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Prostration on the Soil of Karbala (The Land of Imam al-Husayn's Martyrdom)

The Philosophy behind Prostrating on the Soil of Karbala

One of the subjects which has attracted the attention of both Sunnis and Wahhabis is why the Shi'ahs prostrate on soil from Karbala, known as the soil [*turbat*] of Imam al-Husayn (as). They question the essence of this prostration and wonder whether it is for Imam al-Husayn (as) or the soil itself. We will now examine this topic to make this issue clear.

The Shi'ahs prostrate on any kind of soil

The Shi'ah scholars [*'ulama'*] do not say that it is obligatory [*wajib*] to prostrate on soil from Karbala. They have said that it is permissible to prostrate on any clay, earth and dust in general. Because of the fact that the soil from Karbala has special distinctions, it is considered preferable and more desirable to prostrate on it.

The superiority of some lands over other lands in the Qur'an

It can be deduced from a number of verses of the Holy Qur'an that certain lands have been blessed and have special distinctions over other lands. Allah, the Exalted, says,

﴿ إِنَّ أَوَّلَ بَيْتٍ وُضِعَ لِلنَّاسِ لَلَّذِي بِبَكَّةَ مُبَارَكًا وَهُدًى لِّلْعَالَمِينَ ﴾

"Most surely the first house appointed for men is the one at Bekka, blessed and a guidance for the nations."¹

And He also says,

﴿ وَقُلْ رَبِّ أَنْزِلْنِي مُنْزَلاً مُبَارَكاً وَأَنْتَ خَيْرُ الْمُنْزِلِينَ ﴾

“And say: O my lord! Cause me to disembark a blessed alighting, and Thou art the best to cause to alight.”[2](#)

Another Qur’anic verse says,

﴿ وَنَجَّيْنَاهُ وَلُوطاً إِلَى الْأَرْضِ الَّتِي بَارَكْنَا فِيهَا لِلْعَالَمِينَ ﴾

“And We delivered him as well as Lut (removing them) to the land which We had blessed for all people.”[3](#)

Talking about the Prophet Moses (as), the Holy Qur’an says,

﴿ إِذْ نَادَاهُ رَبُّهُ بِالْوَادِ الْمُقَدَّسِ طُوًى ﴾

“When his Lord called upon him in the holy valley, twice.”[4](#)

And likewise, while addressing him, the Holy Qur’an says,

﴿ فَاخْلَعْ نَعْلَيْكَ إِنَّكَ بِالْوَادِ الْمُقَدَّسِ طُوًى ﴾

“Therefore put off your shoes; surely you are in the sacred valley, Tuwa.”[5](#)

In a story about Sulayman, the Holy Qur’an says,

﴿ ... وَلِسُلَيْمَانَ الرِّيحَ عَاصِفَةً تَجْرِي بِأَمْرِهِ إِلَى الْأَرْضِ الَّتِي بَارَكْنَا فِيهَا ﴾

“And We made subservient to Sulaiman the wind blowing violent, pursuing its course by his command to the land which We had blessed.”[6](#)

About the Holy Prophet of Islam, the Holy Qur’an says,

﴿ ... سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي أَسْرَى بِعَبْدِهِ لَيْلًا مِنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ الْأَقْصَى الَّذِي بَارَكْنَا حَوْلَهُ ﴾

“Glory be to Him who made His servant to go on a night from the Sacred Mosque to the Remote Mosque of which We have blessed the precincts.”[7](#)

The superiority of some lands over others in hadiths

From the viewpoint of both Sunni and Shi'ah traditions, it can be inferred that certain parts of the earth, and likewise the people dwelling therein, are endowed with qualities of either wickedness or prosperity and salvation:

1. On his own chain of transmission, Bukhari recounts that 'Abd Allah ibn 'Umar said, "When the Holy Prophet (S) was passing through the land of Thamud, he said, 'Do not enter lands whose owners have committed oppression against themselves so that you may not be afflicted with suffering as they were, unless you pass through while crying.' Then, the Prophet of Allah covered his blessed head and passed through that valley quickly."⁸
2. Bukhari also narrates, "Ali disliked performing his prayers in the valley of Babylon."⁹
3. Halabi recounts, "The consensus of the Islamic community [*ummah*] is that this place (Medina), which contains the body of the Holy Prophet (S), is the best part of land on earth. It is even higher than the Ka'bah (Mecca). Some say it is the most excellent part of the earth and is even higher than the Throne [*'arsh*] of Allah."¹⁰
4. In a discussion about why Medina is higher than all the other parts of the earth, Samhudi Shafi'i says, "The second reason is this: this land consists of parts of the earth that are considered by consensus of the Islamic community [*ummah*] to possess the holy body of Allah's Prophet (as)."¹¹
5. Likewise, it is narrated that after the death and burial of the Holy Prophet (S), people used to come and carry some soil from his grave with the aim of seeking divine favors from it. 'A'ishah got worried that the soil would get finished and hence reveal the body of the Holy Prophet. Therefore, she ordered that a wall should be raised around the Prophet's grave.¹²

The excellence and superiority of the clay of Karbala

Clay from Karbala is one of the soils on earth which Allah, the Exalted, has blessed for certain reasons, and one of the reasons is that this piece of the earth is where the pure and noble body of the Doyen of Martyrs, Imam al-Husayn (as), rests.

