



A RESEARCH REVIEW OF SULṬĀN PAUL'S OBJECTIONS TO THE ISLAMIC CONCEPT OF SALVATION

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Abstract

Every man subliminally desires salvation and merely religion can accomplish this craving. Every religion enunciates salvation based on different conditions and limitations. Islam, being a divine faith, and the Qur'ān being a final revealed message not only enucleates the former scriptures but also disillusions misunderstandings in them. So, the Islamic concept of salvation is based on apocalyptic doctrines, not on delusional thoughts. Some scholars have no conception of Qur'ānic teachings so they raise objections to the Islamic concept of salvation. Sulṭān Paul is one of such contestants. He was born in Afghanistan from there his family migrated to Delhi, India, where he got Islamic education. In 1903, during a meeting in St. Paul's Church in Bombay, he converted to Christianity. After conversion, he raised a lot of questions about the truisms of Islam, and the concept of salvation is one of them. To justify his assertion he utilized Islamic sources, Qur'ān and Ḥadīth but ignored the Bible which describes the same idea that Sulṭān Paul cast away. This short article provides a critical review of Sulṭān's allegations regarding the Islamic concept of salvation so that the readers may know the facts.

Keywords: Sulṭān Paul, Concept of salvation, Islamic concept, Biblical arguments

Short Introduction to Sulṭān Paul

Before converting to Christianity, Sulṭān Paul was one of the Subcontinent's most well-known Muslim debaters. He enjoyed debating with Christian authorities, which eventually caused him to become intellectually detached. After his conversion, his obsession with detail helped him become well-known in Christian circles. He was born in 1881 to Pāyendah Khān, a colonel in the Afghan army. In Amīr 'Abdul Raḥmān Khan's territory, a number of family members—including his father—were taken into custody and given death sentences. Sul'ān moved to India with his mother and made his home in Delhi, where he studied Islamic studies at the seminary run by Fateh Pūrī. He acquired reasoning from Maulānā 'Abdul Jalīl and Maulānā Fateh Muḥammad Khān in addition to Ḥadīth and Tafsīr.¹ He was a Professor of Arabic at Forman Christian College, Lahore.

Debates with Christian pastors were started by Sulṭān Paul early in the seminary's days. Church leaders in the Subcontinent publicly opposed Islam and preached Christianity in public places since they were legally allowed to do so at the time.² Sulṭān Paul began to take regular part in these discussions and, along with some friends, formed an association called 'Nadwat ul Mutakallimīn', the main purpose of which was to prepare Muslim youth against Christianity. The association used to hold daily religious dissensions in which allegations were raised against Islam by Christianity and Hinduism and Muslim scholars responded to the objections.³ In a meeting,



Sulṭān Paul discussed with Munshī Mansūr Masīḥ, a Christian pastor, who objected that there is no salvation in Islam and provided arguments. Although Sulṭān refuted the arguments but he was not satisfied with his performance. So he started investigating salvation, and eventually, this research resulted in his apostasy. After conversion to Christianity, he did a lot of debates with not only Muslims but also Hindus and gained a reputation as a Christian debater in the Subcontinent. He also wrote books in defense of Christianity and in response to Islam and other religions.

Sulṭān's Views regarding Salvation

After undecided discussion with Munshī Mansūr Masīḥ, Sulṭān went in for making out the reality of salvation. He studied Islam and Christianity in this matter and shared his thoughts, after a deep and long comparative study of both religions, in his biography “Why I Became a Christian” (میں کیوں مسیحی ہو گیا) by name. He raised separate objections to both the Holy Qur’ān and Ḥadīth (Prophet’s sayings) regarding the Islamic concept of salvation. Actually he could not make neither head nor tail the real theme of the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth. He concluded that, according to the Qur’ān, salvation is in a way impossible. Everyone will go to hell, whether human or jinn, whether he is virtuous, pious, or the greatest sinner. The righteousness of the pious will not be inspected, nor will the sins and errors of the sinner be observed. Everyone will be thrown into Hell, and after that will be taken out according to his deeds. He quotes the following verse of the Qur’ān:

*“And only he will visit it; there are none of the rest of you.
This is an inevitable decree upon your Lord. The wrongdoers
will then be left inside it, on their knees, while We save those
who feared Allah.”⁴*

And the second verse is:

