

An account of the people of Ras

Imam al-Ridha mentioned that one of the nobles of the Tamim tribe approached Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ('a) three days prior to his martyrdom and requested him to relate the facts regarding the People of Ras; where they lived, in what period, who were their rulers, whom did Allah send as a Prophet for guiding these people, how they were destroyed? etc. The inquirer told 'Ali that though they are mentioned in the Holy Qur'an no details available.

'Ali said, "You have inquired about something that none have inquired before. After me there is no one who will be able to relate their account except one who quotes me. There is no verse in the Holy Qur'an whose exegesis is unknown to me. I know the place of revelation of each ayah. Whether it was revealed at night or day. On a mountain or in plains." Then pointing towards his breast said, "It contains unlimited knowledge and its seekers are few. People would regret why they did not obtain knowledge from me.

O Brother! The People of Ras were a particular group. They worshipped the pine tree and called it the 'King of Trees'. It had been planted by Yafith the son of Nuh besides a spring. The spring was known as Rooshtaab and had formed after the deluge. They were known as 'People of Ras' because they had buried alive a Prophet who came after Sulayman. The People of Ras inhabited twelve cities on the bank of the river Ras in the eastern hemisphere. The area was known as Aras and the people were named after the river Ras. During that time it was the best fresh water river in the world and the Kingdom of Ras was the most prosperous nation of its time. The nation consisted of cities named as Abaan, Aazar, Dee, Bahman, Isfandaar, Farwarrdeen, Urdi-Behisht, Khordaad, Mardaad, Teer and Shaharpoor. Isfandar was the largest city and the seat of the ruler Tarkooz son of Ghaboor son of Yarish son of Saazan son of Narmood son of Canaan. Nimrod was the contemporary of Ibrahim. The spring and the tree called Sanobar were situated in this city. The people of Ras had taken some seeds from that tree to other towns and sowed them near streams. Then they took some water from the original spring and mixed it in the spring of each town. It irrigated the saplings that gradually grew into thick trees laden with sour fruits. The people prohibited themselves and their animals from partaking in any of the products of these trees. They also refrained from drinking the water of those springs and claimed that it was the cause of existence of their gods.

Thus it did not befit them to drink this water that would result in the decrease of their god's lives. They used the water from the river Ras that flowed by their cities for themselves and their animals. Every month one of the towns celebrated 'Id. On this day, people of that particular town gathered near the Sanobar tree situated there. They covered the tree with a silk curtain embroidered with pictures. Cows and sheep were sacrificed at the tree and later burnt with firewood. When the smoke and ashes darkened the atmosphere they fell down prostrate in front of that tree. They wept and wailed and implored the tree to be pleased with them. The Satan used to sit upon the tree and shake its branches. He would hide in the trunk of the tree and say in the voice of a young boy, "My servants! I am pleased with you. May you be happy and your eyes brighten with joy." Hearing this, the people would arise. They would celebrate the next few days in drinking, playing drums, singing and making merry. Then they would return home. "

The Persians have named the months after the cities of Ras, Abaan, Aazar, etc. Every month was associated with the feast of a particular city, hence that month was named after that city. When it was the turn of their largest town to celebrate the festival, people from all the other cities came there. They would gather at the great tree near the spring and cover the tree with a large curtain embroidered with icons. The curtain was partitioned to have twelve entrances, one for each city. They would prostrate before the tree from outside the curtain. They sacrificed animals equal to those slaughtered from all the other cities collectively. The accursed Iblis sat on the tree and shook its branches. He would call out to them and speak to them. He would make promises to them greater than the promises made by the Shaitans of the other trees. Then they would rise and drink a lot of wine. For twelve long days they indulged in merry making and enjoyment equal to all the festivals of the other towns together. After the celebration they returned home. When the transgression crossed all limits Allah sent towards them a Prophet from the Israelites to make them recognize Allah and worship Him. But they refused to obey the Prophet.

