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**The Theological Concept of '*Isma* from the Early to Modern Period of
Islam**

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by

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Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2016

Dedication

For my oldest sister Hannah,

I dedicate this work to you, with the hope that it might possibly make you half as proud as you make me every day. Thank you for always answering my phone calls and patiently listening to my rambles about the latest updates on the workings of this thesis. I am so proud of how intelligent and beautiful you are, inside and out. I'll never stop bragging about you, and this dedication is a testament to that. I love you.

-LS

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the support, guidance, and mentorship of my wonderful thesis committee, Dr. Denise Spellberg and Dr. Dale Correa. Words cannot express how thankful I am for the opportunity to have worked with you and learned so much from you both. A special thanks to Dr. Spellberg, who from the first day of class two years ago, warmly welcomed me into the program, and has ever since been such a supportive and inspiring academic mentor and friend to me. Having the opportunity to take your classes and learn from you was the highlight of my academic career here, and I am so grateful for your guidance. I would also like to thank my second reader, Dr. Dale Correa, for her hard work and dedication in providing me with suggestions for this thesis and for her constant willingness to help.

Finally, I give my utmost love and gratitude to my family for their encouragement and for always believing in me. To my father, ever since I can remember, you have taught me to be strong, diligent, and humble in everything I do. I hope this makes you proud. And for my mother, thank you for your encouragement, love, and support, without which this thesis would not have been possible. I love you all.

Abstract

The Theological Concept of ‘*Isma* from the Early to Modern Period of Islam

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This thesis traces the theological change in the concept of ‘*isma*, (the infallibility of the Prophet Muhammad in regards to receiving and communicating divine revelation) from the medieval to modern period of Islam. In order to trace this change, this study analyzes the exegetical commentaries of Sunni and Shi‘i theologians regarding two case studies found in the Qur’an that call into question Prophetic ‘*isma*: the so-called Satanic Verses of Qur’an 22:52, and the so-called wife-beating verse of Qur’an 4:34.

In doing so, it demonstrates the differences between Sunni and Shi‘i theological perspectives of ‘*isma*, and the fact that by the modern era, both Sunni and Shi‘i theologians professed ‘*isma* as an aspect of the Prophetic persona that must be defended. Only within the modern era do Sunni theologians begin to think of ‘*isma* as conceptually in line with the Shi'a, with whom the theological understanding of the concept originated, as it initially pertained to the infallibility of the Imams, and by extension, the Prophet. For

the Sunnis, while in the early period it was deemed acceptable and even necessary at times to assert the fallibility of the Prophet, they could no longer do this in the modern period in light of the fact that the Shi'i theological understanding of *'isma* had been doctrinally established and defended for some time.

Posited as another potential explanation that contributed to this shift in the minds of modern Sunni Muslim scholars regarding the concept of *'isma*, the conclusion of this thesis provides a brief series of examples of how 18th-century scholars of Enlightenment Europe, such as George Sale, regularly depicted the Prophet Muhammad as an imposter, accusing him of intentionally creating a false religion. In effect, modern Muslim theologians such as Sayyid Qutb may have been both informed by, or responding to this Western/Orientalist idea of “Muhammad the Imposter,” since this notion of “Imposture” continues to be recycled and utilized within contemporary Western scholarship.

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Introduction

The theological term *'isma*, defined as “infallibility in the total knowledge of the meaning of revelation and its prescriptions,” does not occur in the Qur’an or in canonical Sunni hadith.¹ In fact, the concept of *'isma* was first used by the Imami Shi’a in the early 8th century in order to promote the idea that the Imam was immune from error and sin, and thus occupied the position of a divinely appointed and guided leader of the Muslim community.² *'Isma* eventually became associated with the Prophet Muhammad and with the concept of his infallibility in the knowledge and communication of divine revelation.

While there was a tendency in early Islamic scholarship to freely mention if the Prophet erred in divine revelation, such as the incident of the so-called Satanic Verses as recorded in the 10th-century *sira* (prophetic biography) of al-Tabari, over the centuries of Islamic history leading to the modern period, theologians totally rejected the idea that the Prophet was capable of error in divine revelation. As this thesis will demonstrate, by the modern era, both Sunni and Shi’i theologians professed *'isma* as an aspect of the Prophetic persona that must be defended. Only within the modern era do Sunni theologians begin to think of *'isma* in line with the Shi’a, with whom the theological understanding of the concept originated, as it initially pertained to the infallibility of the Imams and by extension, the Prophet.

Modern Muslims’ strong rejection of the idea that the Prophet could err in regards to divine revelation can be seen by their outrage regarding Salman Rushdie’s

¹ Wilfred Madelung, "'isma." *Encyclopedia of Islam*. (2nd ed. Brill Online, 2012).

² Ibid.

controversial novel published in 1988, *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie portrays the Prophet as having intentionally miscommunicated divine revelation in order to appease the pagan Meccans by conceding worship to their three pagan goddesses. This study undertakes an analysis and comparison of the treatment and responses to the verses in the Qur'an, later known as the Satanic Verses incident in the early and modern period, in order to identify the societal, political, or polemical factors that influenced the historical evolution of this concept.

According to the majority of modern Muslim scholars, the definition of *'isma* is that, while the Prophet was immune from error in divine revelation, he was not immune from human error in general, and so certain incongruities may have existed between the intentions of God and those of the Prophet. Within this study, the Satanic Verses incident of Qur'an 22:52 serves as the most direct example portraying the conceptual shift of *'isma* from the early to modern period of Islam. However, this thesis also examines another instance found in the Qur'an in which the Sunna and divine revelation seem to be at odds with one another (as will be portrayed through the example of the so-called "wife-beating verse" of Qur'an 4:34). These two cases studies form the core of this study.

In regards to the wife-beating verses of Qur'an 4:34, this thesis analyzes the *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis) of Sunni and Shi'i medieval and modern scholars in order to understand how they reconciled the apparent incongruity of the Prophet's opposition to wife beating and the Qur'anic commandment that seems to make it permissible. In doing so, I argue that male Sunni and Shi'i theologians did not view the incongruity between the *Sunna* (Prophetic precedent) and the Qur'anic verse as a violation of his *'isma* in the

theological-historical record because the Prophet did not prohibit husbands from physically disciplining their wives, despite his opposition to it. In fact, both the early and modern male exegetes reconcile this seeming discrepancy with the rationale that the Sunna, although seemingly in conflict with this Qur'anic verse, actually helped clarify the ambiguity of the verse by citing the actions and sayings of the Prophet that delineated the special and limited circumstances in which the physical discipline of wives was permitted.

However, as will be shown in a later chapter of this thesis, modern Muslim feminists such as Hadia Mubarak and Ayesha Chaudhry reject the idea that the *Sunna* and divine revelation could be at odds in any way, and therefore argue on the basis of Prophetic practice that the verse does not allow Muslim men to strike their wives. Following this logic, these modern progressive Muslim feminists reject the idea that the Prophetic practice of refraining from wife-beating simply acts as a restriction. They argue instead that the verse in conjunction with Prophetic practice outlaws the permissibility of wife-beating all together.³ Thus, another apparent shift occurs between early and modern Muslim notions of *'isma*.

By analyzing these two major cases of Prophetic "error" alongside their respective exegetical commentaries within both the Shi'i and Sunni traditions, this thesis aims to examine and compare how early and modern Muslim scholars reconciled these

³ Ayesha S. Chaudhry, "'I WANTED ONE THING AND GOD WANTED ANOTHER . . .': The Dilemma of the Prophetic Example and the Qur'anic Injunction on Wife-Beating," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39:3 (2011): 416.

incidents in order to better understand the dynamic behind the historical theological shift in the concept of *'isma*.

Research Questions, Method, and Sources:

One of the major questions this study addresses is: How did the concept of *'isma* (the infallibility of the Prophet Muhammad in regards to receiving/communicating divine revelation) change over time in the minds of male Muslim theologians? This thesis traces this change from the medieval to modern period of Islam by analyzing the exegetical commentaries of the two case studies, demonstrating the differences between Sunni and Shi'i theological perspectives of *'isma*. How did these Muslim scholars reconcile these incidents in which the Prophet commits error? If their reconciliations and conclusions are different, what factors influenced their various conclusions?

Although today the so-called Satanic Verses incident is the best known litmus test for evaluating *'isma* and its challenges, this thesis not only tracks these verses, but also focuses on the question of whether Muslim theologians challenged and/or called into question what appears to be an incongruity between Prophetic practice and divine revelation in regards to the wife-beating verse of Qur'an 4:34. In other words, this thesis analyzes the commentaries of Sunni and Shi'i theologians in order to understand whether they viewed the Prophet as fallible in not following the possible dictates of the Qur'an, given that he himself refrained from ever physically disciplining his wives. While scholars such as Shahab Ahmad, Wilfred Madelung, and Meir Bar-Asher have already written on the theological concept of *'isma* and its development, this thesis is different from their studies of *'isma* in that it incorporates an analysis of the wife-beating verse of

Qur'an 4:34 and its implications on Prophetic *'isma*, in addition to the Satanic Verses incident.

The other major question this thesis addresses (and which will be taken up in the conclusion) is what societal, political, or polemical factors influenced the historical evolution of the concept of *'isma* from the early to modern period of Islam? For example, what role did English Orientalist thought, if any, have in the modern Islamic perception and rejection of the idea that the Prophet could err in divine revelation? What were the possible implications and consequences of such an attack on the infallibility of the Prophet in regards to divine revelation, and by extension, the veracity of Islam?

In order to address these questions, this study analyzes and compares the exegetical commentaries of six male Muslim theologians on these two cases of Prophetic error, the Satanic Verses incident and the issue of wife-beating, based on Qur'anic verses 22:52 and 4:34, respectively. Of these six male scholars, two are Imami Shi'i and the other four are Sunni. In regard to the Sunni medieval exegetes, this thesis analyzes the commentaries of Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923 CE) and Ibn Kathir (d. 1373 CE). For the Shi'i classical scholars, this thesis analyzes the exegetical commentaries of al-Qummi (d.~920 CE), and al-Tabarsi (d.1150 CE). Among the Sunni modern scholars surveyed in this thesis are Muhammad Jamal al-Din al Qasimi (d.1914 CE), and Sayyid Qutb (d.1966 CE). The method utilized in this paper is organized around analyzing the two topics sequentially and comparing the early and modern Muslim exegetical commentaries surrounding these verses in both the Shi'i and Sunni traditions.

As part of this thesis, I have translated all of the Arabic *tafsir*, or Qur'anic commentary, accounts into English (which can be accessed online) within the body of this thesis, except for those of Sayyid Qutb and Ibn Kathir's commentaries, since the English translations of their commentaries already exist. As mentioned previously, this thesis also analyzes the Muslim progressive feminist interpretations of Hadia Mubarak and Ayesha Chaudhry regarding the wife-beating verse as a way of further demonstrating the conceptual shift of *'isma* from the early to modern period. This thesis does not include Shi'i exegetes of the modern period, since the major theological shift regarding *'isma* occurs early on with the occultation of the 12th Imam in 874 CE.

Argument and Organization:

This thesis traces the theological change in the concept of *'isma* from the medieval to modern period of Islam, demonstrating the differences between Sunni and Shi'i theological perspectives of *'isma* and the fact that by the modern era, both Sunni and Shi'i theologians professed *'isma* as an aspect of the Prophetic persona that must be defended. Only within the modern era do Sunni theologians begin to think of *'isma* as conceptually in line with the Shi'a, with whom the theological understanding of the concept originated, as it initially pertained to the infallibility of the Imams and by extension, the Prophet.

The first chapter of this study begins with a brief discussion of Sunni and Shi'i exegesis, paying particular attention to the differences in methodology between the two traditions. The majority of this chapter is devoted to explaining the concept and history of *'isma* in the Sunni and Shi'i traditions. It starts with Shi'ism because the concept of *'isma*

originated within this tradition. The second chapter introduces the two Qur'anic case studies and their corresponding verses found in the Qur'an. Chapter three examines and compares Sunni and Shi'i classical exegesis on the satanic verses found in Qur'an 22:52 as well as the wife-beating verse of Qur'an 4:34, and takes notes of any differences between the Sunni and Shi'i exegetical interpretations. Similarly, the fourth chapter analyzes modern tafsirs for the two Qur'anic case studies, but only within Sunnism. This chapter also analyzes the progressive Muslim feminist interpretations of Hadia Mubarak and Ayesha Chaudhry, and then compares their conclusions to that of their male counterparts.

Lastly, the conclusion of this thesis discusses the overall findings of this research and re-iterates the idea that because of Shi'i-Sunni medieval and early modern polemics, the Shi'i concept of *'isma* most likely informed and influenced the Sunni modern theological understanding of *'isma*. For the Sunnis, while in the early period it was deemed acceptable and even necessary at times to assert the fallibility of the Prophet, they could no longer do this in the modern period in light of the fact that the Shi'i theological understanding of *'isma* had been doctrinally established and defended for some time. In other words, the ongoing polemical debate between Sunnis and the Shi'a thus necessitated a Sunni response to the Shi'i claim of infallibility of the Imams, and by extension, the Prophet Muhammad.

Posited as another potential explanation that contributed to this shift in the minds of modern Sunni Muslim scholars regarding the concept of *'isma*, the conclusion provides a brief series of examples of how 18th-century scholars of Enlightenment

Europe, such as George Sale, regularly depicted the Prophet Muhammad as an imposter, accusing him of intentionally creating a false religion. In effect, modern Muslim theologians such as Sayyid Qutb may have been both informed by, or responding to this Western/Orientalist idea of “Muhammad the Imposter,” since this notion of Imposture continues to be recycled and utilized within contemporary Western scholarship.

Chapter One: The History of 'Isma in the Sunni and Shi'i Traditions

Sunni and Shi'i *Tafsir* and Differences in Their Exegetical Approaches:

Given that this thesis relies heavily on *tafsir* (Qur'anic commentary) in order to trace the theological shift of the concept of 'isma from the early to modern period, this chapter begins by briefly discussing the concept of *tafsir*, while making note of the major differences between the Sunni and Shi'i approaches to Qur'anic exegesis. Afterwards, the history of 'isma in the Sunni and Shi'i traditions is explained.

In general terms, the Arabic word *tafsir* means "interpretation," and this term is used to represent the entire corpus of exegetical texts of the Qur'an.⁴ In regards to its primary purpose, Rippin argues that *tafsir* embodies both a theoretical and practical nature in that it uses the text of the Qur'an as its beginning point of analysis, and then finds a way to make that text applicable to the current generation of Muslims; this becomes necessary when the meaning of the text is ambiguous, lacks detail, is contradicted by another passage or verse in the Qur'an, or simply has "unacceptable meanings."⁵

In fact, Shi'i exegetes often interpret the "unclear verses" of the Qur'an, or the *mutashabihat*, as having inner meanings that support Ali ibn Abi Talib and his family's claim of leadership over the Muslim *umma*.⁶ The direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, the Imams, were believed to be the only human individuals capable of correctly interpreting this inner meaning, and therefore have an extremely significant role

⁴ Andrew Rippin, "Tafsir," *Encyclopedia of Religion* 13 (2007): 8949.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8950.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8954.

in Shi‘i *tafsir*. The central role of the Imams within Shi‘i *tafsir* is the most notable difference between the exegetical approaches of the two traditions.

