

Could the Prophet (peace be upon him) read?

The purpose of this paper is to show that like all prophets and messengers before him, Sayyiduna Muhammad (peace be upon him) could read and write. To commence, the issue will be put in its rightful context, which is the rank of the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in Islam. Then the rest of the paper will conclusively prove the issue from the Qur'an and Sunna.

The Qur'an: The Final Book of Guidance.

Allah sent countless divine revelations to mankind throughout the course of history. Unfortunately, all of them were changed and distorted by human hands. Why did they change? Because (i) the responsibility to look after it was with the prophet and his followers (ii) they were not always memorised. The Qur'an states:

Then woe to those who write the Book with their own hands and then say, "This is from Allah" in order to purchase it with a little price. Woe to them for what their hands have written and woe to them for that they have earned. (2: 79).

From the Jews are those who altered the words from their [correct] places... (4:46).

With the Qur'an – the last book sent to the Last Messenger – Allah took steps to ensure that it would be protected from change and that no one would doubt its divine nature.

Steps to secure the Qur'an.

Our Lord took countless several steps to ensure the Final Word would be protected. For example, Allah took responsibility for its preservation:

Verily we revealed the Remembrance (i.e. the Qur'an) and verily We are its protectors. (15:9)

Also, Allah made the Qur'an easy to remember:

We have made the Quran easy to remembrance, so is there anyone that will remember? (54:17)

Importantly, Allah wanted there to be no doubt that the Qur'an was divine and not man-written. So he ensured that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him):

- (i) was not seen to read and write in public. Otherwise, people would have assumed he wrote it.
- (ii) was not taught by anyone else. Otherwise people would think the Qur'an has come from his teachers.

The Qur'an perfectly highlights this point when Allah states:

'Neither did you (O Muhammad) read any book before it (this Quran) nor did you write any book whatsoever with your right hand. Otherwise, the followers of falsehood might have doubted' (29:48)

Our Prophet's knowledge

This analysis has shown so far that in order to protect the Qur'an, it was extremely important that the Prophet (peace be upon him) was not seen to read and write in public. However, there is a big difference between: 'not being able to read and write' and 'not being seen to be able to read and write'. If no one has seen Zaid swim, it doesn't automatically mean he cannot swim. Illiteracy is a defect and all prophets and messengers are free from such defects and shortcomings.

Two areas of concern.

There are two areas which have left some Muslims confused about the reading of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

1. The First Revelation.

It was in the blessed month of Ramadan that the Messenger (peace be upon him) was first granted the Holy Qur'an. Whilst in seclusion in the Cave of Hira, Jibril (peace be upon him) brought him the first words of the Qur'an, 'Read'. Unfortunately, the initial reaction of our Messenger (when he received this first revelation) has been misinterpreted by some Muslims. Whereas it is clear the Messenger said 'I shall not read', some have suggested he said: 'I cannot read'.

2. The Meaning of Ummi.

Furthermore, confusion exists over the exact meaning of the word '*Ummi*', used in the Qur'an to describe the Perfect Messenger (peace be upon him). Some have translated this word to mean 'unlettered', 'illiterate' and even 'ignorant', God forbid.

So this paper will deal with both concerns and project the correct interpretation.

a. The First Revelation.

Whilst in seclusion in Hira, Jibril (peace be upon him) appeared and instructed the Prophet (peace be upon him), 'Recite'. Thrice the Prophet responded with the words '*Ma ana bi-Qari'in*'.

Some Muslims have translated this to mean 'I cannot recite' or 'I am not a reciter'. This suggests that the Messenger did not know how to read and that he was illiterate.

