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Question 19: Why do the Shi'ah prostrate on turbah {dried clay}?

Reply: Some think that prostration on the earth or *turbah* taken from the burial site of martyrs is tantamount to worshipping it and consider it a form of polytheism {*shirk*}.

In reply to this question, it must be noted that there is a great difference between the phrase, “*as-sujud lillah*” {prostration for Allah}, and “*as-sujud ‘ala’l-ard*” {prostration on earth}. The problem of the mentioned people is that they fail to distinguish between the meanings of the two phrases.

It is clear that the meaning of “*as-sujud lillah*” is “prostration for the sake of Allah” while “*as-sujud ‘ala’l-ard*” means “prostration on the earth”. In other words, by prostrating on earth we prostrate for the sake of God, and in principle, all Muslims of the world prostrate on something for the sake of God. All pilgrims to the House of God prostrate on the stones of Masjid al-Haram in the same way but their aim is prostrating for the sake of God.

Given this, it becomes clear that prostration on earth, plant byproduct, etc. does not mean worshipping them but it means prostrating for the sake of God and worshipping Him by lowering oneself and getting close to earth. Similarly, it becomes clear that prostration *on turbah* is different from prostration *for turbah*.

On one hand, the Holy Qur'an states:

"ولله يسجد من في السموات والأرض."

“To Allah prostrates whoever there is in the heavens and the earth.”¹

Also, the Holy Prophet (S) says:

“جُعِلَتْ لِي الْأَرْضُ مَسْجِدًا وَ طَهُورًا.”

“The (pure) earth has been made for me as a place of prostration and an agent of purification.” Therefore, “prostration *for* God” and “prostration *on* earth or *turbah*” are not only far from being inconsistent but they agree with each other completely. This is because prostration on earth or plant byproduct represents the highest form of meekness and humbleness before the One and Only God. In order to clarify the Shi‘ah view, it is worth pointing to part of a speech by our great leader—Imam as-Sadiq (‘a):

عن هشام ابن الحكم قال: قلت لأبي عبد الله: أخبرني عما يجوز السجود عليه وعمّا لا يجوز؟ قال: السجود لا يجوز إلا على الأرض أو ما أنبتت الأرض إلا ما أكل أو لبس. فقلت له جعلت فداك ما العلة في ذلك؟ قال لأن السجود هو الخضوع لله عز وجلّ فلا ينبغي أن يكون على ما يؤكل و يلبس لأن أبناء الدنيا عبيد ما يأكلون ويلبسون. الساجد في سجوده في عبادة الله عز وجلّ فلا ينبغي أن يضع جبهته في سجوده على معبود أبناء الدنيا الذين اغتروا بغرورها. والسجود على الأرض أفضل لأنه أبلغ في التواضع والخضوع لله عز وجلّ.

Hisham ibn al-Hakam says: “I asked Abu Abd Allah (Imam as-Sadiq) (‘a) regarding the things on which one is allowed to prostrate and the things on which one is not allowed to prostrate.” The Imam said: “Prostration is permissible only on earth and whatever grows in it excluding the edible and wearable.” I asked: “May I be your ransom! What is the reason?”

He replied: “In prostration one shows humility and obeisance to God, the Honorable and Glorious, and so it is not proper to perform it on anything edible or wearable because materialists are slaves to things which they eat and wear while in prostration man is in a state of worshipping God, the Honorable and Glorious.

Thus, it is not appropriate for one to place his forehead on something which stubborn materialists worship. Prostration on earth is the best way of prostration because it is the most appropriate way of showing humility and meekness to God, the Honorable and Glorious.²

This lucid statement clearly testifies that prostration on earth is performed as the most suitable way of expressing humility and meekness to the One and Only God.

Also, this question may be posed: Why do the Shi'ah prostrate only on earth or some plant byproducts and why do they not prostrate on other things?

The reply is: Just as the act of worship should emanate from the sacred law of Islam, its conditions, parts and ways of performance should be explained in the light of the Holy Prophet's (S) words and actions; for, the Messenger of Allah (S), according to the Holy Qur'an, is an exemplar of excellence for the entire humanity.

Now, we shall state some Islamic traditions {*ahadith*} that elucidate the conduct and lifestyle of the Prophet (S)—all of which indicate that the Prophet (S) used to prostrate on pure earth and on things that grow from it including straw mat, which is exactly the same method which the Shi'ah follow:

1. A group of *hadith* scholars {*muhaddithun*} recount the statement of the Prophet (S) in which he defines the earth as the place of his prostration, when he says:

“جُعِلَتْ لِي الْأَرْضُ مَسْجِداً وَ طَهُوراً.”

