

prayer. Anyone who has an imam like Hasan, why should he ask me for a prayer?"

*Hasan of Basra and the fire-worshipper*

Hasan had a neighbour named Simeon who was a fire-worshipper. Simeon fell ill and was at death's door. Friends begged Hasan to visit him; he called, to find him in bed, blackened with fire and smoke.

"Fear God," Hasan counselled him. "You have passed all your life amid fire and smoke. Accept Islam, that God may have mercy on you."

"Three things hold me back from becoming a Muslim," the fire-worshipper replied. "The first is, that you speak ill of the world, yet night and day you pursue worldly things. Secondly, you say that death is a fact to be faced, yet you make no preparation for death. In the third place, you say that God's face shall be seen, yet today you do everything contrary to His good pleasure."

"This is the token of those who know truly," Hasan commented. "Now if believers act as you describe, what have you to say? They acknowledge the unity of God; whereas you have spent your life in the worship of fire. You who have worshipped fire for seventy years, and I who have never worshipped fire—we are both carried off to Hell. Hell will consume you and me. God will pay

no regard to you; but if God so wills, the fire will not dare so much as to burn one hair of my body. For fire is a thing created by God; and the creature is subject to the Creator's command. Come now, you who have worshipped fire for seventy years; let us both put our hands into the fire, then you will see with your own eyes the impotence of fire and the omnipotence of God."

So saying, Hasan thrust his hand into the fire and held it there. Not a particle of his body was affected or burnt. When Simeon saw this he was amazed. The dawn of true knowledge began to break.

"For seventy years I have worshipped fire," he groaned. "Now only a breath or two remains to me. What am I to do?"

"Become a Muslim," was Hasan's reply.

"If you give it me in writing that God will not punish me," said Simeon, "then I will believe. But until I have it in writing, I will not believe."

Hasan wrote it down.

"Now order just witnesses of Basra to append their testimony."

The witnesses endorsed the document. Then Simeon wept many tears and proclaimed the faith. He spoke his last testament to Hasan.

"When I die, bid them wash me, then commit me to the earth with your own hands, and place this document in my hand. This document will be my proof."

Having charged Hasan thus, he spoke the attestation of faith and died. They washed his body, said the prayer over him, and buried him with the document in his hand. That night Hasan went to sleep pondering what he had done.

“How could I help a drowning man, seeing that I am drowning myself? Since I have no control over my own fate, why did I venture to prescribe how God should act?”

With this thought he fell asleep. He saw Simeon in a dream glowing like a candle; on his head a crown, robed in fine raiment, he was walking with a smile in the garden of Paradise.

“How are you, Simeon?” Hasan enquired.

“Why do you ask? You can see for yourself,” Simeon answered. “God Almighty of His bounty brought me nigh His presence and graciously showed me His face. The favours He showered upon me surpass all description. You have honoured your guarantee; so take your document. I have no further need of it.”

When Hasan awoke, he saw that parchment in his hand. “Lord God,” he cried, “I know well that what Thou doest is without cause, save of Thy bounty. Who shall suffer loss at Thy door? Thou grantest a Guebre of seventy years to come into Thy near presence because of a single utterance. How then wilt Thou exclude a believer of seventy years?”