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Lesson Eight: The Inerrancy of the Prophets

Taking on the grave and sensitive responsibilities of prophethood and the guidance of society requires the possession of a whole series of exalted and previous qualities, without which a person will never be fit to assume a position of leadership.

One of the exceptional qualities required in a Prophet is that there should exist within him a restraining force that, arising from the perfection of his faith and the intensity of his piety, protects him against not only the commission of sins and acts of moral corruption but also from considering them or intending to commit them, so that throughout the entirety of his life, both before and after the beginning of his mission, all dimensions of his being should be free of the dark blemish of sin.

There can be no doubt that the more crucial the position of an individual in society, the deeper is his need for public trust and confidence. Now can any position be graver and carry more responsibility than that of the Prophet who is to guide society, exercising his guidance in all affairs of life, both spiritual and material?

The supreme purpose and aim of the mission of God' s Messengers is to guide and educate human beings across the world by means of a series of Divine teachings and ordinances. It is, at the same time, the religious duty of mankind to submit to all the sublime injunctions of religion that the Prophet has presented as revelation and Divine law. Naturally, humans will implement those teachings with all their heart and soul and accord absolute value to them only when they are thoroughly convinced that those teachings do indeed emanate from the source of all being.

What authority or person can earn such universal trust that whatever he says will earn sincere and unquestioning acceptance so that human beings submit to his commands? Can anyone deserve that trust unless he is armed with the weapon of inerrancy and virtue is manifest in him in all its dimensions?

Were it not possible to trust completely a Messenger of God in his receiving and conveying the revelation, the aim of prophethood – which is the perfection of humanity – could not be ensured; were the Prophets to lack inerrancy in conveying the Commands of God, society would inevitably deviate from

its true course.

Were the Prophets not to be protected from pollution by sin and infection by moral disease, and were they not to gain immunity from all kinds of impurity, the possibility would always exist that they would stumble when confronted with the deceptive allure of the material world and pursue personal goals such as wealth and power.

This would be true even if they had lofty human attributes to a superior degree. It is obvious that the existence of such a possibility would cause their followers to hesitate before implementing the commands and pronouncements.

The one who claims prophethood and the right to lead human beings, whom human beings must follow in order to attain the pinnacle of perfection in all aspects of their life – if such a one were to have the slightest record of deviance, dishonesty and inclination to sin, could it be totally excluded that he would never again live, betray or speak an untruth? Could he be accepted as a model of virtue and purity?

Without doubt, intelligence and logic compel us to answer this question in the negative. No one could accept with complete confidence as revelation and the Command of God the words of someone whose life did not shine with purity, who had fallen into the whirlpool of sin and openly engaged in corruption and moral turpitude before claiming prophethood, even though later a spiritual revolution and transformation had occurred in him. No one could accept his teachings as an unquestionable message from heaven, particularly with regard to matters that lie beyond the experience of the human being.

The Prophets must also be completely removed from anything that causes doubt to arise or impairs the completeness of God's proof. The Qur'an proclaims:

"Before this, you were unable to read or to write; this was lest the deniers should doubt concerning your prophethood." (***29:48***)

"Say: God is the best and most eloquent proof." (***10:47***)

"We sent the Prophets as givers of glad tidings and warnings so that no excuse should remain thereafter for human beings." (***4:165***)

Therefore the first necessary condition for the appearance of revelation is the absolute sincerity and inner purity of the Prophets.

The burning love of human beings for the Prophets and their devotion to them which arises from the deepest layers of their inner being as well as their belief in absolute values, in God, and the guardians of religion – all of this is made possible by the inerrancy and perfection of those Divinely guided personages.

The effectiveness of conduct and mode of action is infinitely greater than that of mere words. The

behavior and attributes of a teacher plays a fundamental role in the instruction of those for whom he is responsible, action have a far-reaching effect in building the character of an individual that cannot in any way be compared with the mere effect of speech.