“The (pure) earth has been made for me as a place of prostration and an agent of purification.”³ From the word “*ja'ala*” {“made”} which is used here to have a legal and legislative sense, meaning (“ordained”), we understand that this issue is a decree ordained by the Divine for the followers of Islam to abide by. This proves the legitimacy of prostration on earth, stone, and some other parts of the ground.

2. A group of narrations verify the fact that the Holy Prophet (S) used to order the Muslims to place their forehead on (pure) earth while prostrating. Umm Salamah, a spouse of the Prophet (S), narrates that the Prophet (S) said:

"تراب وجهك لله."

“Place your face for the sake of Allah on earth.”⁴

And from the word “*tarrīb*” in the statement of the Prophet (S), two points can be inferred; one is that at the time of prostration one should place his forehead on “*turab*”, i.e. dust; and the other is that this act is a binding order because the word “*tarrīb*” which comes from “*turab*” meaning “dust” has been expressed in the form of command.

3. The conduct of the Holy Prophet (S) in this respect is another vivid proof and a good guide for the Muslims. Wa'il ibn Hajar says:

"رَأَيْتَ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَآلِهِ وَسَلَّمَ - إِذَا سَجَدَ وَضَعَ جَبْهَتَهُ وَأَنْفَهُ عَلَى
الْأَرْضِ."

"I noticed that whenever the Prophet (S) prostrated, he would place his forehead and nose on the earth."⁵

Anas ibn Malik, Ibn al-'Abbas, some spouses of the Prophet (S) such as 'A'ishah and Umm Salamah and a large group of *muhaddithun* thus narrate:

"كَانَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَآلِهِ وَسَلَّمَ يُصَلِّي عَلَى الْخَمْرَةِ."

"The Messenger of Allah (S) used to prostrate on *khumrah* (a mat made from palm fibers)."⁶

Abu Sa'id al-Khudri, a Companion of the Messenger of the Allah (S), says:

"دَخَلْتُ عَلَى رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَآلِهِ وَسَلَّمَ وَهُوَ يَصَلِّي عَلَى حَصِيرٍ."

"Once I came to the Messenger of Allah (S) and saw him praying on a straw mat."⁷

This statement is another proof which supports the Shi'ah view that prostration on whatever grows in the earth other than what is eaten or worn is permissible.

4. The sayings and actions of the Companions and the Followers *{tabi'un}* of the Prophet (S) also affirm this *Sunnah*:

Jabir ibn 'Abd Allah al-Ansari says:

"كَانَتْ أَصْلِي الظَّهْرَ مَعَ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَآلِهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَأَخَذْتُ قَبِيضَةً مِنَ
الْحِصَاءِ لَتَبْرُدَ فِي كَفِّي إِذَا سَجَدْتُ عَلَيْهَا لِشِدَّةِ الْحَرِّ."

I used to perform noon *{zuhr}* prayer with the Messenger of Allah (S). Because it was very hot I used to take a handful of small gravel, keep it in my hand till it got cool, and place my forehead on it for prostration.⁸

Then, the narrator adds: "If prostration on the garment worn by someone were permissible, it would be easier than keeping a gravel (in one's hand).

Ibn Sa'd (d. 209 AH), in his book, *At-Tabaqat al-Kubra*, thus writes:

"كان مسروق إذا خرج يخرج بلبنة يسجد عليها في السفينة."

"Whenever Masruq (ibn Ajda') traveled, he used to keep a mud-brick with him on which to prostrate while onboard the ship."⁹

It is necessary to note that Masruq ibn Ajda' was one of the Followers and a companion of Ibn Mas'ud, and the author of *At-Tabaqat al-Kubra* considers him among those in the first class of the Kufans after the Prophet (S) and among those who narrated from Abu Bakr, 'Umar, Uthman, 'Ali, and 'Abd Allah ibn Mas'ud.

This explicit statement establishes the groundlessness of the claim that bringing along a piece of *turbah* {dried clay} is an act of polytheism and innovation in religion {*bid'ah*} and makes clear that the forerunners in the history of Islam used to prostrate like that also.¹⁰

Nafi' says:

"إن ابن عمر كان إذا سجد وعليه العمامة يرفعها حتى يضع جبهته بالأرض."

"Whenever ('Abd Allah) ibn 'Umar prostrated, he removed his turban so as to place his forehead on the ground."¹¹

Rizin says:

"كتب إليّ عليّ بن عبد الله بن عباس رضى الله عليه أن ابعث إليّ بلوح من أحجار المروة أسجد عليه."

"Ali ibn 'Abd Allah ibn 'Abbas (may Allah be pleased with him) wrote to me: 'Send me a tablet of the stones of Mount Marwah so that I may prostrate on it.'¹²

5. Also, *hadith* scholars narrate that the Holy Prophet (S) has prohibited people from placing part of their turbans between their forehead and the ground while prostrating.

