

A Re-Appraisal of Exegetical Views on ‘*Iṣmah*’ of the Prophet Yūsuf

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Abstract

Qur’anic exegetes (*mufasssīrūn*) have engaged in a serious debate over the disposition of the Prophet Yūsuf at the time of great temptation as related in the Qur’an 12:24. Against this background, a traditional exegetical research method was adopted to study the opinions of some scholars regarding the infallibility or otherwise of the Prophet Yūsuf with a view to identifying the appropriate interpretation of the verse in question. Findings of the work revealed that, whilst some scholars considered only the divine protection enjoyed by the Prophet Yūsuf in a narrow sense, others underscored the person of Yūsuf as a prophet of Allah and placed him above all human tendencies. Another group maintained the middle course between the two groups. This paper concludes that Yūsuf was a prophet of Allah who enjoyed divine protection against committing sins but, at the same time, was a human being who could have had an inclination towards evil thoughts without having a determination to commit sinful acts.

Introduction

The authenticity of a divine message is established by the unique quality of those through whom the message was sent to mankind. This quality is divine protection from the human inclinations they enjoyed. Allah extolled the Prophet Muhammad in Qur’an 68:4 as a man of exalted character to further strengthen the reliability of his message. ‘*Iṣmah*’ is used to refer to the distinguished nature of the prophets that accounted for them being flawless. The word is used in various verses of the Qur’an to imply protection, hence the literal meaning divine protection. ‘*Iṣmah*’ refers to divine protection against committing sins that prophets enjoy by virtue of their lofty spiritual position. The Prophet Yūsuf was amongst such prophets who enjoyed this protection but the report of what happened

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between him and the wife of his master in Egypt as captured in Qur'an 12:24 threw exegetes of the Qur'an into debate regarding the reaction of the Prophet Yūsuf at the time of temptation. This work examines divergent views of scholars on the incident.

'Iṣmah and divine mission

'Iṣmah (infallibility) is divine protection that Allah grants the prophets to ensure they remain free from all indecencies and atrocities.^{1 2} Infallibility is "a spiritual grace (*luṭf*) of Allah to a person which (sic) enables him to abstain from sins by his own free will".³ Infallibility is argued as a necessity with respect to the prophets for the same reason they were sent; to guide and lead the people towards Allah. Allah, Who decided to guide mankind, also intended to send immaculate and perfect human beings as models and examples. If they were not infallible, it would have been extremely difficult even to believe in the message, let alone the example they presented. Prophethood in this context should be understood as an office of high task that entails provision of guidance to multiple people. As such, anybody occupying that sensitive office must enjoy divine protection,⁴ lest there be no belief or confidence in whatever they say. Appointing fallible people as prophets would have defeated the very purpose for which they were sent; to lead and guide the people to follow and obey. According to the Qur'an:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا لِيُطَاعَ بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ..... ﴿٦٥﴾

"And we did not send a messenger except to be obeyed by permission of Allah....." (Q. 4:64).

Regarding the personality of the Prophet Muhammad all other prophets, Allah says:

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِّمَن كَانَ يَرْجُوا اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ وَذَكَرَ اللَّهَ
كَثِيرًا ﴿٣١﴾

"There has certainly been for you in the Messenger of Allah, an excellent pattern for anyone whose hope is in Allah and the last day and (who) remembers Allah often" (Q. 33:21)

This verse implies that the Prophet Muhammad was sent to be a role-model who should personify high moral standards, as were all other prophets. The need to obey the prophets on account of their exemplary characters is emphatically expressed in the Qur’an as follows:

وَمَا كَانَ لِمُؤْمِنٍ وَلَا مُؤْمِنَةٍ إِذَا قَضَىٰ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ أَمْرًا أَنْ يَكُونَ لَهُمُ الْخِيَرَةُ مِنْ أَمْرِهِمْ
وَمَنْ يَعْصِ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ فَقَدْ ضَلَّ ضَلَالًا مُّبِينًا ﴿٣٦﴾

“It is not for a believing man or a believing woman, when Allah and His Messenger have decided a matter, that they should (thereafter) have any choice about their affair and whoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger has certainly strayed into clear error” (Q. 33:36).

