The First Revelation in the Holy Qur'an: It's Significance in the Methods of Learning

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Abstract

This writing is a discussion pertaining to the first revelation i.e. Surah al-Alaq particularly on its first five verses. This study comprises the significance of Surah al-Alaq, its exegesis and prominent commentaries from the mufassirun. The fundamental method of learning such as reading, writing and memorizing in the context of the Surah will also be discussed. The 'qalam' which is known as an important medium of learning, teaching and spreading knowledge is also elaborated in the discussion.

Introduction

Surah al-'Alaq which contains nineteen verses were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. who was illiterate or ummi, and the Holy Qur'an throws light on this matter. Allah states:

“And thou was not [able] to recite a Book before this [Book came], nor art thou [able] to transcribe it with thy righthand. In that case, indeed would the talkers of vanities have doubted.”

(al-Ankabut 29:48)

Illiteracy was a common feature and almost universal in the Arab community before Islam. (Tibawi 1972: 23-241; Ahmad.M 1997: 1-15) As result we find that the pre-Islamic Arabian tradition, which is rich in poems and stories was transmitted orally from generation to generation. (Tibawi 1972: 23) Indeed, the Holy Qur'an itself was revealed orally to the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h., proclaimed orally and transmitted by word of mouth in the lifetime of the Prophet. In an illiterate environment its passages and messages concerning reading and writing could be considered revolutionary. The reason for this is that, apart from its religious
content, the Holy Qur'ān contains revelations about the importance and value of learning as exemplified in Surah al-'Alaq. Thus, a learned man is placed in a high position, next to the Prophet in the Holy Qur'ān. In the tradition, the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. was reported saying:

"The learned are the successors of prophets."

(Bukhari 1864: 28)

The Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. being chosen to receive the revelation of God is the teacher of the divine message. The preaching of Islam was accompanied by two practical measures of special educational significance which were: [i] literate believers were required to teach illiterates to read and write, and [ii] literate preachers were sent out in the communities to teach Islam. Therefore, the Holy Qur'ān can be considered as the first textbook for Muslims and the mosque as a place of worship became the first school in Islam.

Prominent Commentaries on Surah al-'Alaq

This Surah contains two parts in terms of its period of revelation. The first part consists of five verses which is considered as the first revelation and the second part consists of verses 6-19 which were revealed later when the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. had started his mission. (M. Asad 1980: 963) Discussion in this section will be confined to the first part of the Surah due to its importance in the context of learning and seeking for knowledge.

Verse 1: Proclaim [or Read!] In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, who created.

The word "read" which is repeated several times by the angel, according to Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, has two implications. Firstly it indicates the Prophet should read in the name of Allah, and the second meaning is that the Prophet p.b.u.h. was asked in his vision to read the Holy Qur'ān. (al-Razi: 13)

When the angel asked the Prophet p.b.u.h. to read, the latter replied that he could not read. This indicates that the angel had presented these words of revelation before in the written form and the Prophet p.b.u.h. was asked to read them. For if the angel had meant that he should repeat what the angel had said, the Prophet p.b.u.h. would not have
replied by saying, "I cannot read". (al-Maududi 1992: 126-127; M. Asad 1980: 963)

The imperative *iqra'* means "read" or "recite" or "proclaim aloud" and the word is understood as a message from Allah. For years, the Prophet p.b.u.h. was deeply absorbed in the cave in Mount Hira in his search for the truth and now his mind and soul were ready to stand forth to spread the mission of Allah. Therefore, he was sent with the message from Allah to proclaim in the name of the Lord. (Ibn Kathir: 564)

His viceregents, thus, Allah has exalted humanity to a position higher than His other creations, including the angels. This is why we found that the angels are being asked to bow to the first man [Adam] in His words:

"And behold, We said to the angels: "Bow down to Adam": And they bowed down: not so Iblis: he refused and he was Haughty: he was by those who reject faith."