Shi‘i exegesis is also characterized for its radical anti-Sunni bias. Shi‘i exegetes often interpret openly negative verses of the Qur’an that describe evil-doers as referring to individuals within Sunni Islam; for example, Shi‘i exegetes associate negative terms frequently repeated within the Qur’an such as *bagy* (insolence), *fahsa* (indecent), *monkar* (dishonor), and *al-fojjar* (the wicked) with Sunni individuals.⁷

The earliest Twelver Shi‘i exegete known today, Ali‘ibn Ibrahim al-Qummi (d. 10th CE), defines Islam as a submission not only to God, but also to the authority and legitimization of the Imams.⁸ Al-Qummi also expresses a common Shi‘i concern in his *tafsir* that the contents of the Qur’an had been corrupted during the third Caliph Uthman’s reign in order to prevent the Shi‘a from assuming their right to succession. For example, he claims “‘letters have been replaced by other letters,’ and he says that there are places where ‘verses contradict what God has sent down’ (that is, they contradict or at least do not support Shi‘i beliefs).”⁹

General Overview: Tracing ‘*Isma* from the Early to Modern Period

In its most basic and general meaning, ‘*isma* denotes immunity from sin and error and is used by Sunnis in reference to the prophets and by Shi‘is also to the Imams.¹⁰

Although the term ‘*isma* does not exist in the Qur’an or in canonical Sunni hadith, “in

⁷ Meir M. Bar Asher, “Exegesis II: In Shi‘ism,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (1999): 3.

⁸ Rippin, “Tafsir,” 8954.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Madelung, “*isma*.”

early Islam moral failures and errors of Muhammad were freely mentioned, although there was an inconsistent tendency to minimize the shortcomings of the Prophet and in particular to deny that he had ever participated in the worship of idols.”¹¹ This chapter demonstrates that pre-modern Muslim scholars were less concerned with the issue of whether the Prophet was completely infallible, and sets up the juxtaposition with modern Muslim scholars who would later place greater emphasis and importance on upholding this concept as it applies to both the Prophet and the Imams.

‘Ismā in Imami Shi‘ism:

Because the concept originated among early Shi‘i scholars of the mid 8th century CE, a history of its development within Shi‘ism is first discussed. Given the significance of the Imamate and its integral role in the development of *‘isma* as a major doctrine with Shi‘ism, the following section briefly outlines a general history and concept of the Imamate in Imami/Twelver Shi‘ism, and explains how *‘isma* eventually became associated with the Prophet. Subsequently, the historical overview of *‘isma* in Imami/Twelver Shi‘ism is discussed.

Meir M. Bar Asher provides an insightful explanation to the importance of the Imamate in early Imami Shi‘ism and how the significance of the Imams directly influenced Shi‘i scripture and exegesis, including their perception of *‘isma*. As compared to their Sunni counterparts who would not even attribute such qualities to the Prophet Muhammad, Imami Shi‘is characterized the Imams as having supernatural attributes that set them apart from that of ordinary human beings and whose succession required a

¹¹ Ibid.

specific designation or appointment (*nass*).¹² Thus, with the death of the 11th Imam al-Hasan al-‘Askari (d.873-4), this ushered in what is known as the two “Occultations” of the 12th Imam. The “Minor Occultation” (*al-ghayba al-sughra*) began in 874 CE and according to Imami Shi‘i tradition, the 12th Imam continued his guidance of the Shi‘i community through four successive representatives (*sufara*), whom he met in secret.

However, the Imam ultimately disappeared all together after the death of the fourth representative in 941 CE, the period after which characterizes the “Major Occultation” (*al-ghayba al-kubra*).¹³ The Shi‘a believe that the Mahdi will not physically present himself again until the end of the world when he will return. In light of this history of occultation and the simultaneous need for guidance by the Imam, it is no surprise that the immunity of the Imam from error and sin became imperative. The integrity of the role of the Imam as the divinely appointed and guided leader of the Muslim community was especially important once he was no longer physically visible to the Shi‘i community.

The emergence of Imami scriptural and literary scholarship can be traced back to this period between the two occultations, since the Imams did not leave behind any written works.¹⁴ However, Bar Asher points out, “Imami tradition ascribes many works to the Imams—some being holy scriptures, which according to Imami belief were handed down to them, and others of their own composition—these are clearly pseud-

¹² Meir M. Bar-Asher. *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imāmī Shiism* (Leiden: Brill, 1999),

12.

¹³ Bar Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

epigraphic.”¹⁵ For example, the Qur’anic commentaries of Ja’far al-Sadiq and Hasan al-Askari, Bar Asher argues, “are clearly ahistorically ascribed to them.”¹⁶ These texts, along with early Imami traditions in general, were heavily edited and amended.¹⁷ It is imperative to keep this in mind while reading the exegetical accounts of early Imami tafsir scholars surveyed in this thesis, since the theological positions within these accounts may in fact derive from a later origin. In addition to this, it is also important to take note that early works of the Imami tradition often contained views and beliefs that were accepted at the time, but would later be deemed heretical.

The period of time between the death of the 11th Imam, Muhammad b. Hasan al-Askari, and the rise of the Buwayhid dynasty (934 CE-1062 CE), witnessed a flourishing of doctrinal development for the Imamiyya. As Bar Asher notes, “despite the insignificance of this intermediate period in the political sense...the Imamiyya was deeply involved in the questions that were on the agenda of both Sunni Islam and other Shi‘i sub-sects.”¹⁸ The period between the two occultations witnessed strong ideological tensions between two conflicting approaches to early Imami Shi‘i doctrine regarding the status of the Imams. The *muqassira*, also known as the minimizers, “were disciples of the Imams who espoused a position close to that of the Sunna—namely, that the Imams are devoid of supernatural features and are no more than virtuous learned men (*‘ulama abrar*).”¹⁹ However, unlike the Sunnis, the *muqassira* maintained that loyalty (*walaya*)

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.,8.

¹⁸ Ibid., 16.

¹⁹ Ibid., 13.

and obedience to the Imams was mandatory as they were the sole religious authority for the Shi‘i community.²⁰

While the *muqassira* upheld the notion that the power of the Imams was limited, the *murtafi’a* (exaggerators), also known as *ghulat*, took an extreme stance regarding the authority and divine status of the Imams. For example, the Mufawwida were a sect of the *ghulat* and believed in *tafwid*, the idea that God had granted the authority of divine delegation to the Prophet Muhammad and the Imams in creating the world and all of its creatures.²¹ As Bar Asher notes, “there was no issue in the world of Islam that was not addressed by the scholars of the Imamiyya, as is clearly evident in their writings...for the most part, the two groups [Sunnis and the Shi‘a] used similar means in interpreting the Qur’an or, more precisely, in reading their ideas into it.”²²

Imami Shi‘i exegetes of the pre-Buwayhid period were generally less concerned with doctrinal issues such as *‘isma* and *shafa’a*, although these tenets of belief would develop to be central theological positions of the Imami tradition during the Buwayhid period.²³ Keeping this in mind, one can expect to find that the exegetical commentaries of the pre-Buwayhid period such as that of al-Hakam (d.796) will display less discomfort with incidents found in the Qur’an which challenge the idea that the Prophet was infallible in receiving and communicating divine revelation. However, Imami scholars still needed to look to the Qur’an in order to find verses that could be interpreted

²⁰ Ibid., 13-14.

²¹ Ibid.,14.

²² Ibid., 17.

²³ Ibid., 126.

allegorically in order to uphold the centrality and importance of the Imams. For example, Imami exegetes extensively used Qur'an 24:55 to legitimize the Imams as the divinely appointed sovereign rulers: "God has promised those of you who believe and do righteous deeds that He will surely make you successors in the land."²⁴ Although there is no explicit mentioning of the Imams as the intended successors, Imami exegetes would look to this verse as proof that the Imams were the rightful leaders of the Muslim community.

The centrality and importance of the Imams within Imami Shi'ism posed a theological problem because the "the equality of Imama and prophecy would amount to contradicting Muhammad's position as 'seal of prophets,' a central religious tenet both in Imami Shi'ism and in Sunni Islam."²⁵ Thus, Imami scholars and exegetes went to great lengths to delineate the differences between prophets and Imams, the biggest difference being "the ways in which God revealed himself to them and in the means he chose to transmit hidden knowledge to them."²⁶ For example, while prophets receive revelation or *wahy*—a term used in reference to prophets exclusively—Imams communicate with God through an inferior form of contact known as *ilham*, or "inspiration."²⁷

Al-Mufid (d.1022), an Imami exegete of the Buwayhid period, summarizes the three most prevalent views during his time regarding the relationship between the prophets and the Imams: the first, which was the most popular and which al-Mufid himself felt most inclined to, was the belief that "Imams are superior to messengers

²⁴ Ibid., 127.

²⁵ Ibid., 140.

²⁶ Ibid., 141.

²⁷ Ibid., 158.

(*rusul*) and prophets of the past with the exception of Muhammad himself.”²⁸ Even today among the Shi‘a, this view remains the most popular. The second view argued for the supremacy of Imams over all prophets excluding “[the messengers] possessing constancy’ (*ulu l-‘azam*),” a term designating the five great prophets who brought the world new religions: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad.²⁹ Lastly, the third view argued that prophets are superior to Imams; however, views among the Shi‘a similar to that of the third one mentioned here were eventually discarded as they under-emphasized the importance of the Imams.³⁰ Although many Shi‘i scholars argued that Imams were superior to the prophets, this was not seen as problematic since the Imamate occupied the status of “the heir to prophecy, and not as prophecy itself.”³¹

The major occultation of the twelfth Imam in 941 CE proved to be a decisive and crucial development in the formulation of the final theological concept of *‘isma* in the Imami Shi‘i tradition. As Said Amir Arjomand explains, with the occultation of the twelfth Imam, Imami theologians developed a mature theory of occultation “...and rose to the task of putting an end to the period of perplexity by equipping Imami Shi‘ism with a rationalized legal and theological system that obviated the need for the presence of an Imam.”³² Imami scholars were forced to develop a systematic theology of occultation

²⁸ Ibid., 154.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 155.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Said Amir Arjomand, "The Consolation of Theology: Absence of the Imam and Transition from Chiliasm to Law in Shiism," *The Journal of Religion* 76 (1996): 553.

because the role of the Imam as the divinely guided and appointed ruler of the Muslim community was so central to the functioning of Shi‘i belief.

By 1040 C.E., Shaykh al-Tusi developed a systematic theory of the Imamate based on three principles: “the necessity (*wujub*) of leadership (*riyasa*); the necessity of certitude concerning Infallibility; and [the principle] that truth (*haqq*) does not leave the community.”³³ Concerning the necessity of leadership, al-Tusi argued that God would never leave the Muslim community devoid of leadership and thus rationalized the absent Imam as the figurehead of the community. Secondly, al-Tusi argued that the Imam must be infallible in all aspects because the fallibility of humans necessitates an infallible Imam that would correctly guide the Muslim community. Finally, al-Tusi restates the necessity and rationality of an infallible Imam with the idea that truth cannot leave the community because the Infallible Imam guides the community.³⁴

The infallibility of the Imam was a crucial necessity as it functioned as “...the expression of the certainty of divine guidance of mankind through Grace.”³⁵ The occultation of the 12th Imam thus formulated is a crucial development in the final theological concept of *‘isma* as total infallibility of the Imams from sin and error. The significance of rationally attributing total infallibility to the Imams extended to the infallibility of the prophets as well. However, it is important to note that in the early stages of Imami Shi‘ism (pre-occultation), *‘isma* was extended only to the “holy five” of the Prophet Muhammad’s family: Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husayn. It was

³³ Arjomand, “The Consolation of Theology,” 566

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 567

not until the 10th century CE after the occultation of the 12th Imam that the maximalist approach of *‘isma* could be extended to all 12 Imams, as Imami Shi‘ism shifted to Twelver or *Ithna-ashariyya* Shi‘ism.³⁶

As previously mentioned, the concept of *‘isma* was attributed exclusively to the Imams in the early 8th century CE and only later extended its meaning to the infallibility of the prophets. The early Imami theologian Hisham b. al-Hakam (d.796) defined the concept of *‘isma* as exclusively applicable to the infallibility of the Imams and believed that prophets were susceptible to disobeying God’s commands since they would be reprimanded for their sin in a revelation sent from God.³⁷ Rather than immunity from error, Ibn al-Hakam defined *‘isma* as immunity from sin. The sins they are protected from are: “preoccupation (*hirs*) with the vanities of this world, envy (*hasad*), anger (*ghadab*), and desire (*shahwa*).”³⁸ Later on, however, Muhammad ibn Babuya (d. 991 CE), a Persian Shi‘i scholar, refuted Ibn al-Hakam’s concept of *‘isma* and argued that the applicability of *‘isma* extended to the prophets as well as the Imams. The Prophets were considered infallible from both major and minor sins but were susceptible to inadvertence (*sahw*) due to their human nature.³⁹

The concept of *‘isma* underwent another theological development when Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 1022) refuted Ibn Babuya’s opinion with the argument that prophets and Imams were immune from *sahw* and forgetfulness (*nisyan*) after being called to

³⁶ Bar Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis*, 169.

³⁷ Madelung, “*isma*.”

³⁸ Bar Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis*, 161.

³⁹ Madelung, “*isma*.”

prophethood.⁴⁰ The sequential development of the concept of *'isma* posited by these early Shi'i scholars culminated in the formulation of Al-Mufid's disciple, al-Sharif al Murtada (d.1044), who established *'isma* as the total immunity of prophets and Imams from sin, error, and inadvertence before and after their vocation.⁴¹ This is still the accepted Imami doctrine today.

'Isma in Sunnism:

In his article "The Concept of Infallibility in Islam," Ahmad Hasan theorizes a rational explanation for the origin of the doctrine of *'isma* among Sunnis. Because of the erring and imperfect nature of mankind, the inherent weakness of human agency alone prevents the religious community from being all-correct and all-perfect in action. Therefore, the Muslim community depends on a source of infallible authority in order to formulate the laws that regulate human life.⁴² The Qur'an functions as the primary source by which legal discipline is derived and thus "the Qur'an is the only authoritative and infallible source and basis of law in Islam."⁴³

However, with the passing of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), who essentially functioned as the physical revelation by which the Muslim community guided their lives by, the *umma* faced the dilemma of no longer having a physical source of authority to ensure the veracity of choices and decisions made by Muslims as they faced new circumstances. As a response to this dilemma "...cropped up the idea of the impeccability of the Prophet of Islam, of the Prophets in general, of the infallibility of the community,

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ahmad Hasan, "The Concept of Infallibility in Islam." *Islamic Studies* 11 (1972): 7.

⁴³ Ibid., 2

and finally of *ijma* according to the Sunnis, and of the infallibility of Imam according to the Shi'a."⁴⁴ *isma* thus rectified the problem of the absence of divine revelation and protected against human error.

Outside the Shi'i tradition, the doctrine of *isma* pertaining to the prophets originated and was upheld most consistently by the Mu'tazali school of theology.⁴⁵ However, the concept of *isma* underwent several developments as Mu'tazali scholars argued the specificities of the doctrine before it reached its final stage. By the late 8th century, scholars such as al-Nazzam were discussing and teaching the infallibility of the prophets, but there remained disagreement as to whether it was possible for prophets to commit minor sins on purpose or inadvertently.⁴⁶ Al-Nazzam (d.845) argued that prophets could only sin inadvertently or by erroneous interpretation (*ta'wil*) of God's commands. Mu'tazali scholar al-Jahiz (d. 868 CE) refuted the whole question on the grounds that unconscious transgression of divine law and revelation was not considered sinful.⁴⁷

At this early stage of development of the concept of *isma*, it appears that Mu'tazali scholars held the notion that prophets were capable of sinning or straying from God's commands, whether unconsciously or not. Later scholars further developed and extended the immunity of the prophets from all major sins and minor sins "causing

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Madelung, "isma."

