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Is The Belief In An "Unschooled" Prophet Rooted In The Interpretation Of The Word "Ummi"?

The claim of Dr Sayyid `Abd al-Latif (who observes that the source of belief in an "unschooled" Prophet (SA) has been in the interpretation of the word "ummi"), is unfounded. This is because, firstly, the history of the Arabs and the Makkah at the advent of Islam, is decisive evidence of the fact that the Prophet (SA) was untaught.

Earlier, we have explained that the status of reading and writing in Hijaz at the advent of Islam, was such that the names of all the people familiar with reading and writing were recorded in the history, but no one had listed the Prophet (SA) among such people. Assuming that there was no reference to the question, nor any explanation thereof, Muslims following the unquestionable verdict of history, would have to accept that their Prophet (SA) was untaught.

Secondly, in the Holy Qur'an, there is another verse which is not less explicit than the verses of Surat "al Ar'af" containing the word "ummi". On the concept of "ummi" used in the verses of "Surat Al-A'raf", the opinion is divided among the Islamic interpreters of the Qur'an; but on the concept of the following verse which indicates unschooled or untaught Prophet (SA), there is no difference of opinion:

"And you did not read before it any book, nor did you write one with your right hand, for then those, who say untrue things, could have doubted (29:48). "

This verse makes it explicit that the Prophet (SA) neither read nor wrote before his prophethood. Islamic exegetes have generally given a similar interpretation of the verse. But Dr `Abd al-Latif claims that, the very verse has been misinterpreted.

He claims that the word "kitab" used in this verse, has a reference to such sacred books as the Tawrat (Old Testament) and the Injil (Bible). He claims that the verse suggests that until the revelation of the Holy Qur'an, the Prophet (SA) was unfamiliar with any sacred book, for such books were not available in

Arabic, and if the Prophet (SA) had read the books available then in a language other than Arabic, he would have been suspected and accused by the idle talkers.

This claim is not true. Contrary to its meaning nowadays widely used in Persian, the word "kitab" in Arabic language has been defined purely as "writing", be it a letter or a book, sacred or otherwise, or be it holy or otherwise. This word has been used in the Holy Qur'an repeatedly.

Occasionally, this word "kitab" has been used (in the Holy Qur'an) to signify a letter sent by one person to another, such as the one concerning the "Queen of Saba": "O Noble Men! I have received a revered letter from Sulayman (Solomon) "; and occasionally it is used in connection with an agreement concluded as a document between the two parties: "Slaves who wish to be freed as per an agreement, accede to their requests to conclude such contracts". At times the term has been used in connection with occult tablets and heavenly truths which tell scientific facts about the world events: "There is neither any thing green nor dry but (it is all) in a clear book ...(6:59). "

In the Holy Qur'an, only at places where the word "ahl" has been added to form "ahl al-kitab", a particular concept is meant.

"Ahl al-Kitab" signifies "the followers of a heavenly book." In the Surat al-Nisa' of the Holy Qur'an, verse 152 reads: "The followers of the heavenly book shall ask you to send unto them a letter from the heavens. " In this verse, the term has been employed at two places: at one place, in conjunction with the term "ahl" and at another place, it is used alone. Wherever the term "ahl" has been prefixed, it is meant "heavenly book" and wherever it is used alone it is meant "letter".

In addition, the construction of the sentence: "You did not write with your right hand" suggests: "You did neither read nor write and if you knew how to read and write, you would have been accused of copying from some other source; but since you did not know how to read or write, there was no room for such an accusation".

However, if the purport is that "You did not read the holy books since they were available in other languages", then, the verse would be under-stood as: "earlier you neither read nor wrote in other languages", which is not right, for only reading the books in those languages would have well justified the accusation, and also it would not have been necessary for him to have been able to write in those languages. If he had been able to write in those languages it would have justified the accusation, even though he should have written in his own language. Admittedly, here, there is a point which may confirm Dr `Abd al-Latif's view, even though neither he himself nor any one of the exegetists has given attention to this point.

In this holy verse, the word "tatlu" has been used, a word derived from the root "tilawah" which, as referred to in Raghīb's book: "Mufradat Alfaz al-Qur'an", is peculiar to reading the holy verses, and which contrasts with the generic term "Qira'ah" signifying "reading". Therefore, although the word "kitab" is applied commonly to "the holy and other books", the term "tatlu" is peculiar to reading "the Holy" verses.