While explaining the hidden meaning of prostrating on soil from Karbala, 'Allamah Amini says, "This issue is based on two basic principles:

- a. That the Imamate Shi'ahs try to always have a clean cake of natural earth in their possession so that they may prostrate on it.
- b. That some graves are superior to others; therefore, there are special blessings derived from these tombs. It is for this reason that the precincts of the Ka'bah and other holy shrines have special religious

laws.

One of the lands which has gained superiority over other lands and has become a source of blessings and favors is Karbala, the place where the body of the Doyen of Martyrs, Imam al-Husayn (as), lies. Karbala is that same holy piece of land from which Imam 'Ali (as), long before the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn (as), had picked up a handful of clay. He smelled the soil and cried so much that the soil got wet with the tears flowing from his eyes."

Then, he said, "Seventy thousand people will be raised from this land. They will enter heaven without their actions of this world being accounted." [13](#)

Can it not be said that prostrating on such holy soil is a desirable and virtuous act? Won't prostrating on such soil bring about nearness to Allah, the Exalted? Is it not deserving that man should prostrate on soil which is the symbol of monotheism and reminds him of the sacrifices which have to be made for the Beloved, Allah the Exalted?

A piece of soil which, if man looks at it from the perspective that it truly deserves, brings about tenderness of heart and brings man closer to Allah. [14](#)

Professor 'Abbas Mahmud 'Aqqad, Egyptian author, says the following about the land of Karbala,

"The land of Karbala is a holy place where Muslims go for pilgrimage in order to learn lessons from the example of Imam al-Husayn. For those who are not Muslims, they come here as tourists to see and visit the holy land.

However, in order for us to do justice to this land, we have to make it a place of pilgrimage for all inhabitants of the earth so that everyone might gain his portion of virtue which this land has to offer, regardless of what they believe in, because we do not have any piece of land in living memory that possesses as much virtue nor as many benefits as Karbala. The main reason is that this land called Karbala is the resting place of al-Husayn, and thus is connected and joined to him." [15](#)

Shaykh Muhammad Husayn Al Kashif al-Ghita', while explaining why it is preferable and desirable to prostrate on soil from Karbala, said, "One of the high motives and aims of preferring to prostrate on soil from Karbala is that when the person who is praying puts his forehead on this soil, he remembers the sacrifices that were made by Imam al-Husayn (as) and the love which he displayed when he was in the presence of Allah.

The man who is praying on the soil from Karbala becomes overwhelmed by such thoughts as how it is possible for a man to sacrifice as Imam al-Husayn (as) did for his beliefs and convictions, and stand up against the oppressors!

Considering the fact that prostration is the best posture where a servant of Allah finds himself in the presence of Allah, it is befitting that while in this state he remembers holy and pure souls; souls which

sacrificed their lives in the way of their Beloved, Allah. At this moment, and with such thoughts, man acquires a condition of humility and modesty. Everything that is in this world will then appear low and abject before him.

With such thoughts, man's soul acquires a strong mystical and spiritual attachment to Allah, like the station of conviction which was attained by Imam al-Husayn (as) and his companions. This is the benefit of betaking a strong connection with Imam al-Husayn (as) by means of prostrating on soil from Karbala.

It is for this reason that we read in narrations about Imam al-Husayn (as) that his clay (the soil of Karbala) removes the seven veils [*hijab*]. Therefore, in reality, prostration on the soil of Karbala is a secret for ascending from the earthly domain towards the Lord of lords..."¹⁶

'Abd al-Razzaq Muqarram writes, "One of the methods that the *Ahl al-Bayt* (as) have employed to manifest the oppression which Imam al-Husayn (as) suffered is prostrating on soil from Karbala. This action has lots of hidden meanings.

The most important secret is that every time man's eyes fall on the soil of Karbala as he performs his five daily prayers, he is reminded about Imam al-Husayn (as) and his companions and the sacrifices they made. It is clear that remembering such role models will produce remarkable psychological and spiritual effects in man's soul..."¹⁷

The grave of al-Husayn (as) is likened to the Holy Prophet's (S)

At the beginning of this discussion, we mentioned the virtues and special qualities of the Holy Prophet's (S) shrine and the whole area where his holy body rests. Now, we have to bring back to mind that the grave of Imam al-Husayn (as) is just like the Prophet's (S), because Imam al-Husayn (as) is a part of the Holy Prophet (S). The Holy Prophet (S) said,

«حسين منِّي وأنا من حسين»

"Al-Husayn is from me, and I am from al-Husayn."¹⁸

Umm al-Fadl recounts that she saw the Holy Prophet (S) in a dream. She dreamt that a part of the Holy Prophet's (S) body had gotten separated from him and was placed in her lap.

