

A study of Moses' request to see God and the issue of his infallibility

Seyyid Muḥammad Mūsawī Muqaddam ¹, Murtidā Āqā Muḥammadī^{2*}

1. Assistant Professor, Hadith and Qur'an Sciences Department, College of Farabi, University of Tehran, Qom, Iran.

2. Ph.D in Islamic Studies, Faculty Member in Al-Mustafa International University, Qom, Iran.

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Abstract

The request to see God is one of the theological paradoxes mentioned in the life story of Prophet Moses (a) that apparently opposes his infallibility. The verse 143 of the chapter A'rāf is one of the places this story is narrated. The opponents of infallibility suggest that Moses knew God is not physical or visible, nor occupies a place, so why did he have such a request? The answer is that he made a mistake by asking so. Therefore, it negates his being an infallible. On the other hand, Hadiths as well as the views of the exegetes of the Qur'ān and theologians believe that Moses spoke out on behalf of his people and it wasn't his real request.

Keywords:

Moses, Request to see God, Infallibility of prophets, The verse (Qur'ān 7: 143)

* Corresponding Author, Email: M_ghamohammadi@miu.ac.ir

Introduction

To delve into discussions related to the prophets is of great importance in the theological studies and they usually come forth after studying the divine unity. One central issue in this regard is the infallibility of the prophets that is directly related to the happiness and success of mankind. The prophets enjoy the state of infallibility, meaning that they are immune from committing sins, making mistakes, or failing in their divine mission of delivering the message of God to people. On the other hand, the opponents of the infallibility of the prophets appeal to some verses of the Qur'ān many of which are about the Prophet Moses. There are some verses in this regard that apparently do not go along with the concept of infallibility. The verses talking about the request to observe and see God are among them.

In the verse 143 of the chapter A'rāf¹, the Qur'ān narrates that Moses addressed Allah while he was worshiping by the Mount Sinai and asked for having a chance to see Him. "you can never see Me!" was the response he received. Thus, based on the apparent meaning of the verse, the opponents of infallibility support their stance; asking this request was a mistake that Moses made.

This research is based on the hypothesis that the contradiction between the infallibility of Moses and this request is not serious; therefore, it is in complete correspondence with his being an infallible. Beside the rational arguments the theologians and the interpreters of the Qur'ān have suggested for this idea, there are many Hadiths, proving the preferred view. This issue has been discussed in the Quranic exegeses when they come to study the verse, but no separate work was found on the issue.

¹. When Moses arrived at Our tryst and his Lord spoke to him, he said, "My Lord, show (Yourself) to me, that I may look at You!" He said, "You shall not see Me. But look at the mountain: if it abides in its place, then you will see Me." So when his Lord disclosed Himself to the mountain, He levelled it, and Moses fell down swooning. And when he recovered, he said, "Immaculate are You! I turn to You in penitence, and I am the first of the faithful (Qur'ān 7: 143).

Infallibility of the prophets

Infallibility of the prophets is one of the significant ideas accepted by Shi'a theologians, since it is considered that the prosperity and salvation of their followers depends on it. Infallibility is a permanent state with the prophets, protecting them from committing sins, forgetting, or making mistakes. Rational and textual arguments are raised to prove this state for them. One of these rational arguments is purpose violation, i.e., if a prophet forbids people from a certain action but he commits it, this makes people confused and misguided, while their purpose was to guide mankind to the truth (Ḥillī, 1999: 349; Lāhījī Qomī, 1953: 540).

Another argument is by appealing to Divine Grace. Divine Grace assists people in finding truth and refraining evil. It also entails the infallibility of the prophets, so that not to cause trouble for people (Ḥillī, 1959: 153).

There exist other rational arguments suggested for the infallibility of the prophets that we avoid mentioning all, in order to keep brevity.¹ Besides, other proofs for this notion are textual. From among the textual arguments are the verses calling the prophets purified (Mukhlaṣīn). The Qur'ān declares that Satan has no authority to misguide or influence purified servants of Allah:

He (Satan) said, " By Your might, I will surely pervert them except Your exclusive servants among them (Qur'ān 38:82-83).

In another place, the Qur'ān describes Moses as:

And mention in the Book Moses. Indeed, he was exclusively dedicated (to Allah), and an apostle and a prophet (Qur'ān 19:51).

Another textual proof is the verse (Qur'ān 2: 124) talking about Prophet Abraham and his receiving Imamate:

And when his Lord tested Abraham with certain words, and he fulfilled them, He said, " I am making you the Imam of mankind." Said he, " And from among my descendants?" He said, " My pledge does not extend to the unjust. "

¹. For further study on these arguments, one can refer to the book (Miṣbāḥ, n.d: 199-206).