It will be a disaster for humanity if the one who assumes a lofty position of spiritual guidance in society is himself immersed in a whirlpool of pollution and evil. If he lacks true awareness and piety, can he create an appropriate environment for the fostering of virtue, and can he bring about an inward transformation and revolution in the human being that will have a lasting effect? Will he have the capacity to train human beings and be their moral guide? Can he implant piety and virtue in their minds and their thoughts?

The commission of even a single sin by the Prophets would render fruitless their attempts at nurturing human beings to attain perfection, which is the goal of their mission. How can one who is himself polluted with sin purify others of their sins? One who is not himself morally and spiritually perfect cannot possibly succeed in training human beings to perfection.

We cannot take into consideration only the deeds and conduct of the Prophets during the period of their mission, and treat them separately from the spiritual and ethical characteristics they display during the rest of their lives. A more comprehensive investigation must be carried, for it is not enough that Prophets turn to purity only at the beginning of their missions.

The firm and continuous link of the Prophets with the source of existence and the complete absence of pollution by sin throughout all of their lives constitute an absolute necessity. Divinely guided personalities must never have been polluted by sin. Any prior record of sin on their part will form a great obstacle in the path of their heavenly mission which is to guide human beings to God and call them to purity and the avoidance of all abomination.

One who until yesterday stood in the ranks of the impure, those polluted by corruption, and who devoted a whole segment of his life to sin, will inevitably have his evil record remembered by others; it will be vividly present in their minds, and they cannot overlook it as they analyze and sit in judgment on his past life. The beginning of a profound spiritual transformation cannot by itself wash away all previous corruption and remove it from the minds of human beings.

When studying the histories of the Prophets, one should never content oneself with a superficial listing of events. The perceptive researcher must investigate all the different dimensions of the lives of the Prophets before their assumption of the prophethood. Then only will they be able to understand why the obstinate sworn enemies of the Prophets, in their conspiratorial efforts to prevent the dissemination of the heavenly message, do not shrink even from attributing madness to the Prophets, but never dare to accuse them of moral corruption.

The character and personality of the Prophets were so well known and so brilliant to their contemporaries that such an idiotic accusation on the part of their enemies would have caused people to

reject their other accusations as well and thus nullified all their long-standing efforts.

If the Prophets had been sullied by even as much as a single sin, this would have been used as an effective weapon to destroy their social standing and prestige. It is obvious that point out weaknesses in the past lives of the Prophets and recalling their previous errors and sins would have been a most effective weapon for destroying the repute of the Prophets and shaking people's trust and belief in them. This in itself constitutes vital and eloquent proof that they had already acquired a certain sanctity which characterized both their way of viewing things and their actions.

In the story of Moses we read that Pharaoh, the oppressive tyrant, immediately reminded Moses of his past when he was confronted by him. He addressed him critically as follows: "'Are you not that child whom we reared and who spent years of his life in our presence? Did you not kill a man and did you not deny our Divinity?' Moses answered: 'I did indeed commit that act, but not intentionally. I was acting only with the intent of saving one who had been wronged, and the result was an accidental killing. Then I fled because of my fear of you until God taught me knowledge and wisdom and made me one of the Prophets.' " (***26:18-21***)

Let us recall that the environment in which the Prophets were raised was encircled by all kinds of darkness and corruption. It was not an environment in which purity, innocence, and piety might flourish, or the inner nature of the human being, with its predisposition to the truth, might be nurtured. Such an unfavorable environment ought surely to have caused the Prophets also to become polluted by conforming to the social conditions that surrounded them.

However, we see that true awareness, virtue and honor came into being in precisely the most corrupt of environments, shinning like so many jewels over the heads of human beings. This in itself is clear testimony to the different dimensions and aspects of the personality of the Prophets, the nature of their inerrancy and their complete moral immunity.

It can also be clearly deduced from the Qur'an that attaining the lofty station of prophethood (as well as that of imamate) is possible only through being free of all contamination by sin and spiritual evil.

