

Approaches to the Understanding of the Qur'an

Now that the necessity of understanding the Qur'an has been confirmed, let us see what are the ways of understanding this book. Generally for the purpose of a profound understanding of any book it is necessary to study it in three ways:

1. Authentication

At this stage, we want to know to what extent the relationship of a book with its author is authentic. Suppose we want to study the *Diwan-Hafiz*, or the *Ruba'iyat* of 'Umar Khayyam. At first, we have to see whether the work which is attributed to Hafiz, wholly belongs to him, or whether a part of it is Hafiz's work and the rest is an apocryphal annexation to it. Similarly in the case of 'Umar Khayyam, and others too, we must judiciously scrutinize their works.

It is here that the matter of examination of manuscripts --and for that matter the oldest of them-- becomes relevant. Thus we see that none of these books can dispense with such a treatment. The *Diwan-e-Hafiz* printed by the late Qazvini, which has been based on some of the most authentic manuscripts of Hafiz's work, varies greatly from the ordinary editions of Hafiz, printed in Iran and Bombay, which are usually found in homes. The editions of Hafiz's works published during the last thirty or forty years contain as much as twice the amount of Hafiz's original works.

In view of certain modern manuscript experts of repute, they are fake; although we occasionally come across in them some verses which match the sublime heights of Hafiz's poetry. Likewise when we study the quatrains attributed to 'Umar Khayyam, we shall find nearly two hundred quatrains of the same poetical standard with only minor differences usually possible even among the authentic verses of a single poet.

However, if we look back at the history of Khayyam's times, we shall notice that the number of quatrains attributed to him may perhaps be less than twenty. The authenticity of the rest of them is either doubtful, or may with certainty be said to belong to other poets.

It means that the first step towards the research study of any book is to see to what extent the book in our hands is authentic, whether all the things recorded on its pages are genuine, or if only a part of it is authentic. Moreover, what criteria and standards should be employed in order to judge the authenticity and genuineness of authorship? By what logic can the authenticity of any book be totally rejected or affirmed?

The Qur'an is absolutely exempt from all such criteria that may be applicable to all worldly books. It is regarded as the exclusively singular book since the ancient times. No book of ancient days has remained above doubt to such extent despite a long lapse of several hundred years. No one can ever say about it that such and such a surah has a questionable authenticity or such and such a verse that is present in such and such a manuscript is missing from another manuscript.

The Qur'an stands above the notions of manuscript reading. There is no place for the slightest doubt that all of the verses that exist in the Qur'an are those conveyed to Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah (S) who communicated them as the miraculous Word of God. Nobody can ever claim that another version of the Qur'an existed anywhere, or still exists.

There has not been any Orientalist either who would begin the study of the Qur'an by saying, "let us trace from the earliest of the manuscripts of the Qur'an to see what was included in it and what was not." The Qur'an is absolutely free from this kind of investigation necessary in case of such books as the Bible, the Torah, or the Avesta, or the Shahnameh of Ferdowsi, or the Gulistan of Sa'di and every other ancient or not so ancient work.

Only for the study of the Qur'an no such questions arise, and the Qur'an is far above the usual norms of authenticity and the craft of manuscript reading. Moreover, besides the fact that the Qur'an is one of the heavenly scriptures and has been regarded by its followers as the most basic and authentic proof of the Prophet's (S) claim to prophethood, and as the greatest of his miracles, the Qur'an, unlike the Torah, was not revealed at one time and was not subject to later difficulties in distinguishing the true manuscript.

The verses of the Qur'an were revealed gradually during a span of twenty-three years. From the very first day, the eager Muslims memorized its verses, preserved and recorded them. Those were the days when the Muslim society was quite a simple society. No other book existed besides the Qur'an, and the Muslims were inevitably inclined to memorize its verses.

Their clear, unmarked minds and their powerful memory, their general ignorance about reading and writing, all these factors assisted them in acquiring and retaining their information regarding the Qur'an. This is the reason why the message of the Qur'an, which was so congenial to their sensibilities and their natural propensities, got effectively imprinted on their hearts like inscription on stone.

Since they believed it to be the Word of God, it was sacred to them also. They couldn't permit themselves that a single word or even a letter of it be altered or replaced in its text. They tried to acquire

the nearness to God by reciting its verses. It should be noted here that from the very early days the Prophet (S) had engaged a group of scribes for the purpose of writing down the Qur'an, who were known as the "Scribes of the Revelation."

This should be regarded as one of the merits in favour of the Qur'an from which all other ancient books are excluded. The absence of any alteration and change in the Word of God was on account of this process of writing and recording from the very beginning.

The other reason responsible for the popularity of the Qur'an among the people was its extraordinary, supernatural literary and artistic dimension depicted in its rhetoric and eloquence. It was this strong literary attraction towards the Qur'an, which had an appeal for the people, that prompted them to immediately memorize its verses.

But unlike other literary works like the Diwan-e-Hafiz and poems of Rumi, which are exposed to meddling by admirers who think they are improving on the original, nobody could ever give himself the permission of meddling with the sacred text; for the Qur'an immediately declared in one of its verses:

وَلَوْ تَقَوَّلَ عَلَيْنَا بَعْضَ الْأَقَاوِيلِ لَأَخَذْنَا مِنْهُ بِالْيَمِينِ ثُمَّ لَقَطَعْنَا مِنْهُ الْوَتِينَ

Had he [the Prophet (S)] invented against Us any sayings, We would have seized him by the right hand, then We would surely have cut his life vein. (69:44-46)

There are several other verses in the Qur'an that forbid forgery in relation to the Word of God. The gravity of this sin as stressed by the Qur'an had profound impression upon minds and served as a severe discouragement in this regard. In this way, before any type of alterations could have taken place in its verses, they were repeated often, thus reaching a stage that it was impossible to increase, diminish or alter even a single word in this heavenly book.