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

aversion” (*munaffira*), but still maintained the notion that a prophet could sin inadvertently or by erroneous interpretation.⁴⁸

However, by the time Abu al-Hasan al-Ash’ari (d.936 CE) founded the Ash’ari school of theology, the Mu’tazila had finally formulated the concept of *‘isma* to extend immunity to the prophets from unbelief and major sins both before and after their vocation to prophethood. This was considered to be the unanimous doctrine of *‘isma* within Mu’tazili theology.⁴⁹ Although the doctrine of *‘isma* had reached its final form in Mu’tazili theology, the debate between al-Nazzam and al-Jahiz regarding whether conscious or unconscious infraction of divine law was sinful still remained ambiguous in nature and likely influenced the way in which early/medieval scholars wrote so freely about infractions of the Prophet.

Within Ash’ari theology, the doctrine of *‘isma* is that, “...prophets are immune from committing grave and minor sins deliberately, but they may commit a mistake or sin inadvertently.”⁵⁰ As compared to the other theological schools, the Ash’ari’s were much more reserved in confirming the concept of the total infallibility of the prophets from sin and error. The hesitation of the Ash’ari scholars to affirm the concept of *‘isma* was a direct result of their traditionalist learning and beliefs, since their literal acceptance of the verses and passages in the Quran and hadith openly referenced errors of the prophets which came into complete conflict with the doctrine of infallibility of the prophets.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Hasan, “Infallibility in Islam,” 5.

⁵¹ Madelung, “isma.”

Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d.1209), a champion of *'ilm al-kalam* (theology), used this rational discourse to extensively argue for and defend the *'isma* of the prophets.⁵² However, al-Razi ultimately admitted that prophets could commit major sins before their vocation and unintentional minor sins after their call to prophethood.⁵³ The Ash'ari reservation in affirming the infallibility of the prophets may reflect that pre-modern traditionalist scholars did not find conflict with openly referencing infractions of the prophets because these errors were also referenced in the Qur'an and hadith literature.

The Maturidi approach to *'isma* is similar to that of the Ash'aris, but more widely accepts and supports the infallibility of the prophets and “the importance given to the doctrine of *'isma* is reflected by the fact that it is usually included in Maturidi creeds in contrast to Ash'ari and Hanbali creeds.”⁵⁴ However, it is important to note that al-Maturidi himself believed that prophets could commit errors and still be infallible because this error was not considered to be a sin but rather a slip (*zallah*).⁵⁵ Thus, the variation of approaches in different theological schools to the doctrine of *'isma* is further complicated by the fact that these theologies hold different opinions regarding the definition and parameter of “sin” itself.

As mentioned previously, traditionalists oppose the notion of the infallibility of the prophets because this doctrine comes into direct conflict with passages within the Qur'an and Hadith admitting errors of the prophets. For example, the Athari school consists of traditionalist scholars who reject the theology of *kalam* utilized by the Ash'ari

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Hasan, “Infallibility in Islam,” 6.

and Maturidi schools in favor of interpreting the Qur'an by strict textualism.⁵⁶

Muhammad ibn Jarir-al-Tabari (d.923 CE), the famous exegete and historian, followed the Athari traditionalist creed of opposition to the total infallibility of prophets, and thus openly referred to the infamous incident of the Satanic Verses in his biography of the Prophet Muhammad.

However, modern Muslim outrage regarding the controversial nature of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* highlights the shift in conceptualizing 'isma in the modern period, which now firmly upheld the belief that the Prophet Muhammad was protected from sin and error in regards to divine revelation. Further discussion surrounding this change in perspective of modern understandings of 'isma is explored in the next chapter (the Qur'anic verses of the two topics) in the section regarding the Satanic Verses incident. While the Prophet Muhammad was "protected" in his responsibility of receiving divine revelation, to early/medieval Sunni scholars, this did not mean that he could not err or make a mistake while doing so. However, by the modern period of Islam, the concept of 'isma within the Sunni tradition had finally evolved into its final doctrinal form, and modern Muslim scholars would now reject the notion that the Prophet could even slightly err in divine revelation. For the Twelver Shi'a, this logic would apply to both the Prophet Muhammad and the twelve Imams.

⁵⁶ Jeffrey Halverson, *Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam: The Muslim Brotherhood, Ash'arism, and Political Sunnism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 36.

Chapter Two: The Qur'an on the Two Topics

Before analyzing the exegetical commentaries of the medieval and modern Muslim scholars examined within the next two chapters, it is imperative first to establish a contextual basis for these two Qur'anic case studies. This chapter examines the Qur'anic verses corresponding to the Satanic Verses incident as well as the so-called "wife-beating verses" of Qur'an 4:34.

Starting with the Satanic Verses incident, this chapter will examine not only the Qur'anic verses surrounding this topic, but also the accounts of this incident within the *sirat* (biographies) of the Prophet's life written by Ibn Hisham and al-Tabari. The attitudes taken by the medieval scholars within these *sirat* is then compared to the modern Muslim outrage regarding the controversial nature of Salman Rushdie's fictional novel, *The Satanic Verses*. Next, this chapter examines the controversial "wife beating verses" of Qur'an 4:34 and the disjoint between Prophetic practice and divine revelation.

Topic One: Qur'anic Verses Regarding the Satanic Verses Incident

The Satanic Verses incident, also known as *qissat al-gharaniq*, is the account of how the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have wrongly identified a satanic deception as divine revelation in regards to the concession he made allowing the worship of the three pagan goddesses within the context of Islamic practice. Although this deceptive revelation was removed from the Qur'an and is only mentioned briefly in a few Qur'anic verses, early and medieval Islamic scholars such as Ibn Hisham and al-Tabari recorded the Satanic Verses incident within their biographies of the Prophet Muhammad.

Before delving into the analysis of how early and medieval Muslim scholars wrote about the incident of the Satanic Verses, it is important to first refer to the Qur’anic verses that refer back to this incident in order to provide contextual background. Because the verses referring to the false revelation allowing for the worship of the three pagan goddesses al-Lat, al-Uzza, and Manat were removed from the Qur’an after the Prophet received revelation from the angel Gabriel that these verses were delivered from Satan, “the historicity of the Satanic verses incident is rejected by modern Muslims...as having been transmitted by *isnads* that are considered unreliable by Hadith methodology.”⁵⁷

Shahab Ahmed provides a brief overview of the narrative of the Satanic Verses incident as well as the Qur’anic verses that refer to this supposed incident. According to Ahmed, “the accounts of the incident state that, when under persecution by Quraysh in the pre-Hijra phase of his mission, Muhammad was eager to be reconciled with Quraysh and accordingly hoped to receive a Divine Revelation that would effect this.”⁵⁸ The Prophet then began to recite *Surat al-Najm*, until he reached Qur’an 22:19, which references the pagan deities of the Quraysh: “And have you considered what it is you are worshiping in al-Lat, al-‘Uzza and Manat, the third the other?”⁵⁹ Ahmed explains that at the end of the verse, Satan purportedly interjected the following two verses, which allowed for the worship of these three pagan deities in Islamic doctrine: “Indeed, they are

⁵⁷ Shahab Ahmed, “The Satanic Verses Incident in the Memory of the Early Muslim Community: An Analysis of the Early Riwayāhs and Their Isnāds” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1999), i.

⁵⁸ Shahab Ahmed, "Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses," *Studia Islamica*, 87 (1998): 69.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

as high flying cranes! And, indeed, their intercession (with God) is hoped for!”⁶⁰ Thus, the Prophet is said to have mistakenly interpreted this Satanic deception as divine revelation much to the happiness of the Quraysh, who then prostrate alongside the Prophet in harmony; this reconciliation is short-lived, however, when the angel Gabriel corrects and informs the Prophet of this grave deception.⁶¹

After the angel Gabriel informs Muhammad of this grave mistake, the following verses from *Surat al-Hajj* are then revealed, thus “nullifying the Satanic interpolation and explaining the Divine rationale behind what had taken place.”⁶² Shahab translates and lists these Qur’anic verses from Surat al-Hajj:

We have not sent before you a Messenger or a Prophet but that when he recited/desired [*tamanna*], Satan cast something into his recitation/desire [*umniyyati-hi*], but God annuls that which Satan casts and then establishes His signs clearly- and God is All-Knowing, All-Wise- to make what Satan casts a trial for those in whose hearts is sickness and those whose hearts are hardened – for indeed the wrong-doers are in far dissension – and to teach those who have been endowed with knowledge that this is the Truth from your Lord, that they believe in it and humble their hearts to Him, for God guides those who believe to a straight path.⁶³

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 69-70.

Ahmed concludes his explanation of this narrative by describing how after the Prophet took back the concession of the Satanic Verses that allowed the worship of the pagan deities, the dissatisfied Quraysh continued their persecution of the Prophet.⁶⁴ These verses describe how the pagan Arabs, who would only have accepted Muhammad if he had conceded this great sin of polytheism, are blameworthy and corrupt for trying to pressure the Prophet into corrupting the message of Islam. In addition to this, these verses also abdicate Muhammad from blame since Allah corrects Satan's deception.

Because the actual lines considered to be the Satanic Verses are not present in the Qur'an, the majority of modern Muslim scholars reject the Satanic Verses incident and instead discredit the *isnads* from which the biographies of early and medieval Muslim scholars relied on for their accounts. With this in mind, the next section of this chapter will analyze the depiction of the Satanic Verses incident by the early Muslim scholar Ibn Hisham and then that of the medieval Muslim scholar al-Tabari.

Ibn Hisham's Account of the Satanic Verses Incident

As the analysis of the Sunni opinion of *'isma* in the last chapter has shown, early and medieval scholars were overall reluctant in granting full impeccability to the prophets. The doctrine of *'isma* was by no means rapidly accepted by the Muslim community as can be seen in al-Ghazali's (d.1111) reluctance to accept this doctrine as he believed that "...none is immune from disobedience, even the Prophets, as the Qur'an talks of their errors and sins, and their repentance and weeping for their mistakes."⁶⁵

However, while he admitted that prophets were of a fallible nature, he warns the Muslim

⁶⁴ Ibid., 70.

⁶⁵ Hasan "Infallibility in Islam," 6-7.

community against emphasizing the belief in their sinfulness as God prohibits Muslims from insulting the Prophets.⁶⁶ Thus, this section will now analyze Ibn Hisham and al-Tabari's early and medieval accounts of the satanic verses incident as recorded in their *sira* of the Prophet Muhammad. The analysis of early/medieval treatments of this account will prove that Ibn Hisham (d.833) and al-Tabari's perception of *'isma* falls in line with that of al-Ghazali: while they openly refer to the Prophet erring in divine revelation and being deceived by Satan, they refrain from condemning the Prophet for this infraction, but rather frame the incident as the Prophet inadvertently falling victim to the trickery of Satan.

Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham's work is considered to be the earliest biography of the Prophet and thus will help identify how early Muslim scholars treated this incident. Before analyzing the text however, it is important to refer to the *isnad* of this account, because this is the basis on which modern Muslim scholars reject the account of the satanic verses. The *isnad* of the account goes as follows: "Ibn Hamid told me that Salama said M. b. Ishaq told him from Yazid b. Ziyad of Medina from M.b. Ka'b al-Qurazi."⁶⁷ As Shahab Ahmed explains in his dissertation, although the transmitter of Ibn Ishaq, Salama b. al Fadl, was considered to be an excellent transmitter of Ibn Ishaq's *sirah-maghazi* works, "...for the *muhaddithun*, such as the prominent 14-15th century Hadith scholar Muhammad Nasir al-din al-Albani, the mere fact of his presence in this

⁶⁶ Ibid., 7

⁶⁷ Ibn Hisham, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*. Translated by Alfred Guillaume. (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 165.

isnad was sufficient basis to reject Riwayah 1 as inauthentic and untrue.”⁶⁸ This detail is important in explaining one method of how Muslim scholars in later centuries would later reject the incident of the satanic verses by attacking the validity of the *isnads*.

The account as reported by Ibn Hisham begins with Muhammad being anxious about the welfare of his people and feeling despair by their estrangement from God’s message delivered by him.⁶⁹ The despair Muhammad feels, as recorded in the account, is due to his “...love for his people,” and longing for a revelation that would reconcile him with the pagan Arabs.⁷⁰ Thus, Satan casts the false revelation upon Muhammad because of Muhammad’s desire to reconcile with the Quraysh. Unlike other accounts, which begin with the Prophet reciting the *Surat al-Najm* and then falling asleep, which provided the opportunity for Satan’s intervention, this account is unique in that its contextual background begins with the Prophet’s desire for reconciliation with the Quraysh.⁷¹ After the Prophet voices his desire for reconciliation, God then sends down “Have you thought of al-Lat and al-Uzza and Manat, the third, the other,” to which Satan then intervenes while Muhammad meditates upon this and is deceived into declaring the Satanic Verses: “these are the exalted *Gharaniq* whose intercession is approved.”⁷² *Gharaniq*, meaning “Numidian cranes,” were said to have flown at great heights and are representative of the

⁶⁸ Ahmed, “Satanic Verses Incident,” 37.

⁶⁹ Ibn Hisham, *Life of Muhammad*, 165.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ahmed, “Satanic Verses Incident,” 47.

⁷² Ibn Hisham, *Life of Muhammad*, 165-6.

three pagan goddesses to whom Muhammad concedes worship to.⁷³ In Quran 10:18, the pre-Islamic worship of intercessionary lesser deities is mentioned:

“And they worship, side by side with God, that which neither harms nor benefits them, and they say: These are our intercessors with God.” (10:18)⁷⁴

Perhaps, considering the somewhat neutral tone towards these lesser deities in this Qur’anic passage, the Muslims (and Muhammad) believed in the false revelation allowing for the worship of the deities because they too were once pre-Islamic Arabs who worshipped goddesses and idols. In modern times, however, with Islam fully established and removed from any associations of polytheistic tendencies, this concession to polytheism is understandably much more controversial and could explain modern scholars rejection of the satanic verses incident.

The account then goes on to describes how the Quraysh rejoiced at this revelation and the Muslims accepted the Prophet’s word and the news spread to the Prophet’s companions in Abyssinia.⁷⁵ However, the angel Gabriel then approaches the Prophet and says “‘What have you done, Muhammad? You have read to these people something I did not bring you from God and you have said what He did not say to you.’”⁷⁶ These lines indicating Muhammad’s communication of false revelation, along with Muhammad’s grief over the matter, clearly shows that early Muslim scholars such as Ibn Hisham accepted the idea that Muhammad was capable of error and was not infallible. Ibn Hisham then goes on to describe the Qur’anic verses mentioned in the first section of this

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ahmed, “Satanic Verses Incident,” 49

⁷⁵ Ibn Hisham, *Life of Muhammad*, 166.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

paper, which abrogated the false revelation and how these Qur'anic verses relieved Muhammad's grief over delivering the satanic verses.⁷⁷ By continually emphasizing Muhammad's grief in the matter, Ibn Hisham admits that the Prophet erred in his judgment of delivering the verses, even though blame is ultimately given to Satan for his trickery. Ibn Hisham furthers this idea of Muhammad not being an infallible prophet at the end of the account with the story of the blind man who asked for Muhammad to recite the Quran.⁷⁸ While Muhammad was trying to convert al-Walid to Islam, a blind man by the name of I. Umm Maktum passed by and asked the Prophet to recite the Quran. Ibn Hisham then goes on to narrate how "the prophet found this hard to bear and it annoyed him, because he was diverting him from al-Walid and spoiling the chance of his conversion; and when the man became importunate he went off frowning and left him."⁷⁹ Once again, God sent down a revelation correcting Muhammad with these verses from *surat 'Abasa*:

"I sent you only to be an evangelist and a reprove; I did not specify one person to the exclusion of another, so withhold not (the message) from him who seeks it, and do not waste time over one who does not want it." (80:1-3)⁸⁰

It is important how Ibn Hisham ends the account of the Satanic Verses incident with this story portraying the Prophet once again making a mistake and receiving correctional revelation since it reveals the perception of early Muslim scholars in their belief that the Prophet was capable of error. However, it is also important to note that these instances of

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 167.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

error were not only corrected but also taught a valuable lesson to the Muslim community and thus, the Prophet's error was always educational and served a purpose.

