع الشيء في غير موضعه، كل ما أعجلته عن أوانه

The Case of Prophet Ibrahim (a.s.)

There are some verses in the Qur'an that apparently attribute sins and wrong doings to Prophet Ibrahim (a.s.). We shall look at the three most important such examples.

Chapter 6 (al-An'am) verses 75-80

[Remember] when Ibrahim said to his uncle, Azar, “Do you take idols for gods? Surely I see you and your people in manifest error.” Thus We were showing Ibrahim the kingdom of the heavens and the earth so that he might be of (al-muqinin) those who are sure [of their faith]. So when the night outspread over Ibrahim, he saw a star; he said, “This is my Lord.” But when the star set [in the morning,] he said, “[This cannot be my Lord because it has passed away,] I do not like the transitory [gods].”

[On the next night,] when he saw the moon rising, he said, “This is my Lord.” But when the moon set he said, “If my Lord had not guided me, then I shall surely be of (adh-dhaliyn) the people who have gone astray.”

[In the morning,] when Ibrahim saw the sun rising, he said, “This must be my Lord [because] this is greater [than the star and the moon!]” But when the sun set, he said, “O my people, surely I am free from what you associate [with Allah.] I have sincerely turned myself to Him who originated the heavens and the earth, and I am not one of the polytheists.”

Many historians of religion take Ibrahim as the founder of the monotheistic idea. This definitely goes against the Islamic view that monotheism was the original faith of mankind from the days of Adam (a.s.), and that later on people became polytheists.

The Qur'anic statements quoted above have been used as a proof of the evolutionary phases in Ibrahim from polytheism to monotheism. This is, obviously, an incorrect reading of the Qur'an.

1. This entire passage quoted above actually shows that Prophet Ibrahim was actively engaged in combating idol - and nature-worshipping. Reading the whole passage does not raise any problem about the 'ismah of Prophet Ibrahim. He did not raise the possibility of the star, the moon and the sun being gods as a fact; it was raised only as a part of his method of disproving such a possibility. In debates, it is quite common to initially accept the view of your opponent in order to lead him to your own view.

If you read the first part of the passage where Ibrahim is disputing with his own uncle[11] against idol-worshipping and also Allah's statement that "We were showing...so that he might be of those who are sure [of their faith]," it shows that he was a true believer before he engaged in debate with the idol- and nature-worshippers.

2. Even the passage where he says, "If my Lord had not guided me, then I shall surely be of the people who have gone astray," is a conditional statement. It says "if" and "then". And since the first part did not take place, therefore the second part is not relevant.

Chapter 21 (al-Anbiya') verses 62-63

In pursuant of his mission against idol-worshipping, Ibrahim one day smashed all the all idols of the temple except the big one. Then the Qur'an says: [The idol-worshippers] said, "Who has done this to our gods? He surely must be one of the unjust people." [Some of them] said, "We have heard a youth speaking [ill] of them, and he is known as Ibrahim."...

[When Ibrahim was brought to the king,] he said, "Rather it was this their leader that has done it— ask the [smashed idols] if they can speak."

The objection against 'ismah is that if Ibrahim was ma'sum, how could he lie? Again, if we look at the entire passage, we see that Ibrahim wanted to make his people realize that idols are not worth worshipping—if they cannot defend themselves or even talk, then how can they help you.

Secondly, Ibrâhîm's answer is conditional: "...if they can speak." Ibrâhîm's answer was rhetorical and intended to force the people to think. This becomes clearer from the following verse: 21:65-66

...They said, "You know that the idols do not speak." Ibrahim said, "Well then, do you worship, besides Allah, [the idols] that neither benefit you in any way nor harm you."

Chapter 2 (al-Baqarah) Verse 260

And [remember] when Ibrahim said, "My Lord! Show me how You give life to the dead." Allah said, "What, do you not believe [in resurrection]?" He answered, "Certainly [I believe, I am asking this] so that my heart may be at ease."

Allah said, "Take four of the birds...."

Some people use this incident as a proof that Ibrahim did not believe in resurrection. This is absolutely incorrect. The question and answer are themselves very obvious that he believed.

"Certainly [I believe]."

