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Is It Inferred From The Qur'an That The Prophet Used To Read And Write?

According to Dr Sayyid `Abd al-Latif, it can explicitly be understood from some of the Qur'anic verses that the Prophet (SA) could both read and write: In Surat Ali-`Imran, verse 164, we read:

"Truly Allah conferred a benefit upon the believers when He raised among them a Messenger from among themselves, reciting to them His communications and purifying them, and teaching them the Book and the Wisdom, although before that they were in manifest error (3: 164)."

Dr. `Abd al-Latif says:

"As the Holy Qur'an clearly states, the foremost duty of the Prophet (SA) was teaching the Qur'an to his followers, and it is certain that the minimum capability required for the one who wants to teach the contents of a book to others is, again as the Qur'an states explicitly, being able to make use of the pen or, at least, being able to read what has been written by the pen."

This reasoning seems queer, as, firstly, what all Muslims unanimously believe in, and he desires to prove the vice versa, is that the Holy Prophet (SA) neither could write nor read before the appointment to prophethood. Such a reasoning at the most can prove that the Holy Prophet (SA) was able to read and write during the period of his prophethood. This is agreed by Sayyid Murtada, Sha'bi and some other people.

Secondly, even as regards the period of prophethood, Dr `Abd al-Latif's reasoning is ineffective; for example, pen, paper, blackboard, drawing, etc, are required when a teacher is to teach reading and writing or to teach mathematics for which he has to solve himself so that the students may learn. However, there is no need for such tools for prophets who teach metaphysics, ethics and halal and haram matters.

Among Mashsha'in philosophers (peripatetic philosophers) were called so because they used to walk when teaching, and the learners had to take notes in order not to forget the matters taught. The Holy

Prophet (SA) too frequently advised his followers to write down his sayings. He used to say: "Record the knowledge", and when he was asked, "how?", he answered, "By writing down".¹ He also said: "May Allah grant happiness to the servant who hears what I say, records it (in his mind) and conveys it to the one who has not heard me saying that."²

It is in the traditions that the Messenger of Allah twice announced this statement, "O God bless my successors". "Who are your successors?", he was asked, and he replied, "They are those who come after me, who learn my sayings and traditions and teach them to others"³

He also said: "Among the rights of a child on his father is to choose him a good name, teach him writing and choose him a spouse when matured."⁴

The Holy Qur'an states explicitly:

"O believers! whenever you contract a debt with one another for a fixed time, then write it down; and let a scribe write it down between you with equity ... (2:282)."

Thus, based on the commands of Allah (SWT) and His Prophet (SA), Muslims were bound to acquire the noble art of reading and writing in order to preserve their religious heritage; to fulfil their duties towards the rights of their children; and to administer well their worldly affairs. This led to the rise of "the pen movement", which stimulated the people among whom the literate were only a few, to seek knowledge and to acquire the skills of reading and writing with such an enthusiasm that some of them learned few languages in Madinah and could propagate the message of Islam throughout the world in different languages.

History tells us that the Holy Prophet (SA) made the captives of the Battle of Badr free on compensation. Some of them were poor, and were freed without paying while some others had the ability to teach writing and each of them were obliged to teach writing to ten children of Madinah, in return for their freedom.⁵ This was the extent to which the Holy Prophet (SA) insisted on the learning of reading and writing and on the acquiring of knowledge. But this does not necessarily mean that he had to know and employ these two skills in order to call people to Islam and propagate his religion.

Dr `Abd al-Latif says:

"In the first surah of the Holy Qur'an, Allah makes mention of `pen' and `writing'. Isn't this the explicit mentioning of a proof that the Prophet of Islam knew reading and writing and that he made use of them? How was it possible that the Holy Prophet encouraged people seek knowledge and become literate, whilst he himself paid no attention to reading and writing? Although he always had a pioneering role in any activity."

This is, again, a strange reasoning. The initial verses of the above-mentioned s6rah indicate, of course, that these were revealed to a servant of Allah (SWT), who was in charge of guiding Allah's other servants, and that the Prophet (SA), who received them at his holy heart, acknowledged the value of

reading and writing for men. But these verses never suggest that either Allah (SWT) or the Prophet (SA) dealt with reading, writing, pen or paper.

Dr `Abd al-Latif also says: "The Holy Prophet was the initiator in practising all that he himself ordered. How could he then order this without doing it himself?"

It is, as if to say that a physician who prescribes a medicine for a patient, should first use the medicine himself. Of course, if the physician falls sick and is in need of the same type of medicine, he will definitely take it just as his patient does.