When she asked the Holy Prophet (S) to interpret that dream, he said that a blessed son called al-Husayn (as) was going to be born from his daughter Fatimah al-Zahra (as). That son would later be raised on the lap of Umm al-Fadl.¹⁹

It follows therefore that if Imam al-Husayn is part of the Holy Prophet (S), the same kind of respect and status which is reserved for the Holy Prophet should also be reserved for him. If the soil from the

Prophet's grave is blessed, then soil from the grave of Imam al-Husayn is also blessed.

The virtues of clay from Karbala

1. Ahmad ibn Hanbal narrates from 'Amir Shatibi, "I once accompanied 'Ali ibn Abi Talib on a journey. He was traveling to Siffin. When he reached the valley of Naynawa, he shouted out, 'O Aba 'Abd Allah! Bear patiently near the River Euphrates.' 'Amir Shatibi says, 'I asked him: why?' 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (as) answered, 'One day I went to visit the Holy Prophet and found him crying. I asked him, 'O Prophet of Allah! Has anyone annoyed you? Why are you crying?' The Holy Prophet (S) answered, 'No one has annoyed me, but just a while ago the Archangel Gabriel left. He brought the news that al-Husayn will be martyred near the River Euphrates. Gabriel asked me if I wanted to smell the scent of that soil. I agreed. Then, he brought out a handful of soil from the place where al-Husayn will be martyred in Karbala. It was at that moment that I could not control myself and started crying.'"²⁰

2. Umm Salamah says, "One day, the Prophet of Allah woke up in a very disturbed state. He slept again and once more woke up in the same agitated state. He repeated this three times. When he woke up for the third time, I saw him holding red soil in his hand. He was kissing it while shedding tears. I asked him, 'O Prophet of Allah! What is that soil?' He said, 'Gabriel has informed me that my son al-Husayn will be martyred in Iraq. I asked Gabriel, 'Show me the soil where al-Husayn will be martyred' Gabriel brought this soil and gave it to me'."²¹

It is essential to point out that there is a difference between "the one for whom prostration is done" and "on what material it is done". The Shi'ahs do not consider the soil from Karbala to be "the one for whom prostration is done".

On the contrary, they consider it to be "the material on which prostration is done". This means that the Shi'ahs do not prostrate for or to the soil of Imam al-Husayn. On the contrary, they prostrate before Allah, the Exalted, by using the soil of Imam al-Husayn (as) as a pure place where they place their foreheads (a *medium* of prostration). There is a clear distinction between these two.

- ^{1.} Surat Al 'Imran 3:96.
- ^{2.} Surat al-Mu'minun 23:29.
- ^{3.} Surat al-Anbiya' 21:71.
- ^{4.} Surat al-Nazi'at 79:16.
- ^{5.} Surat Ta Ha 20:12.
- ^{6.} Surat al-Anbiya' 21:81.
- ^{7.} Surat al-Isra' (or Bani Isra'il) 17:1.
- ^{8.} Sahih Bukhari, vol. 6, p. 7, Kitab al-Maghazi.
- ^{9.} Ibid., vol. 1, p. 90; Kitab al-Salat.
- ^{10.} Al-Sirah al-Halabiyyah, vol. 3, p. 306.
- ^{11.} Wafa' al-Wafa', vol. 1, p. 52.
- ^{12.} Ibid., vol. 1, p. 385.
- ^{13.} Al-Mu'jam al-Kabir, vol. 3, p. 111, hadith 2825.

- [14.](#) Al-Sujud 'ala al-Turbat al-Husayniyyah 'inda al-Shi'ah al-Imamiyyah, pp. 69–87.
- [15.](#) Abu al-Shuhada, p. 145.
- [16.](#) Al-Ard wa al-Turbat al-Husayniyyah, pp. 32–33.
- [17.](#) Maqtal al-Husayn (as), pp. 103–104.
- [18.](#) Al-Tirmidhi, Sunan, vol. 5, p. 658; Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Al-Musnad, vol. 4, p. 174; Ibn Majah, Sunan, hadith 144.
- [19.](#) Al-Hakim al-Neyshaburi, Al-Mustadrak 'ala al-Sahihayn, vol. 3, p. 176.
- [20.](#) Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Al-Musnad, vol. 2, p. 60.
- [21.](#) Al-Hakim al-Neyshaburi, Al-Mustadrak 'ala al-Sahihayn, vol. 4, p. 398.

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