

CRITICAL REVIEW OF AVICENNA'S THEORY OF PROPHECY

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Abstract. Avicenna played a remarkable role in the development of philosophy but his considerable contribution is not confined only to the medieval ages. In this paper researcher has high lightened Avicenna's doctrine of prophecy which is purely Islamic in essence and a true example of non-Aristotelian teachings. He provides a careful and philosophical analysis of different aspects of prophet hood. This most influential philosopher of Islam has tried to present a valuable account of this complex phenomenon. He gives a detailed explanation of prophet's ability to grasp the truth. Through this lucid and insightful interpretation, he fills the need to understand the doctrine easily.

Key Words: Prophecy, Miracles, Truth, Prophetic Consciousness, Spiritual excellence, Kalam, Fiqh, Shariah, Umat.

Introduction

Ibn Sin (980-1037), known as Avicenna in Latin belongs to Persia and was a well-known polymath of his time. He wrote about 450 treatises on various subjects and only 240 of those are present today. Particularly, on the subject of philosophy there are 150 books. Ibn Sina's research in the field of medicine is a complete system and still occupies a unique and dominating position. His research works also include astronomy, psychology, geology, logic, Islamic theology, physics, alchemy and mathematics.

Circumstances were very favorable when Avicenna created an extensive corpus of works. This was the time which is commonly known as Islam's Golden Age. Islamic intellectuals were extensively studying, commenting and developing substantially Greco-Roman texts. These

scholars were provided a thriving atmosphere for cultural and scholarly development by *Samanid* dynasty and Buyid dynasty. Avicenna worked most noticeably in the fields of philosophy, theology, (*Kalam*) and *Fiqh*.

By the 12th century, Avicennism successfully established its position as a leading school of Islamic Philosophy particularly, due to reconciliation and bridging the gap between Aristotelianism and Neo-Platonism along with *Kalam*.

Muslim Philosophers when translated Greek thought, it was taken by many just an imitation and a footnote. They after translating Greek thought, build up their own system. It was Muslim Philosophers' own creative assimilation. They came up with their own fresh insights. No one can minimize their contribution regarding new advances in the sphere of religio-philosophical thought. Muslim Philosophers successfully engulfed the gap between religion and philosophy (Sheikh, 1994).

Phenomenon of prophet hood is undoubtedly not traceable in history of Greek Philosophy. Importance of this institution is not hidden from anyone. It exclusively belongs to the history of Muslim thought and culture.

The doctrine of prophecy is absolutely an Islamic notion. Muslim philosophers took up this conception for the first time in the history of philosophy.

Prophecy

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines Prophecy as: "In the usual sense, Prophecy involves disclosing some important information that could not have been known to the Prophets in any ordinary way. Prophecy is interesting from a philosophical point of view because it introduces, interesting questions about divine knowledge, time, and human freedom."¹

According to Merriam-Webster Prophecy is "an inspired utterance of a Prophet. The function or vocation of a Prophet, specifically: the inspired declaration of divine's will and purpose."²

¹ "Prophecy", in Stanford, 2014 ed.

² "Prophecy" in Merriam Webster, 2014 ed.

Encyclopedia of Britannica describes Prophecy as “Prophecy, in religion, a divinely inspired revelation or interpretation. Although prophecy is perhaps most commonly associated with Judaism and Christianity, it is found throughout the religions of the world, both ancient and modern”.³

Ibn Sina's Views About Prophecy

Khalique and Shaidae while discussing Ibn Sina's view about prophecy argued that Ibn Sina takes prophecy as an ability through which a Prophet gets connected with the ultimate reality without the help of faculty of reasoning, and this is the special characteristic which is strictly not found in ordinary people. He also argues that a Prophet through revelation perceives guiding principles for the well-being of his *Umat* (people). He has a very strong grip on the principles involved in the phenomenon of historical evolution. For this reason, he also can easily and confidently predict about the forthcoming events.⁴

Prophecy as Distinctive Imaginative Power

In the opinion of Ibn Sina, Prophetic consciousness is to be defined as distinctive characteristic of a prophet and he takes it as a divine duty and tries to reform a society with the help of his experience. Being a moral and a spiritual teacher, prophet's duties also includes mentioning the social evils and reforming them in his own way. With this practice he is able to create a healthy society.

Ibn Sina while comparing intellectual abilities and intuitive powers of ordinary men and a prophet's, states that both differ totally. Sharif argues that Prophet possesses very high level of intellect and his intuitive powers are also absolutely different both qualitatively and quantitatively.⁵ They are constantly in connection with reality and the degree of this quality of prophets is rare and exceptional. Prophet holds the rank of 'depository of truth' without any support of apparent sources. In ordinary men's folk, the degree of imagination varies. Even some are nearly devoid of this.

³ "Prophecy" in Encyclopedia of Britannica, 2014 ed.

⁴ Abdul Khaliq & Yusuf Shaidae, *Muslim Falsafa* (Lahore: Aziz Publishers, 1984), 182.

⁵ M.M.Sharif, *A history of Muslim Philosophy*(Vol. 2) (West Germany: Wiesbaden, 1966), 499.

