



both under the shelter and unerring guidance of His Holiness the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both)."[2]

The term translated as 'unerring guidance' here is 'ismat fa'iz, lit. overflowing protection. The Prophets and other holy figures are sometimes referred to as 'ismatiyan. This word also carries the connotation of chastity. I gather from this that what is implied here is that the moral immaculacy of Guardian and the House of Justice are divinely protected.

The passage goes on to say,

"Whatsoever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso disputeth with him hath disputed with God; whoso denieth him hath denied God, whoso disbelieveth in him hath disbelieved in God; who deviateth, separateth himself and turned aside from him hath turned aside from God."[3]

This passage suggests that firmness in the Covenant primarily involves obedience. But it should be stressed that the reason we obey is because what they decide constitutes the will of God. Another passage in the Will and Testament states:

"And now, concerning the House of Justice which God hath ordained as the source of all good and freed from error . . ."[4]

The word for error here is \*kata\*. The Persians can correct me if I'm wrong, but I think the term literally means 'misstep.' It is an unintentional trespass.

The usual word translated as infallibility is ma'sum. This too carries the connotation of moral immaculacy. But I think the important thing here is to examine what mas'um implies within the context of the Writings themselves. The longest discussion of infallibility is found in Ishraqat. Unfortunately I could not find an entire Persian Tablet in my library, so I will have to make do with the English translation.

"Know thou that the term 'infallibility' hath numerous meanings and divers stations. In one sense it is applicable to the One Whom God hath made immune from error. Similarly it is applied to every soul whom God hath guarded against sin, transgression, rebellion, impiety, disbelief and the like."[5]

Notice that the stress here is on sinlessness not propositional inerrancy. The passage goes on to say:

"However the Most Great Infallibility is confined to the One Whose station is immeasurably exalted beyond ordinances or prohibitions and is sanctified from errors or omissions. Indeed He is a Light which is not followed by darkness and a Truth not overtaken by error. Were He to pronounce water to be wine or heaven to be earth or light to be fire, He speaketh the truth and no doubt would there be about it; and unto no one is given the right to question His authority or to say why or wherefore. Whosoever raiseth objections will be numbered with the

foward in the Book of God, the Lord of the worlds. 'Verily He shall not be asked of His doings but all others shall be asked of their doings.' (cf. Qur'an 21:3) He is come from the invisible heaven, bearing the banner 'He doeth whatsoever He willeth' and is accompanied by hosts of power and authority while it is the duty of all besides Him to strictly observe whatever laws and ordinances have been enjoined upon them, and should anyone deviate therefrom, even to the extent of a hair's breadth, his work would be brought to naught." [6]

What Bahá'u'lláh seems to be saying here is that the Manifestation is not simply sinless, but because He embodies the Will of God itself, He defines what is righteous and what is sinful. The juxtaposition of dualities such as heaven/earth, light/fire, water/wine are all ways of expressing that the Manifestation determines is the right and wrong.

My understanding of this passage (and what follows) is that figures like 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the House of Justice are infallible in that they do what is right, but Manifestation is the Truth itself.

To summarize, infallibility in the Manifestation means that He Himself is the touchstone that determines what is morally right and wrong. In lesser figures it means that they invariably follow the standards thus laid down. Figures like Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have supernatural knowledge as well, but I think this is quite a separate issue from that of infallibility which is a moral question.

What we need to ask ourselves in regards to the doctrine of infallibility is not so what infallibility is in the metaphysical sense (who really knows?) but what function does it play? It has sometimes been argued that the Central Figures are engaging in hyperbole when they speak of something or someone being "freed from error." Let us presume for the moment that that is true. Even hyperbole has its function. Why are we being told this? According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá that none may "raise the standard of revolt, wax stubborn and open wide the door of false interpretation [ijtihad]." [7]

We may all have different understandings of infallibility, but the bottom line is that any interpretation which encourages people to do the things mentioned above is inadequate.

...

It might be that authoritative interpretation doesn't so much mean that the Guardian knows exactly what a specific text meant or said in all instances, but only that he is aware of what overall intention of the Writings is and how they should be applied at present.

Notes:

(notes were missing from [infallibility.susanmaneck.com](http://infallibility.susanmaneck.com) so I copied them from the Spanish translation)

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