When Abraham addresses the Divine Presence with the petition that He appoint his descendants as leaders and guides, God responds by making the avoidance of oppression an explicit condition of prophethood:

"My covenant and the station of prophethood are given only to those who have not committed any oppression (***whether toward themselves or others***)***."*** (***2:123***)

"He knows the unseen dimensions of this world, whereas none knows His world of the unseen except those He has chosen from among the Prophets, to protect whom He sends angels from in front and behind. Thus He may know that the Messengers have fully conveyed the messages of their Creator to mankind." (***72:26-28***)

So from the point of view of the Qur'an, which describes the Prophets by the use of various attributes, it is an essential condition of prophethood that the Prophet possess inerrancy and never have been polluted by any act of oppression, for this counts as an encroachment on God's sanctity. God does not permit the reins of guidance for humanity to fall into the incompetent hands of one whose heart is blackened by sin and whose hands are stained by cruelty and oppression.

The question of the apparent attribution of sins to the Prophets by the Qur'an can be understood when we examine the type of sins at issue, for there are differences of degree among sins. Veritable and absolute sin lies in rebelling against the commandments of God; the commission of this sin brings punishment and retribution, and God's Messengers are absolutely protected against it.

Another kind of sin is relative; if a human being commits a sin of this category, Divine Law does not provide for punishment or retribution. However, acts of this type would detract from the loftiness of the Prophets and would be totally irreconcilable with their vision and moral refinement.

In social and religious matters, the expectations that are had of different personages are not uniform. The level of expectations depends on the capacities of individuals, together with the position they hold, the knowledge they have, and other matters.

If an illiterate person delivers an eloquent and powerful speech, it will be a matter for congratulation, even though the content of the speech, deriving from the thoughts of an undeveloped mind, may be insignificant. But if a serious scholar, whose words ought to create a storm and to leave an impress on the mind, delivers the same kind of speech, it will be regarded as deficient and open to objection.

Let us now draw an analogy with the sublime and majestic personalities of the Prophets. They have vast resources of knowledge and faith, as well as direct access to reality and the richest and most abundant source of awareness and knowledge.

Considering this, if for an instant they are neglectful of God – something which would not earn a reproach for others – it will count as a manifest error on their part. The brilliant visage of their prophethood will be clouded and sin will be ascribed to them, for that instant of neglect was not compatible with their lofty personality.

In addition, the position of prophethood and the guidance of mankind is of such crucial importance that if the Prophet commits any error, the honor of the community he leads will also be affected; society will also carry the stain of his shame.

Inerrancy Does Not Negate Free Will

Here the following question arises. If inerrancy is a gift from God, resulting in the protection of the Prophets when faced with abomination and sin, their abstention from sin cannot be conscious and deliberate, nor be regarded as a proof of their superior status or a source of pride for them. For their

mental constitution is such that God has guaranteed them immunity from sin.

This objection would be justified if inerrancy were the result of pre-determination, with the commission of any kind of sin being impossible for the Prophets, and the Prophets being compelled to obey God's Commands and acquire virtues and purity of soul. But this is not the case; the inerrancy under discussion is founded on perfect faith and awareness. It demonstrates itself clearly in action, and in no way negates free will and choice.

All the deeds of the leaders of religion, like those of other human beings, arise from free will and consciousness. Why should it be necessary for an external coercive force to push them in the direction of inerrancy? Will any difficulty remain if their vision of the world is seen to play this role? With their profound vision, the Prophets perceive the majesty and splendor of the Supreme and Absolute Power, manifest across the limitless plain of existence, at so sublime a level that their heart and their mind overflow with the love of God. How could it be believed that such highly conscious and excellent beings should stain their hearts with sin and disobey the commandments of their God and Beloved? Furthermore, they are profoundly aware of the severe consequences of sin, given which it would be impossible for them even to consider committing sins and evil acts.

It is true that knowledge of the evil consequences of sin does not in itself provide immunity against it. However, the inerrancy of the Messengers of God arises from so powerful and realistic a form of knowledge that they are able clearly to see with the eye of their heart the requital that sin brings. It is this that makes it quite impossible for them to commit any sin.