After the Prophet had exhausted all efforts to guide them and was convinced that they would not come on the right path he complained to Allah "My Lord, these people do nothing but falsify me and refuse to believe in You. Therefore at the time of their great festival manifest your power to them by causing the trees that they worship to wither." The curse was effective and the next day the people saw that their trees had dried and withered. They were astonished and terrified. They were divided among themselves on what they thought had happened to the trees. One group said that the man from Allah had performed sorcery in order to transfer the credit of sustenance bestowed by their gods to his Lord. The second group said that their gods were displeased with them because the Prophet mentioned their defects and criticized them and the people did not object to this. It was for this reason that their god had concealed its freshness and budding to show his anger against that Prophet so that the people would rise up against him.

Having formed such an opinion the people discussed ways of eliminating the Prophet. After consultations they agreed that he should be killed. They constructed huge pipes of lead and fixed them

to the spring reaching its bottom. Then they climbed down and after removing all the water and dug a well underground. After this the people caught hold of the Prophet and imprisoned him in that well. Then they closed the mouth of the well with a huge boulder. They climbed up, removed the pipes and allowed the water to flow over the well into the spring. They said, "Now our gods shall be pleased with us for we have killed the Prophet who maligned us. We have buried him at the base of the greatest Sanobar tree. Maybe now it will regain its freshness and bloom." The whole day they heard the pleas of the Prophet buried inside. He was praying to his Lord thus: "O my Lord! You are aware of my confinement and see my sorrow and grief. Have mercy on my helplessness and take away my soul at the earliest. Do not delay it." Ultimately the oppressed Prophet met his end. Peace of Allah be upon him.

Allah revealed to Archangel Gabriel, "My creatures have become very sinful and unheeding of My wrath. They feel secure from disaster. They worship something other than Me and have killed My messenger. Do they think they shall be able to face My Chastisement? Can they escape from My Kingdom and Dominion? I shall send retribution to all those who disobey Me and are not fearful of My punishment. By My Might and Honor I shall punish them in such a way that they would be an example to all mankind."

Thus when the People of Ras were engrossed in celebrating their festival, a red storm caught them by surprise. They clung to each other. The ground beneath their feet became melting sulphur and a black cloud overshadowed them. Fire began to rain from this cloud melting the bodies of men, just like lead melts in fire.

'Ali says, "I seek Allah's refuge from this wrath." *Wa laa h'awla wala quwate illa billahil a'liyyil a'z'eem* (and there is no power and strength except that of Allah the High and the Great)."

A number of reliable traditions mention that the women of Ras practiced lesbianism and that was the reason the Almighty destroyed them.

Ibn Babawayh, al-Qutb al-Rawandi and Thalabi in his book 'Arais' have recorded from Imam al-Ka'im that the People of Ras consisted of two groups. One of these groups have not been mentioned by Allah in the Holy Qur'an. They inhabited a village and possessed a large number of sheep. Prophet Salih sent a Prophet towards them. The people murdered him. Another Prophet was sent in his place and he too was killed. The third Prophet also met with the same fate. Now a Prophet was sent with an assistant (wali) When they put to death this Prophet too, the wali exhausted all proofs on them and called out to the fish that was worshipped by those people. The fish emerged from the sea and came to the land and sat besides the wali. The people still denied him. Allah sent a wind towards them that lifted all the people and their sheep and tossed them into the sea. The representative of Salih distributed the booty of gold, silver and utensils, etc. among his followers. Thus the generations of this nation became extinct.

The above incident has been mentioned by us in the Account of Salih.

Imam Musa al-Ka'im says that the group mentioned in the Qur'an is the one that inhabited the banks of river Ras. They are known as the People of Ras. Allah sent many Prophets among them. There was

never a time when they had been devoid of a Prophet who warned and exhorted them and they invariably killed all of the Prophets. The river flowed between Azerbaijan and Armenia and reached to the northern tip of Azerbaijan where people worshipped the lizard. According to one report they worshipped virgin girls. When that virgin girl completed thirty years of age they would kill her and install another in her place as a deity. The stream was three *parasang* wide. The stream swelled every day to such an extent that its level reached to half the size of their mountains, but its water did not flow into the sea or plains. It reached only up to the inhabited areas and not beyond. It flowed through their towns and cities. Allah sent thirty Prophets to them in a single month but they killed them all.

