

Prostration in the Tradition of the Prophet (a.s) and the Companions

The prostration in prayers is another issue on which the Shi'a and Sunni are disagreeing. The Shi'a necessarily prostrate themselves only on the earth (either soil, sand or stone) or uneatable and unclothing plants.¹ When they do not have access to clean earth, they carry some molded soil or something else on which they can prostrate. Those aware of jurisprudential issues know that so many arguments prove this way of prostration, which has been the way of many Companions and their followers. It is also preferred according to religious precautions. In this part, we first define prostration, and then briefly deal with some traditions adducing the way of the prostration of the Shi'a. We finally mention the opinions of jurists.

Lexical and Idiomatic Meaning of Prostration

In *Al-Sihah*, an Arabic-Arabic dictionary compiled by Al-Jawahiri, we read, "Prostration in prayers stands for putting the forehead on the earth." The same definition is mentioned in *Al-Nahayah*, *Lisan Al-Arab* and *Taj Al-Aroos*. Obviously, prostration is the ultimate degree of humility above which there is no humility and it is not permitted except for Allah, the Holiest.²

The Holy Qur'an states:

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ اللَّيْلُ وَالنَّهَارُ وَالشَّمْسُ وَالْقَمَرُ لَا تَسْجُدُوا لِلشَّمْسِ وَلَا لِلْقَمَرِ وَاسْجُدُوا لِلَّهِ الَّذِي خَلَقَهُنَّ إِن كُنتُمْ إِيَّاهُ تَعْبُدُونَ .

And among His signs are the night and the day and the sun and the moon; do not prostrate to the sun nor to the moon; and prostrate to Allah Who created them, if Him it is that you serve. (41:37).

Also, prostration is the closest state a servant can have toward his Lord:

كَأَلَّا لَا تُطْعُهُ وَاسْجُدْ وَاقْتَرِبْ.

Nay! Obey him not, and make obeisance and draw nigh (to Allah). (96: 19).

A tradition reads:

إِنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ: أَقْرَبُ مَا يَكُونُ الْعَبْدُ مِنْ رَبِّهِ وَهُوَ سَاجِدٌ؛ فَأَكْثِرُوا الدُّعَاءَ فِيهِ.

The Prophet (a.s): “The nearest state of a servant to his Lord is in prostration, so supplicate a lot in prostration.”^{[3](#)}

Keeping in mind that prostration is the ultimate degree of humiliation and is lawful only for the Almighty, we should now see what can we prostrate on to show the greatest degree of humility. As is evident from the definitions of the lexicographers, the highest level of humility is prostration on the ground and, especially, the soil while the ground cannot be applied to rug or eatable or clothing things growing from the earth.

So, in addition to the arguments, which will follow, prostration should essentially be on the ground or soil, unless of course there is enough evidence that prostration on things other than the earth is lawful. Yet, as we will see later on, there is only support for prostration on the ground and uneatable and unclothing things growing from it.

Traditions about Prostration

The traditions about prostration are generally of the following kinds:

جُعِلَتْ لِيَ الْأَرْضُ مَسْجِدًا وَطَهْرًا.

The Prophet (a.s): The earth is set as the place for my prostration (*masjid*) and as cleaner.^{[4](#)}

As you see, in this uninterruptedly reported tradition, the ground is especially mentioned as the place of prostration proving that there must be a reason for this specification. This tradition at least shows that prostration is not permissible on anything and, as a result, it is only permitted on the things allowed in the religion and not on uncertain things. It may be claimed that the honorable tradition means that worship in Islam is not limited to special places like the synagogues of the Jews or the churches of the Christians, and it is possible in any place on the earth.

The tradition is therefore, not related to prostration. In response, this meaning is not in contrast with the issue of prostration, and that prostration is not allowed on all things. In other words, the former meaning is included in the latter and is a requirement for it because if all the places on earth are suitable for

prostration (and this is prostration in prayer, because of the concept of ‘clean’ afterwards,) worship can be done on all the places on the earth. Accordingly, Sunni master scholars, like Ibn Hajar⁵, Muhammad Ashraf Azim Abadi⁶, Qastalani⁷ and Amir Al-San’ani⁸ have all accepted and rather preferred the meaning of prostration place for ‘*masjid*,’ in the tradition.