A doctor will never drink from a vessel that is contaminated by a microbe because he knows the dangerous consequences this would entail. Mountaineers spend a whole life climbing mountains, but their intelligence and awareness never allow them even to conceive of the possibility of deliberately falling vertically, let alone undertaking such an act.

Do the doctor and the mountaineer in these two examples have some kind of built-in and involuntary immunity against these irrational acts? Do they avoid these fatal acts without exercising free choice? To drink from the contaminated vessel or not to drink, to fall or not to fall - both alternatives are possible for them, but their conceptualizing of the results and consequences of the fatal acts reduce to near zero the likelihood of their undertaking them

Here we can grasp dearly the link between knowledge, which is the very kernel of awareness, and action, which is the external manifestation of awareness. We can see how profound and exact mental awareness objectifies itself, and how the human being is situated between cause and effect, between subjective and objective action and reaction.

Similarly, inerrancy in the Prophets proceeds from their profound awareness of the effects of sin, of Divine anger and punishment. Their awareness of these is so clear and complete that the abolition of spatial and temporal distance would not have the slightest effect on their profound and categorical faith.

Furthermore, the Prophets acquire a steely determination as a result of their strivings and unstinting self-sacrifice and their continuous orientation to the origin of being; they have no fear of the problems and difficulties that confront them on the road to establishing justice and truth, and they devote their entire beings to winning the satisfaction of God. This, too, is a powerful factor in bestowing inerrancy on those men of God and protecting them from making use of their ability to sin and even from allowing the idea of sin to enter the pure sanctuary of their minds.

This comprehensive protection against sin is, then, the direct result of their encompassing knowledge of the requital that evil deeds earn and their perfect awareness of the exalted station of the Lord. It is, too, an indication of their lofty, proud spirituality which harnesses all the rebellious inclinations of their being as that they never step beyond the bounds that have been set.

Let us set aside for the moment the case of the Prophets. In every age there have been persons of pure heart who as a result of a fundamental change in their manner of thought and constant struggle against various forms of captivity, have torn apart the chains of attachment and liberated their thoughts and their deeds from the entrammeling prison of enslavement to the world. For human beings such as these, the only source of value in life has been their love for God, their determination to do His will and to advance towards Him. Their burning love, arising from their purity of mind and their belief in the primacy and authenticity of religion, gives them a certain kind of protection against many forms of sin and moral corruption.

In many cases, they may not be fully aware of the harmful consequences of sin, but their sense of obedience to God creates such a transformation in their consciousness that it functions like an impenetrable barrier interposed between them and sin. So firm and unbreakable is that barrier that instinctual desire and arbitrary inclination are unable to breach it.

Muhammad bin Umary relates the following: "I asked Hisham, the outstanding student of Imam Sadiq, peace be upon him, whether the Imams have the station of inerrancy. He answered that they do. I then asked him to explain for me the nature of their inerrancy. He replied as follows: 'There are several qualities that give rise to sin and vice: greed, envy, lust and anger, and none of these can penetrate the beings of the Imams. How might they experience greed, considering the abundant resources they have at their disposal, including the public treasury of the Muslims?

Similarly, why should the Imam be envious? The envious person is the one who cannot endure the thought of someone being higher than him, and the imamate is assuredly the highest of all stations.

As far as worldly matters are concerned, it is impossible for the Imam to be angry because he has been entrusted with the implementation of the penalties God has decreed. As for anger in matters touching on the hereafter, which is a praiseworthy form of anger, it is impossible for the Imam to fall prey to lust and desire, for he is well aware that the pleasures and desirable things of this world are transitory and totally insignificant when compared to the Divine reward and bounty which are reserved on the Day of

Judgment for the pure and the worshippers of God." 1

There are then two basic sources for the commission of sin: a failure to recognize the ugliness of sin, and a defeat of the intelligence when confronted by the power and pressure of lusts. So if a person be fully aware of the corrupt and ugly nature of all sin and if he can bring his desires fully under control, it is impossible that he should pollute his hands with the commission of sin.