Salih as-Saba'i says:

"إن رسول الله صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم رأى رجلاً يسجد بجانبه قد أعتم على جبهته فسحر رسول الله صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم عن جبهته."

Once the Messenger of Allah (S) saw a person prostrating beside him, with his turban covering his forehead. The Messenger of Allah (S) removed the turban from the person's forehead.¹³
'Ayyad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Qarashi says:

"رأى رسول الله صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم رجلاً يسجد على كور عمامته فأوما بيده: إرفع عمامتك وأوماً إلى جبهته."

"The Messenger of Allah (S) saw a person prostrating on part of his turban, so he gestured to him to remove (that part of) the turban, pointing to his forehead."¹⁴

From these traditions it becomes clear that in the time of the Holy Prophet (S) the need to prostrate on earth was beyond dispute and it was such that if one of the Muslims put part of his turban between his forehead and the ground, he would be prohibited by the Prophet (S) from doing so.

6. The infallible Imams followed by the Shi'ah who, according to the *Hadith ath-Thaqalayn*, are the inseparable peer of the Qur'an, as well as members of the Prophet's Household {*Ahl al-Bayt*}, emphasize this fact in their speeches:

Imam as-Sadiq ('a) says:

"السجود على الأرض فريضة وعلى الخمرة سنة."

"Prostration on the earth is obligatory while prostrating on a straw mat is a *sunnah*."¹⁵

He ('a) also says:

"السجود لا يجوز على الأرض أو على ما أنبتت الأرض إلا ما أكل أو لبس."

"It is not permissible to prostrate on anything except the earth or what grows in it excluding that which is eaten or worn."¹⁶

Conclusion

From the aggregate of the stated proofs, it becomes very clear that not only the traditions of the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) but also the *Sunnah* of the Messenger of Allah (S) and the actions of his Companions and Followers {*Tabi'un*} testify to the necessity of prostrating on the earth and what grows in it (excluding that which is worn and eaten).

In addition, the permissibility of prostration on the mentioned things is definite whereas the permissibility of prostration on other things is doubtful and disputable. Therefore, by precaution—which is the way to attain deliverance and uprightness—it is appropriate to prostrate on the mentioned things only.

Finally, it should be noted that this discussion is a *fiqhi* question and differences among Muslim jurists concerning such minor issues are very common, but such differences should not be a source of concern because these differences are also common among the four Sunni *fiqhi* schools. For example, the Malikis say that placing the nose on the place of prostration is recommended {*mustahabb*} while the Hanbalis consider it obligatory {*wajib*} and say that ignoring it renders the prayer invalid {*batil*}.¹⁷

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1. Surah ar-Ra'd 13:15.
 2. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 58, 147 as in 'Ilal ash-Sharayi'.
 3. Sunan al-Bayhaqi, "Bab at-Tayammum bi-s-Sa'id at-Tayyib," vol. 1, p. 212; Sahih al-Bukhari, vol. 1, "Kitab as-Salah," p. 91; Ibn Taymiyyah, Iqtida' as-Sirat al-Mustaqim, p. 332.
 4. Kanz al-'Ummal (Halab), vol. 7, p. 465, hadith 19809, "Kitab as-Salah, as-Sujud wa ma Yata'allaq bih."
 5. Jassas al-Hanafi, Ahkam al-Qur'an (Beirut), vol. 3, "Bab as-Sujud 'ala'l-Wajah," p. 209.
 6. Sunan Bayhaqi, vol. 2, "Kitab as-Salah," "Bab as-Salah 'ala'l-Khumrah," p. 421.
 7. Sunan al-Bayhaqi, vol. 2, "Kitab as-Salah," "Bab as-Salah 'ala'l-Hasir," p. 421.
 8. Sunan al-Bayhaqi, vol. 1, "Kitab as-Salah," "Bab ma Ruwiya fi't-Ta'jil biha fi Shiddat al-Harr," p. 439.
 9. At-Tabaqat al-Kubra (Beirut), vol. 6, p. 79, the biography of Masruq ibn Ajda'.
 10. For further information, refer to the book, Siratuna, written by 'Allamah Amini.
 11. Sunan al-Bayhaqi (Hyderabad), vol. 2, "Kitab as-Salah," "Bab al-Kashf 'an as-Sajadah fi's-Sujud," p. 105.
 12. Azraqi, Akhbar Makkah, vol. 3, p. 151.
 13. Sunan al-Bayhaqi, vol. 2, p. 105.
 14. Ibid.
 15. Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol. 3, "Kitab as-Salah," "Abwab ma Yusjad 'Alayh," p. 593, hadith 7.
 16. Ibid., p. 591, hadith 1.
 17. Al-Fiqh 'ala'l-Madhab al-Arba'ah (Egypt), "Kitab as-Salah," "Mabhath as-Sujud," vol. 1, p. 161.

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