The great temptation

The story of Prophet Yūsuf is perhaps the most detailed and fascinating story in the Qur’an. The story exposes such human weaknesses as envy, hatred and pride, as well as such noble qualities as patience, loyalty and bravery. The Prophet Yūsuf was the most beloved child of his father, Yacquḇ. Out of envy, his elder brothers plotted against him and threw him into a well.⁵ The Prophet Yūsuf was rescued from the well to become a slave who was sold to the Azīz, the Chief Minister of Egypt⁶ The chief minister’s wife, *Zulaykha*, noticed the qualities in Yūsuf from day to day. She sat with him, talked with him, listened to him and her admiration for him increased with the passage of time until she could no longer resist him and tempted him to sin. Qur’an 12 verse 23 confirmed that Zulaykha sought to seduce him. She closed the doors and said, "come on, O you," and Yūsuf responded, "I seek refuge in Allah" (or Allah forbid). In explaining the state of mind of both Yūsuf and Zulaykha at the point of temptation, the Qur’an says:

وَلَقَدْ هَمَّتْ بِهِ وَهَمَّ بِهَا لَوْلَا أَنْ رَأَىٰ بُرْهَانَ رَبِّهِ كَذَلِكَ لِنَصْرِفَ عَنْهُ السُّوءَ
وَالْفَحْشَاءَ إِنَّهُ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا الْمُخْلَصِينَ ﴿٢٣﴾

“And she certainly determined (to seduce) him and he would have inclined to her had he not seen the proof (i.e. signs) of his Lord.

Thus (it was) that We should avert from him evil and immorality. Indeed he was of Our chosen servants.”(Q. 12:24)

The last part of this verse clearly exonerates the Prophet Yūsuf from committing sin and no commentator of the Qur’an ever mentioned that he did. The bone of contention is the state of mind of both the Prophet Yūsuf and Zulaykha at the time of the temptation and the scope of ‘Iṣmah in relation to the Prophet Yūsuf. To take an objective stand on the interpretation of the verse, it is pertinent to analyse the divergent views of scholars regarding the disposition of Zulaykha and the Prophet Yūsuf.

Divergent interpretations of the verb *hamma* in Qur’an 12:24

Scholars are divided over the interpretation of Qur’an 12:24 because it affects the psychological disposition of the Prophet Yūsuf at the time of temptation vis-à-vis his infallibility as a prophet. These scholars are divided into groups based on their views.

The first group of *mufasssīrūn* are those who give the literal meaning of desire and inclination to the word *hamm* as it applies to the woman and the Prophet Yūsuf. To these scholars, the Prophet Yūsuf did not only desire her but also attempted to have carnal knowledge of her. The iṣmah (divine protection) in him then intervened and he withdrew. The majority of scholars who belong to this group are early Qur’an interpreters who relied on Israelite stories. This group includes Ali Ahmad who said:

فمعنى قوله: {هَمَّتْ بِهِ} أي أرادته وقصدته، وأما معنى همّ يوسف بها، فقال المفسرون الموثوق بعلمهم المرجوع إلى روايتهم: همّ يوسف أيضًا بهذه المرأة همًا صحيحًا، وجلس منها مجلس الرجل من المرأة، فلما رأى البرهان من ربه زالت عنه كل شهوة .

“The meaning of hammat bihi is that she wanted him and desired him. As for the ḥamm Yusuf had for her, scholars whose knowledge we trust and to whose transmission we refer said that Yusuf also had a true inclination to her and sat with her in a manner a man sits with a woman but, when he saw evidence from his Lord, his lust vanished.”⁷

Al Baghawi went further to say that the Prophet Yūsuf removed his trousers when he became inclined to her. He criticised those who gave it the meaning of “He would have desired her, but he saw the sign of his Lord”⁸ He held that Yūsuf desired her before the evidence came to him. This view gained the support of Imam at-Tabari so much that he said the two of them entered the room by consent before he saw the sign of his Lord⁹

The second group constitutes the latter mufassirūn. This group positioned the Prophet Yūsuf as a man who bore the human nature of having desire but, with the ‘Iṣmah he enjoined, could not translate his intention to action. This group maintained that the Prophet Yūsuf had an inclination for Zulaykha but the inclination was limited to the desire of the heart without succumbing to the desire of Zulaykha in any way. They were both believed by this group to have shared the inward burning for love.¹⁰ Az Zamakhshari submitted:

وقوله وَلَقَدْ هَمَّتْ بِهِ معناه. ولقد همت بمخالطته وَهَمَّ بِهَا وَهَمَّ بمخالطتها لَوْلَا أَنَّ
رَأَى بُرْهَانَ رَبِّهِ جوابه مخدوف، تقديره: لولا أن رأى برهان ربه لخالطها

“And His words ‘And she certainly determined (to seduce) him’ means that she decided to relate with him sexually and ‘he desired her’ means he decided to do the same had he not seen the sign of his Lord. The clause is ‘if not that he saw the sign of his Lord he would have related with her sexually.’”¹¹

Sayyid Quṭb elucidated the stand of az Zamakhshari when he maintained that the character of Yūsuf embodied his natural human tendencies with his religious upbringing. He further stressed that, when the woman tempted him openly, he almost responded to her but the other influence (‘Iṣmah) saved him from falling into her trap. He felt his own weakness as he faced the woman’s deceitfulness coupled with the pull of his environment and the social surroundings, but he remained steadfast. His feeling for the woman neither distorted his character nor put his being infallible into question.¹² As Sayyid Qutb, Ash-Shanqīṭī¹³ and authors of *At-tafsīrul Muyassar*¹⁴ maintained, Yūsuf desired for the woman what she desired for him but the Glorious Qur’an explained his innocence in committing a sinful act. The desire of Yūsuf was a desire of the mind, which is natural with any human being. The desire of Yūsuf could be likened to a fasting Muslim who saw cool water at noon when the weather was hot. He wanted

the water but that desire did not invalidate his fasting.¹⁵ The argument of this group is that the verse is explicit enough in maintaining that Yūsuf had a desire for Zulaykha but that desire neither negated his infallibility nor portrayed him as a sinner; it merely affirmed his human nature.

The third group are the contemporary *mufasssīrūn* who deny giving *ḥamma* the meaning of desire of the heart but, rather, that of intention to execute an action. Al-Marāghī interpreted the verse to mean that Zulaykha intended to punish the Prophet Yūsuf for disobeying her even when he knew she was his mistress. Yūsuf, on the other hand, intended to defend himself and avoid committing the crime.¹⁶ Al-Marāghī stressed that the subsequent verse explains the function of the divine intervention on the Prophet Yūsuf in that it guided him to the alternative of running away from Zulaykha instead of hurting her in retaliation or aggression.¹⁷ According to this group, *ḥamma* in the context of this verse implies intention to act and not a desire of the mind or an inclination for love.¹⁸ Kishki argued that scholars have strayed in the interpretation of the verse on the Prophet Yūsuf, forgetting that they were discussing the issue of a person who was infallible and who enjoyed the protection of Allah both inwardly and outwardly¹⁹. He argued that a prophet praised by Allah to have been endowed with knowledge and wisdom, chosen for messengership and blessed with the knowledge of the interpretation of dreams could not descend so low as to have an inclination for illicit sex. He argued that *ḥamma* in the context of the woman meant to be prepared to execute evil because of the evidence that she was already mad with love for him. As for Yūsuf, he remained chaste and decent; hence the word *hmm* in his own context was a preparation to react against the intention of the woman. Kishki interpreted the verse to mean that she was prepared to lure him into fornication and he was prepared to resist the situation and harm her in the process.²⁰ It was further argued that the Prophet Yūsuf was considered not to be a *mukhlis* (one purified and sincere owing to self-discipline and spiritual training) but, rather, a *mukhlas* (one made sincere and pure by God). Inasmuch as he had been protected from the beginning against sin, he could not have any desire for her. In either case, he neither felt something for her nor inclined towards her.²¹

A consideration of scholastic views regarding the ‘Iṣmah of the Prophet Yusuf

No doubt, Prophets of Allah were protected against committing sins.²² This is not to say that they did not make mistakes in their human dealings. Messengers, like a mujtahid, may err in attempting to find solutions to problems²³ but the covenant made by Allah is that all believers will be protected against all forms of deviation and error provided they remain steadfast.²⁴ Whilst some scholars consider ‘Iṣmah to cover a prophet’s divine protection against both major (*kaba’ir*) and minor (*lamama*) sins, others see it as covering only the major ones. With regard to errors of omission or commission, prophets shared human tendencies with other men. It is a submission of some scholars that prophets never deliberately committed sin. Commission of error could emanate from their human tendency and, when it happened, they confessed the mistake to their followers.²⁵ The Prophet was ordered to proclaim the following:

قُلْ إِنَّمَا أَنَا بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُكُمْ يُوحَىٰ إِلَيَّ أَنَّمَا إِلَهُكُمُ إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ ﴿١٨﴾

“I am only a man like you to whom has been revealed that your god is one God” (Q. 18:110)

Issues of divergence amongst scholars regarding this verse include the interpretation of the word *hamma*. A group of scholars (mainly amongst the early exegetes of the Qur’an) considered the word *hamma*, to mean having an intention to perform an action as opposed to having a psychological desire or inclination for love, interpreting the verse to mean that Zulaykha intended to beat Yūsuf and Yūsuf intended to run away.²⁶ A second group was of the view that Zulaykha had an inclination for Yūsuf with a determination to commit sin, whereas Yūsuf had a love inclination for her but determined not to commit sin with her because of the ‘Iṣmah he enjoyed²⁷. The third group held that Yūsuf had an inclination for Zulaykha in proportion to that of Zulaykha and that he was already making the attempt to fall victim when he saw the sign of his Lord. A study of the three positions reveals that the third group descended too low. Even though Yūsuf was not yet a prophet at the time of this great temptation, it is a design of Allah to protect those He wished to send as messengers from all forms of indecencies right from their childhood as a preparation for the task ahead. This could be found in the Prophet Ibrahim, who declined the

worship of idols in childhood even when his father was a staunch idol worshipper. Allah says:

“And We had certainly given Abraham his sound judgment before and We were of him, well knowing” (Q. 21:51).

In a similar vein, the Prophet Muhammad was reported to have said:

ما هممت بشيء مما كان أهل الجاهلية يعملون غير مرتين، كل ذلك يحول الله بيني وبينه، ثم ما هممت به حتى أكرمني برسالته.

“I had never intended doing what the *jahiliyya* (the unbelievers before the advent of Islam) used to do except twice and in each of the two instances Allah protected me from it, after which I never intended doing them up to the time Allah honoured me with messengership”.²⁸

Even though Qur'an 28 verse 15 reports the Prophet Mūsa as having committed the offence of murder, what Mūsa 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 resulted unexpectedly in the death of the oppressor. Helping an oppressed person is a praiseworthy act in itself. Killing man can at most be regarded as accidental death, which is neither a crime nor a sin. The eating of the forbidden fruit by Adam occurred out of forgetfulness.

The group of scholars that consider *hamma* as intending to beat or to run away give the word a meaning that is far from its linguistic connotation.²⁹ *Hamma* has the meaning of sorrow or intention³⁰ but, when the word *hamma* is suffixed by the letter ب (b) as in *hamma bihi*, the meanings are to intend to, to plan, to resolve, to make up one's mind, to be about to, be on the point of, be going to.³¹ *Hamma bihi* therefore means, to intend doing something or to have affection for something.³² The closer meaning to the word *hamma* as it applies to Qur'an 12:24 is desire or inclination for love. The author of *Lisān ul Arab* submitted:

وَهُمْ بِالْشَيْءِ يَهْتُمُّ هَمًّا: نَوَاهُ وَأَرَادَهُ وَعَزَمَ عَلَيْهِ. وَسُئِلَ ثَعْلَبٌ عَنْ قَوْلِهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ: وَلَقَدْ هَمَّتْ بِهِ وَهَمَّ بِهَا لَوْلَا أَنَّ رَأَى بُرْهَانَ رَبِّهِ ؛ قَالَ: هَمَّتْ زَلِيخَا بِالْمَعْصِيَةِ مُصِرَّةً عَلَى ذَلِكَ، وَهَمَّ يُوسُفُ، عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ، بِالْمَعْصِيَةِ وَلَمْ يَأْهَأْ وَلَمْ يُصِرَّ عَلَيْهَا، فَبَيَّنَ الِاهْتِمَامَيْنِ فَرَقًا.