They interpret being “unjust” as a person who commits any sins, violating the divine rights or rights of others or even one’s own rights over himself/herself. It also includes the past, present and future conducts of a man. Putting these two notions together, a “just” person is one who avoids any kind of sin in any part of his/her lifetime and this is the very definition of being infallible.

The argument of opponents of infallibility

Bearing in mind the fact that there is no body, place, or limit for God and therefore He is beyond being visible¹, having such a request mentioned in the verse above is not suitable to be uttered even by an ordinary person. So Moses made a mistake and he was wrong in his request. Thus, he did not benefit from something as infallibility. The story was when a group from the children of Israel asked from Moses and insisted on having chance to see God. They said, without seeing God, they wouldn’t believe in Him. So Moses chose seventy people out of them and took them to the tryst with God. There, he spoke out their request to his Lord. The answer he received solved the problem and illustrated the fact for those people. A part of this story is mentioned in the verse 55 from the second chapter:

And when you said, " O Moses, we will not believe you until we see

¹. According to the Salafī view among the Sunnis, who hold literalist approach toward the religious texts, the believers see God with a physical appearance on the Day of Judgment. Considering the verse 42 of chapter Qalam, there are some Hadiths narrated by Abu Sa‘ād Khudrī, Abu Mūsā Ash‘arī, Abu Hurayra and Abdullāh b. Abbās that on the Day of judgment, people from different religions will be called with their Gods and then they will be taken toward hell. Later the true believers will be addressed by saying: “Are you waiting for something?” They replied: “Yes, we are looking for visiting our lord”. They will be responded, “Can you recognize your lord if you see Him?” “There is a sign between us and Him, so if we see it we can recognize Him”, they will say. After being asked about the sign, they will answer, “He will show us His leg (calf)”. At this moment, God will show His leg to them and they will fall in prostration. (Bukhārī, n.d, Vol.1:195). Sheikh Al-Nawāwī considers this Hadith from the greatest ones in describing God’s attributes (Al-Baghdādī, 1979, Vol.7: 138). Ibn Taymiyah (Ibn Taymiyah, 1987, vol.6:394) and his followers hold this view (Uthaymīn, 2010, vol.14: 273).

Allah visibly." Thereupon a thunderbolt seized you as you looked on.

Another part of the story is:

The People of the Book ask you to bring down for them a Book from the sky. Certainly they asked Moses for (something) greater than that, for they said, "Show us Allah visibly," whereat a thunderbolt seized them for their wrongdoing ... (Qur'ān 4:153).

Also a part of the story is uttered as below:

When Moses arrived at Our tryst and his Lord spoke to him, he said, "My Lord, show (Yourself) to me, that I may look at You!" He said, "You shall not see Me. But look at the mountain: if it abides in its place, then you will see Me." So when his Lord disclosed Himself to the mountain, He levelled it, and Moses fell down swooning. And when he recovered, he said, "Immaculate are You! I turn to You in penitence, and I am the first of the faithful (Qur'ān 7:143).

The most important views about the request of Moses

3.1. Generally, the exegetes believe that the request of Moses was not for himself, but it was on behalf of his people. There were some ignorant people among the children of Israel who believed and insisted that they have to see God. **We will not believe you until we see Allah visibly (Qur'ān 2:13)**. After all, Moses repeated what they demanded before his Lord to show how irrational it was and to teach them the fact that God is not visible to the eyes. This is the reason that after them being punished, he said: **Will You destroy us because of what the fools amongst us have done (Qur'ān 2:13)**; (Ṭabrisī, 1982, vol. 4: 730; Hussainī Shīrāzī, 1980, vol. 4: 102; Kāshānī, 1926: 240).

3.2. Some other exegetes believe the request was real but Moses did not want to see God by his eyes and through the physical way. Thus, he was willing to experience an internal disclosure and intuition, i.e. a perfect way of spiritual and intellectual perception. The term "seeing" is used in this meaning a lot; for instance, a person may say: "I see this ability in myself to do so". This seeing is not by the eyes, but it means the person has the crystal cognition of something (Makārim Shīrāzī, 1995, vol. 6: 358; Qurashī, 1998: 504).

3.3. Late Allāmah Tabātabā'ī believes "seeing" in the verse refers to

essential knowledge, i.e., a sort of cognition and perception that helps to comprehend the reality of things without applying one's eyes or thought; therefore, it is another term for presentational knowledge and using the term "seeing" is to emphasize the extent of certainty this knowledge brings about.