Al-Tabari's Two Accounts of the Satanic Verses Incident:

Although al-Tabari (d.923) wrote his biography of the Prophet Muhammad in the medieval era, his accounts of the Satanic Verses incident are roughly equivalent to the one presented in Ibn Hisham's biography of the Prophet. In particular, the first account al-Tabari presents concerning the Satanic Verses incident is nearly identical to that of Ibn Hisham. This is because their isnads are identical, and "the chain Muhammad b. Humayd- Salamah- Ibn Ishaq occurs in al-Tabari's *Tarikh* over 350 times."⁸¹ Thus, the only noticeable difference between Ibn Hisham's account and the first account presented in al-Tabari's work exists at the very end of the account. While Ibn Hisham's account finishes the Satanic Verses incident with verses from *Surat 'Abasa*, which depicts the story of how the Prophet turned away from the blind man who wanted the Prophet to recite the Qur'an, al-Tabari does not mention this detail and instead ends the account with the companions returning back to Mecca and how "not one of them entered Mecca without obtaining protection or entering secretly."⁸²

The second account presented by al-Tabari, however, does slightly differ from the account of Ibn Hisham and of course has a different *isnad* as well. Unlike the account of Ibn Hisham which describes the Prophet as feeling anxious over the pagan Arabs estrangement of him and his desire for a revelation to draw them together, this account

⁸¹ Ahmed, "Satanic Verses Incident," 38.

⁸² Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: Muhammad at Mecca*, trans.by Montgomery Watt and M.V. McDonald. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 110.

describes how “the Messenger of God was sitting in a large gathering of Quraysh, wishing that day that no revelation would come to him from God which would cause them to turn away from him.”⁸³ However, the revelation from God does come, as do the Satanic Verses, “these are the high flying cranes; verily their intercession is to be desired.”⁸⁴ In this account as in Ibn Hisham’s, the Muslims upon hearing the false revelation accept Muhammad’s judgment towards the worship of the pagan goddesses. The account continues to follow the same narration as Ibn Hisham’s account in regards to the prostration of all Muslims and pagan Arabs together in reconciliation but then again differs when it describes how “that evening Gabriel came to him and reviewed the *surah* with him, and when he reached the two phrases which Satan had cast upon his tongue he said, ‘I did not bring you these two.’ Then the Messenger of God said, ‘I have fabricated things against God and have imputed to Him words which He has not spoken.’”⁸⁵

Although this account differs from that of Ibn Hisham in the way Muhammad directly admits that he himself has uttered words which God has not spoken instead of the angel Gabriel telling him he has done so, both accounts still share the same perception towards the Prophet’s fallible nature and that he did commit an error in reciting the false revelation. Thus, whatever minor differences exist between the early and medieval accounts of the satanic verses incident, both accounts describe how the Muslims accepted Muhammad’s revelation and did not doubt the Prophet’s conviction in transmitting divine

⁸³ Tabari, *History of al-Tabari*, 111.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

revelation, which "...seems to relate the incident to the question of *'ismat al-anbiya.'*"⁸⁶ Although the term *isma* is never mentioned in the accounts, the terms *khata* "error," *wahm* "delusion," and *zalal* "slip," were concepts that were tied to *isma* since the 1st century of Islam regarding the infallibility of the Prophet.⁸⁷ Thus, although the Muslims in the actual narration of the accounts did not believe there was any possibility that the Prophet had committed *khata*, *wahm*, or *zalal*, it is clear through the depictions of the accounts of Ibn Hisham and al-Tabari that early and medieval scholars did consider the Prophet to be "...a man whose own understanding of his Prophetic mission developed only gradually, in the course of which development he was subject to error and Divine correction."⁸⁸

Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*

This section of the chapter will now examine Salman Rushdie's controversial fictional novel *The Satanic Verses*. Although it is a work of fiction, it represents a pertinent example of the kind of skepticism and attack the Prophet's reputation has received in modern times, which in turn makes modern Muslim responses to the issue of the Prophet's infallibility more understandable. After describing and analyzing some of the most controversial themes presented in this fictional novel, this section will examine the responses received by Rushdie for the highly controversial and offensive nature of his work. Rushdie is known for his fictional and magical style of writing, as seen in his 1983 fictional novel *Shame*. However, Rushdie alerts the audience in *Shame* that it is an

⁸⁶Ahmed, "Satanic Verses Incident," 51.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 51-2.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, ii.

allegorical novel by prefacing the novel with: “Realism can break a writer’s heart. Fortunately, however, I am only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale, so that’s all right; nobody need get upset, or take anything I say too seriously.”⁸⁹ In *The Satanic Verses*, however, no such clarification exists and thus the novel delves into religiously dangerous territory.⁹⁰ *The Satanic Verses* tells the magical, surrealistic adventures of two East Indians from London, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, whose fates become intertwined when their plane, which is supposed to take them from India to England, is hijacked by religious extremists and eventually blown up.⁹¹ However, this thesis focuses on the chapter titled “Mahound,” as it relates the fictional account of the satanic verses incident constructed by Rushdie.

The story begins with “...the three of them, Lat Manat Uzza, motherless girls laughing with their Abba, giggling behind their hands at Gibreel, what a trick we got in store for you, they giggle, for you and for that businessman on the hill.”⁹² In other words, Rushdie constructs the context of the satanic verses as being a plot of the goddesses to trick both the angel Gabriel (Gibreel) and the Prophet, referred to as a businessman. Rushdie’s attribution of highly offensive nicknames to the Prophet such as “the businessman turned Prophet,” conveys the idea that Muhammad’s revelations are motivated by his own ambitions and political aspirations.⁹³ The most used and most outlandish nickname given to the Prophet by Rushdie, however, is “the Devil’s synonym:

⁸⁹ Alex Knonagel, "The Satanic Verses: Narrative Structure and Islamic Doctrine" *The International Fiction Review* 18, no. 2 (1991): 69-70.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁹² Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*. (New York, N.Y.: Viking, 1989), 91.

⁹³ Rushdie, *Satanic Verses*, 95.

Mahound.”⁹⁴ By associating Muhammad with the devil, Rushdie attempts to taint the entire message and veracity of Islam.

In addition to this, when Rushdie describes the three pagan goddesses, he asserts that they are in equal standing with God when he says, “Al-Lat. *The goddess*. Even her name makes her Allah’s opposite and equal.”⁹⁵ This is obviously highly controversial to modern Muslims since it corrupts the oneness of God and goes even further to equate a pagan goddess to be His equal. Yet, Rushdie does not stop here. Keeping consistency with the portrayal of Muhammad as an ambitious political seeker of power, Rushdie asserts that the Satanic Verses incident was in fact a deal negotiated by Muhammad with the pagan Arabs as he quotes Muhammad as saying “‘He asks for Allah’s approval of Lat, Uzza and Manat. In return, he gives his guarantee that we will be tolerated, even officially recognized; as a mark of which, I am to be elected to the council of Jahilia. That’s the offer.’”⁹⁶

Although Rushdie’s account of the Satanic Verses incident departs from the historical accounts in regards to the skeptical and offensive details attributed to Muhammad, “the incident of the ‘satanic verses’ appears almost completely unchanged from the historiographical model.”⁹⁷ For example, Rushdie keeps the same basic narrative of the historical accounts concerning the Qur’anic verses revealed to Muhammad and the subsequent prostration of the Muslims and pagans together.⁹⁸ Thus,

⁹⁴ Ibid., 93.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 100.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 105.

⁹⁷ Knonagel, “The Satanic Verses,” 72.

⁹⁸ Rushdie, *Satanic Verses*, 114.

by combining such unrealistic and offensive details among a historically accurate narrative context, Rushdie's fictional novel becomes even more controversial with its seeming semblance of historical truth. A final note made on the controversial substance of Rushdie's novel concerns the way in which he ends the account, with Muhammad saying "'Yes. Bitterness, cynicism. It was a wonderful thing I did. Deeper truth. Bringing you the devil. Yes, that sounds like me.'"⁹⁹ Once again, Rushdie associates Muhammad with the devil and suggests that Muhammad knowingly reported, and possibly even conceived himself, the Satanic Verses. This idea of "Muhammad the Imposter" will be taken up in the conclusion of this thesis, as another possible way of explaining attempts made by medieval Western and Orientalist scholars in portraying Muhammad as a false prophet who contrived a false religion, and how this in turn affects the Muslim psyche and self-awareness.

The Rushdie File: Responses to Rushdie's The Satanic Verses

Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* was published in the United Kingdom on September 26, 1988. A few months later in February 1989 the book was officially published in the United States while in Britain, it was being publicly burned.¹⁰⁰ Muslim communities around the world considered Rushdie's work to be "...a deliberate and aggressive blasphemy against Islam."¹⁰¹ Not only did several people die in riots in India and Pakistan, but on February 14, 1989 Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* imposing a death sentence against Rushdie and his publishers and offered a million and a

⁹⁹ Ibid., 125

¹⁰⁰ Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland, *The Rushdie File* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1990), vii.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

half dollar reward to Rushdie's executioner.¹⁰² Thus, *The Rushdie File*, which aims to provide different perspectives around the world towards Rushdie's novel and the controversy of the affair, has collected several pertinent collections and viewpoints of modern Muslims and scholars towards this subject.

While the *Rushdie Files* collects several responses from modern Muslims, one common criticism they all share towards Rushdie's highly offensive work deals with the idea that "the root idea of the novel is that there are no absolutes. Heaven and hell have no boundaries. It's almost impossible to tell angel and devil apart: Mahound the prophet has a tough time telling the difference between the voice of the angel and the shaitan (devil) up there on Mount Cone."¹⁰³ In other words, Rushdie not only implies that the Prophet is not infallible, but further implies that he has satanic associations because of his inability to distinguish the voice of an angel or the devil. Another Muslim response points out the outrageousness of Rushdie's novel in the derogatory nature of its title, the depiction of the Prophet as an imposter, and the naming of the Prophet as Mahound, when "anyone conversant with the English language knows that Mahound is an archaic form for Muhammad, the name of the Prophet."¹⁰⁴ Both of these responses indicate that modern Muslims are not open to the idea of the Prophet as being fallible in any way, especially regarding divine revelation. Thus, reviewing the controversial material presented in Rushdie's work and Muslim reactions towards it further leads one to believe that a possible reason for modern Muslims' strong belief in the infallibility of the Prophet

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 39.

may in part derive from a need to defend his reputation against controversial accusations such as those found in Rushdie's novel.

The Shaping of Modern Muslim Perception Towards *Isma*

If early and medieval scholars such as Ibn Hisham and al-Tabari could openly express the error of the Prophet in reciting false revelation, why then, do modern Muslim scholars fully reject the Satanic Verses incident, and furthermore argue for the total infallibility of the Prophet in regard to divine revelation? This section will discuss possible explanations for this change in perception from the early to modern period.

Within the past two centuries, "certain sorts of material were excluded from Muhammad's life story as it developed in the seventh through ninth centuries; things got left out, written off, forgotten."¹⁰⁵ The incident of the Satanic Verses is one account that likely would have been marginalized by Muslim tradition in later centuries. However, this exempted material was brought back into the spotlight by Western and Orientalist discourse, as these scholars attempted to dismantle the veracity of Islam as a religion. For example, while Ibn Hisham and al-Tabari admit the event of the Satanic Verses incident under the belief that Muhammad unknowingly revealed the Satanic Verses, Scottish Orientalist William Muir (d.1905) emphatically argues that these verses were not a product of satanic intervention but rather Muhammad's attempt to reconcile with the Meccans; according to Muir, Muhammad, upon his realization that these verses compromised the core of Islam, decided to abrogate these verses in favor of the current

¹⁰⁵ Kecia Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 237.

set in the Qur'an.¹⁰⁶ Muir's arrogance in decisively stating that Muhammad purposefully recited these verses despite the fact a person cannot definitively know the intention or consciousness of another human being, rationalizes the Muslim response of defending their Prophet's integrity and legitimacy against Orientalist attack.

Thus, modern Muslim scholars devised a number of ways to deny the total authenticity of the Satanic Verses incident. Modern Muslim scholar Ahmad Khan, in response to Muir, denied the total authenticity of the Satanic Verses incident on the grounds that "...the accounts of the supposed event contradict each other...their irreconcilability points to their untrustworthiness; they are not to be taken as authoritative."¹⁰⁷ Criticism of source methodology became the integral tool utilized by modern Muslims to reject the satanic verses incident. In fact, "the historicity of the satanic verses incident is rejected by modern Muslims...as having been transmitted by isnads that are considered unreliable by Hadith methodology."¹⁰⁸ Other modern scholars would reconcile this incident by arguing that while Muhammad did utter the verses, he was referring to the validity of the intercession of angels, and not the pagan goddesses.¹⁰⁹ Another view holds that "...Muhammad said this with reference to the views of unbelievers, i.e., that it was *they* who uttered these words, and he cited the words in amazement at their unbelief."¹¹⁰ As a response to the Orientalist attack of the Satanic Verses incident and other incidents which threatened the veracity and authority of the

¹⁰⁶ Ali, *Lives of Muhammad*, " 63.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 63-4.

¹⁰⁸ Ahmed, "Satanic Verses," i.

¹⁰⁹ Tarif Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad: Narratives of the Prophet in Islam across the Centuries*, (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 219.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 219.

Prophet and Islam, modern Muslim reshaped the concept of *'isma* as entailing the total infallibility of the Prophet Muhammad in receiving and communicating divine revelation. The theological debates of *'isma* and the evolution of this concept from the early to modern era explains the intransigence of modern Islamic scholarship in regard to their complete rejection of the Satanic Verses incident, as the concept of *'isma* was now firmly established within Islamic doctrine.

Topic Two: Qur'an 4:34: An Incongruity Between Sunna and Divine Revelation

Verse 4:34 of the Quran, the so-called “wife beating verse,” has become a contentious issue among Muslim scholars as it is central to the paradigm on gender relations in Islam.¹¹¹ While some Muslims have used this verse to argue for, or are in agreement with, the permissibility of husbands physically disciplining their wives under certain circumstances, others have used this verse to argue that Islam is an inherently misogynistic and demeaning religion for women. Another group, largely composed of Muslim feminists, however, has taken the opposite stance from the former in order to emphatically argue that this Quranic verse has been misread and misinterpreted all together since its origin, and has provided men with an un-Islamic method of disciplining their wives. What further complicates this controversial issue is evidence found in the *hadith* and *tafsir* literature, which points to the idea that Muhammad refrained from ever physically disciplining his wives, despite God’s revelation that made it permissible. As will be shown in the analysis of medieval and modern interpretations of this verse in later chapters, “the dialectic between the Qur’an and prophetic practice is a mainstay in

¹¹¹ Hadia Mubarak, "Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34" *Hawwa* 2:3 (2004): 261.

Muslim scholarship and scholars navigate their sometimes conflicting dictates when arguing for the acceptability, mitigation, or rejection of the right of husbands to physically discipline their wives.”¹¹²

Analyzing the controversy and intense debate surrounding this verse will accomplish two things: first, by analyzing the way in which Muslim scholars have explained and interpreted this verse in *tafsir* literature, one can understand how Muslims scholars from the early to modern period reconciled this apparent incongruity between the Sunna of the Prophet and the Quranic permissibility of physical discipline. Secondly, this analysis will prove that this issue/incongruity cannot be considered a breach of *'isma* because the Prophet ultimately submitted to God's revelation and did not seek means against men who physically disciplined their wives as permitted in the Qur'an.