“The word *hamma bi shay* in means he intends it, he desires it, he is prepared to do it. Thālab was asked about the words of Allah, the Most High: ‘And indeed she desired him, and he desired her; (and he would have succumbed) had he not seen (in this temptation) an evidence of his Sustainer’s truth.’ He said Zulaykha desired him for a sinful act and was determined. Yusuf also desired her for the sinful act but he was not determined; there is therefore a difference between the two desires.”³³

If a prophet should have a desire of the mind for an error without executing such sin, that should not be counted against him because he is but a human being. Moreover, the Prophet was reported to have said in a hadith narrated by Anas:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَتَبَ الْحَسَنَاتِ وَالسَّيِّئَاتِ ثُمَّ بَيَّنَ ذَلِكَ، فَمَنْ هَمَّ بِحَسَنَةٍ فَلَمْ يَعْمَلْهَا كَتَبَهَا اللَّهُ لَهُ عِنْدَهُ حَسَنَةً كَامِلَةً، فَإِنْ هُوَ هَمَّ بِهَا فَعَمِلَهَا كَتَبَهَا اللَّهُ لَهُ عِنْدَهُ عَشْرَ حَسَنَاتٍ إِلَى سَبْعِ مِائَةِ ضِعْفٍ إِلَى أَضْعَافٍ كَثِيرَةٍ، وَمَنْ هَمَّ بِسَيِّئَةٍ فَلَمْ يَعْمَلْهَا كَتَبَهَا اللَّهُ لَهُ عِنْدَهُ حَسَنَةً كَامِلَةً، فَإِنْ هُوَ هَمَّ بِهَا فَعَمِلَهَا كَتَبَهَا اللَّهُ لَهُ سَيِّئَةً وَاحِدَةً.

“Verily, Allah has recorded good and bad deeds and He made them clear. Whoever intends to perform a good deed but does not do it, Allah will record it as a complete good deed. If he intends to do it and does so, Allah the Exalted will record it as ten good deeds up to seven hundred times as much or even more. If he intends to do a bad deed and does not do it, Allah will record for him one complete good deed. If he does it, Allah will record for him a single bad deed.”³⁴

According to the above-quoted hadith, it is human to intend doing evil. In the situation where the Prophet Yūsuf found himself, it was the

intervention of the divine protection (*ʿIṣmah*) that dissuaded him from committing the evil act.

Conclusion

A prophet is *maʿṣūm* (divinely protected) because he is able to abstain from sin. This ability is based on (a) his highest level of righteousness, (b) his ever-present consciousness and love for God and (c) his certain knowledge about the consequences of committing sin. A person who is infallible is not so because he doesn't have the ability to commit sin but because he receives the mercy of Allah. This mercy, even though giving him a status higher than that of other human beings, does not make him completely different from those who benefit from the free-will given them by their creator. Error and forgetfulness are two defining characteristics of human behaviour – all the more reason why human beings must always seek for Allah's help and turn in repentance irrespective of spiritual position as emphasised in Q. 2:286. Inclination or admiration did not negate the infallibility of the Prophet Yūsuf. The *ʿIṣmah* functioned in him when he did not succumb to the temptation. Any attempt to give the situation a different interpretation would be tantamount to relegating the prophets of Allah to a status that does not befit them. That notwithstanding, the position of those who maintained that the Prophet Yusuf had translated his desire to action by sitting on the lap of Zulaykha naked is an insult to the personality of a person who enjoyed the divine protection of Allah against committing sin.

Endnotes and References

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²⁰ AbdulHamid Kishk. *Fī Rihābī t-Tafsīr*... 1799.

²¹ Fethullah Gulen, *The Messenger of God* ... 142.

²² Fethullah Gulen, *The Messenger of God*... 116-117.

²³ Fethullah Gulen, *The Messenger of God* ... 130-132.

²⁴ Allah says: “O you who believe! If you obey God in utmost respect, He will establish in you a Criterion (to judge between right and wrong), purify you of all your evils, and forgive you. God is of grace unbounded”. (8:29)

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³² Ibrahim Mustapha, Ahmad Az Zayyat, Hāmid AbdulQādir and Muhammad An Najjar. *Al Muʿjamul Wasīl*, Vol. 2, (Cairo. Dārud Daʿwah, nd.) 99

³³ Muhammad Mukram Ibn Manzūr. *Lisānul Arab*, Vol. 12 (Beirūt: Dāru ṣādir, 1414 H.) 620.

³⁴ Ismail Muhammad al- Bukhari, *Al-Jāmiu s-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Vol. 8 (Cairo: Dārut Turukin Najāt, 1952,) 10.

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