Ma ana bi-Qari'in does not mean 'I cannot read'. Consider two similar examples from the Quran to prove this point, as highlighted by M.I.H. Pirzada:

The word *qari'in* in the phrase *ma ana bi qari'in*, is in the form of the 'active present participle'. Generally, when the 'active present participle' is negated, it doesn't negate the strength, ability and capability of performing the action of the verb; rather, it merely denotes that the action of the verb is not being performed due to some other reason. In verse 4 of Surah Kafirun (109) of the Quran it's stated:

"Wa la ana 'abidun ma 'abadtum"

As the word used in this verse is in the form of the 'active present participle', this phrase can also have three meanings; 'I am not a worshipper of what you worship', 'I do not worship what you worship' and 'I will not worship what you worship'. No one has translated this verse as 'I do not have the ability to worship the idols you worship'. What this actually means is that the ability and capability of worshipping the idols exists, but, worshipping idols will not be pursued because they are not worthy of worship. If the ability was not there in the first place, then there would have been no reward for this statement. It is like a blind man saying that he has never seen a non-mahram woman. There is neither any virtue in this statement nor any reward, since the original capability of performing such an act is not present.

In addition to this example, consider the incident of Habil and Qabil, the two sons of Prophet Adam, mentioned in the glorious Quran. It states that Habil said to Qabil:

"Even if you do raise your hand against me to kill me, I am not going to raise my hand (ma ana bi-basitin) against you to kill you. For, truly, I fear Allah, the Lord of all the worlds." (5:28)

Here, also the negation of Habil of not raising his hand against his brother to kill him has been mentioned using the 'active present participle'. The phrase used is *ma ana bi basitin* (which has the same grammatical structure as *ma ana bi qari'in*). This does not mean that Habil didn't have the strength or ability to raise his hand; rather, he would not do as such because he feared Allah. Furthermore, al-Qurtubi in his exegesis writes that according to the vast majority of the exegetes of the Quran, Habil was much stronger than Qabil. It is for this reason that whilst Habil was asleep, Qabil struck him with a rock causing his death.

So from the Qur'an, we can show that to translate *Ma ana bi Qari'in* as 'I cannot read' is wrong and inaccurate. What the Prophet (peace be upon him) really said was 'I shall not read.'

Why did he not read?

Because Jibril did not take the name of Allah for the first three times. Only when he said 'Recite in the name of your Lord' did the Prophet react! M. I. H. Pirzada writes:

Only Allah knows the actual motives and wisdoms behind the Prophet not reading at that auspicious moment of receiving the first divine revelation. However one of them could be that since it is necessary to begin every chapter of the Quran with the name of Allah and Jibril, in the first 3 instances, merely said 'read' without the name of Allah, the Prophet refused to read saying, "I will not read." In other words, the Prophet is clarifying that if he were to instruct all his followers to begin every action with the name of Allah, how is it possible that he himself begins this divine message and starts to read without invoking the name of Allah.

The Ahl al-Sunna correctly translate '*Ma ana bi-Qari'in*' as 'I shall not read' so that the dignity of Jibril and the Prophet are preserved. M.I.H. Pirzada writes:

Consider the situation where there is an illiterate person standing before me who cannot read nor write and I ask him to read. If I am aware that he cannot read then by asking him to do so, I am actually insulting him since he will not be able to read and will be embarrassed in front of the audience. On the other hand, if I am unaware of the fact that he cannot read then by asking him to do so, I am actually insulting myself since I am asking a person to do something that he does not have the ability to do. In the same manner, if Jibril was aware that the Prophet could not read, then (God forbid) he is insulting the Prophet. Conversely if Jibril is not aware that the Prophet cannot read, then (God forbid) he is insulting himself.

b. The Prophet (peace be upon him) as *Ummi*.

In the Holy Qur'an, Allah describes the fortunate believers as the ones who: '...follow the Messenger, the Prophet, the *Ummi*...' (7: 157).

In relation to the Prophet, some have translated this as someone who cannot read and write. But in the verse, would Allah mention several excellent traits, followed by a negative one?

All prophets are literate.

Prophet Adam (peace be upon him)

Prophet Adam (peace be upon him) continued to cry over his mistake for years on end, however, the glad tidings of acceptance of his repentance did not come.