This thesis argues that the perception of *'isma* as it developed from the early to modern period must have contributed to the scholars' understandings of how to reconcile the apparent incongruity between Muhammad's actions and this Qur'anic verse. As described in the last chapter, because Sunni medieval scholars held a more relaxed and flexible perception of *'isma* as not entailing the total infallibility and impeccability of the Prophet, the idea that the Prophet could desire or want something different from God would not have seemed as problematic so long as the Prophet did not purposefully stray from God's commands. In fact, the following chapter demonstrates how medieval exegetes referred to the Sunna of the Prophet to clarify and restrict the ambiguous and

¹¹² Ayesha S. Chaudhry, "“I WANTED ONE THING AND GOD WANTED ANOTHER . . . ”: The Dilemma of the Prophetic Example and the Qur'anic Injunction on Wife-Beating," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39:3 (2011): 417.

unrestricted permissibility of physical discipline in the Qur’anic verse. Given the wariness of modern scholars to portray Muhammad’s fallibility or any incongruity between God and the Prophet, some modern Muslims would argue against the veracity of the medieval interpretation of this verse in various ways, but grounded in the idea that the Sunna of the Prophet could not be at odds with God’s revelation.

This section will now analyze the verse as it appears in the Qur’an and provide background to the disjoint between Prophetic practice and divine revelation regarding wife-beating.

Chapter 4, verse 34 reads:

“Men are *qawwamun* (in authority) over women, because God has *faddala* (preferred) some over others and because they spend of their wealth. *Salihat* (good/righteous) women are *qanitat*(obedient) and guard in the husbands’ absence what God would have them guard. Concerning those women whom you fear *nushuz* (disobedience/rebellion), *fa’izuhunna* (admonish them), *wa-hjruhunna fi l-madaji’i* (abandon them in bed), *wa dribuhunna* (hit them). If they obey you, do not seek a means against them.”¹¹³

Conventional readings of this verse stipulate the three steps men should undertake if they fear disobedience (*nushuz*) from their wives: first, admonish them (*fa’izuhunna*), secondly, shun them in bed (*wa-hjruhunna fi’l madaji*), and last, strike or beat them (*wa’dribuhunna*).¹¹⁴ However, “ there are several words and phrases in this verse that have contested meanings and were the subject of extensive discussion in the exegetical

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 418

and juridical discussions in the pre-modern period.”¹¹⁵ Although the verse provides the steps a husband should take in disciplining his wife, the verse remains unclear about issues such as God’s preference (*faddala*) of men over women, why men are *qawammun* over women, what it means for a wife to be obedient (*qanitat*), and when a husband should “fear” (*khawf*) a wife’s disobedience (*nushuz*).¹¹⁶ These were the kinds of issues medieval exegetes needed to further explicate in order to qualify the ambiguity surrounding this verse.

As will be seen in the next chapter in the analysis of the medieval exegetical commentaries, these medieval scholars provided extensive reasoning for the justification of men’s preference over women in the eyes of God that was necessary for the rationalization of physical discipline. If men did not in fact hold a degree over women or did not hold a higher status, then the physical disciplining of wives would seem too irrational and unjust to be permissible. However, these medieval exegetes also restricted the permissibility of wife-beating by referring to the Sunna of the Prophet which for the most part, “...upholds the divinely ordained right of husbands to physically discipline recalcitrant wives in Q.434, while at the same time qualifying this unqualified prescription.”¹¹⁷

In the following two chapters, this thesis will analyze and compare the methods used by Sunni and Shi‘i exegetes of the medieval and modern period of Islam in regards

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 437.

to these two instances of Prophetic error, which have now been contextualized and explained for better understanding.

Chapter Three: Classical *Tafsir* on the Two Topics

Now that the history and concept of *'isma* and the context of the Qur'anic verses surrounding these two topics has been explained, this chapter will now turn to an analysis of the classical exegetes' commentaries of these two topics. The Sunni classical exegetes surveyed within this chapter are al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir, while the Shi'i classical scholars within this chapter comprise of al-Qummi and al-Tabarsi. Starting with the Satanic Verses incident (verses of Qur'an 22:52) as the first topic to be discussed, this chapter will discuss each topic separately, with the Sunni and Shi'i commentaries analyzed side by side; the same will be done with the wife-beating verses of Qur'an 4:34.

Sunni Classical Commentaries of Qur'an 22:52

Qur'an 22:52, a verse believed by some scholars to refer to the supposed event of the Satanic Verses incident, reads as follows: "And We did not send before you any messenger or prophet except that when he spoke [or recited], Satan threw into it [some misunderstanding]. But Allah abolishes that which Satan throws in; then Allah makes precise His verses. And Allah is Knowing and Wise."¹¹⁸

Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d.923 CE) remains one of the most influential Sunni exegetes to this day and authored a massive Qur'anic commentary, which is arguably "the most important of the classical Arabic historical texts still extant."¹¹⁹ Given his profound significance within the corpus of medieval exegesis, especially within the Sunni tradition, the analysis given to al-Tabari will be the most

¹¹⁸ "Surat Al-Haj." The Noble Qur'an. Accessed April 10, 2016. <http://quran.com/22>.

¹¹⁹ Elton L. Daniel, "Al-Tabari," *Encyclopédie De L'Islam*.
doi:10.1163/9789004206106_eifo_com_1133.

extensive. Lastly, verses in the Qur'an that are cited by the exegetes will be put in brackets such as these “{ },” following the format of the exegetical accounts found online that this thesis utilizes.

Al-Tabari begins his exegetical account by providing the circumstance of revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*) and the surrounding context in which the verse was revealed, a tool often utilized within Islamic exegesis. For example, he starts with the following contextualization of this verse:

The reason why this verse was revealed to the Messenger of Allah is because the devil cast onto the Prophet's tongue something that he cited from the Qur'an as being revealed from God but in fact was not sent down from Allah, and so the Prophet (peace be upon him) was frustrated and saddened by this and so God sent down these verses.¹²⁰

Al-Tabari's explanation behind the circumstance of the revelation of this verse is significant in that it provides insight into the theological position of classical scholars regarding *'isma*. As previously mentioned and explained by Bar-Asher, while it was common for early exegetes to discuss without much concern the possibility of error/sin on the part of the Prophet Muhammad, they would often blame the mistake or error on someone else as a way of absolving the Prophet and maintaining his exalted status. Here, while al-Tabari does make a clear reference to the supposed account of the Satanic Verses incident (the historical veracity of this account is debated among modern Muslims

¹²⁰ “Tafsir al-Tabari,” *Altafsir.com*, accessed May 5, 2016 (Qur'an 22:52).

but al-Tabari seems to believe in its credibility), he also makes a point to clearly place the blame on Satan, rather than denoting any fault on Muhammad's part.

Al-Tabari continues describing the *asbab al-nuzul* of this verse with the following description:

The Prophet was sitting in a club of a lot of Quraysh, and he desired that day that nothing would come from God that would alienate/isolate him, and so God sent down: {By the star when it descends, your companion (i.e. the Prophet Muhammad) has not strayed nor has he erred.} So the Prophet, peace be upon him, continued to read this until he reached: {Have you considered al-Lat, al-Uzza and Manat, the third, the other?}¹²¹

First, the way in which al-Tabari describes Muhammad's desire for peace and reconciliation with the Meccans whom he was having difficulties with portrays al-Tabari's defensive nature towards upholding the moral/ethical status of the Prophet regardless of his mistakes in this incident. Secondly, al-Tabari includes a number of Qur'anic verses throughout this account that are important to discuss since they also contribute to the upholding of the Prophet's superior character. However, these verses are significant in that they also directly point to al-Tabari's open admission that this event, which compromised the notion of *'isma* of the Prophet Muhammad, could have historically occurred.

The first bracketed verse above comes from Sura al-Najm (Qur'an 53:1-2), which al-Tabari includes since "these claims amount to saying that the Prophet has a true

¹²¹ Ibid.

religion, is following it correctly, and is not subject to his own whims.”¹²² Given this, it is obvious that al-Tabari did not see the discussion of this event as problematic or threatening to the infallibility of the Prophet Muhammad in regards to divine revelation. Perhaps al-Tabari included this verse which portrays the Prophet’s moral superiority as a reminder /precursor to the next verse, (Q: 53:19-20), in which Muhammad is believed to have recited revelation that allowed the worship of three pagan goddesses. Al-Tabari explains how this could have taken place and blames Satan for this incident:

Satan cast these words ‘these are the exalted cranes whose intercession/mediation is desired.’ The Prophet then went on and read the whole *sura*. He prostrated at the end of the *sura*, and all the people prostrated together with him...And there was an old man who was not able to prostrate, so he rubbed dust from the ground on his forehead.¹²³

By specifically citing Satan as the one who allowed for the worship of the three pagan goddesses, al-Tabari absolves the Prophet of any major error within revelation. What is interesting, however, is al-Tabari’s inclusion of the description of the old man who was unable to prostrate due to his elderly age, but still managed to symbolically prostrate along with the Meccans and the Muslims by placing dust on his forehead from the ground. It seems as if al-Tabari is placing emphasis on the idea that everyone prostrated together after the verse was revealed that allowed for the intercession of the deities, even individuals who were physically unable to do so.

¹²² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 53:2-3, 1290.

¹²³ “Tafsir al-Tabari,” *Altafsir.com*, accessed May 5, 2016, (Qur’an 22:52).

After they have all prostrated together, al-Tabari continues describing the account as follows: “Then the Quraysh say ‘We know that Allah gives life and causes death and that He creates and provides sustenance, but these gods (our gods) intercede for us with Him, since you give them (the gods) a share we are with you.’”¹²⁴ This is significant in that it portrays the Qurayshi members’ belief in the ultimate superiority of Allah and that these exalted cranes hold a status below that of Allah. The account continues:

So then Gabriel came to him and offered him the *sura* and when he reached the words that the devil cast he (Gabriel) said: ‘I didn’t bring this to you,’ and then the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: ‘I have misquoted Allah and said what Allah never said.’ And then Allah brought to him, {If they had been able, they would have seduced you away from that which we revealed to you in order to make you invent about us something else} to {Then you would not find for yourself against us a helper}.¹²⁵

As will be seen, the Sunni classical exegetical accounts vary as to whether the Prophet himself or the angel Gabriel was the first to recognize and admit the error of miscommunicating divine revelation. In addition to this, the two verses that are included in this account reinforce the notion that the pagan Meccans (and Satan), rather than Muhammad, erred in this incident. Finally, the account ends as follows:

And so the Prophet remained upset until God revealed this to him: {And We did not send before you any messenger or prophet except that when he spoke [or recited], Satan threw into it [some misunderstanding]}. But Allah abolishes that

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

which Satan throws in; then Allah makes precise His verses. And Allah is Knowing and Wise}. It is said that the immigrants from Ethiopia heard that the Meccans had all converted, and so they returned to their clans, and they found that the people had all degenerated (back to their old ways) when God corrected what Satan had cast.¹²⁶

Thus, in the end, al-Tabari seems to summarize his overall opinion of this account as one in which ultimately no harm was done. Furthermore, if the Prophet did err in divine revelation, al-Tabari's commentary places the fault on the devil and the pagan Meccans for their trickery and evil.

Although Ibn Kathir's commentary is not remarkably different than that of al-Tabari's, there are some slight variations worth noting. For example, instead of interpreting Q 22:52 separately on its own as al-Tabari does, Ibn Kathir groups verses 22:52-54 together in his interpretation. Q 22:53-54 reads as follows:

[That is] so He may make what Satan throws in a trial for those within whose hearts is disease and those hard of heart. And indeed, the wrongdoers are in extreme dissension. And so those who were given knowledge may know that it is the truth from your Lord and [therefore] believe in it, and their hearts humbly submit to it. And indeed Allah is the Guide of those who have believed to a straight path.¹²⁷

Ibn Kathir's conglomeration of these verses as one unit of analysis is significant in that the last two verses (situated within this particular context) further emphasize the notion

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ "Surat Al-Haj." The Noble Qur'an. Accessed April 10, 2016. <http://quran.com/22>.

that this incident was known and planned by God as a sort of test for the Muslim community. Secondly, Ibn Kathir begins his commentary with an interesting prelude worth noting:

At this point many of the scholars of Tafsir mentioned the story of the *Gharaniq* and how many of those who had migrated to Ethiopia came back when they thought that the idolaters of the Quraysh had become Muslims, but these reports all come through *mursal* chains of narration and I do not think that any of them may be regarded as *sahih*. And Allah knows best.¹²⁸

Here, Ibn Kathir clarifies his stance on the credibility of this event and argues that it most likely never occurred. However, classical exegetes would often include narrations of questionable legitimacy within their commentaries if they found the accounts interesting enough to pass on or thought that an incident like it may have possibly occurred.¹²⁹ Thus, this analysis reveals that although Ibn Kathir most likely rejects the veracity of the story of the satanic verses incident, his interest and inclusion of this account portrays at least to a certain extent his relative ease in discussing an incident which compromised Prophetic *'isma*.

Shi'i Classical Commentaries of Qur'an 22:52

Now that the classical Sunni exegetical accounts of this verse have been explored, this section will now discuss the classical Shi'i commentaries of this verse starting with Ali Ibn Ibrahim al-Qummi (919 CE). Al-Qummi's commentary of this verse is relatively

¹²⁸ "Quran Tafsir Ibn Kathir." Quran Tafsir Ibn Kathir. Accessed May 5th, 2016.
http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content.

¹²⁹ Nasr et al., *Study Quran*, 842.

short, which is perhaps indicative of his relative lack of concern over this issue. It begins as follows, after the recitation of Qur'an 22:52:

The general story is that the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) was praying and he recited *Sura al-Najm* in the Masjid al-Haram and the Quraysh were listening to his recitation until he reached these verses: {Have you considered al-Lat and al-Uzza and Manat, the third, the other?} Satan cast on his tongue 'For these are the exalted cranes and their intercession is desired,' and so the Quraysh were very happy and prostrated, and there was an old man name al-Mughira who took some dirt in his hand and he prostrated too and he was sitting. The Quraysh said Muhammad approved the mediation of al-Lat and al-Uzza, so Gabriel came down and said 'You have recited that which was not revealed to you.'¹³⁰

The account ends with verse of Qur'an 22:52 being revealed to the Prophet. While the details of this account are nearly identical to that of al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir and he too blames Satan for this error, al-Qummi exercises greater brevity in describing this event and the details surrounding it. However, the next account that al-Qummi provides is strikingly different and has a unique Shi'i quality at its core. This account is narrated by Abi Abdallah and goes as follows, as recorded by al-Qummi:

And so a man from the Ansar came and the Prophet asked: 'Do you have any food? So he said, 'Yes, Messenger of Allah, and he slaughtered an animal for him, grilled it, and when he presented it to the Prophet, the Prophet wished that

¹³⁰ "Tafsir al-Qummi," *Altafsir.com*, accessed May 5, 2016, (Qur'an 22:52).

his family was with him- Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Hussein, and so two *munafiqun* came, and afterwards Ali came and Allah revealed {Never did we send a messenger....} meaning as for when Ali came to the Prophet after them (the *munafiqun*) {then God makes firm his signs} meaning God supports (renders victorious) the prince of the believers (i.e. Ali).¹³¹

As discussed in previous chapters, Shi‘i exegetes would often interpolate hidden meanings within the Qur’an that upheld the successive rights of the Prophet’s family in leading the Muslim community. Here, al-Qummi offers this account as an alternate to the previous one in that it seems to portray the same meaning but through a different context/narrative. For example, in this account as in the previous one, the Prophet is found desiring something (in this account, he desires the presence of his family). However, instead of getting what he desired, two *munafiqun* come instead, which seems to represent the so-called “casting of the satanic verses,” as recorded in the original account. Shortly after, however, God corrects this “error” and Ali comes and joins the Prophet’s company. The verse 22:52 is then revealed, symbolically placing Ali as the means through which “God makes firm his signs.” Thus, al-Qummi’s inclusion of this account is significant in that he uses this opportunity to assert the authority of the *ahl al bayt*.