Evidently, however, the reason that the word "tatlu" has been used here, is that the subject under discussion is the Qur'an. The term has been used in respect of all the texts for reading, ie, as if it should have been said to mean: "Now you read (tilawah) the Qur'an but you did not read any writing before the revelation of the Qur'an.

Another verse indicating the unschooling of the Prophet (SA), is verse 52 of the "Surat al-Shura' " (The Counsel):

"And thus We revealed to you a spirit by Our command. You did not know what a writing or a faith was ... (42:52)."

The verse suggests: "You were unfamiliar with the book or a writing until the Qur'an was revealed. "Dr Sayyid `Abd al-Latif has made no mention of this verse. He may observe that the term "kitab" as used in this verse, means "the holy texts", which existed in a language other than Arabic. The answer to this point, however, is the same as was referred to in the earlier verse.

For some reason, not clear to us, Islamic exegetes have maintained that "kitab" particularly refers to the Qur'an. Therefore, the interpretation of this verse is out of the scope of our logic.

Thirdly, the Islamic exegetes been unanimous regarding the meaning of the term "ummi". On the contrary, all the Islamic exegetes and scholars without any exception, have been unanimous on the unschooling of the Prophet (SA) and his non-acquaintance with reading and writing prior to his prophethood. This in itself is a conclusive evidence of the fact that the source of the Muslims' belief in the unschooling of the Prophet (SA) has not been the interpretation of the term "ummi". However, we have to discuss about the meaning of the word "ummi".

The Meaning of the word "Ummi"

Islamic exegetists have come up with three interpretations of the word "ummi ".

(i) Unschooled and unacquainted with writing

The majority of exegetes who favour this observation, have said that the word ummi is related to "umm" meaning "mother". The word "ummi" means a person who by birth is familiar with human written works and knowledge; or, it is related to "ummah" ie, who observes the customs of the majority, for the majority of people did not know about writing. Rather, only a few did. Likewise, the word " ummi" means, a man who is like the common people and ignorant.¹ Some have said that the meaning of "ummah" is "creation", and "ummi" is one who has remained in his original state, ie, the illiteracy. For evidence one should refer to a poem² by Al-A'sha. However, be it either a derivation of "umm" or "ummah" – or whatever meaning of "ummah" is preferred – the meaning of the term ummi is the same, ie, "untaught".

(ii) An inhabitant of Umm al-Qura

Those who favour this view associate the word with "Umm al-Qura", ie, Makkah. The Qur'anic verse 92 of Surat Al-An'am refers to Makkah as "Umm al-Qura":

...And that you may warn the (inhabitants of) Makkah and those (who live) around it (6:92). "

This possibility³ has, since ancient times, found its way in the interpretive literature, and is confirmed in a number of Shi'ah ahadith, although these very ahadith have been found to be un-authentic and have been said to be of Israelite origin.⁴ This possibility has, however, been rejected on the basis of certain proofs.⁵

One reason is that the word "Umm al-Qura" is not a proper noun, and has been applied to Makkah as a common attribute and not as a proper noun of Makkah. The word "Umm al-Qura" signifies the "centre of villages". Any point which serves as a centre of villages is known as "Umm al-Qura". From another Qur'anic verse, ie, verse 59 of the Surat Al-Qasas, it becomes clear that the word carries a descriptive rather than a nominative function:

"Your Lord is not like this that He kills the residents of the villages until He sends a prophet to them in the centre of the villages, reciting to them Our revelations."

It becomes evident that in the Qur'anic language, any point constituting the centre of an area⁶ is called its "Umm al-Qura".

Moreover, this word "Ummi" used by the Holy Qur'an, has been applied to non-Makkans. Verse 19 of Surat Ali `Imran says:

"...And say to those who have been given the Book and the unlearned people (non-Jewish and non-Christian Arabs): 'Do you submit yourselves?' ... (3:20). "

It then becomes evident that according to the custom of the time; and also in the language of the Holy Qur'an, all the Arabs who did not follow a heavenly book were referred to as "ummiyyin".