(al-Baqarah 2: 34)

Iblis refused to obey God's order and he was considered as "those who reject faith". (Abdullah Yusuf 1992: 129-130) On a similar basis, among human beings are also found those who rebel and go against Allah's orders and commands, who are mentioned in the second part of this Surah.

It is also noteworthy that this verse alludes to man's embryonic evolution out of a clot of "congealed blood" which sprang out of a fertilized female ovum. (M. Asad 1980: 964) *Alaq*, which is the plural of *alaqah*, is the primary state of the embryo which appears a few days after conception, then it changes into the form of lump of flesh, then gradually, it takes on a human shape. (al-Maududi 1992: 132; al-Zamakhshari 1995: 767) The Holy Qur'an affirms this:

"...We created you out of dust, the out of sperm, then out of a leech-like clot, then out of a morsel of flesh, partly formed and partly unformed, in order that We may manifest [Our power] to you; and We cause whom We will to rest in the wombs for an appointed term, then do We bring you out as babes,..."

(al-Hajj 22: 5)

It is worth mentioning that the first revelation emphasized the Lordship of Allah [*rubbubiyah*] that is, Allah as the Master and the Cherisher. Furthermore, it refers to the most significance attribute of God as the Creator, who runs and sustains this universe. This is an answer to the Pagan Arabs who had rejected the unity of God and accepted
their own idols and gods as divine. In General, this verse instructs the Prophet p.b.u.h. to contact Allah, and before taking his first step in his mission he should read in the name of Allah, the Lord of all creation and the Creator. This should also apply to every Muslim that he/she is required to read “Bismillah” at the very beginning of any work or action.

**Verse 2: Created man, out of a clot of congealed blood**

The term *khalaq* which means created, appears in the form of a past tense verb by which is meant that the act of divine creation has been and is being continuously repeated. This verse emphasizes the uniqueness and importance among Allah’s creation, of human beings. In this regard, the Holy Qur’an points out:

“We have indeed created man in the best of moulds.”

(al-Tin 95:4)

The above identifies that there is no fault in Allah’s creation, particularly in the creation of human beings. Allah has preserved the pattern and form of human beings in its purest form and best creation. The reason for this is that human beings are made to be.

Allah has created human beings from an insignificant and simple substance *alaqah* but gradually they grow and develop into a perfect human. The above verse indirectly refers to human development from the prenatal period, through the attainment of maturity, into the period of old age until they ultimately reach the point of death. The whole cycle of human experiential development is shaped by Allah in an orderly and structured manner. Thus, a human being’s biological origins, with his intellectual and spiritual potential, point out the purpose of his/her creation; that is, to search for the ultimate truth and develop the self. This should also contribute to the ultimate aim in human life which is to prostrate oneself before Allah and glorify Him or worship the Creator. This ultimate aim of human creation is stated in the last verse of this Surah:

“...but bow down in adoration, and bring thyself the closer [to Allah].”

(al-‘Alaq 96:19)

**Verse 3: Proclaim! And Thy Lord is Most Bountiful**

This verse begins with an order to read or proclaim, similar to the first verse of Surah al-Alaq, which reflects the importance of reading as
means of attaining knowledge. In this regard, the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. is required to read [proclaim] for himself and also read [proclaim] to the community. (al-Razi: 16)

Al-Zamakhshari explains the meaning of the word akram or Most Bountiful, referring to Allah’s attribute which is without any fault or defect. (al-Zamakhshari 1995: 767)

In general, it is through Allah’s grace and mercy that humanity is elevated to the highest rank of His creation whereby human beings can be taught and are able to learn, read and write. Furthermore, it is also by God’s grace and blessing that the unlettered Prophet p.b.u.h. was taught to read and recite the Holy Qur’an.