Al-Tabarsi (d. 1154 CE) differs in his interpretation of this verse in two primary ways. His interpretation of this account reads as follows:

¹³¹ Ibid.

The Prophet was reciting Sura al-Najm and when he reached the verses {Have you considered al-Lat, al-Uzza, and Manat the third the other?}, Satan cast on the Prophet's speech 'these are the exalted cranes and their intercession is desired,' and the disbelievers (*mushrikun*) were happy because of this and when they reached the end to the prostration, the Muslims and also the disbelievers prostrated...¹³²

Here, al-Tabarsi makes a point to differentiate between the Muslims and the disbelievers, whereas the previous accounts surveyed above group the two together in their description of the prostration following the verse that allowed for the deities' intercession. Al-Tabarsi continues,

“And when they (the *mushrikun*) heard the mentioning of their deities' names, this news pleased them and when the Prophet recited the Qur'an and reached the topic of mentioning the goddesses' names they (the *mushrikun*) learned of his (the Prophet's) manner and that he was distraught/set back and some of the disbelievers said 'these are the exalted cranes,' and cast this on the Prophet's recitation...”¹³³

Thus, while al-Tabarsi follows the previous exegetes in blaming Satan for the error within revelation, he also directly attributes fault to the pagan Meccans who tricked the Prophet into saying this. It is notable not only that he differentiates the Muslims from the disbelievers during the act of prostration in order to clearly condemn the latter for this mistake in revelation, but also in how he emphasizes the notion that the disbelievers

¹³² “Tafsir al-Tabarsi,” *Altafsir.com*, accessed May 5, 2016, (Qur'an 22:52).

¹³³ *Ibid.*

prayed upon the Prophet Muhammad in a moment of weakness after seeing that he was distraught.

Overall, the following analysis of these exegetical accounts taken as a whole and their openness to discussing this incident gives credence to the notion that “it is conceivable that the historians and exegetes passing on the story might have in hindsight seen the end result—namely, Gabriel’s correction of the Prophet—as sufficient Divine protection against error and indeed as evidence of active participation by God in the life of the community and a warning against the promptings of Satan.”¹³⁴

Sunni Classical Commentaries of Qur’an 4:34

As the contemporary Muslim feminist Hadia Mubarak notes, a distinguishing characteristic of al-Tabari’s *tafsir* is how he provides multiple accounts of various interpretations and explanations of the verse so as to ensure that he did not limit the meaning of this verse to one exclusive possibility; later scholars, however, developed this reductive tendency as they became more concerned with conveying a particular theological message and thus excluded other interpretations.¹³⁵ From the very beginning of his exegesis, it becomes clear that al-Tabari has imposed a patriarchal interpretation of Q:434 to explain the permissibility of wife-beating. For example, al-Tabari interprets “bi ma faddala allahu ba’dhum ‘ala ba’d,” literally meaning, “due to what God has favored some over others,” as “due to what God has favored men with over women.”¹³⁶ The

¹³⁴ Nasr et al., *Study Quran*, 844.

¹³⁵ Mubarak, “Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly,” 268.

¹³⁶ “Tafsir al-Tabari,” *Altafsir.com*, accessed May 5, 2016, (Qur’an 4:34).

significance lies in the fact that al-Tabari ascribes gendered terms into this gender-neutral verse rendering men higher status than women in the eyes of God.

Al-Tabari interprets the beginning of this verse as follows: “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women due to what God has conferred upon men over women and because men give the dower to women and because they spend of their wealth and sufficiently provide for their needs.”¹³⁷ Al-Tabari’s patriarchal reading of this verse rationalizes men’s authority over women, which entails the right to physically discipline their wives, as God has preferred men over women. Later exegetes such as al-Razi and Ibn Kathir adopted and furthered al-Tabari’s patriarchal reading of this verse as it was in line with the patriarchal environment of Islamic society during the medieval period.

Al-Tabari then goes on to explain the context in which the verse was revealed (*asbab al nazul*) in order to show that although Muhammad was personally opposed to wife beating, he ultimately submits and upholds God’s revelation. According to al-Tabari, a woman who had been struck by her husband approaches Muhammad, and as the mark was still visible on her face, Muhammad decided to give retribution to the woman. Before Muhammad can punish the husband and give the woman retribution, God reveals “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women due to what God has conferred upon men over women and because they spend of their wealth.”¹³⁸ It is important to note here that al-Tabari does not insert the verse that actually allows the permissibility of wife-beating. It can be assumed that instead of referring to the verse directly, al-Tabari again

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

emphasizes the idea of the superiority of men over women, which was essential to the rationalization of a man physically disciplining his wife. Muhammad is then reported to have said “I wanted one thing and God wanted another,” and neither punishes the husband nor gives retribution to the wife.¹³⁹

Thus, the Prophet does not violate the concept of *'isma* in regards to divine revelation since he ultimately submits to God’s revelation despite his own feelings. Medieval exegetes did not see the Sunna of the Prophet as in conflict with the verse and instead used prophetic practice to restrict the permissibility of wife beating. For example, al-Tabari refers to an account in which a man approaches the Prophet and asks, “What is the right of a wife over one of us?” to which the Prophet responds: “Feed her and clothe her, and do not strike her in the face and do not disfigure her (literally “make ugly”) and do not leave her except in the house.”¹⁴⁰ Although al-Tabari has established men’s right to physically discipline their wives on the basis of his patriarchal reading, al-Tabari uses the Prophetic Sunna in order to protect women against unbridled physical discipline. Also, by mentioning an account which refers to the “rights” of a wife over her husband, al-Tabari seems to be further curtailing the permissibility of unrestricted physical discipline by emphasizing that wives too have certain rights.

Al-Tabari ends his commentary by offering an account in which the Prophet says: “If they (the wives) reject/oppose you in something that is good,” then this is reason for the husband to fear disobedience of his wife and consider the steps of the Qur’anic

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

verse.¹⁴¹ However, al-Tabari also comments that “the Prophet never allowed a man to hit his wife until after he admonished her for her disobedience,” which emphasizes the idea that the order of the Quranic steps must be followed in order for physical discipline to be ethical.¹⁴² Once again, al-Tabari refers to the Sunna of the Prophet in order to curtail the permissibility of wife-beating and to emphasize the idea that the order of the steps listed in the Quranic verse must be followed.

As Mubarak accurately states, “Ibn Kathir represents the apex of the development of the concept of *qiwama*.”¹⁴³ His interpretation of this verse represents the most patriarchal and perhaps, misogynistic reading of the three scholars, as can be seen in the way he expands the man’s authority to that of a judge and political leader.¹⁴⁴ Ibn Kathir includes a report in which the Prophet is to have said: “People who appoint women to be their leader will never achieve success,” thereby excluding women’s role in the public sphere and further asserting men’s authority.¹⁴⁵ Ibn Kathir goes so far in extending the authority of men so that “now, the authority of a husband over his wife is extended to the authority of men over women in society.”¹⁴⁶

Ibn Kathir further emphasizes the superiority of men over women by referring to a report in which Muhammad is to have said: “If I were to command anyone to prostrate to another, I would order the woman to prostrate to her husband because of the magnitude

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Mubarak, “Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly,” 270.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ “Tafsir Ibn Kathir,” Altafsir.com, accessed May 5, 2016, (Qur’an 4:34).

¹⁴⁶ Mubarak, “Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly,” 270.

of his right over her.”¹⁴⁷ Ibn Kathir’s reference to this report is significant in that it draws a parallel between Muslims prostrating to God in prayer to that of a woman prostrating to her husband in obedience. This account, in addition to the idea that men not only have domestic authority but social authority over women as well, clearly suggests that Ibn Kathir heavily relied on and expanded the superior authority of men over women in order to legitimize physical discipline.

It appears that Ibn Kathir attempted to tone down this extremely patriarchal tone at the end of his commentary as he concludes that “If a woman gives her husband everything that he wants from her, of which God has permitted to him from her, then the man has no path (recourse) for him to take upon her after that; he cannot hit her and he cannot leave her.”¹⁴⁸ Ibn Kathir’s attempt to curtail wife-beating seems extremely futile in light of the fact that he ascribes full authority to men over women in society and husbands authority over their wives. While al-Razi delineated the circumstances of when to fear *nushuz* from one’s wife, Ibn Kathir has extended husbands the authority to decide what constitutes disobedient behavior since the husband acts as the sole judge of whether his wife has given him everything he wants.

Thus, it is clear that the medieval exegetes reconciled the incongruity between the Prophet wanting one thing and God wanting another by referring to prophetic reports in their commentaries which upheld, clarified, and restricted the permissibility of wife-beating.

Shi‘i Classical Commentaries of Qur’an 4:34:

¹⁴⁷ “Tafsir Ibn Kathir,” Altafsir.com, accessed May 5, 2016, (Qur’an 4:34).

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

Al-Qummi's interpretation of this verse is extremely brief and to the point, and he interprets this verse quite literally. He begins by explaining the first part of the verse:

{Men have authority over women by right of what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend from their wealth}. Meaning, God has preferred men to spend (maintain) over women and then God praises women. It is said: {The righteous women are obedient and preserve in absence what God would have them preserve}, meaning she preserves herself in the absence of her husband.¹⁴⁹

Al-Qummi provides a literal interpretation of this verse but clarifies that women should protect their virtue in the absence of their husbands. In addition to this, in explaining the three procedural steps when fearing *nushuz* from one's wife, al-Qummi further clarifies the nature of this disobedience: "And if a women is disobedient (in regards to) her husband's bed, her husband should say 'Remember God and return to your bed.'"¹⁵⁰ Al-Qummi defines *nushuz* in terms of a wife's disobedience/ neglect of her sexual relationship with her husband, and thus curtails the permissibility of physically disciplining one's wife. In regards to how this issue relates to Prophetic *'isma*, al-Qummi does not comment on the incongruity between Prophetic practice and divine revelation. In fact, he is unlike the Sunni classical exegetes surveyed above in that not once in his commentary does he refer to the Prophetic reports that uphold the notion that the Prophet did not beat his wives.

In regards to al-Tabarsi's commentary of this verse, he shows little concern for the clarification of the meaning of the verse, but rather spends most of his energy

¹⁴⁹ "Tafsir al-Qummi," *Altafsir.com*, accessed May 5, 2016, (Qur'an 4:34).

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

explicating its grammatical components.¹⁵¹ However, al-Tabarsi provides an interesting *hadith* in which the circumstance of revelation is described:

Sa'd b. Rabia 'ibn Amr was from the nobles and his wife was Habiba bint Zaid ibn Abi Zuhair and they were from the Ansar. The wife was being disobedient, so her husband slapped her on the face. Her father took her and went to the Prophet and said 'I gave him my daughter in marriage and he slapped her.' So the Prophet told her to slap her husband back, and as she and her father were leaving to go punish him, the Prophet said: 'Return, Gabriel has come to me and revealed this verse from Allah.' And so the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: 'We wanted one thing and God wanted another and what God wants is best.'¹⁵²

Al-Tabarsi's inclusion of this report is significant in that it directly addresses the issue of whether he views the Prophet as having violated his *'isma* or not. Although the Prophet tells the woman that she can return her husband's punishment and slap him, he immediately abrogates that order when Gabriel reveals Allah's commands. Thus, one can assume from the inclusion of this report, as well as his general brevity in dealing with this verse, that al-Tabarsi does not view the discrepancy between the Prophet's wishes and the verses of the Qur'an as a violation of *'isma*, since the Prophet ultimately submits to God and corrects the woman's actions before she can punish her husband.

Conclusion:

As the previous analysis of classical exegesis has portrayed, both Sunni and Shi'i exegetes were relatively open to discussing, or at least including in their commentaries,

¹⁵¹ "Tafsir al-Tabarsi," Altafsir.com, accessed May 5, 2016, (Qur'an 4:34).

¹⁵² Ibid.

incidents in which the Prophet Muhammad seemingly violates the notion of Prophetic *'isma*, although they would often justify and/or defend his actions. Overall, however, the Imami Shi'i exegetes were more committed to dismantling the notion that the Prophet himself erred in regards to receiving and communicating divine revelation. For example, as seen in their commentaries of the satanic verses incident, al-Qummi offers a variant reading that promotes the status of the *ahl al-bayt*, while al-Tabarsi, makes the claim that the pagans (rather than the Prophet) communicated fictitious revelation. In regards to Qur'an 4:34, the Sunni classical exegetes al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir both point to the incongruity between Prophetic practice and divine revelation regarding the physical discipline of wives, but reconcile this incongruity by representing the Sunna as a means of restricting the permissibility; in effect, this portrays their relative lack of concern regarding the concept of *'isma* in that they were able to reconcile the meaning of the verse despite the incongruity of Prophetic practice. Interestingly, al-Qummi has little to say regarding this issue and does not even mention the incongruity.

As previously explained in earlier chapters, the system of the Imamate was crucial for the survival of Shi'ism after the occultation of the 12th Imam. Crucial to this survival was the infallibility of the Imams and the Prophet Muhammad. Thus, it is logical that the classical Shi'i exegetes surveyed in this paper are more invested in defending Prophetic *'isma* than their Sunni counterparts.

Chapter Four: Sunni Modern *Tafsir* on the Two Topics

Overview:

This thesis now turns to an analysis of the Sunni modern commentaries of these two topics. As seen in the previous chapter, both Sunni and Shi'i exegetes of the classical period were more or less willing to discuss instances of Prophetic error with relative ease (although Shi'i exegetes were more hesitant to do so, in light of the necessary requirement of *'isma* of the Imams and the Prophet). However, as was discussed in Chapter 2 of this work, modern Muslims came to reject the incident of the Satanic Verses altogether and were outraged that such claims could be made against the Prophet such as those found in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* novel. Thus, this thesis has already established a foundational basis for the idea that modern Muslims were more sensitive to claims made against the Prophet that challenged the notion of *'isma*. It will now turn to a more expansive analysis of this topic by analyzing the Sunni modern commentaries of Sayyid Qutb and Muhammad al-Din-al-Qasimi on the two topics. As with the last chapter, it will begin with the topic of the Satanic Verses incident, and then move on to Qur'an 4:34. Finally, this chapter ends with an analysis of the interpretations of modern progressive Muslim feminists Ayesha Chaudhry and Hadia Mubarak regarding Qur'an 4:34, in an effort to further portray this conceptual shift of *'isma* in the minds of modern Muslims.