More important still is the fact that this word "ummi" was applied for the common Jews who were not educated. Verse 78 of Surat Al-Baqarah of the Holy Qur'an reads: '

"Some children of Israil are "ummi"; who do not know their Book except false hopes... (2:78)".

It is obvious that the Jews whom the Holy Qur'an refers to as "ummi" were not the inhabitants of Makkah, but rather, most of them were residents of Madinah or of its neighbourhood. Thirdly, if a word is associated with "Umm al-Qura", literary rules require that "qurawi" should be said in place of "ummi", for, according to the lexical rules governing attribution, when modifying the modifier or the modified, particularly when the modifier is "ab=father", "umm=mother", "ibn=son", or "bint=daughter", it modifies the

modified and not the modifier, just as when modifying "Abu Talib", "Abu Hanifah", "Banu Tamim", they are referred to as "Talibi", "Hanafi" and "Tamimi".

(iii) Arab polytheists who were not the followers of the Book

This view has existed among the exegetes of the ancient times. In Majma` al-Bayan, under verse 20 of Surat "Ali-`Imran" of the Holy Qur'an, "ummiyyin" has been placed against "Ahl al-Kitab" This view is described as that of the Companion and great exegete, `Abdullah ibn `Abbas. Under verse 78 of the Surat Al-Baqarah, Abu `Ubaydah states', a similar view.

It follows from what is understood from verse 75 of Surat Ali-`Imran that Al-Tabarsi himself has selected the meaning for the verse. In his book: "Al-Kashshaf", Al-Zamakhshari has provided a similar interpretation of this verse and of verse 75 of the Surat Ali-Imran. Fakhr al-Razi mentions the same possibility under the verse 78 of the Surat al-Baqarah and verse 20 of the Surat Ali-`Imran.

But the fact is that this meaning is not different from the first one. However, it is not correct that a people who do not follow a divine book, be referred to as "ummi" although they may be literate. This term has been applied to Arab polytheists because they were illiterate. What constituted the basis for applying this term to Arab polytheists was their unfamiliarity with reading and writing rather than their not following a heavenly book.

Hence, wherever this word has been used in the plural form and applied to Arab polytheists, this possibility has been mentioned: but wherever it has been used in the singular form and applied to the Holy Prophet (SA), no interpreter has said that the significance is that the Prophet (SA) did not follow one of the heavenly book. In this case, the possibilities are only two at the most.

One is that the Prophet (SA) was not familiar with handwriting, and the other was that he was from Makkah. Since, for the conclusive reasons enumerated above, the second possibility is ruled out, definitely the Prophet (SA) was called "ummi" because he had not been taught, nor did he know how to write.

Here, there is a fourth possibility in regard to the meaning of the word: this being that the word meant unfamiliarity with the texts of holy books.

This possibility, is the one that Dr Sayyid `Abd al-Latif has innovated, and that he confused it with the third one that we have mentioned, quoting the ancient exegetes. The aforementioned person says:

"The words "ummi" and "ummiyyin" have been used at several places (in the Holy Qur'an) but they have always been used to mean the same everywhere. Lexicographically the term "ummi" means a "newly-born baby" from a mother's womb. It is with reference to this state of living and life, that the word "ummi" came to imply: "one who can neither read nor write. The word "ummi" also means "a person who lived in "Umm al-Qura". "Umm al-Qura" means "the mother of cities", "capital city", and "metropolis". This was the

attribute the Arabs of the Prophet's (SA) time associated with Makkah. Therefore, whoever was from Makkah was referred to as "ummi".

Another area of application of the word "ummi" is to a person who has not been conversant with Semitic texts nor been a follower of Judaism or Christianity which has been referred to as "Ahl al-Kitab" in the Holy Qur'an. In the Holy Qur'an, the word "ummiyyin" was applied to the pre-Islamic Arabs who neither had a holy book nor followed the New Testament and the Old Testament, and that the word was used for Ahl al-Kitab.

While there are so many meanings for the word "ummi" it is not known why the exegetes and translators of the Holy Qur'an, Muslim or non-Muslim, have picked up the meaning namely, "a newly-born baby unaware to his environment" and interpreted it as illiterate and ignorant, and as a consequence, have introduced the pre-Islam inhabitants of Makkah as "ummiyyin", or "an illiterate people".