Then why did he ask for a demonstration of resurrection? Firstly, Ibrahim surely believed in God's power of giving life to dead. However, this was a belief based on the revelation of Allah just as we believe in it based on the information reached to us through the prophets and the Imams.

Secondly, Ibrahim wanted to elevate the level of his belief from "information" to "demonstration". According to traditions, one day Ibrahim saw a dead fish, half in the water, the other half outside the water. He also saw that sea creatures were eating away one half of the fish and land animals were eating away the other half. This incident made Ibrahim wonder about the issue of resurrection. We are using the word "wonder" not "doubt". This is when he had the desire of seeing a demonstration of Allah's power of resurrection, and this also explains the way Allah asked him to kill and mix the parts of the four birds.

In conclusion, Ibrahim believed in resurrection before as well as after this event. The difference is that his belief prior to this event was based on the information about the future revealed to him by God; whereas after this event, his belief in resurrection was based on visual demonstration done by him with Allah's permission. This is similar to a Muslim who has been to hajj: before his journey, he believed that the Ka'bah existed; but the basis of his belief changed after his journey—now he has seen the Ka'bah with his own eyes.

The Case of Prophet Musa (a.s.)

Chapter 28 (al-Qasas) Verses 15-16

And he entered the city at a time when its people were not aware [of his presence], and found therein two men fighting: one was from his party and the other was from his enemies. [When] the one who was his follower [saw Msa, he] cried out to him for help against the one

who was from his enemies. So M̄sa [went and] struck him with his fist and killed him. [Then M̄sa] said, "This is Shaytan's deed (عمل الشيطان); surely he is an open enemy who leads [others] astray." [M̄sa] said, "My Lord! I surely have been (ظلمت نفسي) unjust to myself; therefore (فاغفر لي) forgive me." So [Allah] (غفر) forgave him; He is the Forgiving, the Merciful."

The common translation of the last verse combined with the statement about the Shaytan creates conflict with the concept of 'ismah, infallibility.

When reading these verses, keep the following points in mind:

1) What M̄sa did was not a crime; he went to help an oppressed person and, in the process, struck a blow with his fist at the oppressor. This ended, unexpectedly, in the death of the oppressor. Helping an oppressed person is a praiseworthy act in itself. The death of the oppressor, at most, can be labeled as accidental death that is not a crime or a sin.

2) M̄sa's words that "This is Shaytan's deed" does not necessarily refer to his own action. Remember that the Shaytan himself knew his limits; he says to Allah, "...I will certainly mislead them all together except the devoted servants of Your's from among them." (38:82-83) And Allah says to the Shaytan, "...As for my servants, you have no power over them except those who follow you from among the misled people...." (15:41) And M̄sa surely was not among the misled servants of Allah!

So the sentence that "this is Shaytan's deed" refers to the mischief started by the oppressor himself.

3) As for the sentence that "My Lord I have surely been unjust to myself," this must be interpreted in light of the meaning of dhulm explained in the case of Prophet Adam (a.s.). Its correct translation would be: "My Lord I surely have put myself into harm" — after the accidental death of the oppressor, M̄sa was pursued by the people of Fir'awn.

4) Then how do you explain the sentence after that which says that "ighfir li" which means "forgive me" and "ghafara" which means that Allah "forgave him"?

Again, the common meaning of ghafara (forgiving) is not applicable here. The word "ghafara" also means "to watch over someone" or "to guard someone" or "to cover something [i.e., protect it]". This second meaning does not imply any sin; it just means that by accidentally killing the oppressor, M̄sa found himself in harm and trouble from the people of Fir'awn; and, therefore, he prays "...therefore, guard me and Allah guarded him."

This meaning of the last sentence is also supported by another verse of the Qur'an which quotes Allah saying to M̄sa that, "...when you killed an [Egyptian] man [accidentally and were being pursued by Fir'awn's people], We delivered you from the worry..." (20:40) So the dhulm is explained in this verse as "worry"; and "ghafara" is explained as "delivered".

The Case of Prophet Yunus (a.s.)

Another verse which is considered to be incompatible with the concept of 'ismah is about Prophet Yunus (a.s.).

Chapter 21 (al-Anbiya') verses 87-88:

And (remember) Yunus, when he went away in anger; and he thought that We would never have power over him (naqdira). Then he called in the darkness [of night, sea, and fish]: "There is no god but You, glory be to Thee; surely I am one of the unjust ('alimeen).