While discussing doctrine of prophecy McGinnis stated that Divine orders are conveyed through prophets to the masses in form of metaphors and images. “Avicenna says that the prophet ‘blazes with insight’ and through which he immediately grasps causal connection inherent in the world. He also can predict firmly about forth coming future events”.⁶

Ibn Sina terms this creative knowledge, value and insight of a prophet as active intellect and identifies it with revelation angel. IbnSina affirms that prophet is also attributed by God with exceptionally strong imagination. He is able to transform spiritual truths and concepts into material images and symbols. Besides IbnSina, Al Farabi also stressed upon prophetic imagination by its symbolizing and unifying function.

Explaining the strong imagination of the prophet Ibn Sina here stated that in prophets this kind of symbolization works so strong that it comes before them as vivid images and whatever their spirit conceives and thinks, it comes before them so, as in reality they are hearing someone and seeing it. Moreover this is also because of this strong imagination that they are capable to talk about the blissful paradise and torment of hell.⁷

Prophet as Law-Giving Institution

Ibn Sina also takes prophet hood as an institution of law giving. The law (*Shariah*) is always effective in making people socially good and provides with code of life and morality at every step.

Sharif argued that after taking insight through revelation, a prophet tends to apply it on moral purposes. Now he holds the status of a lawgiver and severs as an excellent statesman in the socio-political structure. Only prophet can train humans as the best moral beings. Through this provision, men attain the vision by which they understand the real meaning of the purposeful life. This philosophical vision enables them to grasp the truth and to live according to this moral law. Ibn Sina thinks

³ Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010),148.

⁷M. M. Sharif, *A history of Muslim Philosophy*(Vol. 2) (West Germany: Wiesbaden, 1966), 500.

that still there are some unfortunate souls who fail to find philosophical truth from prophet's given law.⁸

Miracles

Miracles are taken to be a distinguished trait of a prophet. Ibn Sina was also convinced about prophets for possessing this attribute. It has been a prevailing historical trend in case of divine religion specifically that people did not acknowledge magnificence of a prophet or mystic until or unless they have not seen any show of miraculous powers in them. People tend to accept any prophet or mystic only if he is possessed with this exceptional quality. Holy Quran tells about the wish of people for miracles as:

“And they say, "We will not believe you until you break open for us from the ground a spring”.

“Or [until] you have a garden of palm trees and grapes and make rivers gush forth within them in force [and abundance].” Al-Quran (365: 90-92)

Ibn Sina takes miracles as extra ordinary happenings. He is of the view that miracles are not something against the universal laws of nature. He thinks when we are unable to discover the causal connection of miracles within the phenomenon of nature, we start calling them miracles because of our little knowledge of the nature. In this way Ibn Sina tried to give a scientific explanation of the miracles.

People with little knowledge are unable to understand the miracles. Muslim philosophers like Ibn Sina took miracles as the distinctive quality of prophets. When Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be upon Him) declared prophet hood, people demanded some miracles from him. As it has been mentioned in Holy Quran in Surah Al Anam as:

“And they said: Why is not a sign sent down to him from his Lord? Say: Allah is certainly able to send down a sign, but most of them know not”. Al-Quran(165: 37)

Elucidating the idea of miracles critic narrated that Ibn Sina mentions for orthodox Muslims, miracles are thought to be a special trait

⁸ M. M. Sharif, *A history of Muslim Philosophy*(Vol. 2) (West Germany: Wiesbaden, 1966), 501.

belongs to prophets only. Ibn Sina also considers them extra ordinary happenings but still he thinks that these events are not against the laws of nature. Causes of these happenings are definitely present in the nature of those things but he says that we are unable to discover those causal relations. He is of the view that possibly scientific investigations will become able to discover it with the passage of time.⁹

Ibn Sina takes miracles of prophets like all other natural phenomena and they should be scrutinized scientifically. They need to be explained like other factual phenomena. In fact Ibn Sina does not agree with the orthodox conception of miracles which considers it as supernatural and divine gift. According to Ibn Sina intuitive power or insight to receive intelligible objects is a natural disposition of human intellect conferred upon by God, capacity of which is stronger in certain souls.

Prophets hold the highest level of this insight according to Ibn Sina. He viewed that 'it is not God Who Chooses the prophets (or at least not directly); rather, it is properly disposed human soul that explains why someone receives prophetic revelation.'¹⁰

Conclusion

Prophet Hood is one of the basic articles of faith. Message of God is conveyed to the humans through the prophets. In the history of Muslim thought there have been certain questions about the nature of prophet hood which were answered by different philosophers differently. Some of these answers were acceptable to Muslim orthodoxy while others were not.

Ibn Sina in this doctrine tried to construct a philosophical system. He interprets prophetic consciousness as the highest rank of mankind. He divides prophet's mission into theoretical and practical. Prophets not

⁹Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 148.

¹⁰Abdul Khaliq, *Problems of Muslim Philosophy* (Lahore: Aziz Publishers, 2002), 83.

only convey God's universal order but also determine the direction of practical life.

According to orthodox point of view prophet hood is a responsibility of a very high level and prophet is appointed on this spiritual excellence by God. Character of a prophet is exceptionally noble. But still he has to go through a stage of preparation. Prophet does not discover truth on his own, it is granted to him by Almighty Allah.

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