Firstly, since the earliest days, the Islamic exegetes have interpreted the words "ummi" and "ummiyyin" in three ways, and have come up with at least three possibilities. Contrary to Dr Sayyid `Abd al-Latif, Islamic exegetes have not given one single meaning.

Secondly, no one has said that the word "ummi" means a newly-born baby unaware of his surroundings "whose connotation is that a person who can neither read nor write. Basically, this is not applied to a newly-born baby, but rather to an adult who knows as much about the skills of reading and writing as when he is just newly-born. As referred to by logicians, the word signifies "absence and second nature". Islamic logicians would always mention this word as one of the examples of "absence and second nature" in books of logic.

Thirdly, it is not true to say: "the word is also used to mean a person who has no familiarity with ancient Semitic texts". What can actually be inferred from the sayings of early exegetes and lexicologists is that the plural form of the word (ummiyyin) has been used for the Arab polytheists who were generally illiterate, as compared with the "people of the book". The polytheists were perhaps given this humiliating title by the Jews and the Christians.

On the whole, it is illogical to call a people "ummi" who can read and write in their own language, just on the basis of unfamiliarity with a certain book or language. The root of the word is "umm" or "umma" and implies remaining in the same state as when one is born.

But why this word "ummi" has not been recognised as being rooted in "Umm al-Qura", although the possibility has been mentioned consistently, is because of numerous objections which have been mentioned earlier. The Indian scholar's amazement is therefore baseless. It is confirmed by the fact that in some other usages of this word, recorded in books of history and ahadith, there is no other meaning for it except "untaught". In the book: "Bihar al-Anwar", vol 16, p 119, it is narrated from the Holy Prophet (SA): "We are a people who neither read nor write". In vol 4 of his history book, under the biography of Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Malik, popularly known as Ibn Al-Zayyat, a minister of Al-Mu'tasim and Al-

Mutawakkil, Ibn Khallikan writes:

"Earlier he was among the secretaries of Al-Mu'tasim, the `Abbasid Caliph, and Ahmad ibn Shadi Al-Basri was the minister. Once a letter came to Al-Mu'tasim, which the minister read for the Caliph. The word "kala'" was in the letter and Al-Mu'tasim, who was not a knowledgeable person, asked his minister for its meaning. The minister didn't know the meaning either. The Caliph said: "An untaught Caliph and an ignorant minister". Then he asked for one of the secretaries to come. Ibn Al-Zayyat was present and came for explaining the meaning of the word. He explained through some other words which were closer to the meaning and stated their differences. This formed a prelude for him to become the Caliph's minister later on."

Here, the Caliph, who spoke the language of the ordinary people, meant "untaught" when he used the word "ummi". The poet Nizami says as given below:

Wisdom is inferior to the Messenger Ahmad,

The two worlds depend on the existence of Muhammad.

He is unschooled but stating in the most fluent way,

The inclusive knowledge from Adam to Jesus, I say.

In the keeping of a promise he is perfectly steadfast,

Ahead of all prophets he was though among them he was the last.

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1. Al-Raghib Al-Isfahani, Mufradat Alfaz al-Qur'an Al-Taqaddum al-'Arabi Press, November 1972, under the word "umm" and Exegesis of the Holy Quran : Majma' al-Bayan, under the verse 78 of Surat Al-Baqarah.
 2. Exegesis of the Holy Qur'an: "Majma' al-Bayan, verse 78 of "Surat Al-Baqarah ".
 3. Exegesis of the Holy Qur'an: Majma' al-Bayan, under the verse 75 of Surat Ali 'Imran and verse 157 of Surat Al-A'raf; and Tafsir al-Razi, under the verse 75 of Surat Al-A'raf.
 4. The Magazine published by the Astani Qudsi Razavi, Mashhad, issue no 2.
 5. Ibid
 6. One of the narrations confirms the word "ummi" as a derivative of "Umm al-Qura" meaning Makkah, although the word "Umm al-Qura" is a common attribute and not a proper noun. The narration states: "The Prophet was known as "Ummi" because he was an inhabitant of Makkah and Makkah is one of the "Umm al-Quras"
 7. The publication of the society of the Headclerks, issue of October 1965 (copied from the publication of the Ministry of Education and Training, September 1965).

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