So We responded to him and delivered him from the grief, and thus do We deliver the believers.

The common translation of the words naqdira and "alimeen make these two verses incompatible with the concept of 'ismah.

1. The first question against 'ismah in this passage is about the action of Prophet Yunus: he left his people when the punishment subsided without him knowing about it. Was Yunus angry at Allah?

The most that this verse says is that Yunus went away in anger; it does not say that he was angry with Allah. So we have no choice but to interpret this verse by saying that Yunus left the people while he was angry with them for not believing him.

2. The second question is about the sentence: "He thought that We would never have power (naqdira) over him." Some people have taken the word naqdira in the meaning of "having power," thus imply that Yunus went away in anger thinking that God "would never have power over him".

Firstly, if this meaning is to be taken seriously, then Yunus would become a kafir, an unbeliever!

Secondly, the word naqdira (which is from qadr) has been used many times in the Qur'an for "restricting of the provision" by Allah. For example, in chapter 13, verse 26, Allah says, "Allah expands and straitens (yaqdiru) the provision for whomsoever He pleases." Or, for

instance, in chapter 89, verses 15-16, Allah says: "As for man: when his Lord tries him by treating him with honour and giving him an easy life, he says 'My Lords honours me.' But when He tries him by straitening (qadara) his provision for him he says, 'My Lord has disgraced me.'"

In conclusion, we can say that the first sentence of the passage under discussion means: And (remember) Ynus, when he went away in anger; and he thought that We would never straiten [the provision] over him." This, at most, means that Ynus thought that because he was God's prophet, his Lord would never straiten his provision for him; he had taken Allah's provision for granted. It has nothing to do with issue of Allah having no power over him.

3. If Ynus had committed no sin by leaving his people, then why did he say that, "surely I am one of the "alimeen, the unjust"?

As mentioned earlier in the case of Prophet Adam (a.s.), the word "ulm does not necessarily imply "injustice" and "sin". It also means "to make haste" and "to come to harm". Any of these two meanings are compatible with the concept of 'ismah and also correct in the case of Prophet Ynus.

The verse would then mean as follows: "There is no god but You, glory be to Thee; surely I am one of those who make haste" or "There is no god but You, glory be to Thee; surely I am one of those who come to harm".

This explanation is further supported by the next verse in which Allah says, "So We responded to him and delivered him from the grief, and thus do We deliver the believers." The "ulm mentioned in the prayer of Ynus is explained by Allah as "al-ghamm—grief", and not as sin or injustice; that is why Allah said "najjayna—delivered" and not "forgiven".

The Case of Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.)

Before we proceed further, it is advisable to refresh your memory by reading the first part of the discussion on 'ismah, especially the verses which prove the infallibility of the prophets in general.

Chapter 93 (az-Zuha) verse 7

Did He not find you an orphan and so gave shelter? And find you dhalan and so He guided? And find you in need and so made rich?

If the Prophet of Islam (S) is infallible (ma'sûm), then why does Allah say that He found him dhalan which normally means "one who has gone astray" or "one who strays from the right path" or "one who is lost"?

First of all, the common meaning is not applicable here. In the normal usage of the word, it is applied for non-believers. But this meaning is negated by another verse of the Qur'an where Allah says, "I swear by the star when it goes down, that your companion {i.e., Muhammad (S)} has not gone astray (ma dhalla), nor does he err..." (53:1-2)

Secondly, even if we take it in the meaning of "lost" or "gone astray", it could be interpreted without denying the 'ismah of the Prophet (S): you can say that he was wandering in search of revelation.

Finally, the idea of being "lost" does not always have a negative sense to it. Read the following two sentences carefully: (1) "I was lost." (2) "The ring was lost." In the first sentence, there is a negative sense; but in the second sentence, there is no negative connotation to the ring that is lost. If we use the word "lost" for the Prophet (S) in the second sense, then there should be no problem at all. We can then explain the verse as follows: "And [did not God] find you lost [among your people], and so He guided [them to you]."

The last interpretation is supported by 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbas, a close companion of the Prophet (S), and also by Imam 'Ali ar-Ridha (a.s.).

