

Concerning Infallibility ('isma)

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Says the Shaykh Abu Ja'far: Our belief concerning the prophets (*anbia'*)², apostles (*rusul*), Imams and angels is that they are infallible (*ma'sum*); purified from all defilement (*danas*), and that they do not commit any sin, whether it be minor (*saghira*) or major (*kabira*). They do not disobey Allah in what He has commanded them; they act in accordance with His behests. He who denies infallibility to them in any matter appertaining to their status is ignorant of them, and such a one is a *kafir* (unbeliever).³

1. The word `isma, translated by Wensinck in MC as impeccability, by Miller in BHA as "immunity to sin" and by W. Ivanow as "infallibility", needs further explanation in view of its doctrinal importance in Shi'itic literature. The root `asama, ya'simu, `asman, means according to Lane, prevented, hindered, protected, defended, preserved, withheld, etc. And `isma is prevention, hindrance, defence, protection; its primary significance being trying or binding. عصمة الأنبياء is explained in Taju '1-Arus as God's preservation of the prophets, first, by peculiar endowment of them with essential purity of constitution; then by the conferring of large and highly-esteemed excellences; then by aid against opponents, and rendering their feet firm, then by sending down upon them tranquility (as-Sakina, Qur'an 9, 26, etc.) and the preservation of their hearts or minds, and adaptation to that which is right. Whence we have "a defence from the state of perdition" and finally, "a faculty of avoiding acts of disobedience, with possession of power to commit them".

This is the positive quality which is believed by the Shi'a to be the peculiar possession of the Imams. It is a state of sinlessness and infallibility or immunity to sin, resulting from a characteristic of their nature, which is a miraculous gift of Allah. It is also fully explained in MB, s.v. عصم also E1, ii. 543 (Ign. Goldziher) and BHA, notes to para. 174 at p.98.

2. The `isma of the prophets is accepted by Sunnis to a limited extent; Fakhru'd-din Razi being a great supporter of the dogma, Goldziher, op. cit.; Donaldson, 337; MC, 217--218; but the Sunnite tradition contains nothing of `isma, while the Shi'a lay great emphasis on it. It is the Fiqh Akbar II which, under Shiite influence, developed the dogma of Muhammad's infallibility, MC, 218. It was claimed by Ibn Tumart, Macdonald, 247, 292, 347 (al-Fudali); BHA, nos- 164 - 173 (see Miller's note to no. 164 at p.97).

3. Browne, iv. 394 - 395; Donaldson, 320 - 338 gives a very valuable account of `isma, the nine proofs whereof will be found on p.321; BHA, nos. 179-185; FC, nos.37, 41, 56; KP, xliii (Imam), xlv.94 (hujja).