A Brief History of Salman, the Persian

First and foremost, of course, is Salman al-Farsi (the Persian).1 He was the son of a Zoroastrian priest in the province of Fars. From the very beginning, he was aspiring to find and follow a religion free from the embellishes of human interpolations. This was long before the advent of Islam. He was converted to Christianity, and served one distinguished priest after .another in quest of divine knowledge

After long lasting hardships and troubles, he attached himself to a monk in Antioch, who at the time of his death advised him that the time was ripe for the emergence of the last Prophet in the world. He told him to make his way towards Hijaz, the Arabian province which has Mecca and Medina in it. In the way, he was taken as a captive by a gang of warriors and was sold from one master to another, till he changed ten masters.

Lastly, he was purchased by a Jewess in Medina. It is not possible to give the details of the tortures meted out to him during his long-lasting captivity. Still it seems that fate was bringing him nearer to his goal, because it was in Medina that he met the Holy Prophet of Islam. After some subtle tests Salman recognised in him the long-awaited “that Prophet” of the New Testament (John 1:19-25). He accepted Islam.2

The Holy Prophet of Islam purchased him from his Jewess mistress and set him free. It was after the battle of Badr, the first battle of Islam, and before the battle of Uhud.3

Salman's faith, knowledge, piety and his unparalleled spiritual achievements put him above all the companions of the Holy Prophet. He is one of the four pillars of true Muslim faith (together with Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, Miqdad and 'Ammar). He has the unique distinction of being included in the Ahlul Bayt (the family of the Prophet) by virtue of his faith and piety. The traditions showing his superiority and virtues cannot be narrated in this short booklet. Nevertheless, I am quoting some of them to give the readers a glimpse of his status in the eyes of the Prophet and his successors.

Though he had already accepted Islam, Salman did not participate in the battle of Badr because of his captivity at that time. After Badr, he took active part in all the battles fought to defend Islam and the Muslims. When the Qurayshites of Mecca together with many other tribes including the Jews of Medina, besieged Medina, it was Salman who advised the Prophet to dig a moat around Medina in order to prevent the enemy from attacking the weak points of the city. And it is for this reason that this battle is called the “Battle of Moat (khandaq)”.4

It was at this battle that a friendly argument began between the emigrants of Mecca (the muhajirun) and the natives of Medina (the ansar). The subject: Was Salman a muhajir or an ansar? The ansar claimed that as Salman came to the Prophet in Medina, he belonged to the ansar group; the muhajirun claimed that as Salman had left his home and family, he was a muhajir.

This friendly dispute also shows how great had become the status of Salman within a short period of three years that every group wanted to claim him as their own. Anyhow, the dispute was referred to the highest authority - the Prophet, who decided that Salman was from neither of the two groups; he said' "Salman minna Ahl al-Bayt -Salman is from us, the family [of the Prophet]."5 It was such a great honour which has continuously been mentioned in traditions and poems.

A poet says:

The devotion of Salman was his pedigree, while there was no relationship between Noah and his son.

The Holy Prophet had also said, "Salman is a sea which cannot be exhausted and a treasure which never comes to end. Salman is from us, the family [of the Prophet]; he has been given wisdom, and is bestowed with reason."6 Imam 'Ali said, "Salman was like Luqman, the Sage."7 Luqman is thought by many Muslim scholars to be a prophet. Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq said that he was even better than Luqman.8 Imam Muhammad al-Baqir said that Salman was from the mutawassimin (those who know the inner character of the people).9 Numerous traditions say that Salman knew al-ismul a'zam (the greatest name of Allah);10 and that he was from the muhaddathin (those to whom the angels talk).11

To show the greatness of Salman, it is enough that the Prophet said, "Faith has ten grades, and Salman is on the tenth (i.e., highest) grade, Abu Dharr on the ninth, and Miqdad on the eighth grade." Whenever Gabriel came to the Prophet, he used to request him to convey the greetings of Allah to Salman, and to teach him the knowledge of the future.12 Accordingly, Salman used to visit the Prophet at nights, where the Prophet and Amirul mu'minin 'Ali taught him from the secret knowledge of Allah which was never taught to any other person because nobody could bear it. It was because of this that Imam 'Ali said, "Salman got the knowledge of the first and the knowledge of the last ones; he is a sea which is never exhausted and he is from us - the family of the Prophet."13

