

Salih, his she-camel and his people

The Almighty has mentioned this incident in a number of places in the Holy Qur'an; to warn the heedless and ignorant people of the community. First, we quote the relevant verses to be followed by appropriate traditions. The Almighty says,

“And to Thamud (We sent) their brother Salih. He said, O my people! Serve Allah, you have no god other than Him; clear proof indeed has come to you from your Lord; this is Allah’s she-camel for you — a sign, therefore leave her alone to pasture on Allah’s earth, and do not touch her with any harm, otherwise painful chastisement will overtake you. And remember when He made you successors after ‘ad and settled you in the land — you make mansions on its plains and hew out houses in the mountains — remember therefore Allah’s benefits and do not act corruptly in the land, making mischief. The chief of those who behaved proudly among his people said to those who were considered weak, to those who believed from among them: Do you know that Salih is sent by his Lord? They said, surely we are believers in what he has been sent with. Those who were haughty said, surely we are deniers of what you believe in. So they slew the she-camel and revolted against their Lord’s commandment, and they said, O Salih! Bring us what you threatened us with, if you are one of the apostles. Then the earthquake overtook them, so they became motionless bodies in their abode. Then he turned away from them and said, O my people I did certainly deliver to you the message of my Lord, and I gave you good advice, but you do not love those who give good advice. (7:73-79)”

“And to Thamud (We sent) their brother Salih. He said, O my people! Serve Allah, you have no god other than He; He brought you into being from the earth, and made you dwell in it, therefore ask forgiveness of Him, then turn to Him; surely my Lord is Nigh, Answering. They said, O Salih! Surely you were one amongst us in whom great expectations were placed before this; do you (now) forbid us from worshipping what our fathers worshipped? And as to that which you call us to, most surely we are in disquieting doubt. He said, O my people! Tell me if I have clear proof from my Lord and He has granted to me mercy from Himself — who will then help me against Allah if I disobey Him? Therefore you do not add to me other than loss: And, O my people! This will be (as) Allah’s she-camel for you, a sign; therefore leave her to pasture on Allah’s earth and

do not touch her with evil, for then a near chastisement will overtake you. But they slew her, so he said, enjoy yourselves in your abode for three days that is a promise not to be belied. So when Our decree came to pass, We delivered Salih and those who believed with him by mercy from Us, and (We saved them) from the disgrace of that day; surely your Lord is the Strong, the Mighty. And the rumbling overtook those who were unjust, so they became motionless bodies in their abodes, As though they had never dwelt in them; now surely did Thamud disbelieve in their Lord; now surely, away with Thamud. (11:61-68)

“And the dwellers of the Rock certainly rejected the messengers; And We gave them Our communications, but they turned aside from them; And they hewed houses in the mountains in security. So the rumbling overtook them in the morning; (15:80-83)”

According to al-Qutb al-Rawandi, Salih was the son of Thamud, son of Aatir, son of Iran, son of Sam son of Nuh. Some believe that Salih was the son of Abeed, son of Asif, son of Masikh, son of Abeed, son of Hawar, son of Thamud, son of Aatir son of Iran, son of Sam son of Nuh.

According to authentic chains of narrators from Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq in the tafsir of the ayahs:

Thamud rejected the warning. So they said, What? A single mortal from among us! Shall we follow him? Most surely, we shall in that case be in sure error and distress: Has the reminder been made to light upon him from among us? Nay! He is an insolent liar! (54:23-25)

That he said,

“It occurred when the people of Thamud belied Salih, for it never happened that Allah destroyed a community before He sent a warner who exhausted the argument upon them. Thus, the Almighty sent Salih to them and he invited them towards Allah, but they did not accept, rather they opposed vehemently and were stubborn in disobedience. They said, ‘We shall not believe in you until you bring out from this rock a she-camel, ten months pregnant.’”

These people used to worship that particular rock, and offered numerous sacrifices to it every year and they congregated around it. They told Salih, “If you are truly a Prophet and a Messenger as you claim to be, pray to Allah that He may cause a she-camel ten months pregnant to emerge from this rock.”

The Almighty acceded to their request and a she-camel appeared from the rock. Allah revealed upon Salih to inform the people that the she-camel should be allowed exclusive access to drinking water on alternate days. So the she-camel consumed all the water on alternate days. She was milked and all the people relished her milk on those days. On other days, the people and other animals drank water, and the she-camel did not come near the pond. This continued as long as the Almighty desired. The people began to deviate and hatched a plot to slaughter the she-camel. “We are not prepared to continue with the existing arrangement,” they said, “the she-camel consumes all the water on alternate days. Whoever kills this camel shall be rewarded according to his wish.”