Verse 4: He Who taught [the use of] the Pen

Fakhr al-Din al-Razi comments that this verse can be rendered in two ways. The first is that humanity is taught all the sciences and knowledge, and in this case, the pen is cited in a metaphoric way. The second meaning is that; Allah taught human beings to write through the medium of the pen. In short, both meanings express clearly the importance of the pen as a means of writing, knowledge and civilization. (al-Razi: 16)

Allah made human beings the possessors of knowledge and He taught human beings the art of writing by the use of the pen. Had Allah not taught the art of the pen [through inspiration], human’s intellectual faculty would not have had the opportunity to develop, expand and thus, would have stagnated.

The fact that humanity was taught by the Creator through the pen was not as clear at the time of the revelation as it is today. However, Allah the Knowledge knows the value of the pen, therefore, reference to the pen as a method of teaching, learning and writing is emphasized at the very beginning of His revelation. Additionally, in another verse in the Holy Qur’an, Allah has sworn in the name of the pen or qalam:

“Nun. By the pen and by the [record] which [men] write.”

(al-Qalam 68: 1)

The pen was honoured by being mentioned in the Holy Qur’an since it has always been the most important tool of learning. The pen has always been the most widespread means of learning from the past until the present time and Abdullah Yusuf Ali regards it as “the symbolical foundations of the revelation to mankind”. (Abdullah Yusuf 1992: 1506)
Verse 5: Taught man that which he knew not

Fakhir al-Din al-Razi explains that this verse elaborates the verse before, that is, “Allah taught human beings what they do not know and He taught them through the medium of qalam”. (al-Razi: 17) This verse clearly names Allah as the ultimate source of knowledge where human beings were given knowledge regarding the past, present and future. The Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. being chosen as the messenger of Allah was taught with knowledge as preparation for fulfilling his duty and mission. Similarly, the Prophet Adam was also taught with knowledge before he was sent to the earth. Generally speaking, whatever knowledge a human being possesses has been given to him/her through His blessing and grace. Al-Maududi in The Meaning of the Qur’an elaborates:

Man originally was absolutely illiterate. Whatever of Knowledge he obtained, it was a gift from Allah. Whatever Doors of knowledge at any stage did Allah will to open for man, they went on opening up before him.

Thus, al-Maududi and other mutassirun unanimously agreed that knowledge originally comes from Allah. Hence, Allah is the One who creates, originates and teaches human beings, for they are chosen to be His viceregents on earth. (al-Razi: 16-17; al-Maududi 1992: 133; Ibn. Kathir: 564; S.Qutb 1979: 223-224)

The Methods of Learning in Surah al-Alaq

The first revelation has shown great concern and attention towards human education and human development in the Holy Qur’an. It is also undeniable that this had a great impact on the subsequent methods of learning and attaining knowledge. From the Islamic perspective, knowledge is seen as a companion of religion which could help the community to face and solve their problems and dilemmas. For the purpose of this study, the discussion below will explore the three significant methods of learning in the light of Surah al-‘Alaq.

Reading

The word iqra which comes at the beginning of the first and third verses of the Surah indicates reading as an important tool of learning. The
name of the Holy Book, al-Qur’an, is derived from the verb, qara’a which means recitation. The verb qara’a preliminary means to study the Holy Qur’an as it was first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h., but in general, it was also used for the studying other fields of knowledge. Allah says in the Holy Qur’an:

“When thou does read the Qur’an. Seek Allah’s protection From Satan the Rejected One.”

(al-Nahl 16: 98)

The above verse alludes to the fact that when reading the Holy Qur’an, one should seek protection from the evil or Satan. (Abdullah Yusuf 1992: 1544) Similarly, in Surah al-‘Alaq, the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. is taught to read in the name of Lord who created. Therefore, human beings as weak creation of Allah should always ask for His strength, protection and guidance when reading or learning, in order to protect or prevent them from the persuasion, influences of Satan and deviances.

On the other hand, recitation of the Holy Qur’an can have great impact and influence on a person’s mind, feelings, faith and belief. The Holy Qur’an mentions how a company of Jinns listened to the Holy Qur’an and claimed that it is a wonderful recital. Allah says:

“Say it has been revealed to me that a company of Jinns listens [to the Qur’an] They said, “we have really heard a wonderful recital”.

