

# Understanding the Holy Qur'an

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**Abstract:** *due to the Qur'an's concise nature, there is a need for interpretation. The prophet Muhammad is the first interpreter, who was followed by the Ahl al-Bayt. This essay gives a brief account of teaching and also understanding the Qur'an in the time of the prophet. There are 3 ways to this purpose as the historical evidences show which are: 1. **Ismā** (hearing) 2. **Iqrā** (recitation) and 3. **The System of Privileging by the Qur'an.***

*The writer discusses about the ways of interpretation which are: 1. **Expressing the Example in Deed** 2. **Oral Explanations about the Qur'an** and 3. **Answering the Qur'anic Queries of the Companions.***

*At the end of the article, the writer puts the position of Ahl al-Bayt in dispute by mentioning the Hadith of Saqalain, which is a proof for all the Muslims till the Day of Judgement! He also counts some valuable results gained by believing this Hadith which at last, leads to follow the Qur'an and the Ahl al-Bayt.*

**Key words:** *holy Qur'an, Tafsir(interpretation), teaching the Qur'an, understanding the Qur'an, Ismā, Iqrā, prophet Muhammad(p.b.u.h), ways of interpretation, Hadith Saqalain, Ahl al-Bayt.*

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From the beginning of Islam, the exegesis of Qur'an has been one of the earliest Islamic disciplines to be under the Muslims' focus. The reason for this focus is the Qur'an's concise nature and the readers' consequent need for the explanation of the *mujmalāt* (the brief expressions in the Qur'an). According to definite evidences, the prophet Muhammad is the first interpreter, who explained the Qur'an for the Muslims. After him, the *Ah al-Bayt* took the charge.

This essay tries to give a short account of the historical evidences related to the understanding of the Qur'an and the ways of achieving that understanding.

### **Teaching the Qur'an in the Time of the holy Prophet**

The holy Qur'an has been concise in such cases as the historical accounts, the events in the age of the Prophet, and, more importantly, in *Āyāt al-Ahkām* (the verses related to the religious rules). So, during the Prophet's life, the Muslims came up with questions for which they referred to the Prophet and got an answer.

On the other hand, the most important means for the Prophet to prove his truth and guide the people was the Qur'an, which he used both in Mecca and Medina.

As the historical evidences show, he had two ways of explaining the Qur'an.

#### **1) *Ismā'***

Literally, *Ismā'* means make (somebody) hear (something). Technically, it means "To make the people (especially the unbelievers in Mecca) hear the Qur'an". In those years, the Prophet sat in *Masjid-al-Harām* (the Grand Mosque of Mecca)

and recited the Qur'an to the people<sup>1</sup>. Sometimes, he recited those verses in his salat and made the people hear those warnings, as the Qur'an says, "This Qur'an hath been revealed to me by inspiration, that I may warn you and all whom it reaches" (6:19). Obviously, in these cases, people heard the Qur'an without any mediation; therefore, the Prophet's mission, which was giving the revealed words to the people, met no obstruction.

For, the Meccan verses were about the major beliefs (like the existence of God or Restoration) and, because of their repetition, they had become comprehensible.

Moreover, the audiences were the Arabs and familiar with the language of Qur'an. So, they had no difficulty in understanding those verses, especially the warnings.

For example, in some historical and tafsir books<sup>2</sup>, we read:

Once Walīd b. Mughaira, then a leader of the unbelievers, had gone to Mecca. He went close to the Prophet to hear the Qur'an. The Prophet was reciting Sura number 40. Influenced by these verses, Walīd went back home, without returning to his people. His friends thought he had converted to Islam!

Hearing the Qur'an, many of the unbelievers were influenced. Among them were Jubair b. Muṭ'am and Ṭufail b. 'Amr-al-Dusī (Rāmyār 214-219).

Therefore, the Quraish leaders, who were afraid of this, forbid listening to the Qur'an, and even did not allow the Prophet to do his salat in Masjid-al -Harām or recite the Qur'an

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<sup>1</sup> As the Qur'an says, "It is He Who has sent among the Unlettered a messenger from among themselves, to rehearse to them His Signs, to purify them..." (62:2). So, the first step the Prophet took was to recite the Quran to the people.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ibn Hishām 289; al-Suyūṭī, vol. 4: 5; al-Ṭabrisī, vol. 10: 584; al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, vol. 20: 92.