*“And although your Lord could have united humanity if He
had so desired, differences among people will never end.
Aside from them, your Lord has shown mercy, and that is
why He made them. However, your Lord's prophecy—that “I
will surely fill Hell with jinn and men all together”—is going
to come to pass.”⁵*

After citing the verses Sulṭān elaborates that he was a spiritual patient and used to recite the Qur’ān, considering as a spiritual healer, it would disclose the cure for his illness but instead of informing the therapy, it told plainly “Every one will go to hell because this is a definite duty upon God.”⁶ Is the Islamic concept of salvation the same as that Sulṭān presents? In fact, he did not understand thoroughly connotations of the verses. The interpretation of these verses is something like this;

1. The verses of chapter 19 (Surah Maryam) do not mention Hell but ‘Pul Širāt’ (slippery bridge) which will be laid across Hell. All human beings will have to go through this bridge for entering heaven.⁷ Therefore, the statement of the Qur’ān is correct that all human beings have to go through this path. And in the very next verse, it is also explained that Allah will save the pious people and will cast the disbelievers into Hell.

2. Secondly, the fire of Hell will be cooled for the believers so that they can cross the bridge and enter Paradise. Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr has narrated the ḥadīth of Musnad Aḥmad that fire will be made as cool and safe for the believers as it was for Abraham.⁸



3. Sulṭān has misunderstood the word 'وَارَد' in the verses of Surah Maryam. He thinks it means just entering, but it is not so. It also means to pass, as the Qur'ān itself has stated.⁹ And this meaning can also be taken in this verse. That is, all people will cross the bridge not enter, and if they enter, according to the commentary of Ibn Kathīr, the fire will have no effect on the believers.¹⁰

4. Sulṭān objected to the Islamic concept of salvation on the basis of these two verses alone ignoring the previous ones. To understand the meaning of these verses, it is necessary to read verses 66 to 72 of Surah Maryam cover to cover, then the whole theme will be comprehended. In fact, in these verses, God remarks about the man that he has doubts about his resurrection but God will resurrect him in the same way as He created him before. He will resurrect not only human beings but also demons and gather them together with all humans around Hell and then those humans who are more arrogant and fearless in the matter of God will be separated. These are the ones who will enter Hell. Then in verse 71, it was explained again in other words the subject of verse 68 that all people will pass through hell.

5. The Jews claimed that they were God's chosen and beloved people, so they would not be touched by the fire of Hell.¹¹ Therefore, in these verses, their claim was refuted that all human beings have to cross the bridge where the believers will be saved and true believers are the only ones who believe in the Qur'ān and the Holy Prophet (ﷺ), in accordance with the Islamic theology. The salvation of Muslims is also mentioned separately in the Qur'ān. God bespeaks:

"Those for whom the good [record] from Us has gone before, will be removed far therefrom. Not the slightest sound will they hear of Hell: what their souls desired, in that will they dwell."^{12,13}

6. The bridge will be over hell so that the believers do not consider their good deeds and actions as a means of salvation but think they are being forgiven only by the mercy of Allah.

7. The meaning of verse 118 of chapter 11 (Surah Hūd) is very obvious. If God willed, He would make everyone a believer and obedient, but then what is the difference between man and angels? God wanted humans to be free to believe in God so, He bestowed the authority in the matter of religion that everyone should adopt the religion by thinking and observing. Now, since human thinking is diverse, on this basis, differences arose among the people and various religions were formed.

8. The meaning of verse 119 is the same as mentioned in the above verses of Surah Maryam that Allah will save the believers and then fill hell with others. Therefore, there is no contradiction in these verses.

Arguments from Ḥadīth

Sulṭān states that the Qur'ān does not pass over human in any way, whether good or bad, but it speaks of sending everyone to hell. He targets Prophet's sayings (ḥadīth) to prove his objection. Talking about salvation, he takes down three concepts in this case from ḥadīth literature.