Upon hearing this, a red-complexioned, red-haired man with blue eyes approached the people. He was of illegitimate birth. His name was Qedar and was a vile and an evil person. The people determined his reward. On her day, the she-camel was on its way back after having a drink from the pond, when this man stroked her with a sword. The stroke did not have any effect. He hit her the second time and she fell down on her side and her young one ran to the mountain. It raised its head thrice towards the sky and pleaded. The people gathered and each of them hit the she-camel and participated in the outrageous crime. They divided the meat among themselves and none remained without partaking of it. Salih was dismayed. He said, "O people you have committed a serious transgression and disobeyed the Almighty." The Almighty revealed to Salih, "Your people have rebelled, transgressed and killed the she-camel that I had sent for them as the final proof. They were not inconvenienced due to the she-camel. It was a great boon, rather. So tell them that I will send chastisement within three days. And if they do not repent and forgo sinfulness I will surely send down the punishment for them." Salih came to his people and said,

"People, I am the Messenger of your lord. He says that if you repent, forgo sinfulness and seek forgiveness, He will condone your sins and accept your repentance."

When Salih said this, their obstinacy and transgression increased. They said, "Salih! If what you say is true, bring the punishment upon us."

Salih said, "Indeed tomorrow morning your faces shall turn yellow, the next day red and then black on the third day."

Thus, next morning all their faces turned yellow. Some of them told others, "What Salih had predicted was true and the chastisement has come to you." The renegades and the transgressors said, "We shall not accept the word of Salih and would not believe him even if what he says is true."

On the second day, their faces turned red. Again, some of them said, "What Salih had predicted has come true. Obstinate transgressors said, "Even though we perish, we shall still not believe in Salih. We shall not forgo worshipping the deities of our forefathers." They did not repent and neither did they stop sinning. On the third day, their faces turned black. Again some people went to them and repeated that whatever Salih had predicted was true but the arrogant ones said, "Indeed whatever Salih predicted has come to pass."

At last, when at midnight, Archangel Gabriel descended and raised a loud call that shattered their eardrums. Their hearts exploded and livers disintegrated. On the third day, they anointed and shrouded themselves, convinced of the imminent punishment. The Almighty killed all of them. By the morning, all of them lay dead in their houses and their bedrooms. Then Almighty Allah caused a loud noise with a fire that descended from the sky and burnt all of them. This is an account of the people of Thamud.

A good, rather an authentic tradition, from Imam Muhammad al-Baqir says that the Messenger of Allah asked Archangel Gabriel why the people of Thamud were destroyed. Archangel Gabriel said,

“O Muhammad! Salih was sent to his people when he was sixteen years old. He remained among them until he was a hundred and twenty years. But they were having seventy idols, whom they worshipped. When Salih saw this he said, “O people! Indeed, I was sixteen years old when I was sent for your guidance. Today I have reached my 120th year. I give you two alternatives. Either of us makes a request to your gods and sees if they respond. After that if still you do not agree I will go away, for I am very distressed and hopeless regarding you.”

“Fair enough,” said the people, promised that one they shall go to the wilderness and performed the test. On the appointed day, the misguided people took their idols to a desert. They ate and drank to satiation. After this, they invited Salih to present his demand. Salih came to largest idol and asked its name. The people told him and Salih addressed the idol by its own name. It did not reply. “Why doesn’t it reply?” asked Salih The people suggested that he question another idol. It also did not respond. One by one Salih called each and every idol but none of them uttered a reply. Salih said, “People! You have seen that I called each of your gods but not one of them responded. Now you present your demand and if you are not able to achieve it, I shall pray to Allah and He will surely grant it.”

The people addressed their idols and asked them as to why they had not responded to the call of Salih. Still they did not get a reply. Then the people told Salih to leave them alone with their idols. Salih obliged them. The people threw away the carpets and utensils and began to roll in the sand and said, “If you do not reply to Salih today, we shall be insulted.”

They called back Salih and told him to inquire again. Once more Salih addressed each of the idols, but there was no response. Salih said, “The whole day has passed in this, these idols do not respond. Now you express your demand so that I can pray to the Almighty. He will accept the prayers at this very moment.”