Moses had already acquired knowledge about the position of his Lord (to find out the existence of the creator by looking at his signs and creation) and even more he had the chance to be spoken to by his Lord (to receive knowledge about God through hearing), therefore by this request he was looking for something more profound and more perfect, i.e., presentational knowledge¹ (Tabātabā'ī, 1996, vol. 8: 238; Abulfotūh Rāzī, 1988: 386).

According to this view, if seeing is another term for presentational knowledge, then it must be accepted that it is impossible to get presentational knowledge in this world, because that request was replied by "you can never see me". Another problem is that this view is not in compliance with the context of the verses.

3.4. Some of the exegetes believe that the request was not for seeing God by eyes or through intuition, but Moses was looking for a sign of the Day of Judgment. This request was like the one Abraham had, when he asked to see how the dead would be revived in the Hereafter.

And when Abraham said, " My Lord! Show me how You revive the dead," He said, " Do you not believe?" He said, " Yes indeed, but in order that my heart may be at rest" (Qur'ān 2: 260).

The same way, Moses sought for knowledge (Ṭabrisī, 1982, vol. 4: 730).

This view is also problematic because it was responded by the saying of Allah «لَنْ تَرَانِي». The term «لَنْ» is for continuous negation, somehow a synonym to "never" in English, while seeing the signs of that day was not impossible. Moreover, this view doesn't suit the context of the verses because it is more than mere interpretation and needs to assume another meaning for the words here; i.e., to say the request "show

¹. Presentational knowledge is a knowledge which considers the reality and existence of a specific being, while acquired knowledge deals with the form and quiddity of specific or universal concepts (Tabātabā'ī, n.d : 237).

yourself to me" means "show your signs to me" and also to assume the answer "you can never see me" means "I won't show those signs to you".

It seems what the majority of the exegetes have suggested is better, so the request was on behalf of the children of Israel. It is not strange to see such a demand from them. They used to live under the authority of the oppressive rulers for a long time and were kept in a weak and poor social and cultural condition. They were affected by the norms of that atmosphere; therefore, it was odd for them to believe in an unseen God. For the very reason they uttered a condition to accept Moses as a prophet. The Quran reads: `

...they asked Moses for (something) greater than that, for they said, "Show us Allah visibly," whereat a thunderbolt seized them for their wrongdoing ... (Qur'ān 4:153).

And when you said, "O Moses, we will not believe you until we see Allah visibly" ... (Qur'ān 2:55).

As the verses declare, "seeing God" was the prerequisite they had to recognize Moses as a prophet. Fakhri Rāzī, one of the Sunni exegetes, says, "They brought the term «جهرية» (visibly) to emphasize what they demanded and to show that they really wanted to see God and it was not a metaphoric term" (Fakhri Rāzī, 1999, vol. 3: 519). Thus, it was quite natural to receive such a request from them and finally Moses decided to mention that request on their behalf. In fact, after he felt that he could not persuade those ignorant people, then he wanted them to hear "nay" from Allah Himself:

Moses chose seventy men from his people for Our trust, and when the earthquake seized them, he said, "My Lord, had You wished, You would have destroyed them and me before. Will You destroy us because of what the fools amongst us have done? (Qur'ān 7:155).

This verse suggests that Moses also describe this request to be irrational and insane. Therefore, he could not be serious by the appearance of the request. According to what mentioned above, what Moses asked doesn't prove the possibility of seeing God, because he was not serious in that question. In fact, the request—"show yourself to me"—and the response—"you can never see me"—sought to teach

people that God is not visible.

It is noteworthy that in the verse 143 of the chapter A'araf, Allah told Moses, **“look at the mountain: if it abides in its place, then you will see Me.”**

This is not to suggest God is visible. It was clear that the mountain wouldn't stand in its place, if God disclosed Himself to it. Therefore, this is a metaphoric analogy to mention impossibility of seeing God (Makārim Shīrāzī, 1995, vol. 6: 355).

Nāṣir Makārim considers the verse to be an evidence for the impossibility of seeing Allah in this world as well as the Hereafter. One of the signs proving this notion is the permanent negation which is put by the term "you will never see me". Moreover, the verse is absolute and negates the possibility of seeing Allah without mentioning any condition for or against it. So it suggests the impossibility of seeing God. The rational arguments also support this view, because being visible entails for that object to be physical or at least to have a shape and limit (Makārim Shīrāzī, 1995, vol. 6: 360).