كُنْتُ أَصَلِّي الظَّهْرَ مَعَ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَأَخَذَ قَبْضَةً مِنَ الْحَصَى لِيَبْرُدَ فِي كَفِّي أَضَعُهَا لَجَبْهَتِي ...
أَسْجُدُ عَلَيْهَا لِشِدَّةِ الْحَرِّ.

Jabir Ibn Abdullah Ansari said:⁹ I was performing the Noon Prayer. It was so hot that I took a handful of sands to cool it and use it for prostration.¹⁰

Bayhaqi has narrated this tradition in *Al-Sunan Al-Kubra* with a little difference. He also narrates the same tradition from Anas Ibn Malik in another way commenting, “If prostration on a cloth one is wearing was permissible, it would for sure be easier than cooling hot sand in one’s hand and putting it for prostration.”¹¹ Bayhaqi has hence considered this tradition as the proof on the impermissibility of prostrating on a cloth attached to the body.

Though Bayhaqi’s claim is true, it should be added that if prostration on cloth—either attached or unattached to the body—was permissible, it would be no need for cooling the sands, because as prostration on an attached cloth is easy, it is also easy on an unattached cloth, a piece of cloth or even a coin in one’s pocket. So, the tradition can also act as a proof on the impermissibility of prostration on unattached as well as attached cloth.¹²

The reason is that Jabir Ibn Abdullah Ansari narrates the tradition with past continuous verb, adding **كنت** to the present tense verb, which shows that this has not occurred just once.

Nevertheless, this tradition shows that prostration is not permissible on everything, otherwise constant attempting to prostrate on sands was not wise.

شَكَّوْنَا إِلَى رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ شِدَّةَ الرَّمْضَاءِ فِي جِبَاهِنَا وَأُكْفِنَا فَلَمْ يُشْكِنَا ...

We complained to the Prophet (a.s) about the hotness of sands to our faces and palms when praying, but he did not pay attention.¹³

Having narrated the same tradition, Ibn Hajar Asqalani says, “This is a true tradition narrated by Muslim.”¹⁴ It is emphasized in *Tuhfat Al-Muhtaj* that the document of Bayhaqi is valid.¹⁵ It is also said in *Subul Al-Salam* that the tradition is true.¹⁶ The same is narrated from Ibn Mas’ud.¹⁷ This tradition clearly proves that prostration is not allowed on everything, otherwise complaining about the hotness of the sands was unnecessary and they could prostrate themselves on things other than the hot sands.¹⁸

وإذا سجدت فأمكن جبهتك من الأرض حتى تجد حجم الأرض ...

A man asked the Prophet (a.s) something about prayer. The Messenger of Allah (a.s) told him: "... and when you prostrate, place your forehead on the earth, in a way that you can feel it. [19](#)

إن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم كان إذا سجد أمكن أنفه وجبهته من الأرض ...

The Prophet (a.s) used to make his forehead and nose touch the earth [20](#) in prostration. [21](#)

Tirmidhi says after this tradition, "The tradition of Abu Humayd is true and fine."

رأيت رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم يضع أنفه على الأرض إذا سجد مع جبهته ...

I saw the Prophet (a.s), when prostrating himself, place his forehead and his nose on the earth. [22](#)

The same tradition is narrated with a bit difference, "I saw the Prophet (a.s) prostrating himself on the earth putting his forehead and nose on it." [23](#)

إنها لا تتم صلاة أحدكم حتى يسبغ الوضوء... فيسجد فيمكن وجهه (أو جبهته) من الأرض... لا تتم صلاة... أحديكم حتى يفعل ذلك.

