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Research Article

Exegetical Views on Ismah of the Prophet Yusuf: A Re-Examination

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Abstract. Qur'anic exegetes engaged one another in a serious debate over the disposition of Prophet Yusuf at the time of great temptation as captured in Qur'an 12:24. Against this background, this work exegetically studied the view of some scholars regarding the infallibility of Prophet Yusuf with a view to identifying the appropriate interpretation of the verse in question. Findings of the work revealed that while some scholars only considered the divine protection enjoyed by Prophet Yusuf in a narrow sense, others underscored the person of Yusuf as a Prophet of Allah and placed him above all human tendencies. Another group however, maintained the middle course between the two groups above. This paper concluded that Yusuf was a Prophet of Allah who enjoyed divine protection against committing sins and at the same time, he was a human being who could have an inclination towards evil thoughts without having a determination to commit sinful acts.

Keywords: *Ismah, Hamma*, Divine mission, Yusuf, Zulaykha

INTRODUCTION

The authenticity of a divine message is established by the unique quality of the messengers through whom the message was sent to mankind. This quality is the divine protection from human iniquities which they enjoyed. Allah extolled Prophet Muhammad in Qur'an 68:4 as a man of an exalted character to further strengthen the reliability of his message. *‘Ismah*, is used to refer to the distinguished nature of the Prophets which accounted for their being flawless beings. The word is used in various verses of the Qur'an to imply protection hence, the literal meaning, 'divine protection'. *‘Ismah* refers to the divine protection against committing sins which the prophets enjoy by virtue of their lofty spiritual position. Prophet Yusuf was among such Prophets that enjoyed this protection. However, the report of what happened between him and the wife of his master in the city of Egypt as captured in Qur'an 12:24 threw exegetes of the Qur'an into a hot debate regarding the reaction of Prophet Yusuf at the time of temptation. This work humbly examines divergent views of scholars on the incidence.

Ismah and Divine Mission

‘Ismah (infallibility) is a divine protection which Allah grants the prophets such that they would remain free of all indecencies and atrocities (An Najjar, 1983:31). Infallibility is "a spiritual grace (*lutf*) of Allah to a person which enables him to abstain from sins by his own free will". Infallibility is argued as a quality of necessity with respect to the Prophets for the same reason for which 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 *ma'sum*, it would have been extremely difficult even to believe in the message let alone the example they presented to us. Prophethood in this context should be understood as an office of high task that entails provision of guidance to multiple people. Gulen (2014:108-112) observed that anybody who will occupy that sensitive office must enjoy divine protection, otherwise, there would be no belief or confidence in whatever they would say. Appointing fallible people as prophets would have defeated the very purpose for which they were sent: for the prophets to lead and guide, for the people to follow and obey. This reason is being articulated in the Qur'an thus:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا لِيُطَاعَ بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ

"We did not send any Prophet, except that he may be obeyed by the will of Allah."
(4:64)

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

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِمَنْ كَانَ يَرْجُو اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ وَذَكَرَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا

"Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any one whose hope is in Allah and the final Day, and who engages much in the Praise of Allah. (Q33:21)

This verse implies that Prophet Muhammad was sent to be a role model that should personify high moral standard and so were all other prophets. The need to obey the Prophets on account of their exemplary characters is emphatically expressed in the Qur'an thus:

وَمَا كَانَ لِمُؤْمِنٍ وَلَا مُؤْمِنَةٍ إِذَا قَضَى اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ أَمْرًا أَنْ يَكُونَ لَهُمُ الْخِيَرَةُ مِنْ أَمْرِهِمْ وَمَنْ يَعْصِ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ فَقَدْ ضَلَّ ضَلَالًا مُبِينًا

“ It is not fitting for a believer, man or woman, when a matter has been decided by Allah and His Messenger, to have any option about their decision: if any one disobeys Allah and His Messenger, He is indeed on a clearly wrong path (33:36)

Prophet Yusuf and the great temptation

The story of Prophet Yusuf is perhaps, the most detailed and fascinating story in the Quran. The story exposes human weaknesses such as jealousy, hatred and pride, as well as noble qualities like patience, loyalty and bravery. In a report contained in Qur'an.12 verses 8-10, Prophet Yusuf was known to be the most beloved child of his father, Ya^cqūb. Out of jealousy, his elder brothers plotted against him and threw him into a well. Prophet Yusuf was rescued from the well to become a slave who was sold to the Aziz, the chief Minister of Egypt. (Q12:19-22) The wife of the chief minister, Zulaykha, noticed the qualities in Yusuf 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 when she could no longer resist him but to tempt him to sin. Qur'an 12 verse 23 confirmed that Zulaykha sought to seduce him (to do an evil act), she closed the doors and said: "come on, O you." And Yusuf responded: "I seek refuge in Allah (or Allah forbid)!. In explaining the state of mind of both Yusuf and Zulaykha at the point of temptation, the Qur'an says:

وَلَقَدْ هَمَّتْ بِهِ وَهَمَّ بِهَا لَوْلَا أَنْ رَأَى بُرْهَانَ رَبِّهِ كَذَلِكَ لِنَصْرِفَ عَنْهُ السُّوءَ وَالْفَحْشَاءَ إِنَّهُ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا الْمُخْلَصِينَ

“ 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 : Thus (did we order) that we might turn away from Him (all) evil and shameful deeds: for He was one of Our servants, sincere and purified.(Q12:24)

The last segment of this verse clearly exonerated Prophet Yusuf from committing sin and not a single commentator of the Qur'an mentioned that he did. However, the bone of contention is on the state of mind of both Prophet Yusuf and Zulaykha at the time of the temptation, and the scope of *‘Ismah* in relation to Prophet Yusuf. To take an objective stand on the interpretation of the verse, it is pertinent to analyze the divergent views of scholars regarding the disposition of Zulaykha and Prophet Yusuf.

Divergent Interpretations as regards the verb “*Hamma*” in Qur’an 12:24

Scholars are divided over the interpretation of Qur’an 12:24 especially as it affects the psychological disposition of Prophet Yusuf at the time of temptation vis-à-vis his infallibility as a prophet. For the purpose of elucidation, these scholars will be divided into groups based on their view.

The first group of interpreters is those who gave a literal meaning of desire and inclination to the word *Hamm* as it applies to the woman and Prophet Yusuf. To these scholars, Prophet Yusuf did not only desire her but equally attempted to have a carnal knowledge of the woman. The *‘ismah* (divine protection) in him then intervened and he withdrew. Majority of scholars who belong to this group are the early Qur’an interpreters and they include Ali who said:

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

“ The meaning of *Hammah bihi* is that she wanted him and desired him. But as for the *hamm* which Yusuf had for her, scholars on whose knowledge we have trust and to whose transmission we refer said: 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 an evidence from his Lord, his lust vanished. (Ahmad, 1430 A.H: 71-71)

Al Baghawi (1997:223) went further to say that Prophet Yusuf removed his trousers when he became inclined to her. He criticised those that gave it the meaning of “He would have desired her, but that He saw the sign of his Lord” He held that Yusuf desired her before the evidence came to him. This view gained the support of Al Imam At-Tabari (2000:34) so much that he said the two of them entered the room by consent before he saw the sign of his lord.

This second group positioned Prophet Yusuf as a human being who bore the human nature of having human desire but, with the *‘ismah* which he enjoined, he could not translate his intention to action. This group maintained that Prophet Yusuf 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. (As-Sharawy 1997, 691) Az Zamakhshari (1407A.H: 455) submits that:

وقوله وَلَقَدْ هَمَّتْ بِهِ معناه. ولقد همت بمخالطته وَهَمَّ بِهَا وَهَمَّ بِمُخَالَطَتِهَا لَوْلَا أَنَّ رَأَى بُرْهَانَ رَبِّهِ جَوَابَهُ محذوف، تقديره: لولا أن رأى برهان ربه لمخالطها

“ And His word that she certainly desired him means that she decided to relate with him sexually. And he desired her, means he equally decided to do the same if not that he saw the sign of his lord. The clause is missen and it is ‘if not that he saw the sign of his lord he would have related with her sexually

Sayyid Quṭb (1981) elucidated the stand of Az Zamakhshari when he maintained that the character of Yusuf 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 (*‘ismah*) 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 surrounding. But he remained steadfast. His feeling for the woman neither distorted his character nor put his being infallible at question. Just like Sayyid Qutb, As Shanqiti (1995: 205) and authors of *at tafsīrul Muyassar* (At-tafsirul Muyassar, 2009::238) maintained that Yusuf desired for the woman what she desired for him but the Glorious Qur’an explained his innocence in committing a sinful act. The desire made by Yusuf is a desire of the mind which is natural with any human being. The desire of Yusuf could be likened to a fasting Muslim who saw a cool water at noon when the weather was hot. He would definitely wish he had the water and that desire does not invalidate his fasting. (Tantawi, 1997 :341) The argument of this group is that the verse is explicit enough in maintaining that Yusuf equally had a desire for Zulaykha and that that desire neither negated his infallibility nor portrayed him as a sinner but rather, reaffirmed his human nature.