The people selected seventy senior leaders. They told Salih that they were prepared to present their demand. Salih asked the people if they agree. “Yes!” replied the people. “If this group accepts your word, we too shall follow it,” assured the people.

The group of seventy said, “O Salih! We present a request to you. If your Lord accepts it, we shall obey you and follow your commands. And the rest of the people will also follow suit.”

Salih told them to ask whatever they wished. They indicated towards a nearby mountain and said, “Come, let us go to this mountain and we shall express our wish there.” When they reached the mountain they said, “O Salih! Pray to your God that at this very moment, He may cause a red-haired she-camel ten months pregnant and three parasang long to appear from this mountain side.”

Salih said, “You have made such a request that it is impossible for me but it’s easy for my Lord.”

He prayed to the Almighty and at that very moment, the mountainside cracked with such a loud noise that the people nearly lost their senses. The mountain felt a terrible pain like a woman during childbirth.

Suddenly the head had not yet emerged when the she-camel began to speak. Then the remaining portion came out and it stood erect. When the people beheld the astonishing scene they exclaimed, "How quickly your Lord responded to your supplication! Now pray that she should deliver a young one too."

Salih prayed and the young emerged from its mother and ambled around it.

"Anything else?" asked Salih. "No!" admitted the people, "Let us go back to and relate all this to our people that they may also believe in you."

They turned and had not yet reached their people when sixty four of the seventy men reneged and said that Salih had performed magic. However, six of them remained steadfast. The situation turned serious and those who belied Salih deserted him. From the six steadfast people one fell into doubt. He remained among them until the time they slew the she-camel.

The narrator says that I have seen the mountain with a mile-long aperture. The sides of the she-camel have left their impression on both sides of the mountain.

According to a reliable chain of narrators Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq said that Salih was in occultation for a long time. He was middle-aged at that time. He had a handsome body and a flourishing beard and was of medium stature. When he reappeared, the people failed to recognize him. Prior to his return, there were three groups among the people. One group used to reject and said that Salih was no more alive and that he could never return. The second group was in doubt. The third group was sure that he would come back. When Salih returned, he first went to the group that was in doubt and said, "I am Salih." They rejected him saying that he did not resemble him. Then Salih came to those were his deniers. They also did not accept him and expressed extreme dislike for him. Finally, he came to the group steadfast in faith and said, "I am Salih."

"Show us a sign to remove all doubts," they demanded. "We know that Allah is the creator and He can change the appearance of whomsoever He likes. We are aware of the special characteristics of Salih. We have also found in the books that he will return."

"I am the one who had brought for you the she-camel," said Salih.

"You speak the truth," accepted the people, "We have read this in our books. Tell us the sign of the she-camel."

"One day is allotted for the she-camel to drink water and the next for you."

They said, "We believe in Allah and in all things that you have brought from Him."

The arrogant group who were harboring doubts said, "We do not accept what you believe."

The narrator says that I asked, "O son of the Messenger! Was there no Scholar among them?"

Imam said, "Allah is more just that he will leave the earth without a scholar. When Salih reappeared all the scholars came to him. And in this Ummah the example of 'Ali and the Awaited al-Qa'im (Peace of Allah be on both) is like that of Salih – Both of them will reappear towards the end of time and at that time also people will divide into three groups. Some of them will accept them and others reject them.

According to authentic reports Musa Ibn Ja'far said, the People of Ras were two different groups. One of them have been mentioned by Allah in the Qur'an. Another group inhabited the desert and owned sheep and goat. Salih the Prophet sent one of his representatives to them. They killed him. Salih sent a second one. He too was murdered. The third messenger was sent with an assistant to help him. They killed the Prophet again. The assistant (wali) tried his best and exhausted the argument. They used to say, "Our god is in the sea," as they lived by the seashore. Every year they had a day of feast. On this day, a huge fish used to emerge from the sea. The people prostrated before it. The Wali of Salih assured them that he was not desirous of being accepted as their god. "But if the fish that you worship obeys me, would you accept my word and hearken to what I invite?"

"Yes", agreed the people and took an oath for the same.

Thus, the fish emerged, riding on four other fishes. When the people saw it, they fell down in prostration. Then the Wali of Salih came towards the fish and commanded,

"Come to me by the name of the Almighty, willingly or unwillingly."