The holy Prophet (a.s) said: Your prayers would not be true unless you accomplish your ablutions... and place your faces (or foreheads) on the earth." [24](#)

In point of fact, using the word ارض (the earth) in these traditions has been on purpose. It is mentioned to distinct earth from the other things, especially since both are being mentioned in the traditions, as we read in *Sahih Bukhari* and other books:

كُنَّا نَصَلِّي مَعَ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فِي شِدَّةِ الْحَرِّ، فَإِذَا لَمْ يَسْتَطِعْ أَحَدُنَا أَنْ يُمَكِّنَ وَجْهَهُ مِنَ الْأَرْضِ بَسَطَ ثَوْبَهُ فَسَجَدَ عَلَيْهِ.

We [25](#) prayed with the Prophet (a.s) in hot weather, and whenever one of us was not able to reach his face to the earth, he prostrated himself on his cloth. [26](#)

If prostration on cloth or rug was the same as prostration on the ground, there was no need for opposing earth and things other than it in these traditions. That is why even when the ground was wet, prostration was done on it. It is narrated, for instance, that the Holy Prophet's forehead was wet with mud sometimes:

رَأَيْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَسْجُدُ فِي الْمَاءِ وَالطِّينِ حَتَّى رَأَيْتُ أَثَرَ الطِّينِ فِي جَبْهَتِهِ.

I saw the Messenger of Allah (a.s) prostrating on the earth, which was wet with water and mud, to the extent that I saw mud on his holy forehead. [27](#)

عَنْ أَبِي سَعِيدٍ الْخُدْرِيِّ: إِنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ رَأَى عَلَى جَبْهَتِهِ وَعَلَى أُنْبُتِهِ أَثَرَ طِينٍ مِنْ صَلَاةٍ صَلَّاهَا بِالنَّاسِ.

Mud was seen on the Prophet's forehead and nose because of the prayer he had performed with the Muslims. [28](#)

'Aishah [29](#) also says, "I never saw the Prophet (a.s) place something between him and the earth." [30](#)

Tradition confirming that the Prophet was seen, on a raining day, putting a parchment rug on earth for praying should only be applied to special situations, not to contrast the previous ones. How is it possible that prostration be permissible on everything and still the earth be specifically mentioned in various traditions?

There are various traditions stipulating that the nose should be put on the earth in prostration, while stating the same condition for the forehead, too. This is specially the case in traditions stating that the nose should be put on the same thing as the forehead is put in prostration. One instance is the tradition Ibn Abbas narrates from the Prophet (a.s):

لَا صَلَاةَ لِمَنْ لَا يَمَسُّ أَنْفَهُ الْأَرْضَ مَا يَمَسُّ الْجَبِينَ.

The prayer of one, who doesn't put his nose on the same thing as he puts his forehead, would not be accepted. [31](#)

Also, traditions stating that in prostrating, the turban should be put aside from the forehead shows the necessity of putting the forehead on the earth:

"The Prophet (a.s) saw a man who prostrated on a layer of his turban, so he pointed with his finger to the man, to take off his turban and pointed to his forehead." [32](#)

Bayhaqi, too, says in *Sunan*, "Reports indicating that the Holy Prophet (a.s) prostrated on a layer of his turban is by no means valid." [33](#) People other than Bayhaqi have stipulated this concept, too.

Opinions of Some Companions and Scholars

With regard to the aforementioned traditions, some of the Companions, their followers and others in later ages necessarily prostrated themselves with their foreheads directly on the earth or at least they preferred this way of prostration.

Abdul Karim Abu Umayyah says, “I was informed that Abu Bakr Siddiq, the caliph, prostrated on the ground or prayed in a way that his body touched the earth.

Abu Ubaydah narrates, “Ibn Mas’ud did not prostrate or pray on anything except the ground.”

Asim narrates, “Whenever Ibn Sirin prayed in a place where his forehead and nose did not touch the earth, he would change his place of praying.