Chapter 48 (al-Fath) verses 2-3:

Verily We granted thee a manifest victory; so that God may
o forgive thee thy sins of the past and those to follow,
o fulfill His favour to thee,
o and guide thee on the straight path
o and that God may help thee with powerful help.

These verses were revealed in reference to the Treaty of Hudaibiyya in which the Prophet (S) made peace with unbelievers of Mecca in the year 6 A.H. The Prophet (S) had gone with only 1400 lightly armed Muslims with the intention of doing the minor pilgrimage ('umrah). The idol-worshippers of Mecca barred them from entering Mecca; after much discussion, they agreed to a ten years peace treaty with the Prophet (S).

Allah described this peace treaty as a "manifest victory". Then He goes on to explain why He

gave this “manifest victory” to the Prophet (S). He gives three reasons: The first reason is very interesting as well as controversial.

“So that God may forgive thee thy sins of the past and those to follow.”

This clearly implies that Prophet Muhammad (S) had committed sins in past and could commit sins in future; he was not a ma'sûm.

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The problem is that this interpretation of the verse creates other problems:

1. It goes against the verses we discussed earlier about 'ismah in general.
2. The first reason, as commonly translated, seems out of place and irrelevant to the issue of the peace treaty. There is no clear connection between granting a manifest victory and forgiving of sins. Moreover, it would seem ridiculous to help a messenger to spread the word of Islam (“to submit to God's laws”) and then grant absolute license for committing sins to that very messenger!
3. It would seem that in Islam, the Prophet (S) is above the law: we are forbidden from committing sins but he is allowed!

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In light of these problems with the common translation, many exegetists have attempted other interpretations:

1. Some say it means “sins of Adam and sins of the Muslims”;
2. Others say it means “past sins of your ummah are forgiven and their future sins will be forgiven by your intercession”;
3. Yet others say it means “your past and future at-tarku 'awla is forgiven”.

Besides lacking any credible basis, such interpretations fail to relate the particular sentence to the event of Treaty of Hdaybiyyah.

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The best interpretation that I have seen is of 'Allamah at-Tabataba'i in his al-Mizan. At-Tabataba'i goes to the literal meaning of the words: dhanb which is commonly used for “sin” and ghafara which is commonly used for “forgiving”.

The word dhanb is from the verb- form dhanaba which means “to follow”; its noun form dhanab means “tail; something that follows”. So the main idea in the word dhanb is the concept of something following the other. “Sin” is known as “dhanb” because it is an act that entails evil consequence in form of Allah's displeasure and punishment.

The word ghafara actually means “to cover or conceal something” which also implies the meaning of protecting something. This word is used in its original meaning in our hadith literature. For example, a hadith say “Ghaffir ash -shayb bi 'l-khidhab” which means “Cover the white hair by dyeing” or “Conceal the old age by dyeing.” “Forgiving” is known as “ghafara” because by forgiving, Allah covers the evil consequence of sins, and protects the sinner from it.

With the literal meanings of the two crucial words in the verse: dhanb and yaghfira, the entire passage under discussion becomes more meaningful and relevant to the Treaty of Hdaybiyya. The verses would now read as follows: Verily We granted thee [in the Treaty of Hdaybiyya] a manifest victory; so that God may protect you from the past and future consequences of your [policy with the Meccans].

Prophet Muhammad (S)'s mission had angered the idol-worshippers of Mecca to the extent that they planned to kill him and when they failed, they waged war after war against him. This had greatly limited the missionary activities of the Muslims outside Medina. With the peace-treaty of Hdaybiyya, the Prophet (S) got the chance to peacefully convey his message to all people of the Arabian Peninsula and outside it. History shows that within three years of the peace treaty of Hdaybiyya, almost all of Arabia had come into the fold of Islam — the year 9 AH is known as the “Year of Delegations” since many delegations of Arab tribes came to Medina and accepted Islam. It was this peace treaty that laid the ground for the fall of Mecca at the hands of the Muslims.

So Almighty Allah fulfilled His promise by saying that He gave a great victory through the treaty of Hdaybiyya: Through this treaty, He protected the Prophet (S) from evil consequence of unbelievers' reaction to what Muhammad (S) had done before and whatever he did after the peace treaty.