Accordingly, there is neither any need of any discussion about the Qur'an from the point of view of authenticity, nor does any scholar of the Qur'an throughout the world see any necessity of such a discussion. However, I think, it is necessary to remind the readers about the fact that, because of the rapid expansion of the Islamic domain and distance of the major part of the population living far away from Medina, which was the center of *huffaz* (those who memorized) of the Qur'an and the Companions of the Prophet, there arose the danger of occurrence of advertent or willful gradual alteration in the Qur'anic text.

But the prompt dexterity and timely awareness on the part of early Muslims averted this danger. Within the first five decades, they utilized the services of the Sahabah (the Companions of the Prophet) and those of the *huffaz* of the Qur'an for the purpose of averting the chances of conscious or inadvertent alterations in the text of the Qur'an. They distributed approved copies of the Qur'an from Medina to the

surrounding regions. They thus checked any chances of wrongdoing, especially on the part of the Jews, who are well-known champions in this field.

2. Analytical Study

During this stage of study and analysis of a book, it is essential to understand these things: the subject it deals with, the goal that it pursues, its outlook regarding the world, its point of view concerning man and society, its style and treatment of the subject—whether the treatment of the subject is in an intellectual and scholarly manner, or whether it has its own characteristic style.

One more question that is relevant in this context is whether this book contains any message and guidance for humanity or not. If the answer to this question is in the affirmative, then what is the message that it conveys?

The first group of questions are, of course, concerned with the point of view and outlook of the book regarding man and universe, about life and death etc. In other words, these questions are associated with the, world-outlook of the book, and in terms of Islamic philosophy, with its *al-hikmat al-nazariyyah* (theoretical wisdom).

But the second group of questions is concerned with the perspective of future of mankind offered by the book. They deal with the suggested basis for moulding the human kind and human societies. This aspect may be regarded as the “message” of the book.

This sort of understanding is, however, concerned with the subject of the book, and is relevant in regard to all kinds of books, whether it is the medical treatise of Ibn Sina, or if it is the Gulistan of Sa'di. It is possible that a book may lack an outlook as well as a message, or it may contain an outlook but not a message, or it may contain both.

Regarding the analytical study of the Qur'an we shall have to see, in general, what sort of problems does the Qur'an deal with, and what is its manner of presenting them. What is its manner of argument and its approach to various problems?

Does the Qur'an, being the defender, presenter and protector of faith, and its message being a religious message, view reason as a rival to its teachings, and clings to a defensive posture against it, or whether it considers reason as a supporter and protector of faith and relies upon its power? These questions and various other queries, arise during the analytical study of the Qur'an.

3. Study of the Sources of Ideas

At this stage, i.e. after verification of authenticity of the authorship of a book, and after thorough study and analysis of its contents, we come to the stage of exploring whether the contents of the book comprise of its author's own original ideas, or, the ideas have been borrowed from some other source.

For instance, in studying Hafiz's works, after verifying the authenticity of the verses and making their analytical study, we have to see whether these themes, ideas and thoughts that have been incorporated into Hafiz's poetry and poured into the moulds of his words, phrases, couplets, language and style, are actually the creations of Hafiz, or whether only the words and phrases and the beauty, art and craftsmanship reflected in the verses come from Hafiz, whereas the thoughts and ideas belong to someone else, or have been borrowed from another source.

After ascertaining his artistic originality, the intellectual originality of Hafiz's works has also to be established.

This kind of study regarding Hafiz, or any other author, implies the study of the source and roots of the author's ideas and thought. This sort of study is secondary to an analytical study; that is, firstly the contents of the author's thought should be completely understood, and afterwards an attempt should be made to identify its roots and sources.

Otherwise, the result of one's effort will be something like the works of certain writers of history of various sciences, who write without any thorough knowledge of the subject, or similar to the works of those writers of philosophical books, who undertake, for instance, a comparative study of Ibn Sina and Aristotle, without any knowledge of either.

After superficial comparison and on discovering some literal similitudes between the works of the two great thinkers, they immediately sit down to pass a quick judgment. Although, for the purpose of a comparative study, very deep and profound knowledge of the ideas and thoughts of both of the philosophers is required. A lifetime of study is necessary for such a task; otherwise, it has no more value than can be given to blind imitative conjectures.

For the study and understanding of the Qur'an, an analytical study must be followed by a comparative and historical study. That is, the contents of the Qur'an should be compared with other books that existed at that time, specially the religious ones. For the purpose of such a comparison, it is essential to keep in mind the conditions and relations of the Arabian peninsula with other parts of the world, and the number of educated Arabs living in Mecca at the time.

Only then we can arrive at an estimation of the influence of other books of those times on the contents of the Qur'an, and if we find something common in them, discover its proportions. We can then see whether the material that has been borrowed from other books is used in an original manner or not. Does the Qur'an go even further to the extent of playing a role in amending the contents of those books and setting right the errors occurring in them?

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