The third group of scholars denies giving *hamm* the meaning of the desire of the heart but rather, that of the intention to execute an action. Al Marāghī (1946 : 130-131) interpreted the verse to mean that Zulaykha intended to punish Prophet Yusuf for disobeying her even when he knew she was his master. Yusuf on the other hand intended to defend himself and to avoid committing the crime. Al Marāghī further stressed that the subsequent verse explains the function of the divine intervention on Prophet Yusuf as it guided him to the alternative of running away from Zulaykha instead of hurting her in retaliation or aggression. *Hamm* in the context of this verse, as viewed by this group, implies intention to act and not a desire of the mind or an inclination for love. (Ali-Rida 1990:229). Kishki (1987:1795) argued that scholars have strayed in the interpretation of the verse on Prophet Yusuf, forgetting that they were discussing the issue of a person who was infallible and who enjoyed the divine protection of Allah both inwardly and outwardly. He argued that a Prophet that is 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 having an inclination for illicit sex. He argued that. ‘*Hamm*’ in the context of the woman means to be prepared to execute evil because of the evidence that she was already crazy with her love for him. As for Yusuf, he remained chaste and decent hence, the word ‘*Hamm*’ in his own context is a preparation to react against the intention of the woman. Kishki (1799) interpreted the verse to mean that she was prepared (*hammat*) to lure him into fornication and he was prepared to resist the situation and harm her in the process. Gulen (142) further argued that Prophet Yusuf was considered not to be a *mukhlis* (one purified and sincere due to self-discipline and spiritual training), but rather a *mukhlas* (one made sincere and pure by God) and since 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.

A consideration of scholastic views regarding the ‘*ismah* of Prophet Yusuf

No doubt, Prophets of Allah were protected against committing sins . This is not to say that they did not make mistakes in their human dealings. Messengers, like a *Mujtahid*, may attempt finding solution to problems regarding an issue as a result of which he may take a wrong decision. However, the covenant made by Allah is that all believers will be protected against all forms of deviation and error provided they remain steadfast.(Qur’an 8:29)’ While some scholars consider ‘*ismah* 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. But as for errors of omission or commission, they shared with other human beings, the human tendencies. It is a submission of some scholars that Prophets did not deliberately commit any sin. As for commission of error, it could emanate out of their human tendency and when such happened, they would explain to their followers that it was an error from them. (Ar-Razi 1420 A.H.;228) The Prophet(S.A.W.) was ordered to proclaim thus:

قُلْ إِنَّمَا أَنَا بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُكُمْ يُوحَىٰ إِلَيَّ أَنَّمَا إِلَهُكُمُ إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ فَمَنْ كَانَ يَرْجُوا لِقَاءَ رَبِّهِ فَلْيَعْمَلْ عَمَلًا صَادِقًا
وَلَا يُشْرِكْ بِعِبَادَةِ رَبِّهِ أَحَدًا

Say: "I am but a man like yourselves, (but) the message has come to me, that your Allah is one Allah. ... (Q18:110)

Issues of divergence among scholars regarding this verse include the interpretation of the word *Hamm*. While some scholars such as Ali Rida (1990: 229) consider the word *hamma*, to mean having an intention to perform an action as against having a psychological desire for love or an inclination i.e interpreting the verse to mean that Zhulaykha intended to beat Yusuf and Yusuf intended to run away. Others such as Az Zamakhshari (1407 A.H:229) view that Zulaykha had an inclination for Yusuf with a determination to commit sin while Yusuf had a love inclination for her but not determined to commit sin with her because of the ‘*ismah* he enjoyed. The third group upheld that Yusuf had an inclination for Zulaykha in the proportion of that of Zulaykha and that he was already making the attempt to fall a 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 Yusuf 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 fact could be found in Prophet Ibrahim who declined the worship of idol at childhood even when his father was a staunch idol worshipper. Allah says:

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا إِبْرَاهِيمَ رُشْدَهُ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَكُنَّا بِهِ عَالِمِينَ

“We bestowed aforetime on Abraham His rectitude of conduct, and well were we acquainted with Him”(Q21:51).