(al-Jin 72: 1)

The Holy Qur’an describes the Jinns, on hearing recitation from the Holy Qur’an becoming absorbed with its uniqueness which invites them to believe in the revelation and become mu’min. (Ibn Kathir: 156)

On another occasion, similarly, the second Caliph of Islam, Umar Ibn al-Khattab became a muslim on hearing his sister reading the Holy Qur’an. (Numani. S.1983: 198-200) Thus, it is undeniable that reading the Holy Qur’an will influence the mind and heart not only of the reader but also of the audience. This is why we are being asked to read the Holy Qur’an in our best manner with good tone and beautiful pronunciation. The Holy Qur’an emphasizes this:

“...and recite the Qur’an in slow, measured rhythmic tones.”

(al-Muzammil 73: 4)

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Regarding this, on one occasion, Anas was asked about the Prophet’s method of reciting the Holy Qur’an. He replied, the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. stretched the words when he was reciting. For example, when he recited *Bismillahirrahmanirrahim* he would stretch the word *Bismillah*, and he also stretch the word *al-Rahman* and *al-Rahim*.

Regarding the above verse, Ibn. Kathir in his commentary, points out that we are asked to read the Holy Qur’an slowly and distinctly, not quickly or in haste. The reason for this is that it will give time for the mind to understand the meaning and purport of the divine revelation; thus, the heart will also be affected through the reading and recitation. In this regard, al-Maududi has commented on the relation between reading and the human heart as follows: (al-Maududi 1992: 121):

> ...if it contains the mention of Allah’s Being and Attributes, it may awe-inspire the heart with His glory and majesty; if it expresses. His mercy, the heart may be filled with feelings of gratitude to Him; if it mentions His wrath and His punishment, the heart may be overwhelmed by fear of Him; if it enjoins something or forbids something, one may understand what has been forbidden.

Therefore, recitation of the Book does not only refer to the uttering of its words and verses, but it should also include comprehension and thoughtful consideration of the whole meaning. Generally, we could say that reading the Holy Qur’an should involve its meaning and an understanding of its message.

It is also noteworthy to elaborate the purpose of reading from the Quranic perspective. Firstly, through reading, humanity will find and discover the absolute truth, i.e. the Lord and the Creator. There are many verses mentioning these, such as:

> “Proclaim! [or Read], in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created.”

(al-‘Alaq 96: 1)

Secondly, through reading, human beings will be able to understand the message of God, what is prohibit and what is permissible. Thirdly, human beings are being asked to read the Holy Qur’an in order to seek guidance on the right path. Fourthly, reading the Holy Qur’an could also lead towards self development and self actualization.
The First Revelation in the Holy Qur'an

Writing

The word qalam or pen in the first revelation signals writing as a tool of learning and teaching. Although most of the Arab community at the time of revelation were illiterate, the word qalam were repeated in four occasions in the Holy Qur’an.

Through the medium of the pen, human beings are able to transmit and transfer their feelings, thoughts, experiences, insights and most of all knowledge from individual to individual and from generation to generation. This ability was granted by God to human beings through His grace and mercy due to the fact that primarily humanity was taught through the medium of the pen.

Today, we find that the basis of the entire civilization, the progress and advancement of humanity in different fields, pivots on the existence of the “pen”. The rank of scholars has preceeded that of martyrs because, generally, it is scholar’s pen that is able to change minds, attitudes and destinies of individuals in society. However, in the community, improvement may begin from the pen of a responsible person, but vice and corruption may also originate from what the pen propagates. These outstanding positions of the pen is probably one of the answer to why the Holy Qur’an invokes the pen. (al-Qalam 68: 1)

