

# ‘Read in The Name of Thy Lord’

by Muhammad Al-Yaqoubi

The first word of the Holy Qur’an that was revealed, ‘Read’, (*Iqra’* أَقْرَأْ) (Qur’an: 96:1), brought the command to read ahead of any other religious command. We might imagine a series of commands that may seem to some people more important than ‘Read’, such as ‘pray’, ‘endure’, or even ‘fight’. It is important to understand why Allah ﷻ specifically chose this word to be the first to be revealed. It is not a random choice: as we know, the Holy Qur’an is matchless. We also know that it is a preserved book that will remain forever unchanged, and every word of it has its own significance not only during the time of its revelation, but until the end of time as well.

The command, ‘Read’ was revealed to a nation of Arabs who did not have a holy book like Jews and Christians: this is why they were described as ‘*Ummiyyin*’ (Qur’an: 62:2) which literally means ‘illiterates’. Reading and writing, though known in pre-Islamic Arabia, was not that popular nor a common practice.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself is described as ‘the unlettered Prophet’ ‘*al-Nabiyy al-Ummiyy*’ (Qur’an 7:107), but for him that was part of the preparation for his job as a Messenger of God and as a recipient of the final revelation. God made it clear in the Holy Qur’an (29:48), ‘You never read a book before nor wrote one with your hand. Otherwise, the deniers would have valid doubts.’

It is more understood now why the first command had to be ‘Read’: in order that the recipients not take their unlettered Prophet as a model in this quality of his or continue in the carelessness of the Arabs of the pre-Islamic era regarding learning.

Allah ﷻ wanted Muslims not only to start reading and writing but to start exploring the unknown. The verses that follow the above-quoted verse continue to speak of learning: ‘Read in the name of thy Lord who created. Created mankind out of a clot of congealed blood. Read as thy Lord is the Most Bountiful. He taught via the use of the pen. Taught man that which man did not know.’ (The Holy Qur’an 96:1-5). Surprisingly, five of these fifteen words to be first revealed have to do with learning: ‘read’, ‘name’, ‘taught’, ‘pen’, and ‘know’, with “‘read’ and ‘taught’ repeated.

It should be noted that when the archangel Jibril addressed the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in the cave of Hirā’ with the word, ‘Read’, he did not present him with a book in which he could read. In fact, the uni-

verse is meant to be the book, created beings are its pages, and the detailed Divine miracles in them are its lines. Furthermore, the verb *iqra’* (read) usually requires an object, e.g. ‘read this passage’ or ‘Read your Book’ (Qur’an 17:14), but in this case, the verb ‘Read’ comes without an object in order to broaden the scope of reading and leave it open so that every reader applies it in the way that is most relevant to him or her.

The emphasis of the Qur’an on learning did not stop there: the elements of reading and writing were mentioned in several chapters of the Qur’an that were revealed early in Mecca. Here are a few examples:

1. “By the Pen and what they write’ (68:1);
2. ‘And by a written Book in an open parchment’ (52: 1-3);
3. ‘Say, O My Lord, increase me in knowledge’ (20: 114).

More over, the root *kataba* (to write) and its derivatives are mentioned in the Qur’an three hundred and twenty times. The Qur’an, by warning that it is not a collection of fables, such as in 25:5, draws a clear line distinguishing between the type of knowledge it brought to humanity and the mythological stories the Arabs inherited from their ancestors: ‘they say, “these are legends of ancient people of which he asked to be written and then read for him morning and afternoon—to memorise.”’

The Qur’an makes it clear that ‘Learned people and unlearned people are never equal! Indeed people of intellect will understand’ (39:9), and that reading books is not the only method of learning. The Qur’an encourages reflection and contemplation in the following quotes:

1. ‘Look at what is the heavens and the earth’ (10:101);
2. ‘In this there are great signs for people who reflect’ (30:21, 39:42, 45:13);
3. ‘The parables we set are not to be understood but by intellectuals’ (29: 43).

All these verses were sent down in Mecca as part of the Divine Revelation when Muslims were still struggling to establish themselves as believers in Allah in a pagan society that not only opposed them but also oppressed them. Despite this, the Qur’an goes beyond the scope of this battle of belief versus disbelief to draw their attention to the battle of knowledge versus ignorance. So Islam came to open the minds



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and the hearts of its followers in order to enrich their souls with the sweet pleasures of belief and satisfy their minds with the great fruits of learning.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ strengthened the love for learning, thinking and exploring in his community in several ways. For instance, he assigned teachers to the children of Medina to teach them reading and writing, encouraged some of his companions to learn foreign languages, posed quizzes, imported material such as leather to be used for writing, and sent some of his companions to the city of Jerash, Jordan, then under the Byzantine authority, to study sophisticated weaponry. And over a period of twenty three years, over thirty scribes worked for him, writing down Divine revelation, the treaties and truces, his letters to the rulers with whom he corresponded, as well as to his deputies and his instructions.

In its following generations, the Muslim Ummah pursued the way of knowledge in all of its aspects, not limiting themselves to the narration of sacred texts and engagement in their interpretations, but also embracing all branches of science such as: medicine, chemistry, biology, zoology, astronomy, and even mechanics. So, in a couple of hundred years, during the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn (813-833 AD), Muslims did not only build the most powerful empire, but the most advanced civilisation for which humanity is indebted forever.

What went wrong? And why are Muslims now part of the 'third world' or 'the developing world'? Some pious preachers speak of the sins of Muslims

being the cause, but some Muslims have always been sinful. This is why Allah declared that He is Oft-Forgiving and that 'My Mercy encompasses everything' (Qur'an 7:156). Some other 'zealous' Muslims speak about the lack of having an Islamic state that rules according to the *Sharia*, judging all current Muslims states as non-Islamic and all of the employees in their governments as apostates. Thus, they try to destroy what has been left of peace and prosperity in the Muslim world. Neither piety nor zeal solve the problem as they are based on emotions and spontaneous reactions. The disease of Muslims lies deep behind a facade of luring symptoms such as poverty, unemployment, or even sins or deviation. There was probably no time in the history of Islam with more deviation than the golden days of the Abbasids, with sects appearing and spreading. Yet that did not prevent from the advancement of research and the leaving behind a harvest of accomplishments in manuscripts that scholars until now have not had enough time to study or publish.

The first Divine command was 'Read', but do we read? The answer to this question presents the first challenge the Muslim Ummah is facing today. We are believers in Allah ﷻ but we do not read as He commands us. Muslim nations around the world are the least likely to read, buy books, or go to public libraries. It is not a common scene in the Muslim world to see someone on a bus or train reading a book. And while phones and iPads now replace books among the youth, they are mainly a means to play games and

engage with social media. Of the 1,750,000 books published this year worldwide, the Muslim world has less than 10% even though Muslims, according to 'Worldmeters.info' are 23.2% of the world's population. I would not be surprised if it is found that the majority of books printed in the Muslim world are religious. This is good when they produce learned believers, but when they produce ignorant or fanatical believers, it goes against the very principles which Islam tried to establish, i.e. peace and civilisation.

Islam wanted more than a group of true believers: Islam wanted to establish a civilisation, to advance science, to transform societies from ignorance to learning; from anarchy to law and order; from transgression to justice. Islam wanted a new phase in the history of humanity where the connection between the heavens and Earth produces the most perfect combination between what is Divine and what is Worldly.

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Sheikh Al-Yaqoubi was born in Damascus and was trained in Islamic studies by his father, who was an Imam and instructor at the Grand Umayyad Mosque. He is a widely respected religious scholar who also has a significant spiritual following worldwide. Background: Please see bio on page 124.

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