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

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 any up to the time Allah honored me with messenger ship (Al-Mubarakfuri 1427 A.H :53)

Even though Qur’an 28 verse 15 reported Prophet Musa as having committed the offence of murder against an Israelite, what Músa 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. The death of the oppressor, at most, can be regarded as accidental death that is not a crime or a sin. The eating of the forbidden fruit by Adam occurred out of forgetfulness

The group of scholars that consider *hamm* as intending to beat or to run away are giving the word a meaning that is far from its linguistic connotation. *Hamm* has the meaning of sorrow or intention. (Ahmad:357) But when the word *hamma* is suffixed by article ب (b) as in *Hamma bihi*, the meanings are: to intend to, plan to, to resolve to, make up one’s mind to, to be about to, be on the point of, be going to (Baalbaki, 1992:1210) *Hamma bihi* therefore means, to intend doing something or to have an affection for something (Az-Zayyat:995) The closer meaning to the word, *Hamma*, as it applies to Qur’an 12:24 is desire or inclination for love. Ibn Manzur . (1414 A.H:620) submits:

وَهَمَّ بِالشَّيْءِ يَهْمُهُ هَمًّا: نَوَاهُ وَأَرَادَهُ وَعَزَمَ عَلَيْهِ. وَسُئِلَ ثَعْلَبٌ عَنْ قَوْلِهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ: وَقَدْ هَمَّتْ بِهِ وَهَمَّ بِهَا لَوْلَا أَنْ رَأَى بُرْهَانَ رَبِّهِ ؛ قَالَ: هَمَّتْ زَلِيخَا بِالْمَعْصِيَةِ مُصِرَّةً عَلَى ذَلِكَ، وَهَمَّ يَوْسُفُ، عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ، بِالْمَعْصِيَةِ وَلَمْ يَأْتِهَا وَلَمْ يُصِرَّ عَلَيْهَا، فَبَيْنَ الْهَمَّتَيْنِ فَرْقٌ.

“ The word *hamma bi shay-in* means; he intends it, he desires it, he is prepared to do it. Thaalab was asked regarding the word 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.

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. More over, Prophet was reported to have said in a *hadith* narrated by Anas that:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَتَبَ الْحَسَنَاتِ وَالسَّيِّئَاتِ ثُمَّ بَيَّنَّ 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 مِائَةٍ ضِعْفٍ إِلَى

أَضْعَافٍ كَثِيرَةً، وَمَنْ هَمَّ بِسَيِّئَةٍ فَلَمْ يَعْمَلْهَا كَتَبَهَا اللَّهُ لَهُ عِنْدَهُ حَسَنَةً كَامِلَةً، فَإِنْ هُوَ هَمَّ بِهَا فَعَمَلَهَا
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, then Allah will record it as a complete good deed. If he intends to do it and does so, then 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, then Allah will record for him one complete good deed. If he does it then Allah will record for him a single bad deed. (Al-Bukhari,1952:10)

Going by the content of the above quoted *hadith*, it is human to intend doing bad. In the situation where Prophet Yusuf found himself, it was the intervention of the divine protection (*‘ismah*) that dissuaded him from committing the evil act.

By the above submission, it is the opinion of the author of this paper that Prophet Yusuf actually had an admiration for Zulaykha just like any other human being could admire something good. But because of the divine protection which he enjoyed, unlike Zulaykha, Prophet Yusuf was not determined to have a forbidden relationship with Zulaykha.

CONCLUSION

A Prophet is *ma‘ṣūm* (divinely protected) because he is able to abstain from sins. 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. By this, a person who is infallible is not infallible because he doesn't have the ability to commit sin but because he received the mercy of Allah. This mercy, even though, made him attain a status higher than that of other human beings, does not make him completely different from other beings who benefit from the free will given to them by their creator. Error and forgetfulness are two defining characteristics of human behavior and this is the more reason why human beings must always seek for Allah's help and turn in repentance irrespective of his spiritual position as emphasized in Q2:286. An inclination or admiration does not negate the infallibility of Prophet Yusuf. The *‘ismah* functioned in him when he did not succumb to the temptation. Any attempt to give the situation a different interpretation would be tantamount to rating the Prophets of Allah to a status that does not befit them. That notwithstanding, the position of those who maintained that Prophet Yusuf had translated his desire to action by sitting on the lap of Zulaykha and setting himself naked is an insult on the personality of a person who enjoyed the divine protection of Allah against committing sins. Such an accusation does not befit a pious servant of Allah who is not officially entrusted with the task of guiding people to the right path like the prophets.

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