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to the people.<sup>1</sup>

The verse "Seest thou one who forbids a votary when he (turns) to pray?" (96:9,10), which reprimands Abū-Jahl<sup>2</sup>, refers to these obstructions against the Prophet. But, since the Prophet was successful and influential in *Isma'*, God encouraged him to stand against the unbelievers and continue his job, as in the last verses of Sura al-alaq (96)<sup>3</sup>.

## 2) Iqrā'

In Qur'anic terms, *iqrā'* means "to teach the qirā'a (reading) of the Qur'an and ask the learner about it and correct him/her" (al-Ṭabrisī vol. 10:719). Hence, Muqrī for the teacher is different from qārī (the person who recites the Qur'an). The Prophet used *iqrā'* for the believers, whereas *ismā'* was used for the unbelievers. However, since the audiences were usually the Arabs and had no difficulty in understanding it, the Prophet conveyed some Qur'anic concepts and did the *iqrā'*.

This was necessary because, after conversion, the believers needed to know the religious rules, when their details were not explained in the Qur'an. Therefore, the Prophet gradually explained them, by word or deed, and taught them the interpretation of many verses. Of course, in Mecca, the Prophet encountered many restrictions in teaching the Qur'an to the believers. He did this job in secret places, far from the unbelievers, one of which was the house of Arqam b. Arqam in the Mount of Ṣafā ('Askarī, 333). But after migration to Medina, mosque was the main center for teaching the Qur'an.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Unbelievers say, 'Listen not to this [K]oran, but talk at random in the midst of its (reading), that ye may gain the upper hand.'" (41:26).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. al-Ṭabrisī Vol 10: 782; al-Ṭabātabā'ī, vol. 20: 327, 329.

<sup>3</sup> "Nay, heed him [=Abu Jahl] not..." (96:19).

Moreover, as the major teacher, he appointed some of his friends, like 'Ubāda b. Ṣāmit, Abdullah b. Mas'ud, Mu'adh b. Jabal, and Ubayy b. Ka'b al-Anṣārī to teach Qur'an.

'Ubāda b. Ṣāmit says, "When a *muhajir* (immigrant) came to Medina, the Prophet appointed one of us (the teachers of the Qur'an) to teach it to him. So, all the time the Qur'an was heard in the mosque. Once the Prophet ordered that the *qārīs* should recite it more quietly so that the voices would not mix" (al-Zaraqānī 234).

At that time, the important issue in teaching the Qur'an was transferring the Qur'anic notions to the learners. It seems that the Prophet had a special program in this regard. One of the teachers of Qur'an in the period of *tābi'in*<sup>1</sup> Abū 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī says, "The Prophet taught the Qur'an in 10 verses packs to his Companions. They did not pass any 10-verse section until they had learnt the issues, or the religious rules related to it" (al-Dimashqī, 4).<sup>2</sup> So, we see that the *iqrā'* involved the teaching of both the words and their meanings. Under the Prophet's supervision, some of the Companions reached a high level of knowledge (in *fiqh* or *tafsir*) so that they could be sent as teachers or missionaries to different areas.

### 3) The System of Privileging by the Qur'an

To expand the Qur'anic culture in the society, the Prophet developed a system, known as "privileging by Qur'an". He said, "The best *'ibāda* (kind of worship) is reading (*qirā'a*) the Qur'an" (al-Ṭabrisī vol. 1: 84). So, he encouraged the Muslims to read the Qur'an more. Considering that, at that time, learning

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<sup>1</sup> Those who saw the Companions, but not the holy Prophet.

<sup>2</sup> There are also some hadiths which say, "He did the *iqrā'...*" So, *iqrā'* refers to teaching. Cf. al-'Askari 157.

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the Qur'an was not separate from understanding it and contemplating on the verses, we can better understand the significance of the above hadith. The Prophet said, "The best of you is the one who learns the Qur'an and teaches it to others"(al-Bukhārī 594; al-Tirmidhī 159; al-Majlisī 186). In this way, he

put all the Muslims in the course of teaching or learning the Qur'an. He kept the hafiz (memorizer) or *qārī* of Qur'an in a higher level, especially in leading the congregational salat and advised the Muslims that "Your imam in the congregational salat should be the one who knows more Qur'an" (Abī Dāwūd 159,160).