It is narrated that whenever Masruq left home, he carried a brick with him to prostrate on.^{[34](#)} It is also narrated in *Fat’h Al-Bari* that whenever Masruq embarked a ship, he carried a brick with him to prostrate on when praying. The same tradition is narrated from Ibn Sirin.^{[35](#)}

Razin, a former slave of the Abbasids, said, “Ali, son of Abdullah Ibn Abbas, asked me to send a flat stone for him for prostration.”^{[36](#)}

Umar Ibn Abdul Aziz has been narrated to take the soil from the earth and put it on his mat to prostrate on.^{[37](#)}

Ibn Abi Shaybah narrates that Urwah Ibn Al-Zubayr was reluctant to prostrate on anything except the earth.^{[38](#)} The same is narrated from people other than Urwah.

It is recorded in *Al-Mudawwana Al-Kubra* that Malik knew it undesirable to prostrate on a carpet, cloth, mat or skin. He used to say, “It is allowed to stand, genuflect or sit on these materials, but prostration and putting the palms on them is forbidden. But he permitted prostration and putting the palms on sand and things growing from the earth.”^{[39](#)}

As a result, as stipulated by some Sunni scholars, prostration should be on earth not other things, except khumra^{[40](#)}, straw mat and other uneatable and unclothing things growing from the earth. The traditions that allow prostration on mat and things other than the earth should only be applied to cases of necessity or be ignored entirely because of their contrast with other traditions. In short, one who puts his forehead on the earth has followed the act of the Prophet (a.s) who said, “Place your face on the earth.”^{[41](#)}

On the other hand, anyone who refrains from this has in fact followed the ignorance of Abu Jahl who said, as Muslim, in *Sahih*, and Ahmad, in *Musnad*, narrated from Abu Hurayrah,^{[42](#)} “Did Muhammad put his face on the earth before you?” They said, “Yes, he did.” He said, “I swear by Lat and Uzza’ (two idols) that if I see him do this, I will cast his face to the earth.” He once came to the Prophet (a.s) while

he was praying and wanted to tread his holy neck.

Whenever Abu Jahl tried to harm the Prophet (a.s), he returned shielding himself with his hands. When he was asked about that, he would answer, “There is a trench of fire and fear between him and I; and many feathers and wings.” The holy Prophet (a.s) said, “If he approached me, the angels would tear him into pieces.”

At the end, it is worthwhile to bring a tradition from Imam Sadiq (a.s) determining things appropriate for prostration:

السُّجُودُ لَا يَجُوزُ إِلَّا عَلَى الْأَرْضِ أَوْ عَلَى مَا أَنْبَتَتِ الْأَرْضُ إِلَّا مَا أَكَلَ أَوْ لَبَسَ... لِأَنَّ السُّجُودَ خُضُوعٌ لِلَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ فَلَا يَنْبَغِي أَنْ يَكُونَ عَلَى مَا يُؤْكَلُ وَيُلْبَسُ لِأَنَّ أُنْبَاءَ الدُّنْيَا عِبِيدُ مَا يَأْكُلُونَ وَيَلْبَسُونَ، وَالسَّاجِدُ فِي سُجُودِهِ فِي عِبَادَةِ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ، فَلَا يَنْبَغِي أَنْ يَضَعَ جَبْهَتَهُ فِي سُجُودِهِ عَلَى مَعْبُودِ أُنْبَاءِ الدُّنْيَا الَّذِينَ اغْتَرَوْا بِغُرُورِهَا

Husham asked Imam Sadiq (a.s): “Inform me of things on which prostration is permissible and things on which it is unlawful.” Imam Sadiq (a.s) stated: “Prostration is not permissible but on the earth or things growing on it, except eatable or clothing things from it.” Husham asked: “May I be sacrificed for you! What is the reason?” The Imam (a.s) replied: “Because prostration is for the Glorified Allah, so it is not lawful to be done on things which are eaten or worn; since those fond of this world are servants of what they eat and wear, while prostration is worshipping God. Therefore, prostration is not lawful on things that deceive the adorers of the worldly life.”⁴³