Thus the verse is connected to the treaty of Hudaibiyya and our belief in the 'ismah of the Prophet of Islam (may peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) is also intact.

Chapter 80 ('Abasa) 1-10

He frowned and turned (his) back because there came to him a blind man. And what would make you know that he may purify himself; or he may be reminded and the reminding would benefit him?

But when a free from need (i.e., rich person come to you), then you address yourself to him...

But when a hard-working person comes to you (and he also fears), then you turn away from him?!

The Event: These verses refer to an incident in Mecca, when 'Abdullah bin Umm Maktim, a blind man, came to a gathering where the Prophet (S) was talking to some people among whom were some leaders of Quraysh ('Atba bin Rab'iy'a, Abu Jahl, 'Abbas, Ubayy bin Khalaf, Umayya bin Khalaf) were also present. When 'Abdullah bin Umm Maktim came to that gathering, someone frowned and turned away from him.

The Problem: Who frowned and turned away from the blind man? The Qur'an does not give the name. There are two versions of this story.

1st View: Sunni sources and a few Shi'ite sources say that it was the Prophet of Islam (S) who frowned and turned away from the blind man.

2nd View: Most Shi'ite sources, following the teachings of the Imams of Ahlu 'l-Bayt (who obviously knew the Prophet (S) better than others), say that it was one of the Umayyid leaders of Quraysh who frowned and turned away from the blind man.

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We accept the second view because there is an internal proof from the Qur'an that it was well below the character of Prophet Muhammad (S) to behave in this way.

(a) **Allah addresses the Prophet (S):** "Nun. I swear by the pen and what [the angels] write that you are not, by the grace of your Lord, a lunatic; and that surely you shall have a perpetual reward [for your work]; and most surely you are on the sublime [level] of morality." (68:1-4)

This testimony about the Prophet (S)'s character was revealed after s'rah al-Iqra and before s'rah an-Najm; i.e., before the revelation of the verses under discussion. How can a person described so highly by Allah allegedly behave in such a repelling manner!

(b) **In the very early stage of his mission, the Prophet (S) was clearly told how to behave in conveying his message to the people:** "And warn thy nearest relatives; and be kind to him who follows you of the believers." (26:214-215) In another verse, Allah says, "Therefore, declare openly what you have been ordered, and turn away from the polytheists." (15:94)

It seems improbable that a Prophet (S) praised so highly in the previous verse and told to be kind to the believers, would frown when approached by a blind person.

(c) **The character of the Prophet (S) and his criterion of preference have historically been proved by the following event:** Many early converts to Islam were the oppressed and weak people of Mecca like Bilal, 'Ammar, Salim Maula Abi Hudhayfa, Ibn Mas'ud, Miqdad and others. The Qurayshi leaders once told the Prophet (S) that, "Why do you sit among these people? If you turn them away from yourself, we might accept you as our leader." The Prophet (S) refused. And Allah confirmed the Prophet (S)'s response by revealing the following verse: "And do not drive away those who call upon their Lord at morning and evening desiring His favour. Nothing of their account falls upon you, and nothing of your account falls upon them. So if you drive them away, you will become one of the unjust. In this way, We try some of them by others. [Because of their spiritual perfection, Allah exalted those poor persons, and thus He tries those rich people who lack faith and] who say, 'Are these [poor people] the ones upon whom Allah has been gracious to among us?' Does not Allah know very well the grateful [servants]?" (6:52-53)

In conclusion, ascribing the act of frowning and turning away from the blind man cannot be ascribed to the holy Prophet of Islam (S).

Chapter 66 (at-Tahrim) Verses 1-12:

1. O Prophet! Why do you forbid (for yourself) what God has made lawful for you? You seek to please your wives; and God is Most Forgiving, the Most Merciful. 2. Indeed, God has made lawful for you the dissolution of your oaths (in such cases), and God (alone) is your Lord. And He is All-knowing, the Wise.

3. When the Prophet confided to one of his wives (Hafsa) a matter, but when she divulged it (to 'A'isha) and God apprised him about it — he made known a part of it (i.e., the talk

between Hafsa and 'A'isha) and avoided a part of it. So when he informed her (Hafsa) about it, she said, "Who informed you of this?" He said, "Informed me, the All-Knowing, the All-Aware."