'Allamah Majlisi writes in 'Aynu'l-Hayat that it is understood from the traditions of Shi'ah and Sunnis both that after the ma'sumin nobody among the companions of the Prophet was equal to Salman, Abu Dharr and Miqdad. Imam Musa al-Kazim said, "On the day of resurrection

someone will call on behalf of Allah that 'Where are the hawariyyin and faithfuls of Muhammad bin 'Abdullah, who stayed firmly on the path shown by him and never broke his convent?' Then will arise Salman, Miqdad and Abu Dharr."14

The Holy Prophet said, "Allah has ordered me to love four of my companions." People asked who those four companions were. The Holy Prophet said, "'Ali bin Abi Talib, Salman, Miqdad and Abu Dharr."15 According to traditions, Allah sent for Salman gifts and presents from Paradise; and the Paradise eagerly awaited his arrival.16

Once Mansur bin Buzurg, himself of Persian origin, asked Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq as to why he remembered Salman al-Farsi so much. The Imam said, "Do not say 'Salman al-Farsi (the Persian)'. Say, 'Salman of Muhammad.' You should know that the reasons of my often remembering him are three of his special virtues: First, he discarded him own preferences in view of the preferences of Amirul mu'minin 'Ali. Second, he loved poor and preferred them against rich and wealthy persons. Third, he loved knowledge and knowledgeable persons. Verily Salman was a good servant of God, a pure Muslim and he was not from the polytheists."17

Once some companions of the Prophet were describing their forefathers, showing pride in their family-trees. Salman was also among them. 'Umar, who later become the second caliph, turned towards him and asked him to describe his pedigree and family-tree. Salman said, "I am Salman, son of a servant of Allah. I was poor, and Allah made me rich through Muhammad (upon whom be peace); I was a slave, and Allah set me free through Muhammad (upon whom be peace). This is my pedigree and my status, O 'Umar!"18

It has been stated earlier that Abu Dharr himself was one of the four pillars of faith and was on the ninth grade of faith (iman). But even Abu Dharr could not understand Salman properly. Once he went to the house of Salman. Salman had put a cooking pot on fire. The two friends were talking when all of a sudden the pot tumbled down and overturned. But, wonder of wonders, not a single drop fell out of the pot. Salman put the pot on the fire again. After some time the same thing happened again. No drop was spilt out, and Salman nonchalantly put it right again.

Abu Dharr was flabbergasted. At once he came out and met Imam 'Ali in the way. He narrated to him what he had seen. 'Ali said, "O Abu Dharr, if Salman informs you of all the things that he knows, you will wonder. O Abu Dharr, Salman is a gate towards Allah on the earth. Anybody who accepts him is a believer, anybody who rejects him is a kafir. Salman is from us - the family [of the Prophet]."19

I think these few authentic traditions are enough to show the highest status of Salman in the

eyes of Allah, in the eyes of the Prophet, Imam 'Ali and his successors.

Salman was appointed governor of Iran. He came to Mada'in, the capital at that time. The people of Mada'in, long accustomed to the splendour and glory of the imperial court of Iranian emperors, came out to welcome the governor designate. They were waiting for a pompous caravan. But no caravan or entourage ever came. Instead, an old man, carrying a few of his belongings on his shoulder was coming towards them on foot. They asked the newcomer whether he had seen the entourage of their governor. The newcomer said, “I am your governor.” And that simple-hearted governor of Mada'in ruled with such knowledge, compassion, justice and firmness that within a short period whole Mada'in was in his hands. That conquest was made not by police or army, but by the power of his spiritual perfection, piety and forbearance.

He died in 36 AH in Mada'in. Imam 'Ali came from Medina to Mada'in in half a day by miracle just to perform the burial rites of his trusted companion and brother.20 It was a unique distinction of Salman. His grave in Mada'in (in Iraq) is visited by hundreds of pilgrims every day. The pilgrimage (ziyarat) prescribed for that visit shows his greatness in the eyes of Allah.

References

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