

A Re-examination of Tark al-Awlā (Abandoning the More Meritorious Act) and a Critique of Its Compatibility with the Infallibility (‘Iṣmah) of the Prophets, with an Emphasis on the Theosophical-Mystical Approach

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ABSTRACT

In Imāmī Shī’ī thought, after establishing the necessity of the sending of prophets (wujūb-i bi’tahat-i anbiyā’), the most important issue is the necessity of their infallibility (‘iṣmah). The obligation to follow a prophet is contingent upon attaining certainty regarding his immunity in receiving and conveying divine revelation (waḥy). Hence, a prophet must be infallible with respect to all sins, errors, and matters that would cause doubt or aversion among the people. On the other hand, there are instances in the Noble Qur’ān that exegetes and theologians have interpreted as the prophet’s “abandoning the more meritorious act” (tark al-awlā), maintaining that tark al-awlā does not contradict infallibility. This article, through an analytical-critical approach and by presenting critiques of this view, clarifies that tark al-awlā by prophets, especially the *ulū al-‘azm*, is incompatible with infallibility, both rationally and textually. The Qur’ānic verses that indicate this issue, when considered in light of authoritative exegeses, each have their own specific hermeneutical interpretation (ta’wīl), indicating that the prophet’s choice was in the path of legislative and ontological guidance (hidāyat-i tashrīṭ wa takwīnī) and in leading toward what is desired. The research finding indicates that the non-selection of the more meritorious act (awlā) and the selection of the less meritorious act (ghayr-i awlā) is based on the prophet’s knowledge. What appears to be the less meritorious act, according to theosophical and mystical thought, was in fact the more meritorious act given the existing exigencies, and the prophet chose the best option on the path of ontological and legislative guidance. Thus, the research finding is that the prophet, by virtue of his knowledge and infallibility, always chooses the more meritorious act (fi’l-i awlā) through his agency and will. If an act appears to be less meritorious, it merely appears so to us.

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1. Introduction

In Imāmī Shī'ī theology (*kalām-i Imāmīyah*), after establishing the necessity of the sending of prophets (*wujūb-i bi'that-i anbiyā'*), the most critical issue is the necessity of their infallibility (*'iṣmah*). Infallibility is the most fundamental presupposition for the authority (*ḥujīyah*) of the prophet's words and actions. The obligation to follow a prophet is contingent upon attaining certainty regarding his immunity in receiving and conveying divine revelation (*waḥy*). Hence, a prophet must be infallible with respect to all sins, errors, and matters that would cause doubt or aversion among the people.

On the other hand, the Noble Qur'ān refers to instances that exegetes (*mufasssīrūn*) and theologians (*mutakallimūn*) have interpreted as the prophet's "abandoning the more meritorious act" (*tark al-awlā*)—the commission of a permissible but less virtuous act while omitting a more virtuous one—maintaining that *tark al-awlā* does not contradict infallibility. This position has become widely accepted in mainstream theological discourse.

The present article, adopting an analytical-critical approach and drawing on rational (*'aqlī*) and transmitted (*naqlī*) proofs, demonstrates that attributing *tark al-awlā* to the prophets is incompatible with their absolute infallibility. The Qur'ānic verses pertaining to this issue, when considered in light of authoritative exegeses (*tafāsīr-i mu'tabar*), each have their own specific hermeneutical interpretation (*ta'wīl*), indicating that the prophet's choice was made within the framework of ontological and legislative guidance (*hidāyat-i takwīnī wa tashrī'ī*) and in order to lead toward what is desired (*iṣāl ilā al-maṭlūb*). What appears to us as the less meritorious act is, in the domain of theosophy and mysticism (*ḥikmat wa 'irfān*), and considering existential and situational exigencies (*iqtidā'āt*), precisely the more meritorious act (*'ayn al-awlā*) and the best option on the path of guidance. Thus, the commission of a less meritorious act by a prophet is fundamentally impossible (*muḥāl*); it arises only from the limitations of our perceptual horizon.

The central research question is: Is the claimed compatibility of *tark al-awlā* with infallibility defensible on the basis of Imāmī rational and transmitted foundations, or not?

2. Methodology

This research was conducted using a descriptive-analytical method (*rawish-i tawṣīfī-taḥlīlī*). The data collection process was carried out through library-based research (*muṭālī'ih-yi kitābkhānah-ī*), and data were extracted from authoritative theological, exegetical, philosophical, and mystical sources using note-taking and index card techniques (*fīshbardārī*). Subsequently, data analysis was performed based on rational principles and the theoretical foundations of Imāmī theology, in order to examine the rational challenges to the prevailing view and to present a new foundation based on the theosophical-mystical approach.

The research draws on primary sources including: the Noble Qur'ān; authoritative Shī'ī exegeses such as al-Mīzān, Majma' al-Bayān, and al-Tibyān; philosophical works of Mullā Ṣadrā and other figures within the school of Transcendent Theosophy (Ḥikmat-i Muta'āliyah); and classical works of Islamic mysticism ('irfān).

3. Findings

The findings demonstrate that the widely held view concerning the compatibility of tark al-awlā with infallibility faces several fundamental challenges.