4. If you two ('A'isha and Hafsa) turn (in repentance) unto Allah, then indeed your hearts are inclined (to righteousness) but if you two back up each other against him, then verily God is his Protector; and Jibrail, the most virtuous among the believers, and the angels will thereafter back him up.

5. Happily his Lord, if he (Muhammad (S)) divorces you, will give in your place wives better than you (who will be) submissive, faithful, obedient, repentant, prayerful, observers of fast, widows and virgins {... }

10. God set forth the similitude of those who disbelieve the wife of Nuh and the wife of Lut: they both were under two of Our righteous servants, but they were unfaithful and they (i.e., their husbands) availed them nothing against God; and it was said to them (the two wives): "Enter you both the fire with those who enter it."

11. God set forth the similitude of those who believe (A) the wife of Fir'awn, when she said, "O My Lord! Build for me a house in the Garden and deliver me from Fir'awn and his doing, and deliver me from the unjust people." 12. And (B) Maryam, the daughter of 'Imran, who guarded her chastity; and We breathed into her Our spirit (i.e., 'Isa), and she testified the truth of the words of her Lord and His scriptures, and she was of the obedient ones.

This chapter was revealed in regard to Hafsa and 'A'isha, the wives of the Prophet (S). Besides Khadijah, the only wife of the Prophet who bore child for him was Mariya Qibtiyya, the Egyptian slave gifted to him by the Egyptian King. After the birth of Ibrahim (the Prophet's son from Mariya), 'A'isha and Hafsa became very jealous of Mariya.

There are many views on the occasion for the revelation of this chapter. The narrations are different but most relate to the jealousy of Hafsa and 'A'isha against Mariya and/or Zaynab bint Jahash. A version of the event considered authentic by some of our scholars is as follows: Hafsa entered her room and found the Prophet (S) with Mariya; she became very upset with him. The Prophet (S), in order to calm Hafsa, took an oath that he would not see Mariya again. He also asked Hafsa to keep the issue of his oath to herself and not divulge it to anyone.

Another version says that in order to change the Prophet (S)'s love for Zaynab bint Jahash, Hafsa and 'A'isha made a plan that whenever the Prophet (S) came from Zaynab, they both would say that his mouth is smelling bad—and attribute the bad smell to a drink of honey (maghafar) which Zaynab always made for the Prophet (S). The Prophet (S) took an oath not to partake the honey-drink that Zaynab made for him. He also asked Hafsa to keep the issue of his oath to herself and not divulge it to anyone.[12]

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Did the Prophet (S) commit a sin by making an oath that he will no longer see his slave-girl, Mariya Qibtiyyah or no longer drink the honey-drink made by Zaynab?

The chapter as a whole is mostly directed to the attitude of the wives who conspired against the Prophet (S): it talks about God willingly to replace those two wives with better wives and asks them to repent. The opening verse, at most, is a friendly rebuke by God to the Prophet (S) for imposing un-necessary deprivation upon himself. There is no prohibition in making an oath to abstain from a thing that is permissible. If a person makes such an oath and then intends to nullify it, then he is permitted to do so after paying expiation for it.[13]

So these verses cannot be used against the concept of infallibility of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, peace be upon him and his progeny.

Notes:

[11] The Qur'an uses the word "ab" for Azar who was an idol-worshipper. He was not father of Ibrahim; he was his uncle. Look at the following verse where he eventually disassociates himself from Azar: 9:114. On the other hand, we see that Ibrahim, at the last stage of his life, prays for his "walid," a word that is used for the real father. See verse 14:41.

[12] For various version of the event, see at-Tabataba'i, al-Mizan fi Tafsiri 'I-Qur'an, vol. 19 (Tehran: Darul Kutub, 1362 [solar]) p. 391-395; Abu 'I-Ma'la Mawd-di, Tafhimu 'I-Qur'an, vol. 6 (Lahore: Idara-e Tarjumanu 'I-Qur'an, 1994) p. 16-17; Fakhru 'd-Din ar-Razi, Mafatihuh 'I-Ghayb, vol. 30 (Beirut: Daru 'I-Kutub, 1990) p. 37.

[13] See 5:89.