But how about the reverse – when the physician isn't sick and consequently not in need of such a medicine? Here we should see whether the Holy Prophet, like others who were in need of learning the arts of reading and writing in order to attain perfection and to remove their defects, had to acquire these two arts and yet, didn't act upon what he himself ordered, or was he in a state that rendered him independent of them.

The Holy Prophet was the forerunner in matters of worship, devotion, piety, honesty, truth, good-temperedness, democracy, humility and other good manners. For all of these were counted towards his perfection and the lack of these was a defect. But the issue of so-called 'literacy' doesn't belong to this category.

The unusual value of being literate for human beings is because the literacy helps them benefit from one another's knowledge. Writing is essentially the conventional symbols used by people to express themselves. In fact through the familiarity with writing, knowledge can be transmitted from one person to another, from one tribe to another and from one generation to another.

Thus, man preserves his knowledge from extinction. This is why being literate is considered equal to knowing languages, i.e, the more number of languages the man knows, the more means he has at his disposal to acquire knowledge from others.

Both knowing languages and being literate are keys to the acquisition of knowledge rather than the "knowledge" in its real sense. The knowledge implies that the man comes to know of a fact or a law which enjoys reality in the world of existence.

Natural sciences, logic, and mathematics are considered as knowledge because they serve the man to discover a real, creative and cause effect type of relationship among subjective things. But knowing words, grammar and the like are not in themselves knowledge, for these will not make us aware of true relationship between the objects. Instead, they will help us to know a series of conventional matters which do not go beyond the limit of assumption. Knowing these matters means knowing the keys to knowledge rather than "knowledge" itself.

Of course, a series of real phenomena such as the development of words and compositions, which represent the evolution of thought and take place on the basis of natural laws, appear in the context of such conventional matters; and needless to say that it is a part of philosophy and knowledge to know

these natural laws. Consequently, the value of literacy lies in the fact that the man can find the key to others' knowledge.

Now, let's see whether acquiring knowledge is limited to man's getting the key to the knowledge of others and making use of it. Does the Prophet have to make use of the knowledge of mankind? If so, then what happens to genius and initiative and to the direct acquisition of knowledge from nature? It actually happens that the most inferior way of seeking knowledge is through the sayings and writing of others, for not only the seeker's personality does not play its role in this process, but also in man's writings there can be found illusions and realities interwoven.

The famous French philosopher, Descartes, after having published a series of articles, earned a worldwide fame and his sayings gave rise to the amazement and admiration of one and all. One of those who had read Descartes' articles and was astounded by them, and whose viewpoint was the same as of Dr Sayyid `Abd al-Latif, thought that Descartes had found a valuable treasure of books and manuscripts and had received all his knowledge and information from these sources. He met Descartes and requested him to show his library. Descartes directed him to a place where he had dissected the dead body of a calf, and addressed the man: "This is my library. I have gained all my knowledge from these books".

The late Sayyid Jamal al-Din Asadabadi used to say:

"It is quite strange that some people spend a long life studying the books and writings by their fellow-human beings under the light of a lamp, but if they close the books one night and study the same lamp, they will acquire much more knowledge."

Nobody is born learned, all people are ignorant at the beginning and they become learned little by little. In other words, every person, with the exception of Allah (SWT), is ignorant himself but turns out to be knowledgeable by virtue of some other forces, causes and means. Thus, every individual is in need of an instructor – an inspiring force. Allah (SWT) speaks of the Holy Prophet (SA) in this respect in the following verse:

"Did He not find you an orphan and give you shelter? Did He not find you unable to see and show you the way? Did He not find you in need and make you free from need?" (93: 6-8)

But, in principle, who and what should the instructor be? Does the man out of necessity have to acquire knowledge from another of his fellow beings? If so, then he would essentially have the key to the knowledge of others (ie, "literacy") at his disposal. Is the man not in a position to be the initiator himself? Can he not study the book of nature and creation independent of others? Is the man not in a position to commune with the ghayb (invisible) and the kingdom of heaven, and Allah (SWT) directly becomes his instructor and guide? The Holy Qur'an clarifies this in respect of the Prophet (SA):

"Nor does he speak out of desire. This is naught but revelation that is revealed; the Lord of Mighty Power has taught him (53: 3-5). "

Imam `Ali (AS) speaks about the Holy Prophet (SA):

"Allah (SWT) had appointed His most honourable angel to look after him since his very childhood. The angel led him to noble ways and manners and the best morals of the world."⁶