Allah sent to them a Prophet and made his wali accompany him. The Prophet waged an intense struggle against them. The people confronted him and when they became busy in repelling his attack, the Almighty sent Mika'il to them during their sowing season. A lot of water was in demand for irrigating the fields. Mika'il diverted all their canals towards the sea. All the springs originating from the streams were blocked by walls. Mika'il was assisted by 500 angels in this venture. The angels took out each drop of water from the canals and threw it into the sea. The canals were completely dry now. Allah sent Archangel Gabriel who caused all the streams and springs of their country to dry up. The angel of death was dispatched and he decimated all their cattle. The south wind, north wind, zephyr and west wind were commanded to destroy their clothes and belongings etc. by snatching everything and dropping it over the mountains and in the seas. The earth was commanded to devour all their utensils, gold and silver. All their treasure shall remain underground and will be thrown out during the time of the great grandson of 'Ali, Muhammad (Imam al-Mahdi).

They woke up in the morning and saw that they had neither any belongings nor cattle, vessels or clothes. All their food grain has been destroyed. Even then only a few converted to the faith in Allah, and Allah guided them. They took shelter in a nearby cave. Altogether they were 21 men, four women and ten boys. Ultimately they achieved salvation. Those who remained adamant in their disbelief were 600,000. They died of the agony of starvation and thirst. Not a single infidel escaped. Later the thirty five people who had accepted faith returned to their hometown. They saw everything devastated and the inhabitants exterminated. They fell down in obeisance to the Almighty and with all sincerity pleaded to Him to bestow them with water, food and cattle sufficient enough for their needs. They did not wish for excess bounties lest it cause transgression in their hearts. They took an oath and vowed that if the Almighty sent a Prophet for them they would help and assist him and believe in him. Allah knew their sincerity and hence showered His Mercy by causing streams to flow and bestowed more than they had prayed for. After that they remained obedient to Allah for their life. But their progeny though outwardly pious practiced hypocrisy. They were also given respite by Allah but their transgression crossed all limits. They remained busy in opposing the righteous servants of Allah. Allah gave their enemies power over them. Many of them were killed and the survivors were subjected to a dreadful plague that wiped them completely. The canals and edifices remained dilapidated for two hundred years.

Allah brought another people to inhabit those abandoned dwellings. For a long time they treaded the

path of Allah's obedience, then lacunae set in and they became sinful. They fell to degraded habits and practices. The notable thing about them was that they considered it a gesture of goodwill and hospitality when they offered their women and daughters to fulfill the sexual desires of their friends and acquaintances. They receded further into sin and homosexuality and lesbianism became rampant. Lesbianism was taught to them by Walhaas the daughter of Satan. She came to them with her sister Shaisaar in a human form and demonstrated the method of sexual contact between two women.

At last Allah sent upon them a thunderbolt. All of them began to sink into the earth during the night. A dreadful scream came from the depths of the earth. Not a single person survived to witness the sunrise next morning. Imam Musa al-Ka'im said "I do not think that that part of the earth was ever inhabited again."

According to Shaykh Tabarsi, the People of Ras were the ones who buried alive their Prophet in a well. Some historians mention that the people reared cattle and dug a well around which they sat and worshipped idols. Allah sent Shu'ayb for their guidance but they refused to believe him. Therefore their well was destroyed and all of them sunk into the earth. Some people say Allah had sent to them a Prophet named han'alah. They slew the Prophet and hence were doomed to perdition. Ras is believed to be a well in Antioch. People of Ras killed habib al-Najjar (the carpenter) and threw him into the well.

Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq says, "Their women practiced sexual contact between themselves. They have been mentioned in the following ayah,

So how many a town did We destroy while it was unjust, so it was fallen down upon its roofs, and (how many a) deserted well and palace raised high." (22:45)

The well was located in Hadramaut and according to some scholars in the city of Khaazoor. It was inhabited by 4000 people who had put their faith in Prophet Salih. Salih also lived with them. Because he breathed his last here, it was called Hadramaut (death).

Later the population increased and progenies proliferated. They began to fall into transgression and idol-worship. Allah sent towards them a Prophet named han'alah. He was put to death mercilessly in public view. They were destroyed as a result of this cruel act. All of them died. Their well became useless and the palace of their ruler was razed to the ground.

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