The fish heard the command and alighted. Wali said, "Climb astride the fishes again and come! So that there remains doubt among these people regarding me."

The fish climbed upon the four fishes and they all came out of the water near the Wali. Despite witnessing such a spectacle, the people continued to belie the Wali. The Almighty sent a wind towards them and along with their animals, they were tossed into the sea. The Wali received a divine revelation to go to a well by the name of Ras. He reached the well and extracted the hidden treasures and distributed it equally among the young old of his followers. It is possible it might be the same well; popularly known as Ras that one passes on way to Makkah.

Both Shi'ah and Sunni traditionalists have quoted from reliable chains that the Messenger of Allah asked Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali: "O 'Ali! Who are the most evil among the ancient people?"

"The killer of Salih's she-camel." replied 'Ali. "You are right," said the Holy Prophet and then asked, "Who is the most evil of the people of the later age?"

When 'Ali did not reply the Messenger of Allah said, "It is the person who will strike your head."

'Ammar bin Yasir says that I and 'Ali Ibn Abi-Talib were asleep on the sand during the battle of Ashira

when all of a sudden the Messenger of Allah awoke us. When we awoke he asked, “Do you want me to tell you who is the most evil of the people?”

Both of us said, “Yes, O Messenger of Allah. The red-complexioned one of the people of Thamud. Who cut off the legs of the she-camel of Salih.” “And next is one who will strike the head of ‘Ali and smear his beard in blood.”

A number of chains quote the tradition that once the Messenger of Allah emerged holding the hand of ‘Ali and called out, “O Ansar, O sons of Hashim! O sons of Abdul Muttalib! I am Muhammad the Messenger of Allah. Indeed, I am the recipient of divine mercy. I live with three orphans, ‘Ali, Hamza and Ja‘far. Just now, a person told me, ‘O Messenger of Allah! These people will be astride you in the Resurrection Day’. May your parents may mourn you! On that day none will be astride except me, ‘Ali, Fatimah and Prophet Salih. I would be astride the lightning. My daughter will be astride my she-camel named Gaza; Salih will be upon Allah’s she-camel that was slain. And ‘Ali will be upon a camel of Paradise. Its bridle will be of rubies. ‘Ali would be wearing two garments and standing between Paradise and Hell. It would be a situation when the people undergo extreme difficulties and would be sweating profusely. A breeze will blow from the Holy Throne drying up their perspiration. The angels, Prophet and the truthful ones will say that it cannot be anyone except the closest angel and a Messenger who has been sent by Allah. At this occasion a voice shall call out, “This is not a proximate angel, nor a Messenger, it is the brother of the Messenger of Allah, in the world and hereafter, it is ‘Ali Ibn Abi-Talib.”

According to authentic tradition, people asked Imam Al-Hasan about the seven creatures that did not come through the womb.

Imam Al-Hasan said, “They are Adam, Hawwa’, the ram of Ibrahim, the she-camel of Salih, serpent of the Garden of Eden, the crow that was sent by Allah to teach Habil the method of burial and Iblis (Curse of Allah be upon him.).”

It is recorded in some traditions that when they had cut off the legs of she-camel the same nine persons said, “Come, let us kill Salih too. For if he had given a correct prediction of chastisement, we would have killed him beforehand. If he is wrong we would have sent him where we sent the she-camel.” After hatching the plot, they came to the house of Salih in the dark of the night. The Almighty had sent the angels for guarding Salih and they stoned to death the attackers of Salih.

According to Ka’b bin Ahbaar the cause of the killing of she-camel was a woman named Malka. She was the queen of Thamud. When the people aligned with Salih she became jealous. There was another woman, Qatam, the beloved of Qedar bin Salif. Another woman, Iqbal was the beloved of Masda’. Qedar and Masdah drank together every evening. Malka told Qatam and Iqbal that when Qedar and Masdah approach you at night you should feign grief and say that you are sorrowful due to the she-camel of Salih. “We shall not be happy with you until you slay it.” When Qedar and Masda’ came to them that night and were told of their desires they agreed to slay the she-camel. They mobilized seven more

people for their mission and slew the she-camel. As mentioned by the Almighty, there were nine people in the town who spread corruption in the land and did not allow peace to be established.

According to authentic traditions it was Wednesday when the chastisement struck the people of Salih. Other reliable narrations state that the she-camel was killed on a Wednesday. There is agreement between these two traditions.

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