Imam Sadiq, upon whom be peace, says: "God extends His aid and assistance to human beings in proportion to their will, determination and choice, so that whoever makes a correct choice and a firm determination will receive the full aid of God, and he who falls short in his choices will find God's aid withheld from him in due proportion." 2

But as for total protection from error and sin, this is possible only through the special favor of God . The Qur'an says:

"Were God 's mercy and favor not to embrace you, a group of enemies would have attempted to turn you aside from the right path. But through God's favor, they were able only to turn themselves aside from the right path, and they could not harm you in any way. God has bestowed on you this book and the station of wisdom and prophethood and taught you what you knew not, because God's favor and grace toward you are infinite." (***4:113***)

In addition, it can perhaps be said that the Prophets participated directly in the unfolding of realities and when the human being confronts objective realities in accordance with a certain particular sense, error and sin can have no meaning for that person.

It is only when the human being attempts to transpose mental forms into objective reality that error can arise, not when the person is inwardly linked with the reality of being, a condition which makes it impossible for mistakes to occur. Thus it is that the Prophet is immune against error when guiding human beings and summoning them to God. Were it to be otherwise, you would look with doubt and hesitation on whatever the Prophet said in promulgating the commandments of God and you would not regard yourself as obliged to obey them.

Inerrancy applies to the receipt of revelation, the preservation of revelation, and the promulgation of the message. All three aspects are contained in this verse of the Noble Qur'an:

"In order that God might know that the Messengers have fully conveyed to mankind the messages of their Lord, that He be fully aware of what the Messengers possess and that He know full well the numbering of all things in this world..." (***38:28***)

In addition, as far as the receipt of revelation is concerned, we know that all things are at the disposal of God; there is no question of any personal view being intermingled in it. We know that the infinite knowledge and power of the Creator are utterly removed from the possibility of error, and that God's

complete vigilance in ensuring the propagation of His message removes the possibility of all error and mistake. So just as the receipt of God's commandments takes place beneath His vigilance, so too does the propagation of the message.

Comprehensive inerrancy, with respect to thought, word and deed, is then indispensable for undertaking the mission of guidance and leadership. It is inconceivable that God should send Messengers subject to error who would thwart the whole purpose of the message they bear.

Freedom from various bodily defects and spiritual inadequacies also forms part of the conditions of prophethood and the receipt of revelation. Contagious diseases, belonging to a family of ill-repute, a harsh and abrasive character, are some of the factors that might arouse repulsion and cause people to shun the Messenger and become disinclined toward him. Thus the aim of the Prophet's message, the training and edification of the human being, would receive a setback.

Given the fact that the Prophet is the bearer of a Divine message, the doctrines he presents must not contradict the firm principles of human logic and knowledge. Were this not to be the case, the message brought by a claimant to prophethood would not be worth studying, nor would it be necessary to demand miracles and proofs in support of it. We see, however, that the Prophet is described in certain religious traditions as 'the external intellect', i.e. the intellect external to one's own being.

Of course, the principle we have put forward concerns the firm rules and established laws of reason and science, a category that does not include hypotheses and theories. The teachings of the Prophets are none other than that system of law laid down by the Creator, and the universal order of creation consists of scientific principles and laws. Since both orders derive from the same source, they must everywhere preserve their harmony.

It is impossible that a Prophet be chosen by God and then propagate his message something contrary to rational laws, for God Who Himself established reason as a criterion for distinguishing between the true and the false will never promulgate a commandment contradicting it. It is likewise impossible that the ordinances of heaven should contradict science, which is, in its essence, the order that God causes to rule over things.

However, it should be borne in mind that if science posits a way for reaching the goal, this does not mean that the way of science is the only way available or that all others are closed.

In matters that are apparently opposed to science, one should always be cautious and avoid hasty judgments aimed at reconciling religious ordinances with scientific concerns. Science still has an infinite road to travel and there is always the possibility that scientific theories will fall subject to doubt as a result of more extensive and comprehensive research.

1. Amali as-Saduq, page 376.
2. Bihar al-Anwar, Volume LXX, page 211.

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