First Concept

1. According to the first concept, there is no connection between deeds and salvation. The most sinful, who has spent his entire life violating God's law, can pass in Paradise while, on the other hand, who has lived his life in righteous deeds can be thrown into hell.¹⁴ He cites two sayings from ḥadīth literature as evidence for his claim. One from Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim:



*"Nobody can die believing in La ilāha illallāh, but if they do, they will go to Paradise. Even if he commits adultery and theft? I asked. Even if he commits adultery and theft, he declared, repeating the statement three times."*¹⁵

And the second from Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī:

*"When someone affirms that 'La ilaha illallah' (that only Allah Alone is deserving of worship, with no partners), that 'Isa (Jesus) is Allah's slave and His prophet and His Word which He conferred on Maryam (Mary), and that 'Paradise, is the truth and Hell is the truth,' Allah will accept him into Paradise following the good deeds he had performed."*¹⁶

Justification of the Sayings

Sulṭān has misinterpreted these ḥadīths. He tried to prove that salvation would come only by saying the word لا إله إلا الله (none has the right to be worshipped but Allah Alone) no matter what anyone does. There is no punishment for any heinous crime. If Sulṭān Paul carefully examined the chapters of these ḥadīths, he would have understood and not objected, but unfortunately, it did not happen. These ḥadīths, stated by Sulṭān, have been narrated in the matter of faith. The title of the chapter of ḥadīth narrated by Imām Muslim is, "الدليل على من مات لا يشرك بالله شيئاً دخل الجنة وإن مات" (The confirmation that the one who expires not correlating anything with Allah will enter paradise, and the one who dies an infidel will enter the fire). The title of Bukhārī's ḥadīth is "قوله تعالى: يا أيها الذين آمنوا لا تغلوا في دينكم" (The declaration of Allah 'O People of the Scriptures! Do not surpass the limits in your religion).

The Christians considered Jesus Christ to be not only the Son of God but also a perfect God, whereas the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) conveyed that believing him to be God's servant and messenger is actual faith. Accepting one as the Son of God is clear-cut infidelity, in the Islamic teachings, and the one who commits infidelity will not enter Paradise. Similarly, the ḥadīth of Mishkāṭ has also been narrated in the matter of faith.¹⁷ These sayings of the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) indicate that the one who accepts faith with his heart and confesses with his tongue will be saved, because such faith is accepted by God, and the second is that eternal salvation will ultimately be based on faith. That is, the abode of the believer will be Paradise in the end but, according to Islamic doctrines, the sinner will go to Paradise only after being punished for his deeds.

Biblical Verses and Prophet's Sayings

The Bible confirms and admits that works are not as important as faith in order to be saved. Accordingly, the New Testament says that you will be saved if you believe in your heart that God has risen Jesus from the dead and confess him with your voice. Because man believes in righteousness with his heart and confesses salvation with his mouth.¹⁸

These verses make it very clear that believing with the heart and confessing with the tongue is faith and that faith is the source of salvation. The same is written in the book of Acts.¹⁹ The Gospel of Mark also clearly states that one who is baptized and believes in Jesus Christ will be saved;

*"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."*²⁰



These biblical verses confirm the ḥadīth that faith is the real basis of salvation. If a Muslim continues to do good deeds all his life, will he get salvation according to the Christian faith? Absolutely not until he is baptized. In the same way, if a Christian continues to do good deeds during his entire life, according to the Islamic faith, he cannot achieve salvation unless he accepts the prophethood of the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) and acknowledges Jesus as a servant and messenger of God. Thus, faith is the main factor in salvation in both religions and the reward of faith is being mentioned in the Prophet's sayings. As far as practice is concerned, there is a clear Islamic injunction that the sinner will go to heaven after being punished for his deeds, while on the other hand, according to the Christian faith, Jesus Christ gave his life for the sake of Christians.²¹

Second Concept

In accordance with the second concept, derived by Sultān Paul, salvation depends on God's mercy merely and, to a certain extent, the prophets themselves seek for it. Unless God's benevolence is involved, the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) himself cannot be saved by the means of his deeds.²² In order to prove this hypothesis, Sultān cites the following ḥadīth from Bukhārī;

*"None of your actions will be able to keep you safe [from the (Hell) Fire]. "Even you, O Messenger of Allah, (will not be saved by your deeds)?" they said. He said, "No, until Allah covers or protects me with His Grace and His Mercy, even I (will not be protected). Thus, perform good actions in a suitable, sincere, and moderate manner; worship Allah in the afternoon and evening, as well as during some of the night; and Al-Qasd (always follow a medium, moderate, and regular path) so that you can get your Al-Qasd (destination, Paradise)."*²³

In fact, Sultān Paul did not take the cue of this ḥadīth. There are two main themes in it, one is to maintain the continuity of action and the other is to hope for God's mercy. The Qur'ān encourages action more than fifty times,²⁴ but Islam never considers it a single means of salvation. In a way, this ḥadīth is conveying the message that it is necessary to act, it is necessary for the welfare of society. Because, if the order of good deeds is stopped from society, its motive and objective will be ended. The welfare of human society is based on righteous deeds, while eternal salvation is based on faith.