Furthermore, writing has been given a significant place since the early period of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. was always keen for the text of the Holy Qur’an to be written down immediately after it was revealed in order to distinguish between his words and the Word of God. There is evidence that the Word of God was written on papyrus, palm leaves, pieces of leather and wooden boards. (al-Zinjani 1969:44)

Besides being a method of learning and teaching, writing plays a decisive role for the purpose of communication in the society such as in doing transaction. For example, in the Holy Qur’an, human beings are taught to write details when dealing with transaction involving future payment. Allah says:

“O ye who believe! When ye deal with each other, in transaction involving future obligations in a fixed period of time, reduce them to writing let a scribe write down faithfully as between the parties; let not the scribe refuse to write; as Allah has taught him, so let him write…”

(al-Baqarah 2: 282)
The above account suggests that written documents are recommended when dealing with transactions in which the payment is not in cash. Therefore, a writer should not write or convey wrong message or false information because this may lead to haphazard in the society. Additionally, the art of writing should be looked upon as a gift from Allah and should be used according to His will and service.

Memorizing

The Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. was taught through oral transmission, where he had to memorize by heart the verses of the Holy Qur’an word by word. As an illiterate, memorization or rote learning is undoubtedly an important method of attaining knowledge besides reading and writing.

The revelation was auditory before becoming in a written text. The Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. first heard the term *iqra’* and only later, he recited the revealed verses on the basis of audition. Additionally, the oral dimension of the Holy Qur’an combined with the traditional significance of memory in the transmission has great impact in the Islamic intellectual traditions and educational system.

Another point worth mentioning here is the importance of memorizing the Holy Qur’an and its impact on human intellect. Khurram Murad in *Way to The Qur’an* elaborates the significance of memorizing the Holy Qur’an as follows: (Khurram Murad 1985: 59-66)

…it makes the Qur’an flow on your tongue, reside in your mind, dwell in your heart: it becomes your constant companion. Also as you memorize more you will find it easier to make your inner self participate in its reading and your mind study and understand its meaning.

Muslims are taught and encouraged to read and memorize the Holy Qur’an, particularly the short *surahs* during their childhood. The reason for this is that, the *surahs* which are being memorized in the stage of infancy will remain engraved on the mind for the rest of life and on the contrary, those who do not memorize the Holy Qur’an in their early stage will not be able to do so when they become adults.

Al-Shafi’i for example, memorized the Holy Qur’an at the age of seven. He also memorized Malik’s book on *Hadith* when he was ten years old. (Abu Layla. M. 1992: 237)

Thus, familiarity with the Holy Qur’an at an early age has its impact on the learner in the sense that it helps to sharpen humans’ intellect and
the power of memorizing. Moreover, the impact of memorizing the Holy Qur'an is manifested in the linguistic ability of a learner, his/her style and moral principles.

At the linguistic level, a learner has to practice pronouncing all the words in Arabic correctly even though it is not his/her mother tongue. At the stylistic level, the learner can quote verses from the Holy Qur'an in their appropriate context for his/her speech, writing or debate in order to support his/her idea or argumentation. In terms of the moral effect, a Quranic learner is frequently in contact with the moral stories and instructions, or regarding the permissible or prohibited. Due to the significant influence of the Holy Qur'an, we believe that Muslim learners should preliminary emphasize on memorizing the Holy Qur'an.

On the other hand, the method of learning through memorizing is a constant feature of medieval education in Islam. There are numerous anecdotes regarding those who possessed extraordinary memorizing ability, who were referred to as "oceans" of learning or "receptacle" of knowledge. For example, the Caliph Harun al-Rashid had two scholars in al-Raiy. They were Shaibani, who was the Hanafi juriconsult and Kisai, the grammarian. When they died in 189/805, the Caliph was reported saying: "I buried jurisprudence and the Arabic language arts in Raiy." (Maqdisi: 99)

Some people have to learn only through memorizing because they are not able to read and write, which is similar to the case of the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. Others had to learn by heart because they had lost their sight, and had no other means of learning.