3.1. Rational and Textual Challenges to the Compatibility Thesis

First challenge: Infallibility is founded upon divinely bestowed knowledge ('ilm-i 'inā'ī wa i'tā'ī). If tark al-awlā is understood as abandoning the truly more meritorious act (tark al-aḥsan al-waqi'ī), such a state would either imply a deficiency in the prophet's knowledge or entail his consciously preferring the less meritorious act over the more meritorious one—both of which are incompatible with the foundation of infallibility.

Second challenge: This analysis contradicts the principle of the prophet as an exemplary model (uswah). If a prophet were to perform a less meritorious act, either the absolute exemplarity of the prophet would be weakened, or the behavioral distinction between the prophet and the community would disappear altogether.

Third challenge: There is a conflation between the truly more meritorious act (aḥsan-i waqi'ī) and the apparently more meritorious act (aḥsan-i zāhirī). What appears from the limited horizon of human perception to be less meritorious may, within the divine system of ontological and legislative guidance and considering unseen interests (maṣāliḥ-i ghaybī), be the truly more meritorious act and the most excellent choice.

3.2. Re-examination of Qur'ānic Instances

An examination of the Qur'ānic instances commonly attributed to tark al-awlā—including the stories of Prophet Adam, Noah, Moses, Jonah, David, and the Prophet Muhammad—by referring to authoritative Imāmī exegeses and the views of philosophers and mystics, confirms the following:

In some cases, tark al-awlā in its real sense did not occur at all. For example, the prohibition addressed to Prophet Adam was directive (nahy-i irshādī) rather than legislative, or the act in question—such as Moses' defense of the oppressed—was, under specific circumstances, precisely the more meritorious act.

In other cases, the divine reproach ('itāb-i ilāhī) is pedagogical (tarbīyatī) in nature, intended to awaken the prophet's soul and the community, not as punishment for an erroneous action.

3.3. A Theosophical-Mystical Interpretation of Prophetic Repentance

From a mystical perspective, the repentance (tawbah) and seeking of forgiveness (istighfār) by prophets following these events indicate an existential return (bāzgasht-i wujūdī) from attention to the manifestations of multiplicity to the station of unity and reconnection with the Truth (ḥaqq). Such a return signifies dynamism on the path of infallibility and the continuation of the prophet's existential relationship with the Divine Source, not compensation for a lapse.

3.4. An Ontological Reading of the Prophet's Nature

The final solution of the research is founded upon an ontological (wujūdshinākhtī) reading of the reality of the prophet and his relationship with the realms of creation (takwīn) and legislation (tashrī'). In this reading, the prophet, as the "Perfect Human" (insān-i kāmīl), possesses two distinct yet mutually entailed existential dimensions:

The dimension of unity and absoluteness (sāḥat-i jam' wa itlāq): The station of unity and absolute witnessing. In this dimension, the prophet, having annihilated (fanā) his virtual determinations, becomes subsistent through God (bāqī bi al-ḥaqq) and observes multiplicities as a single light. In this dimension, there is no duality or otherness to allow any discussion of "more meritorious" (awlā) versus "less meritorious" (ghayr-i awlā).

The dimension of multiplicity and determination (sāḥat-i kathrat wa ta'ayyun): The degree of the prophet's determination and manifestation in the natural world, where legislative guidance and the education of the community are realized. This dimension is the very act and attention to the partial manifestations of the divine names and attributes.

What is called tark al-awlā is, in reality, the prophet's conscious and mission-ordained descent (tanazzul) from the dimension of unity to the level of multiplicity—a descent undertaken not out of negligence or deficiency, but for the sake of realizing guidance and educating the community. This descent is a "luminous veil" (ḥijāb-i nūrānī)—a temporary and wise interval that is immediately followed by "existential repentance" (tawbah-yi wujūdī) and a return from attention to multiplicity toward the station of unity. From this perspective, the prophets' seeking of forgiveness is not a sign of regret for moral sin but an affirmation of this continuous return and the dynamism of infallibility within the legislative realm.

Thus, tark al-awlā is not only compatible with infallibility but is itself a manifestation of the actualization of infallibility within the context of legislative guidance. Through this descent and constant return, the prophet becomes a living and emulatable exemplar for human beings who dwell in the realm of multiplicity. In this way, the concept of tark al-awlā is transformed from a problem in conflict with infallibility into an issue that is not only compatible with it but also reveals its profound depth.

4. Conclusion

Based on the theosophical-mystical analysis, the commission of a less meritorious act by the prophets is impossible (mumtani‘). This is because the prophet's knowledge is presential and intuitive (‘ilm-i ḥudūrī wa shuhūdī), and his will, due to his existential proximity to God, is identical with the will of the Truth. What is superficially called tark al-awlā is, in reality, the truly more meritorious act within the systems of creation and legislation, appearing as less meritorious only from the limited horizon of our perception. This view, while preserving the absolute infallibility of the prophets, offers a coherent interpretation of the Qur’ānic verses and secures public confidence in the authority (ḥujyah) of prophethood.

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