In his outstanding "Al-Muqaddamah (Introduction)", Ibn Khaldun regards the perfection of writing to lie in the fact that man leads a social life, ie, members of human society need the knowledge of one another. He depicts the evolutionary course of writing in different civilizations and after pointing out the advent of writing in Hijaz, continues thus:

"In the early days of Islam, writing enjoyed its initial forms so far as its technical aspect was concerned, and the ways of writings of Prophet's Companions were undoubtedly defective. However, their followers and successors retained the same ways of writing and regarded them as sacred and honourable in transcribing the Holy Qur'an, without making any alterations, though some ways were in distinct opposition to the rules of writing. Consequently, some of the Qur'anic terms and phrases remained in a specific form of writing."

Ibn Khaldun adds:

"We should not be mistaken about the difference between perfection in technical and practical matters, including prescribed forms of writing, which are relative and dependent on means of living, and the absolute perfection, the lack of which creates real defects in man's humanity."

He then sets forth the issue of the Prophet's unletteredness and concludes:

"The Prophet was untaught, and being untaught was an accomplishment for him, for he had received his knowledge from the heavens. But for us, being untaught means defect and imperfection, for it indicates our very ignorance."⁷

Other Qur'anic verses to which Dr `Abd al-Latif refers are 3rd and 4th verses of Surat al-Bayyinah. He says: "It is quite strange that the translators and commentators of the Holy Qur'an have been heedless of these verses about the Holy Prophet (SA), in which Allah (SWT) says:

'(Muhammad) a messenger from Allah, reciting pages purified, therein true Books'. We should take into consideration the fact that in these verses it is not mentioned that the Holy Prophet (SA) narrated the holy "suhuf" (ie, pages) by heart. It is rather stipulated that he read from the texts. "(98:3-4)

The answer to this reasoning will be clear when the meanings of the two words (ie, "Sahifah" and "yatlu") in the above-mentioned verses are understood. The meaning of the verses is: "The Holy Prophet (SA) reads to the people some purified pages on which there are true and everlasting writings." Now, since the "pages" here means the very sheets on which the Qur'anic verses were recorded, it is obvious that the Holy Prophet (SA) recited the Holy Qur'an for the people.

The word "yatlu" (from the root "tilawah") does not have the sense, "reading from a text" and nowhere has it been so employed. A consideration of various applications of the words "tilawah" and "qira'ah" makes it

clear that not every kind of expression can be called "tilawah" or "qira'ah". Rather, these words are employed in cases where the material read is related to a certain text, regardless of being read from memory or from the text.

For instance, reciting the Holy Qur'an is both "tilawah" and "qira'ah" whether it is recited from the text of the Qur'an or from one's memory. There is a difference, of course, between the two, that is, "tilawah" is used when reading a holy text but "qira'ah" can be applied to any reading, holy or unholy sort of written material. As an example, in case of reading Sa'di's "Gulistan" only "qira'ah" can be used, and not "tilawah".

At any rate, whether one reads from the text or from the memory, it does not have anything to do with the concepts of "tilawah" and "qira'ah". Thus, the above-mentioned verses indicate no more than the fact that the Prophet (SA) read to the people the Qur'anic verses which were recorded on some sheets. And there was essentially no need for the Prophet (SA) to read the verses of the Qur'an from the text while hundreds of Muslims recite them from the memory. Had the Prophet (SA) not memorized the Holy Qur'an? In fact, Allah (SWT) had guaranteed his memory. In Surat Al-'A`la, the Holy Qur'an says:

"We shall make you recite so you shall not forget (87:6)."

It is thus clear that one cannot conclude from the Qur'anic verses that the Prophet (SA) of Allah (SWT) was able to read and write. Rather, contrary to this fact can be concluded. Even if we conclude on the basis of the Qur'anic verses to that effect, it would be something belonging to the prophetic period, whereas Dr Sayyid `Abd al-Latif's claim is that the Prophet (SA) was able to read and write before his appointment as a prophet.

1. Bihar al-Anwar, new impression, vol 2, p 151.

2. Al-Kafi, vol 1, p 403.

3. Bihar al-Anwar, vol 2, p 144

4. Wasa'il al-Shi'a, vol 3, p 134

5. Husayn Al-Diyar Bakri, Tarikh al-Khami", vol 1, p 395; and "Al-Sirah al-Halabiyyah", vol 2, p 204

6. Nahj al-Balaghah" Sermon No 190

7. Ibn Khaldun, Al Muqaddamah (Introduction)", Ibrahim Hilmi Press, p 494, 495.

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