Sunni Modern Commentaries of Qur'an 22:52

Muhammad Jamal al-Din-al-Qasimi, the first modern Sunni exegete to be surveyed within this chapter, does not provide many details of this account nor does he

explicitly make references to the Prophet as the subject of these verses. In addition to this, the brevity of his commentary regarding this verse leads to the logical assumption that al-Qasimi either did not want or find it worthy to extensively discuss and analyze. He begins his commentary of the verse by dissecting and interpreting each of its parts. It reads as follows:

{And never did we send before you a messenger or a prophet except that when he desired}, meaning, he wanted to spread his call/invitation to Islam, and with urgency he set upon this task. {Satan cast into his speech/desire}, meaning, he avoids it (Satan’s trickery?) and averts answering the guests. {And so Allah corrects what Satan casts}, meaning, He nullifies and eradicates it. {Then Allah makes firm His signs} meaning, he confirms it.¹⁵³

In the first part of his interpretation, al-Qasimi portrays the Prophet (although not explicitly mentioned as the subject) in a positive light in the sense that his longing was to spread Islam. Regarding the second bracketed section of the verse above and al-Qasimi’s interpretation of it “he avoids it and averts answering the guests,” al-Qasimi does not provide the contextual narrative surrounding this verse as the classical exegetes do. However, al-Qasimi clearly diverts attributing direct blame on the Prophet Muhammad. If one assumes that the Prophet is the subject of this verse, then al-Qasimi seems to be arguing that the Prophet avoided this trickery all together, which is in clear defense and indicative of the modern notion of ‘isma. Al-Qasimi then refers to Qur’an 13:17: “{As for the foam, it vanishes, being cast off, but as for that which benefits the people, it

¹⁵³ “Tafsir al-Qasimi,” Altafsir.com, accessed May 5, 2016, (Qur’an 22:52).

remains on the Earth.}”¹⁵⁴ In other words, al-Qasimi includes this verses as a way of further conveying the idea that the goodness of Allah will always trump the evil and trickery of Satan, and that the Prophet Muhammad was thus not at fault as he is protected (*ma’sum*) by his status and connection to Allah.

Interestingly, al-Qasimi interprets the end of the verse “{God is knowing},” in isolation from the other parts of the verse as a way of further emphasizing the idea that God, and not Satan, is in control of all situations. For example, he states: “He (Allah) teaches the satanic reading/casting and the way He corrected it with revelation.”¹⁵⁵ Following al-Qasimi’s logic, this incident should not be looked at then as one in which the Prophet Muhammad erred in divine revelation because God would not allow such a thing to happen. Al-Qasimi then interprets “{Allah is wise},” as “Allah makes firm his signs by His wisdom.”¹⁵⁶ As a last note reinforcing the ideas above, al-Qasimi ends his commentary with: “Then he points to the requirements of his wisdom that renders the satanic recitation a trial for the complaining hypocrites and their hardened hearts to accept the truth and plague them that they may add sin. And mercy for the believers that they mad add stability and integrity.”¹⁵⁷ Thus, al-Qasimi’s rendering of this incident as a trial for the disbelievers who ignore the call to Islam absolves the Prophet of any blame or error.

Written during 1951-1965, Sayyid Qutb’s extensive commentary contains 30 volumes and is well known throughout the Islamic world. Qutb discusses the satanic

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

verses incident in Volume 12, chapter 3, which he titles “The Sights, Blind Hearts.” Qutb groups verses 42-57 together in this section and also provides a prologue in which he explains the purpose of this *sura*. According to Qutb, this *sura* reassures the Prophet of two things: first, that God will intervene and use His power to protect the Prophet from his mortal enemies, and secondly, “the Prophet is also reassured on another count, namely that God protects His messengers from Satan’s wicked scheming, just like He protects them from their opponent’s plots. He renders all Satan’s attempts futile, keeps His revelations pure and clear, so that people with sound mind reflect on them.”¹⁵⁸ In other words, Qutb argues, revelation must be preserved and kept untainted, so that people may come to know Islam and make that choice for themselves, since the Prophet cannot force submission to Islam.

Before summarizing the narrative of the satanic verses incident, or what he refers to as “The story of the birds, or *gharaniq*,” Qutb indirectly addresses the issue of *‘isma*; he explains that “although God’s messengers are given immunity from Satan, their human nature makes them hope that their efforts in advocating divine faith will be enough to remove all impediments and ensure a speedy victory.”¹⁵⁹ Qutb emphasizes the human nature of the Prophet in that he too is prone to longings and desires while also upholding the notion that Allah protects him because of his status as Prophet and Messenger.

¹⁵⁸ Sayyid Qutb and M. A. Salahi, *In the Shade of the Qur'an = Fī Zīlāl Al-Qur'ān*, Vol. 12. (Markfield, Leicester, and Nairobi: Islamic Foundation, 2004) Accessed April 10, 2016. <https://archive.org/details/InTheShadeOfTheQuranSayyidQutb>, 114.

¹⁵⁹ Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 117-18.

Regarding the reports that narrate the Satanic Verses incident, Qutb flatly rejects the authenticity of these reports and also refers to Ibn Kathir who likewise discredits the veracity of these reports.¹⁶⁰ Qutb describes how “Orientalists and opponents of Islam have taken up this report, circulated it and decorated it with much importance.”¹⁶¹ The translator/editor of Qutb’s commentary includes a footnote here, in which he describes Salman Rushdie as “the most recent opponent of Islam to make a fuss of this absurd story.”¹⁶² Again, Qutb makes another indirect reference to *‘isma* when he states “the fact is that it is a false report that cannot hold its own in discussion. Indeed, it is unworthy of even being a subject of debate.”¹⁶³ Instead, Qutb interprets this verse as being a general rule that applies to all of God’s messengers and thus cannot refer to one single event (i.e. the report of the satanic verses incident). Thus, Qutb simultaneously upholds the notion of *‘isma* as it pertains to the Prophet while also portraying him as a human who is subject to longing and desires.

Sunni Modern Commentaries of Qur’an 4:34:

In his commentary of this verse, al-Qasimi relies heavily on hadith reports which serve two purposes: first, al-Qasimi refers to reports which establish men’s superior authority over women as well as his control and authority over her “manners,” (*adab*). For example, in interpreting the first part of this verse: {Men are the protectors and maintainers of women} al-Qasimi interprets this to mean “men are the rulers/sultans of a

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 120.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

woman's propriety/good manners and they are in charge of them."¹⁶⁴ Al-Qasimi, like Ibn Kathir, also refers to a hadith account in which the Prophet is reported to have stated: "If I were to command anyone to prostrate to another, I would order the woman to prostrate to her husband."¹⁶⁵ Thus, given the unbridled authority of men over women in his interpretation, Al-Qasimi also refers to the Prophetic reports in order to restrict the permissibility of wife-beating. For example, al-Qasimi includes the following report:

A man from the Ansar came to the Prophet (peace be upon him) with a woman and he said: Oh Messenger of Allah! Her husband is so and so from the Ansar, and he beat her and (the marking) is shown on her face. So the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'This is not so.' And so Allah sent down the verse: {Men are the protectors and maintainers of women} in the mannerisms, and so the Prophet said: 'I wanted one thing and God wanted another.'¹⁶⁶

Thus, not only does this account help restrict the physical disciplining of wives by portraying the Prophet's distaste for it, but it also portrays that the Prophet ultimately submits to God's revelation; in effect, the concept of *'isma* is not violated.

While al-Qasimi's above interpretation of the verse definitively places men over women in regards to their superiority, Qutb provides a more moderate understanding of the term *qawwamun*, as well as the overall meaning of the verse in general. For example, Qutb translates the verse as follows:

¹⁶⁴ "Tafsir al-Qasimi," Altafsir.com, accessed May 5, 2016, (Qur'an 4:34).

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

Men shall take full care of women with the bounty with which God has favored some of them more abundantly than others, and with what they may spend of their own wealth. The righteous women are devout, guarding the intimacy which God has ordained to be guarded. As for these women from whom you have reason to fear rebellion, admonish them (first); then leave them alone in bed; then beat them. Then if they pay you heed, do not seek any pretext to harm them. God is indeed Most High, Great.¹⁶⁷

Thus, al-Qutb's understands *qiwama* as an injunction denoting man's obligation to protect and maintain women in all regards, rather than simply as a statement proclaiming men's superior authority over women. Qutb provides his commentary of this verse under the heading "Regulation of Family Affairs," and is primarily concerned with "the regulation of the family and the allocation of duties and responsibilities within it."¹⁶⁸ In order to protect the family unit from destruction, he argues, there are certain measures to be undertaken to preserve its peaceful existence.¹⁶⁹ Before discussing these measures, however, Qutb first establishes a pro-egalitarian basis from which he interprets the meaning of this verse. For example, Qutb argues that God has made men and women equal to each other "because the two mates are two halves of the same soul, they stand in the same position in God's sight;" this equality before God allocates to both men and women an equal reward for their good deeds, as well as rights of ownership and

¹⁶⁷ Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, Vol. 3, 94.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 108.

inheritance.¹⁷⁰ However, because men and women are different, their duties and responsibilities too are different. Thus, “the man has the proper natural abilities to take charge of the family affairs, essential for the proper progress of human life.”¹⁷¹ In other words, Qutb argues that men are the head of the household because they have an obligation to protect and care for women so that they can fulfill their duties of childbearing safely and comfortably.¹⁷²

In regards to the three steps to be followed when a man fears rebellion from his wife, Qutb argues that these measures are of a pre-emptive nature aimed to quickly resolve marital discord so as to avoid the destruction of the Islamic family unit; Qutb does not interpret this verse as condoning the physical discipline of wives within a normal healthy relationship. For example, he states, “These disciplinary measures have been approved of in order to deal with early signs of rebellion and before attitudes are hardened. At the same time, they are accompanied by stern warnings against misuse.”¹⁷³ Like the other exegetes, Qutb also refers to “the practical example given by the Prophet in his treatment of his own family and his verbal teachings and directives serve as a restraint...”¹⁷⁴

For example, Qutb describes the following two hadith reports which portray the Prophet’s admonition of excessive beating as well as his own practice of never having physically disciplined his own wives:

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 109.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 111.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 115.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

The Prophet portrays this horrid picture of a man who beats up his wife: ‘Do not beat your wife like you beat your camel, for you will be flogging her early in the day and taking her to bed at night.’ He also says: ‘The best among you are those who are best to their family, and I am the best of you to my family.’ (Related by al-Tirmidhi and al-Tabarani.)¹⁷⁵

Thus, it is clear that Qutb does not render the incongruity between Prophetic Sunna and Qur’anic revelation as problematic; this is because he does not see it as being incongruous, but rather views the Prophetic example as a way of restricting the permissibility of this measure. Prophetic *‘isma* thus is neither challenged nor violated by this verse from Qutb’s perspective.

Progressive Muslim Feminist interpretations of Qur’an 4:34:

In regards to the so called wife-beating verses of Qur’an 4:34, some modern Muslim feminists argue against the veracity of the medieval interpretation of this verse in various ways, but grounded in the idea that the *Sunna* of the Prophet cannot be at odds with God’s revelation. The following section briefly describes the interpretations of progressive Muslim feminists Hadia Mubarak and Ayesha Chaudhry regarding this verse. Both of their commentaries reflect the wariness of modern Muslim scholars to portray the Prophet’s fallibility or any incongruity between God and the Prophet in regard to divine revelation.

As progressive Muslim feminist Ayesha Chaudhry states, “the dialectic between the Qur’an and prophetic practice is a mainstay in Muslim scholarship and scholars

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

navigate their sometimes conflicting dictates when arguing for the acceptability, mitigation, or rejection of the right of husbands to physically discipline their wives.”¹⁷⁶ While both medieval exegetes and modern Muslim feminists refer to the *Sunna* as a way of understanding and re-interpreting the true meaning of this verse, the conclusions they arrive at are antithetical to one another: while early and medieval male exegetes referred to Prophetic Sunna as a way of simultaneously legitimizing and restricting the permissibility of wife-beating, modern Muslim scholars would argue that because the Prophet Muhammad never beat his wives, this was proof that the verse had been severely misinterpreted by medieval exegetes who were situated within an extremely patriarchal context.

For example, Chaudhry’s interpretation and treatment of this verse includes several *ahadith* attributed to the Prophet detailing his actions (*sunnah fi’liya*) and his sayings (*sunnah qawilya*) in regards to his refrainment from wife-beating.¹⁷⁷ Regarding *sunna fi’liya*, Chaudhry refers to a *hadith* reported by Muhammad’s youngest wife, ‘A’isha bt. Abi Bakr, that Muhammad refrained from hitting anyone, including women and servants.¹⁷⁸ Since Muslims are to embody and emulate the *Sunna*, Muhammad’s refrainment from hitting women serves as an example to be followed by the Muslim community, and thus casts doubt on the idea that the verse allows unbridled physical discipline of wives.

¹⁷⁶ Chaudhry, “I WANTED ONE THING,” 417.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 419.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 420.

Chaudhry also includes another report that portrays Muhammad's dislike of wife-beating. The report states that when the Prophet found out that Thabit b. Qays had beaten his wife so severely as to break her hand, Muhammad initiated a divorce on his wife's behalf and told Thabit "Take what you owe her and release her" (al-Nasa'I 1991, 3:383; Abu Dawud 1996, 1:267).¹⁷⁹ Thabit breaking his wife's hand resulted in divorce because it went against the saying of the Prophet (*sunna qawilya*) in another report which stipulated that husbands could not hit their wives in the face, disfigure their wives, or abandon them outside of their homes.¹⁸⁰

Another method employed by Chaudhry as well as other modern Muslim feminists in disproving or curtailing the unrestricted permissibility of domestic violence is the idea that Islam is a religion of justice, and that wife-beating directly contradicts a Muslim woman's sense of justice.¹⁸¹ The emphasis on justice in Islam as a modern feminist argument for a re-reading of this verse also speaks to the modern understanding of Prophetic *'isma* in that if the Prophet Muhammad is truly the embodiment of the Qur'an and Islamic values, he too must be just in his dealings with his wives and he must also be in line with divine revelation. Thus, modern Muslim feminists refer to Prophetic reports that substantiate the claim that the Prophet never beat his wives as a way of rejecting the unrestricted physical discipline of women.

Hadia Mubarak argues that as classical exegetes were influenced by the patriarchal paradigm in which they lived, it is un-Islamic for the Muslim community to

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 422.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 425.

¹⁸¹ Ayesha S Chaudhry, *Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition: Ethics, Law, and the Muslim Discourse on Gender*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.

eternalize the works of the fallible classical exegetes as Islamic society evolves.¹⁸² Thus, Mubarak develops a rereading of the verse under the modern assumption of *'isma* as it upholds the belief that the Sunna could not possibly be incongruous with that of divine revelation. By defining the word “*daraba*” as “to separate, to distance, to depart, to abandon,” Mubarak argues, the physical discipline of wives becomes impermissible.¹⁸³ Furthermore, its forbidden nature is in line with the Sunna as the Prophet himself is reported to never have hit his wives. Thus, modern scholars consider the Prophetic practice of abstaining from wife-beating as proof that *daraba* cannot mean, “to beat,” as medieval male exegetes have claimed. Also, modern Muslim scholars have discredited interpretations of this verse as permitting physical discipline because the medieval exegetes interpret each verse independently, and thus ignore the systematic structural coherence of the Qu’ran.¹⁸⁴ In other words, some modern Muslim scholars argue that the medieval exegetes failed to consider the surrounding verses of Q 4:34 (Q:432-435) that clearly uphold the equality of men and women, thus rendering wife-beating impermissible.¹⁸⁵

Thus, it is clear that the medieval exegetes reconciled the incongruity between the Prophet wanting one thing and God wanting another by referring to prophetic reports in their commentaries which upheld, clarified, and restricted the permissibility of wife-beating. Clearly, the patriarchal environment of the medieval era in which they wrote

¹⁸² Mubarak, "Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly."262.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 283.

¹⁸⁴ Asma Barlas, "The Qur'an and Hermeneutics: Reading the Qur'an's Opposition to Patriarchy," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 3:2 (2001): 19.

