

SALMĀN PĀK: A MŌBED OF ISLĀM?

by

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In a brief note first posted on the Internet about Salmān Pāk (also Salmān Fārsī), I explained that this enigmatic personality of early Islām played a pivotal role in Muḥammad b. 'Abdallah b. 'Abd al-Muttalib's prophetic career (c. A. D. 570-632). Firoza and Khojeste Mistree have often remarked to me about the striking similarity and assimilation of Mazdean doctrinal beliefs into Islām; hence, this elaborated version of my earlier posting for **Zoroastrian Studies**, Bombay, *frahangestān hudēn pad Hindūgān*¹, (School of the Good Religion in Hindustan).

Unlike pre-Islamic history where one is faced with a dearth of dateable material records, one faces a plethora of written material in the Islamic period where the student of historiography is hard put to flesh out accurate conclusions. Richard Frye rightfully stresses that if scholarship is meant to solve and not compound problems, simplicity and common sense should be our best guides, which I hope to apply here.

Salman was one of the earliest non-Arab converts (*sābiqūn*) to Islām. There is debate about his name and Arabic reports mention him as either Māhbih or Rūzbeh b. Marzubān. The latter seems more probable and most of the sources agree that he was of a distinguished Persian background. In any case, the appellation Salmān is of Arabo-Aramaean origin and was attached to him after his celebrated conversion. Dates about his birth and death are also disputed. He is recorded in the "tradition" (*ḥadīth*) known as the *Khabar Salmān* which is authentic despite having undergone several recensions. The earliest

version is of Abū Ishāq Sābiī (c. A. D. 749). The cradle of major revealed faiths and assorted cults, the Near East in the seventh-century was in a messianic ferment as its inhabitants awaited a prophet foretold in Judeo-Christian scriptures. The question whether Salman is the same famous Christian monk Sergios or Baḥīra is too complex to be discussed here. This ex-Zoroastrian was of an ascetic, contemplative nature even during his early years and had converted to Christianity well before leaving Iran in his spiritual peregrinations. Having met Muḥammad and recognizing the predicted "signs" (*āyāt*) of his mission, he accepted him as a messenger of God. Furthermore, it was Muḥammad and his early Arab companions (*ṣahāba*) that emancipated him from his captors. From then on until the prophet's death, Salmān remained a life-long counselor and friend. For Persian (Shīi) Muslims, Salmān is doubly significant because of the famous saying attributed to Muḥammad that, "Salmān is one of us [as] the people of the house" (*Salmān minnā ahl al-bait*) after the victory of the fledgling Muslim community in the War of the Trench (A. D. 627). There Salmān had instructed the Arabs to construct a trench that became known among the Arabs as the *khandaq Sabur* — a Sasanid military strategy in honour of its Sasanian namesake, Shapur, who was dreaded by Arabs as the "piercer of shoulders" (*dhu'l iktāf*). Having earned the admiration and confidence of the early Muslims, Salmān also remained a supporter and friend of Muḥammad's cousin and son-in-law 'Alī whose claim to the leadership of the community he forwarded after the former's untimely death. For Ismā'īli

Shīis, Salmān forms a holy (gnostic) triad with Muḥammad and 'Alī. Such fascinating contentions among others about Salmān instead of Gabriel having assisted Muḥammad retain the revelatory process (*tanzīl*) of the Qu'rān need not concern us here.

The presence of this Persian, however, cannot be vindicated to neatly posit Zoroastrian influences in Islām. Moreover, the conflating of Salmān with a fictitious *Dastūr Dēnyār* is equally apocryphal for the late J.M. Unvala had demonstrated that such a name (*dēnyār* denotes "friend of religion") is unattested in the Sasanian and early Islamic eras. The non-existence of this Dēnyār ought to dispel any further claims of fiscal immunities afforded by dubious *Ahd nāmehs* to Zoroastrians who, in the main, are still only grudgingly accepted as a "People of the Book" (*Ahl al-kitāb*). Several complex factors are at work in the collation and sanctification of the Qu'rān during the first three centuries of Islam as displayed in the seminal albeit controversial writings of Patricia Crone, Michael Cook and John Wansbrough. Likewise, in the case of Iranian transmissions into Islām which Shaul Shaked has notably examined in recent years.

No Dēnyār need be vilified as *dēn-e petyāragīh* (accursed of the faith) — only a Salmān of Muḥammadan fame rests in a simple tomb near the Sasanid winter capital, Ctesiphon (*al-madā'in*) in present-day Iraq. There, he is revered by Shīi pilgrims among others as a "patron of handicraftsmen" (*pīr al-mashāikh*). A long cherished Parsi nostrum ought to be laid to rest along with that.

¹ Given the range of readership, bibliography and footnotes have been dispensed with in this overview.