Then one day, Prophet Adam said, "O Lord! I ask you for the sake of Muhammad that You forgive me." Allah replied, "O Adam! How have you come to know of Muhammad when I have not caused him to be born yet?" Prophet Adam said, "O Lord! When You created me I raised my head and saw that on the throne it was written *la ilaha illallahu Muhammadur Rasoolullah*. So I understand that the name to accompany yours would only be of the most beloved to You of all creation." Upon this, Allah stated, "you have spoken the truth, O Adam. He is the most beloved of all creation to Me. And since you ask Me for his sake, then I have forgiven you. And if Muhammad was not, then I would not have created you." The particular incident of Prophet Adam reading from the throne occurred well before the time when he was taught the names of all things and the angels as well as the Shaytan were challenged to mention them. (2:31-33)

Prophet Musa (peace be upon him)

Concerning Prophet Musa, Allah states in the Quran:

And We wrote about everything for him on the Tablets (of the Torah) as an admonition and making all things clear. 'Hold to them strongly, and command your people to adopt the best in it, I will show you the home of the deviators! (7:145)

There would only be purpose in writing down for Musa if he could read.

Prophet Isa (peace be upon him)

Concerning Prophet Isa, Allah relates what he uttered as a baby in the lap of his mother:

He said, 'I am indeed a servant of Allah. He has given me the Book and made me a Prophet (19:30).

There would only be purpose in a book for Isa if he could read. M.I.H Pirzada writes:

If Prophet Adam could read the declaration of faith written on the throne, Prophet Musa could read the Torah written on the Tablets and Prophet Isa spoke divine revelation in his mother's lap, does it make sense that our beloved Prophet, who is the leader and Imam of all the Prophets, could not read the divine revelation even at the age of forty years? Moreover, previous Prophets were taught by Allah to read before the annunciation of prophet hood? This scenario does not suit the grandeur and is not befitting to the status of the noble Prophet.

What is the correct meaning of *Ummi*?

a. Imam al-Sha'rawi writes that *Ummi* means 'not taught by humans, but by Allah directly.' Allah didn't want any human to take credit for the great wisdom and intellect of the Final Prophet.

b. One who has an illiterate community. The Qur'an uses the word *Ummi* to describe the Umma of the Prophet:

It is He who raised up among the unlettered people (*Ummiyin*) a Messenger from them to recite His Revelations to them and purify them and teach them the Book and Wisdom, even though before that they were in open error. (62:2)

c. *Ummi* is a reference to Umm al-Qura, namely Makka. The Prophet (peace be upon him) was Makkan born.

d. The Prophet (peace be upon him) was like a mother (*Umm*) in compassion and mercy.

e. *Ummi* means gentile. Namely, the Prophet did not belong to the descendants of the Jews.

Could the Prophet (peace be upon him) read?

*When the Treaty of Hudaibiyya was being finalised, Ali was instructed to write the agreement. He wrote: Then Alī wrote:

هذا ما اصطاح عليه محمد رسول الله 'This is the treaty formed by Muhammad, the Messenger of Allāh.'

Suhayl told him to remove it. He said that if he accepted him as Messenger, there would be no need for the treaty in the first place.

Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) himself refused to remove the name of the Prophet out of respect. So the Prophet himself took the pen and removed it himself and in its place wrote 'Muhammad, son of Abdullah'.

*When describing the role of the Prophet (peace be upon him), Allah states: It is He who raised up among the unlettered people a Messenger from them to recite His revelations to them and purify them and teach them the Book and Wisdom...' (62:2)

Would Allah send an illiterate Prophet to teach people the Book and Wisdom?

Conclusion.

Illiteracy is a great defect and shortcoming. It is inconceivable that Allah would send his final, beloved, Messenger (peace be upon him) to guide humanity with a defect such as illiteracy. Yes, the Prophet (peace be upon him) was not known to read and write and he was not seen doing so. But this was to protect the Qur'an, so that no one would think Sayyudina Muhammad (peace be upon him) wrote the Qur'an.

Dr. Hafiz Ather Hussain al-Azhari.

BA Principles of Theology, al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt.

MA Arabic and Islamic Studies, Dar al-Ulum Muhammadiyah Ghawsia, Bhera, Pakistan.

BA Political Science, MPhil Theology & PhD Theology, University of Birmingham.

www.twitter.com/Hafiz_Ather