1. Some jurisprudents confirm prostrating on paper, even if it is not made of wood, like a paper made of silk.
2. About the prostration of the angels before Adam and the prostration of Prophet Jacob's sons before Joseph (a.s), much has been said in books of Tafsir. One argument is that Prophet Joseph and Prophet Adam (a.s) were qiblah, not worshipped.
3. Sahih Muslim, Kitab Al-Salat, No 744; Sunan Al-Nisa'i, Kitab Al-Tatbiq, No. 1125; Sunan Abu Dawud, Kitab Al-Salat, No. 741; Musnad Ahmad, Baqi Musnad Al-Mukathirin, No. 9083 (Int'l No.) Al-Sunan Al-Kubra, Part II, Kitab Al-Salat, Jama' Abwab Sifat Al-Salat, Bab Al-Ijtihad fi Al-Du'a' fi Al-Sujud, Dar Al-Fikr Publication, 1st ed., p. 448, No. 2744.
4. Sunan Ibn Majah, Kitab Al-Tahara wa Sunataha, No. 560; also: Sahih Al-Bukhari, Kitab Al-Tayammum, No. 323 and Kitab Al-Salat, No. 419; Sahih Muslim, Kitab Al-Masajid, No. 811; Musnad Ahmad, Baqi Musnad Al-Mukathirin, No. 11358, 11483, 11362; Sunan Al-Darimi Kitab Al-Salat, No. 1353 and Kitab Al-Siyr, No. 2358; Sunan Al-Nisa'i, Kitab Al-Ghusl wa Al-Tayammum, No. 429 and Kitab Al-Masajid, No. 728; Sunan Al-Tirmidhi, Kitab Al-Salat, No. 291 and Kitab Al-Siyr, No. 1474 (Int'l No.) etc.
5. Fat'h Al-Bari, Vol. 1, p. 370.
6. Awn Al-Ma'bud, Sharh Sunan Abi Dawud, Dar Al-Kitab Al-Arabi, Vol. 1, Bab fi Al-Mawazi' Allati la Tujawizu fiha Al-Salat, p. 182.
7. Irshad Al-Sari, p. 435.
8. Subul Al-Salam fi Sharh Bulugh Al-Maram, Vol. 1, Bab Al-Tayammum, p. 110.
9. Sunan Abu Dawud, Vol. 1, Kitab Al-Salat, p. 100, No. 338; Sunan Al-Nisa'i, Kitab Al-Tatbiq, No. 1071; Musnad Ahmad, Baqi Musnad Al-Mukathirin, No. 13982 and 13983 (Int'l No.) with unnoticeable difference.
10. Al-Sunan Al-Kubra, Vol. 2, p. 106
11. Al-Sunan Al-Kubra, Vol. 2, p. 105.
12. After narrating the tradition of cooling the sands, Bayhaqi narrates another tradition stipulating the unconditional

permissibility of prostration on cloth. But since he does not accept the latter, he writes afterwards “It is however preferred not to prostrate on cloth.” (Al-Sunan Al-Kubra, Dar Al-Fikr, p. 442, No. 2723).

[13.](#) Sahih Muslim, Kitab Al-Masajid, No. 981 and 982; Sunan Al-Nisa'i, Kitab Al-Mawaqit, No. 493; Sunan Ibn Maja, Kitab Al-Salat, No. 667; Musnad Ahmad, Musnad Al-Basriyyin, No. 20144 & 20153 (Int'l No.); Al-Sunan Al-Kubra, Vol. 2, Kitab Al-Salat, Jama' Abwab Sifat Al-Salat, p. 105, In the version published by Dar Al-Fikr: p. 442, No. 2728; Nearly the same is narrated in Al-Mu'jam Al-Kabir, Vol. 4, p. 80 & Shu'ar Ashab Al-Hadith, Vol. 1, p. 49, etc.

[14.](#) Fat'h Al-Bari, Dar Al-Ma'rifa, 1379, Vol. 2, p. 16.