¹⁸⁵ Chaudhry, *Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition*, 24.

their commentaries influenced their understanding and acceptability that a husband could physically discipline his wives. In the modern period however, Muslim feminists would argue that this verse has been severely misread and misinterpreted, as God would never allow for such injustice against women to exist in Islam. The different methods described above that are utilized by modern Muslim feminists in an effort to obtain a more egalitarian interpretation of this verse and reject the practice of wife-beating altogether gives credibility to the idea that modern Muslims are more inclined to reject discrepancies between Prophetic practice and divine revelation than their medieval counterparts, which in turn reflects their perception of Prophetic *'isma* as a concept to be defended.

Conclusion:

Overall, it is clear that Sunni modern exegetes firmly reject the notion that the Prophet could err in regards to divine revelation, as seen in the commentaries of both al-Qasimi and Qutb in regards to the Satanic Verses incident. As for the wife-beating verses of Qur'an 4:34, al-Qasimi and Qutb do not seem to recognize and/or have a problem with the apparent incongruity between Prophetic practice and Qur'anic revelation, even though they draw upon the Sunna of the Prophet to curtail the permissibility of the act. In fact, both the medieval and modern male exegetes surveyed in this thesis all emphasize some degree of superiority and authority over women in order to legitimize the permissibility of the act. They reference the Sunna as a way of further legitimizing and restricting the practice by including reports in which the Prophet displays his distaste for the practice but does not punish men who exercise this marital right under its restrictive

parameters. Modern Muslim feminists such as Mubarak and Chaudhry however, reject this patriarchal cosmology and emphasize the Prophetic reports that show his refrainment from hitting his wives or any women for that matter; by rejecting the definition of *daraba* as “to beat,” Mubarak (and other modern Muslim feminists alike) reconcile this discrepancy between Prophetic practice and divine revelation.

Conclusion: Muhammad, Prophet or Imposter?

Overview/Summary of Conclusions:

The preceding analysis of the classical and modern commentaries concerning the two Qur'anic case studies demonstrates the differences between Sunni and Shi'i theological perspectives of *'isma*, and the fact that by the modern era, both Sunni and Shi'i theologians professed *'isma* as an aspect of the Prophetic persona that must be defended. Only within the modern era do Sunni theologians begin to think of *'isma* as conceptually in line with the Shi'a, with whom the theological understanding of the concept originated, as it initially pertained to the infallibility of the Imams, and by extension, the Prophet. For the Sunnis, while in the early period it was deemed acceptable and even necessary at times to assert the fallibility of the Prophet, they could no longer do this in the modern period in light of the fact that the Shi'i theological understanding of *'isma* had been doctrinally established and defended for some time.

As seen by the analysis of the Sunni and Shi'i classical commentaries regarding the Satanic Verses incident, classical exegetes were relatively comfortably in their open discussion of incidents in which the Prophet seemingly errs. However, early Shi'i classical exegetes were more reserved in their discussion/admission of these errors than their early Sunni counterparts, given the exalted status of the Imams and the need to defend their infallibility. Shi'i exegetes had to uphold and defend Prophetic *'isma*, since the infallibility of the Imams must also apply to the Prophet. This is reflected in the way the Shi'i classical exegetes surveyed in this thesis sometimes provide alternate readings

of the Satanic Verses incident and argue that the Prophet was not the subject of criticism or error, and/or dismiss the account as unreliable altogether.

As for the Sunni modern scholars regarding the Satanic Verses incident, we see a flat rejection of the concept that the Prophet could err in regards to receiving and communicating divine revelation. For example and as previously described, Qutb's commentary emphatically describes the Satanic Verses incident as one that is constantly used by the "enemies of Islam" and Orientalists in an effort to debunk the veracity of Islam as a legitimate religion.

In regards to the wife-beating verses of Qur'an 4:34, this thesis has demonstrated that both the classical and modern male scholars analyzed within this study do not seem to view this verse as threatening or challenging Prophetic 'isma. They reconcile the incongruity between the Prophet wanting one thing and God wanting another by referring to Prophetic reports which uphold, clarify, and restrict the permissibility of wife-beating. Clearly, the patriarchal environment of the medieval era in which they wrote their commentaries influenced their understanding and acceptability that a husband could physically discipline his wives. However, it is important to note that the Sunni modern male exegetes surveyed in this thesis are also influenced by a patriarchal cosmology, which in turn accounts for their relative lack of concern regarding the discrepancy between the Sunna and divine revelation.

In the modern period however, Muslim feminists such as Ayesha Chaudhry and Hadia Mubarak would argue that this verse has been severely misread and misinterpreted, as God would never allow for such injustice against women to exist in Islam. In an effort

to obtain a more egalitarian interpretation of this verse and reject the practice of wife-beating altogether, both Mubarak and Chaudhry reference reports that uphold the notion that the Prophet never hit his wives. Furthermore, Mubarak point to the incongruity between Prophetic practice and divine revelation as proof that *daraba* does not mean “to beat.” Thus, the analysis of their commentaries gives credibility to the idea that modern Muslims are more inclined to reject discrepancies between Prophetic practice and divine revelation than their medieval counterparts. This in turn reflects the modern perception of Prophetic ‘isma as a concept to be defended.

Muhammad: Prophet or Imposter?

Posited as another potential explanation that contributed to this shift in the minds of modern Sunni Muslim scholars regarding the concept of ‘isma, the conclusion of this thesis will now provide a brief series of examples of how 18th-century scholars of Enlightenment Europe, such as George Sale, regularly depicted the Prophet Muhammad as an imposter, accusing him of intentionally creating a false religion. Notions of the Prophet Muhammad as an “imposter” of religion, as well as other derogatory depictions of him, were constantly used and recycled by Western Christendom in an effort to alleviate the challenge that Islam posed.

In *Saracens*, John Tolan argues that medieval Christian depictions of Muslims as pagan idolaters, heretics, and followers of Satan and the Antichrist, were a product of the Christian effort to situate Islam into pre-existing familiar categories.¹⁸⁶ Tolan further argues that these intolerant European Christian representations of Muslims from the 7th-

¹⁸⁶ John Tolan, *Saracens Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 4.

13th centuries were constantly recycled and utilized by Western scholars well into the 17th century, and largely remained unchanged.¹⁸⁷ However, some European Orientalist and Enlightenment scholars of the 17th and 18th centuries such as George Sale tried to correct some of these derogatory misrepresentations of Muslims and of Islam in general. Despite these efforts, however, even Sale, who possessed a greater tolerance and respect for Islam than most of his contemporaries, also refers to Muhammad as an “imposter,” effectively accusing the Prophet of having made up a false religion composed of false revelation.

Therefore, the notion of Muhammad as an imposter functions as the antithesis to the Prophet’s infallibility in regards to receiving and communicating divine revelation (*‘isma*). The conclusion analyzes the work of English Enlightenment thinker George Sale (d.1736) in order to understand how and why these Western Christian scholars attacked the infallibility of the Prophet Muhammad, paying special attention to this recurring notion of Muhammad as an “imposter.” In doing so, this thesis argues that even scholars such as Sale, who held greater sympathies towards Islam and Muslims, participated in the practice of labeling Muhammad an “imposter,” in an effort to prove that he was not a true Prophet of a true religion; characterizing the Prophet as an imposter was necessary given that the alternative, accepting Muhammad as a true Prophet who received divine revelation from God, could not be accepted in congruence with Christian doctrine.

18th-Century Enlightenment Europe: Politics and Religion

Before discussing Sale’s work, it is important first to consider the political and ideological atmosphere of 17th/18th-century Europe in order to better understand the

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., xix.

politics of translation and the images of Muhammad set forth in these works. Ziad Elmarsafy's *The Enlightenment Qur'an: The Politics of Translations and the Construction of Islam*, focuses on a survey of a number of European translations of the Qur'an that were being read by key Enlightenment figures such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Goethe, and Napoleon.

Elmarsafy provides two important arguments within his work, which portray the significance of studying these translations and other works on Islam that these European Christian scholars produced during the 17th/18th century: First, Elmarsafy argues that the study of 18th century Enlightenment Europe is deliberate in that the Enlightenment era provided the European prelude to the modern age; Elmarsafy goes as far as to argue that the modern world is essentially a result of the intellectual activity of the Enlightenment.¹⁸⁸ Elmarsafy further argues that the Enlightenment era represented the height of interaction between Europe and the Muslim world in that "all those cultural differences that threaten Europe- the 'primitive' world, the violence of the 'savages,' the mores of non-European societies, the difference of physical characteristics and systems of belief—are confronted and rationalized during the Enlightenment."¹⁸⁹

Although the Enlightenment tools of reasoning and rationalization provided these European Enlightenment scholars with the necessary means to re-evaluate Islam and discover its real message apart from the polemical writings of their European predecessors, they arrived at different conclusions and perspectives regarding Islam and

¹⁸⁸ Ziad Elmarsafy, *The Enlightenment Qur'an: The Politics of Translation and the Construction of Islam*. (New York: Oneworld Publications, 2014), xi.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, x.

the Prophet. Thus, Elmarsafy's second major argument is the idea that in order to explain the differences between the translations and other works on Islam of these European scholars, one must consider the political and theological position of the translator.¹⁹⁰ In fact, "the early modern study of Islam, like the early modern study of comparative religion generally—owed much to confessional quarrels that defined the 'enemy' not as a Muslim but a Christian of a different denomination (and for some, *ipso facto*, no longer a Christian)."¹⁹¹ In other words, some of these scholars whose works centralized on attacking the character of the Prophet Muhammad, utilized this practice as a way of critiquing or criticizing the internal divisions and conflicts within Christendom itself, and which had nothing to do with Islam in particular.

These two central arguments posited by Elmarsafy must be kept in mind throughout this chapter as it not only explains the importance of the political and theological positions of the translators themselves and how this affected their treatment of Islam in their writings, but also proves how these translations and works of Enlightenment Europe have had a lasting effect on the modern period in regards to the Western perspective of the Muslim world.

George Sale's *The Alcoran of Mohammed*: Imposter or Legislator?

George Sale (d.1736) was an English Orientalist best known for his translation of the Qur'an, and "although he did not reproduce the Arabic text, Sale stopped at nothing to produce a balanced and informative rendition of the Qur'an, so much so that the few anti-Muslim statements that one runs across in his paratexts come across as being

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 29.

perfunctory and insincere. (The anti-Catholic statements, however, seem to be heartfelt.)”¹⁹² Sale’s translation of the Qur’an marked a turning point in the methods of historiography in the 18th century due to his new method of critically evaluating and reassessing Islam based on a multitude of reliable sources.¹⁹³

In his note “To the Reader,” Sale argues that one of the purposes of his work is “...also to enable us effectually to expose the imposture; none of those who have hitherto undertaken that province, not excepting Dr. Prideaux himself, having succeeded to the satisfaction of the judicious, for want of being compleat matters of the controversy.”¹⁹⁴ It is crucial to understand the idea that even though Sale repudiates Humphrey Prideaux for his moral laxity in wholly characterizing Islam as imposture, Sale too believes in the notion that Muhammad was a false prophet, albeit a skillful and diplomatic one, much like a legislator.¹⁹⁵ Such writings regarding imposture and religion were widely circulated from 1660 to 1680, and these debates concerning the nature of imposture and religion were not limited to Islam; for example, Prideaux argued that the schisms and divided sects of Christianity (especially the deists and the Unitarians) were the true imposters.¹⁹⁶ The regularity of these debates explains one reason why these Orientalist and Enlightenment scholars of the 17th and 18th century use this term in their writing so frequently. It also portrays the recurring theme that these writings and critiques of Islam

¹⁹² Ibid., 23.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 24.

¹⁹⁴ George Sale, *The Koran Commonly Called The Alcoran of Mohammed*, ed. Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson Jr. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), iii.

¹⁹⁵ Elmarsafy, *Enlightenment Qur’an*, 22.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 21.

had less to do about Islam and Muslims, and more to do about European Christendom and the conflicts therein.

Although this study focuses on analyzing Sale's note to the reader (which comes before the Preliminary Discourse) Sale's Preliminary Discourse is worth crediting as he "...presents the history and geography of seventh-century Arabia, the rise of Islam, the history of the revelation and collection of the Qur'an, as well as a cursory map of the doctrines and schools of thought of Islamic theology."¹⁹⁷ It is clear to see that Sale took great pains to thoroughly re-evaluate Islam apart from the perspective of those who came before him. In doing so, Sale carries a tone of respect towards Islamic doctrine and Muslims, even if he doesn't believe that Islam is a true religion. One way in which Sale departs from other Orientalists is that he contributes to the image of Muhammad as a legislator rather than as an imposter. As Elmarsafy notes, "much ink is spilled during this period on the opposition between the imposter and the legislator, with the term "legislator" enjoying a strong positive spin."¹⁹⁸ George Sale significantly contributes to the image of Muhammad the legislator, emphasizing Muhammad's political skill, intelligence, and the complexity of his mission, rather than simplifying his cause to that of an imposter.¹⁹⁹

As seen in the following excerpt from Sale's note "To the Reader," although Sale is discontent with the simplistic answer of Islam as imposture, he still indulges in the idea

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 24-5

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 25.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 25-6

that Muhammad is an imposter (i.e. a man who imposed a fake religion) despite his admiration of Muhammad in many ways as a skillful legislator:

He [Muhammad] has given a new system of religion, which has had still greater success than the arms of his followers, and to establish this religion made use of an imposture, and on this account it is supposed that he must of necessity have been a most abandoned villain, and his memory is become infamous. But as Mohammed gave his Arabs the best religion he could, as well as the best laws, preferable, at least, to those of the ancient pagan lawgivers, I confess I cannot see why he deserves not equal respect, tho' not with Moses or Jesus Christ, whose laws came really from heaven...²⁰⁰

Sale essentially makes the argument here that despite the idea that Muhammad “made use of an imposture” to come up with a fake religion (i.e. imposture as antithesis to *'isma*), he rejects the derogatory stereotypes thrown at the Prophet Muhammad as being a lustful and violent forger of a barbaric religion. Instead, he commends the Prophet for providing the Arabs with a better law than did the pagans who came before him. In addition to this, the fact that Sale cannot put the Prophet Muhammad on the same level of respect as Jesus or Moses speaks to his acceptance of the idea that Muhammad was as an imposter whose revelations did not come from heaven. Even so, Sale sees this as no reason to disrespect and vilify a man who can at least be said to have been a great legislator. In fact, despite his acceptance of Muhammad as an imposter, he is still worthy

²⁰⁰ Sale, *The Koran*, in his “Dedication” “to John Lord Carteret.

of due praise: “for how criminal forever Mohammed may have been in imposing a false religion on mankind, the praises due to his real virtues ought not to be denied him.”²⁰¹

Conclusion:

George Sale epitomizes the Enlightenment effort to rationalize and confront Islam directly in order to re-evaluate and correct some of the derogatory accusations made on the Prophet by Orientalist scholars who came before him. However, despite the fact that Sale held great respect and even admiration for Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, he too contributed to the notion of Muhammad as an imposter of a contrived religion. His effort to label him a “legislator” did not take away from the fact that Sale could not accept Muhammad as a genuine prophet.

In regards to how this European Enlightenment trend of portraying Muhammad as an imposter effects the shift in the theological understanding of *‘isma* from the early to modern period of Islam, an entire paper could be written on the possibilities that can be inferred from the findings contained in this thesis. However, modern Muslim theologians such as Sayyid Qutb were most likely informed of/ responding to this Western/Orientalist idea of “Muhammad the Imposter,” since this notion of Imposture continues to be recycled and utilized within contemporary Western scholarship. This can be seen in W. Montgomery Watt’s work, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (1961), in which he questions the very notion of whether the Prophet Muhammad was really a prophet or not.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Ibid., v.

²⁰² W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 237.

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