The reason for Moses's repentance

There might be a question about the reason that why Moses repented after that request. If he really did not want to see God, then why did he repent after that? What was the sin he committed that he repented for by saying, “glorified are You, I repent to You?”

Many of the exegetes believe this request was without a permission from God to do so; therefore, he repented from that. Others have justified it by saying that he was regretful for having audacity to have such a request that does not suit a sincere servant. (Sharīf Lāhījī, 1954: 91; Nakhjawānī, 1999, vol. 1: 266). Zamakhsharī also stands for the latter by saying that even though the request was for an important purpose, he did not have a permission to ask such a thing. So he repented for that reason (Zamakhsharī, 1987, vol. 2: 155).

Others consider this repentance to be a way of remembering Allah, like saying Subhān Allah (pure is Allah) by seeing something wonderful (Ṭabrisī, 1982, vol. 2: 732).

In Tafṣīr Āsān, the repentance is regarded to be on behalf of children

of Israel, the same as the request (Najafī Khumainī, 1978: 339).

According to Allāmah Tabātabā'ī, Allah taught Moses about the mistake he made by that request and after that he repented, since repenting means to turn back towards Allah and it is not only when a sin is committed, but man should repent after doing anything that may make him far from his Lord (Tabātabā'ī, 1996, vol. 8: 312).

It seems the best answer is to say that Moses, by repenting, chose a way to show to his people that how ugly and irrational their request was. So he wanted to teach them the truth about the God's being beyond his physical eyes, in his practice.

The theologians' standpoint

Similarly, theologians also consider the request of Moses to be on behalf of his people. First, they have faced the above-mentioned question that this request proves the possibility of seeing God; otherwise, he as a prophet wouldn't ask that.

To respond this misconception, they have said:

First of all, Moses tried to teach his people they couldn't see God, after they insisted to see Him and uttered it as a prerequisite for their having faith. So Moses pretended to be satisfied to ask it from his Lord so that he would clarify the truth for them. Moreover, even if it is assumed that Moses was serious in that question, then by the immediate answer from Allah saying "you will never see me" (you can never see me), there would be no place to talk about the possibility of seeing Him. (Ḥillī, 1999: 47; Ḥussainī Tehrānī, 1961: 552).

Shaykh Saduq regards the request to be due to the insisting of the people to observe God, and the repentance of Moses meant: to turn back towards the true knowledge about Allah after asking what people demanded. So it was to refute that request. Thus, it was not repenting from a sin because the prophets are pure from any major or minor sin. Although the request did not need a permission from God, it has been narrated that Moses asked for permission and after he was permitted by his God, he requested to see God in order to teach his people the fact that God is invisible (Saduq, 1997: 119).

Late Sayyid Murtaḍā also believes the request was on behalf of the people after they insisted on seeing God. Moses talked about the impossibility of observing God but it did not work and they repeated their demand to see Him by their eyes. Thus, Moses decided to have them hear the response from God to be persuaded. Then he brings evidences from the Quran:

... they asked Moses for (something) greater than that, for they said, " Show us Allah visibly," whereat a thunderbolt seized them for their wrongdoing. (Qur'ān 4:153).

And:

And when you said, " O Moses, we will not believe you until we see Allah visibly." Thereupon a thunderbolt seized you as you looked on (Qur'ān 2:55).

Moses chose seventy men from his people for Our tryst, and when the earthquake seized them, he said, " My Lord, had You wished, You would have destroyed them and me before. Will You destroy us because of what the fools amongst us have done? ... (Qur'ān 7:155).

Sayyid appeals to these verses to prove that the request was on behalf of the children of Israel. He says that the term is for seeing by eyes not knowing something through thinking or getting knowledge of something (Sharīf, 1834: 75).

Therefore, the theologians also regard the request to be on behalf of children of Israel and that it was not a real request.

The issue in the Hadiths

There is a Hadith from the 8th Imam, Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā, about this issue, saying that Moses asked God on behalf of his people after they insisted to see God. The reason for his repentance is mentioned in different Hadiths:

Alī b. Muḥammad b. Jahm has narrated, "I was in the palace of Ma'mūn and Imam Riḍā was there. Ma'mūn asked him, 'Do you believe that the prophets are infallible?' Imam replied, 'yes.' Then Ma'mūn said, 'But what is the meaning of the verse, **When Moses arrived at Our tryst and his Lord spoke to him, he said, My Lord, show Yourself to me, that I may look at You!** How is it possible for Moses not to know

that he cannot see God and to ask to see Him?' Imam answered, 'Moses knew that God is higher than being seen by eyes but after Moses had speech with Allah and then went back to his people and talked to them about it, they said: we won't confirm you unless we hear God the way you heard Him. They were seventy thousand people so they chose seven thousand out of them and then seven hundred out of the second group and then seventy people out of the seven hundred to go to see God at a defined time. Moses took them to the Mount Sinai and stopped them by the mount and he alone climbed the mountain and asked Allah to talk to him. Allah talked to Moses and those people heard the voice from up and down, and east and west, then Allah created the voice in the tree and spread it from the tree to every dimension. But they did not accept to confirm that voice to be from God and insisted on seeing Him by their eyes. It was after this arrogant behavior that they heard a thunderstorm and it destroyed them for their rude manner. Then Moses asked God: when I go back to my people, what should I tell them if they accuse me of lying and causing death to their representatives after failing in making them hear God? Then God revived those people and sent them back with Moses. They told him if you ask your God to show Himself to you He would accept, and then you can describe Him for us and we will have a better knowledge of Him. Moses said: O my people! Eyes cannot see God! He is known through His signs. They said we don't accept your saying unless you ask God to do so. Moses said: O Allah! You heard these people and you better know what is good for them. Then Allah revealed to Moses to ask Him what they demanded and that He won't blame Moses for the request. Thus Moses asked:

When Moses arrived at Our tryst and his Lord spoke to him, he said," My Lord, show Yourself to me, that I may look at You ... (Qur'ān 7:143).

When he was conscious, he said: I repent to You from the ignorance of these people and I turn to the knowledge I have received from You and I am the first among these people to believe you are not to be seen'' (Sadūq, 1959, vol. 1: 200; Ṭabrisī, 1982, vol. 2: 429).

As it is seen, the hadith of Imam Riḍā also emphasizes that Moses did not ask it for himself. According to this Hadith, Moses tried to

persuade his people to understand that God is not to be seen by their eyes and He is not limited to be sensed physically and they have to look for knowledge about God in the creation as His signs. But they rejected him and insisted on their demand. Then Allah commanded Moses to repeat their request and he did so. Therefore, he asked Allah after He permitted him to have that request.

The Hadiths mention the reason for Moses's repentance as follows:

He did not commit a sin or mistake to repent for himself; therefore, it was for his people. He said: O Allah! You are pure and I turn to you and repent from the sayings of those who consider you to be visible and I appeal to the knowledge I had about You that the eyes cannot see You and I am the first to bear witness among my people that You are beyond the reach of eyes (Rāzī, 1981: 260).

Moses repented from the request he had. Abdullāh b. Abbās said, "Moses by saying **'Immaculate are You! I turn to You in penitence, and I am the first of the faithful'** meant 'O God you are pure and I repent to you from asking to see you and I am the first to believe you are not seen by eyes'" (Sadūq, 1978: 118; Sadūq, 1997: 511, Majlisī, 1984, vol. 4: 45).

3- Ibn Shar Āshūb said, 'Repentance means to get apart from everything and being attached to Allah. So repentance is not only from committing a sin (Ibn Shar Āshūb, 1990, p. 243).

According to this Hadith, Moses repented from the ignorance of his people and declared himself to be the first to have faith in the impossibility of seeing God (Sadūq, 1978, p. 201; Ṭabrisī, 1982, p. 429; Majlisī, 1984, vol. 4: 47).

Conclusion

As it is seen, the majority of exegetes and theologians agree that Moses did not ask to see God for himself, but it was something his people insisted on and the request was on their behalf. Therefore, the request does not negate his infallibility. After choosing this stance, we need to clarify that if he did not wish to really ask for seeing God, why did he repent afterwards? The majority of the exegetes say it was because he did not have permission from God to ask such a thing; therefore, he

repented from unpermitted request. Other exegetes don't consider the repentance of Moses to be out of regret and being sorry for a wrong action done by him, but he used that term in order to remember Allah. Another group regarded the repentance to be on behalf of his people as the request was on their behalf.

Thus, the best answer is to say that by repenting to Allah, Moses was about to teach his people how ugly their request or demand was. So he decided to practically teach them not to expect seeing God by their eyes.

The Hadith of Imam Riḍā also regarded the request of Moses to be on behalf of his people because they insisted on that. About the repentance, the Hadiths say:

A. It was on behalf of the people because Moses did not do anything wrong to repent for.

B. Moses repented from the request to see God.

C. Moses repented from the ignorance of his people.

D. Repentance is not from sins but it is to detach one's self from anything except God and TO attach one's self to Him.

Finally, a full study of the verse shows that it does not negate the infallibility of Moses and that he did not do anything wrong or sinful.

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