[15.](#) Vol. 1, p. 110.

[16.](#) Ibid.

[17.](#) Sunan Ibn Majah, Kitab Al-Salat, No. 668 (Int'l No.).

[18.](#) Vol. 1, p. 110.

[19.](#) Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, Musnad bani Hashim, No. 2473 (Int'l No.).

[20.](#) Sunan Al-Tirmidhi, Kitab Al-Salat, No. 250; Sunan Abu Dawud, Kitab Al-Salat, No. 730, (with a little difference).

[21.](#) In Sunan Abu Dawud, Kitab Al-Salat, No. 527, there is another tradition reading, “Having Prayed with the Prophet (a.s), we saw him cause his forehead and face to be touched to the earth.” Here in the phrase ‘to the earth,’ the conjunction “ـَ” is for the purpose of attaching; hence, it becomes clear that the Prophet (a.s) always put his forehead on the earth whenever prostrating (Editor).

[22.](#) Musnad Ahmad, Musnad Kufiyyin, No. 18101 (Int'l No.).

[23.](#) Musnad Ahmad, Musnad Kufiyyin, No. 18109 (Int'l No.).

[24.](#) Sunan Abi Dawud, Kitab Al-Salat, No. 730; Sunan Al-Darimi, Kitab Al-Salat, No. 1259 (Int'l No.); Sunan Al-Darqutni, Vol. 1, p. 95.

[25.](#) It's been said in another version, “...was not able to reach his forehead to the earth.”

[26.](#) As it was cited before, in this tradition and other similar ones, the earth is mentioned as opposed to things other than it. In this tradition, for example, prostration on cloth is mentioned. As it will be mentioned later, this prostration only applied to the situations where prostration on the earth is not easy or possible. Moreover, these and other similar traditions are in contrast with those permitting only prostration on the earth.

[27.](#) Sahih Al-Bukhari, Dar Ibn Kathir, No. 801 (Int'l No.)

[28.](#) Sunan Abu Dawud, Kitab Al-Salat, No. 777 and 760 (Int'l No.).

[29.](#) Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, Baqi Musnad Al-Ansar, No. 23170; Sunan Abu Dawud, Kitab al-Salat, No. 1108 (int'l No.).

[30.](#) That is the Prophet (a.s) placed his forehead directly on the earth.

[31.](#) Al-Sunan Al-Kubra, Vol. 2, p. 104.

[32.](#) Al-Sunan Al-Kubra.

[33.](#) Al-Sunan Al-Kubra, p. 106.

[34.](#) Al-Tabaqat Al-Kubra, Dar Sadir Beirut, Vol. 6, p. 79.

[35.](#) Fat'h Al-Bari, Dar Al-Ma'rifa, 2nd Edition, Vol. 1, p. 410.

[36.](#) Al-Musannaf, Ibn Abi Shaybah, Maktabat Al-Rushd 1409, Vol. 1, p. 246.

[37.](#) Fat'h Al-Bari, Dar Al-Ma'rifa, 2nd edition, Vol. 1, p. 410.

[38.](#) Ibid.

[39.](#) Al-Mudawwana Al-Kubra, Vol. 1.

[40.](#) Khumra is a small mat made of palm tree branches (Editor).

[41.](#) Sunan Al-Tirmidi, Kitab Al-Salat, No. 348; Musnad Ahmad, Baqi Musnad Ansar, No. 25360 and 25519 (Int'l No.) Also: Kanz Al-Ummal, Vol. 4, p. 79 and Vol. 7, p. 342 and Vol. 8, p. 86, No. 295 and 4559.

[42.](#) Sahih Muslim, Kitab Sifat Al-Qiama, No. 5005; Musnad Ahmad, Baqi Musnad Al-Mukathirin, No. 8475 (Int'l No.).

[43.](#) Wasa'il Al-Shi'a, Mu'assisa 'Al Al-Bayt, Vol. 5, Abwab ma yasjudu alayh, Part one, p. 343, No. 6740.

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