The best time for memorizing is at early dawn, while the most suitable place is at any place far from distraction. Studying in a place where is bound to distract a learner’s attention such as in places of vegetation, on riverbanks, or on highways are not at all advisable. Furthermore, it is also best to study on an empty stomach rather than on a full stomach.

In addition to this, repetition has proven to be one of the best methods to commit any material to the memory. For example, the juriconsult Shirazi said that he used to repeat each lesson of fiqh a hundred times in order to ensure that it has engraved in his mind.

The famous al-Ghazali spent three years to memorize the notes that he had taken from his lectures and book (Khurram Murad 1985: 84). Makdisi in The Rise of Colleges cited Abu Amr bin Ala commenting that memorization is one of the important methods of learning as:
The first rule of learning is silence; the second, good questioning; the third, good listening; the fourth, good memorising; and the fifth, propagating the knowledge acquired among those seeking it.

**Conclusion**

The first revelation has shown its great concern for human development and education by mentioning the means of acquiring and transmitting knowledge in the community. Additionally, the Surah emphasizes the personal growth of human beings and gaining knowledge through reading, writing and memorization. *Al-Alaq* which is the name of the Surah, refers to the origin of man in the third stage of embryogenesis as described in the Holy Qur'an. (Hussain. S.1980: 107-109) In this context, the physical growth of a person is closely related to his/her intellectual and potential growth, which is considered as important in learning and acquisition of knowledge.

The Surah also refers to the word “qalam” or pen as significant tool of writing. By means of the pen, a student is able to take notes [allaqa], dictation [imla], compose reports [khabar] and write [kataba]. These are the various methods of learning and acquisition of knowledge in the different branches of science. The difference between “kataba” and “allaqa” as Makdisi explains is that “kataba” is usually applied to hadith which were noted down from dictation. The term “allaqa” is a process which depends safely on the competence of the learner in his/her note-taking. *Imla* or dictation refers to copying word for word what a teacher or lecturer is saying.

Additionally in order to obtain knowledge, Zarnuji explains that learners should always respect knowledge, the knowledgeable person and teachers. He further adds that, a learner should always respect his/her teacher by his examples that he/she should not talk or leave the class without permission, sit on the teacher’s chair, disobey the rule of the teacher and like. Learners who have caused inconvenience to the teacher will benefit very little from the teacher’s knowledge. Since an Islamic society can only be sustained and advanced through faith, knowledge and education, the role of the teacher is very important in the educational system and society. Tibawi emphasizes that the relationship between the teacher [Murabbi] and learner is more towards a spiritual relationship which is superior to physical relationship as;
Know, o brother, that your teacher is begetter of your soul just as your father is the begetter of your body. Your father gives you a physical form, but your teacher gives a spiritual one. Your teacher nourishes your soul with learning and wisdom and guides it to attain everlasting bliss...

(Tibawi 1979: 38-39)

This special role and status of the teacher should be recognized and it is true that good teachers are the hallmark of Muslim society. Therefore, teaching as a profession should be recognized and acknowledged in terms of remuneration, rewards and respect both in the society and the government policy. This will not only ensure that good teachers for all levels of education are available, but will also be an indispensable investment for the future of human development and human resources.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the first revelation imparts to human beings importance of learning, seeking for knowledge or the ultimate reality, the nature of human creation and the relationship between humanity and the Creator. In general, we find that the Holy Qur’an as a fundamental source of knowledge also deals with the genesis of Allah’s creation, the existing social principles and order, international relations, universal phenomena and the like. Therefore, the Holy Qur’an provides a rational basis for the discovery of the truth which serves as guide and directs the whole of mankind.

To sum up, from the period of the first revelation until today, reading, writing and memorizing have always been the significant methods for learning, teaching and acquisition of knowledge. Thus, this exploration has encouraged the existence of references, libraries and literature at present and has also lead mankind towards progress, technology and advancement.

Bibliography


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