Biblical Verses regarding Second Concept

The concept found in ḥadīth is also seen in the Bible. It is declared in the New Testament that God extends mercy of His own free choice, not because of the quantity of deeds. Someone's hard labor will be rewarded if He so chooses, and He may also reward someone more for less effort. A vineyard owner instructs his agent to contact the workers and give them their wages, starting with the last, according to a parable found in the Gospel of Matthew. Upon the arrival of the employed individuals at the eleventh hour, every man was given a penny. However, they felt they ought to have taken more when the first one appeared. And so a penny was given to each man. After obtaining it, they murmured to the good man of the house, "You have made these last people equal to us, who have borne the burden and heat of the entire day, even though they have only worked for an hour." "Friend! I do you no wrong: have you not agreed with me for a penny?"



he responded to one of them, nonetheless. Proceed with what is rightfully yours. Is it not acceptable for me to spend my time whatever I please? Is your evil eye a result of my goodness? Because many are called but few are chosen, the last will therefore be first and the first last.²⁵

The New Testament further states that God will have mercy on whomever He wills and will not have mercy on whomever He wills. St. Paul wrote to the Romans that He will have mercy on whom He will have mercy, and He will have compassion on whom He will have compassion. So then it is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs, but of God that shows mercy.”²⁶ So, these verses of the New Testament confirm ḥadīth that God forgives not by deeds but by His compassion only.

Third Concept

About the third concept, Sulṭān declares that the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) cannot save anyone, not even his relatives and his daughter Fāṭima. So the idea that he would intercede on the Day of Resurrection, which Sulṭān thought would be true, was proved wrong.²⁷ He presents the following ḥadīth from Bukhārī as evidence;²⁸

*“Narrated Abū Hurairah When Allah revealed the Verse:
“And warn your tribe (O Muhammad) of near kindred,”
Allah's Messenger got up and said, “O Quraish people (or
said similar words)! Buy (i.e., save) yourselves (from the
Hell-fire) as I cannot save you from Allah's punishment.”²⁹*

Sulṭān Paul is unaware of the background and reason for the revelation of the Qur’ānic verse mentioned in this ḥadīth. So, he objected to the intercession of the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) on the basis of this tradition. Actually this verse was revealed in the early days of Islam when, instead of preaching openly, the people used to be secretly invited to the religion and warned of God’s punishment for not accepting the faith. Therefore, at the time when this verse was revealed, after its revelation, the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) started preaching to his family and close relatives and told them that if you do not have faith and not accept my prophet hood my relationship will not be of any use to you on the Day of Resurrection. The Bible itself tells that faith is the real thing.³⁰ In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus Christ says that the relationship of the believer is the real relationship. Matthew states that Jesus Christ stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.”³¹

In these verses of the Gospel, Jesus Christ made it very clear that he belongs to the one who is a believer, and the one who is not a believer, even if he is a blood relative, has nothing to do with him. Therefore, it is not wise to object to the intercession of the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) on the basis of a single ḥadīth.

Sulṭān Paul has narrated only this ḥadīth which proves his position whereas ignored many sauiings which mention the intercession of the Holy Prophet (ﷺ). Ibn Mājah has narrated the ḥadīth, that on the Day of Resurrection, the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) will intercede for the sinners.³² Further, there is a long ḥadīth in Bukhārī which mentions that on the Day of Resurrection God Himself will say to the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) that if you intercede then your intercession will be accepted.³³ Apart from this, there are many other aḥādīth which prove that the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) will intercede for sinners. But the New Testament, on the other hand, tells us at the time of the cross, Jesus Christ



himself cried out to the Lord for help, but God could not save His son. It is written in the Gospel of Matthew;

“And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.”³⁴

It is further written in the Old Testament that sinners cannot be forgiven under any circumstances but they will be forgiven in the redemption of the righteous.³⁵ Further, the New Testament states that the wage of sin is death, but this wage is paid by Jesus Christ through His sacrifice.³⁶ So, the position of Sultān Paul is proved wrong by the above verses of the Bible.

Conclusion

Understanding sin in both Islam and Christianity is essential if one is to comprehend the idea of salvation. Although both religions own up faith and good deeds as the basis for salvation, but as far as sin is concerned, their sentiments are different in this regard. According to Islam, no one will bear the burden of anyone's wickedness, sin, and turpitude but everyone will be responsible for their own actions.³⁷ It cannot happen that the sin of the son is put in the account of the father and the sin of the father in the account of the son. No one can come by the salvation for others by sacrificing himself. But this is not the case in Christianity. In Christianity, it is a unanimous dogma that Jesus Christ gave his sacrifice for the forgiveness and salvation of all sins. Therefore, there is no sin left for anyone. This thought not only removes the shame of sin and the feeling of repentance, but also makes a person a rebel against God. Sultān Paul made an effort to refute the Islamic view of salvation, but all of his arguments are against him. These arguments demonstrate that Islam's conception of salvation is consistent with Scripture.

¹ Paul, Sultān, Why I Became a Christian, The Good Way Publishing, pp.4-5

² Khān, Sir Syed, The Causes of the Indian Revolt, edit by Frances W. Pritchett, Medical Hall Press, 1873, pp.17-18

³ Sultān, Why I Became a Christian, pp.9-11

⁴ Al-Qur'ān, Maryam 19:71-72

⁵ Al-Qur'ān, Hūd 11:118-119

⁶ Sultān, Why I became a Christian, p.19

⁷ Al-Ḥajjāj, Abī al-Ḥussain Muslim, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Book.1, Chapter.81, Ḥadīth.451

⁸ Ibn Kathīr, 'Imād ad-Dīn Ismā'īl ibn 'Umar, Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm, vol.5, p.252 ; Ibn Ḥanble, Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, Musnad Aḥmad, Ḥadīth.8675

⁹ Al-Qurān, Qaṣaṣ 28:23

¹⁰ Asfahānī, Muḥammad Rāghib, Al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur'ān, Dār al-Ma'rifah, Beirut, p.520

¹¹ Al-Qurān, Al-Baqarah 2:80

¹² Al-Qurān, Al-Anbiyā 21:101-102

¹³ 'Abdullah Yoṣuf, The Holy Qur'ān, King Fahd Holy Quran Printing Complex, 1987, p.159

¹⁴ Sultān, Why I Became a Christian, p.21

¹⁵ Muslim, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Book.1, Chapter.40, Ḥadīth.273

¹⁶ Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl, al-Jām'ie al-Ṣaḥīḥ, Book.60, Chapter.47, Ḥadīth.3435

¹⁷ Al-Khaṭīb, Muḥammad b. 'Abdullah, Mishkāṭ al-Maṣābiḥ, Book.1, Chapter.1, Ḥadīth.25

¹⁸ Romans, 10:9-13

¹⁹ Acts, 2:21

²⁰ The Gospel of Mark, 16:16

²¹ The Gospel of Matthew, 20:28



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- ²² Sulṭān, Why I Became a Christian, p.23
²³ Bukhārī, al-Jām‘e al- Ṣaḥiḥ, Book.81, Chapter.18, Ḥadīth.6463
²⁴ ‘Abdulbaqī, ‘Allama Fawād, Al- M’jam al-Mufaharis Alfaz Al-Qurān al-Karīm, Dār al-Kutub, Egypt, 1945, p.483
²⁵ The Gospel of Matthew, 20:8-16
²⁶ Romans, 9:14-16
²⁷ Sulṭān, Why I Became a Muslim, p.23
²⁸ Bukhārī, al-Jām‘e al- Ṣaḥiḥ, Book.55, Chapter.11, Ḥadīth.2753
²⁹ Khān, Dr. Muḥammad Muḥsin, Ṣaḥiḥ Al-Bukhārī Arabic-English, Dār al-Salām, Riādh, 1997, vol.4, 25
³⁰ 2 Chronicles, 20:20
³¹ The Gospel of Matthew, 12:46-50
³² Ibn Mājah, Muḥammad b. Yazīd, Sunan Ibn Mājah, Book.37, Chapter.37, Ḥadīth.4311
³³ Bukhārī, al-Jām‘e al- Ṣaḥiḥ, Book.60, Chapter.3, Ḥadīth.3340
³⁴ Gospel of Matthew, 27:46
³⁵ Proverbs, 21:18
³⁶ Romans, 6:1-23
³⁷ Al-Qurān, Al-Najam 53:38