In this manner, the Prophet emphasized on the value of a hafiz or *qārī* of the Qur'an in this world. Moreover, he talked about their spiritual position in the Day of Judgment. This hadith is famous: "In the Day of Judgment, the hafiz or *qārī* of the Qur'an is told, 'Read the Qur'an and get degrees because your position in the Paradise equals the last verse you remember and recite.'" (al-Ṭabrisī, 1 .85; al-Tirmidhī,163).

## **Ways of Interpretation at the Time of the Prophet**

In the time of the Prophet, interpretation was easy. There was no trace of terminological, literary, or other arguments, which later came to tafsir books. The Prophet Muhammad(p.b.u.h) explained everything in brief statements and even, occasionally, elucidated them, in one word.

However, as the remaining records show, he used a specific diversity in interpreting the Qur'an. Some of those ways will be mentioned here:

## **1) Expressing the Examples in Deed**

In some cases the Prophet expressed the importance of the verses in his doings and showed their truth to the Companions. There are many instances of this kind of behavior, especially in case of the rules and the social issues. Let us look at some instances:

- A)** The Prophet told his Companions, "Do the salat as you have seen I do it" (al-Bukhārī 117). Clearly, the manner of the Prophet's salat is, in one sense, the interpretation of "And be steadfast in prayer" (2: 43, 110, etc) and the Muslims adhered to it, as a *wājib* (obligatory) tradition. This holds true of other rules like *zakā*, *ṣawm*, and hajj.
- B)** In the case of the argument between the Prophet and the Christians of Najrān, the verse of Mubāhala was sent down, which reads, "If anyone disputes in this matter with thee, now after full knowledge hath come to thee, say: 'Come! Let us gather together,--Our sons and your sons, our women and your women, our selves and your selves; then let us earnestly pray and invoke the curse of Allah on those who lie" (3:62).

For acting according to this verse, the Prophet went to the place of Mubāhala [=invocation of the curse] with Imam Ali, Hazrat Fatima, Imam Hasan and Imam Husain (al-Dimashqī 379). In this manner, he showed them that Hasan and Husain (p.b.u.t) are "our sons", Fatima is "our women" and Ali is "our selves". He did similarly in the case of the verse of taḥīr.

## 2) Oral Explanations about the Qur'an

In many cases, the Prophet explained the Qur'an orally to the Companions. In this regard, there are reliable traditions in the Sunni and Shia books. Let us look at some of them:

- A) Interpreting "those whose portion is not wrath and who go not astray" (1:7), the Prophet said " 'those whose portion is wrath' are the Jews and 'those who go astray' are the Christians" ( Suyūfī, vol. 4: 245).
  
- B) Explaining the verse "thus, have we made of you an Ummah justly balanced [= *wasaf*]" (2:143), he said, "'*wasaf*' means 'adl', which means that God has made you an average and middle-of-the-road people" (al-Suyūfī 246).
  
- C) Imam al-Sadiq says, "When the verse 'obey Allah and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you" (4:59) was sent down, the Prophet said, "Every believer who has me as his *mawla*, should have Ali as his *mawla*." He has also said, "I tell you, the believers, not to separate from the Book of God and *Ahl al-Bayt*. I have asked God not to separate *Ahl al-Bayt* from the Qur'an, until they come to me in the Day of Judgment" (al-Kulaynī 287).
  
- D) Suyūfī has related a hadith: Interpreting "Then do you remember Me; I will remember you" (2:152), the Prophet said, "In this verse, God exclaims, 'O my servants, remember me with your worship, and I will remember you with my forgiveness.'" (al-Suyūfī vol.1:287).



### **3) Answering the Qur'anic Queries of the Companions**

In some cases, the Prophet answered the queries of the Companions and solved their problems. For example, we read in the tafsir books of the Sunnis and the Shia: When "It is those who believe and mix not their beliefs with wrong—that are (truly) in security, for they are on right guidance" (5:82) was sent down, some of the Companions asked, "Who is among us that has not wronged himself?" The Prophet said, "Here wrong means Shirk (polytheism). Have you not heard what Luqmān, the true servant of God, said, 'False worship is indeed the highest wrong-doing' (3:97)" (al-Ṭabrisī vol. 3:506)

Also, about "Pilgrimage there to is a duty men owe to Allah,—those who can [find a way to that=] afford the journey" (3:97), the Prophet was asked, "What does 'way' mean in this verse?",

To which the Prophet answered, "Provisions and vehicle" (al-Suyūfī vol. 4:250).

Likewise, there are other questions and answers in the hadith-based tafsir books.

This continued in all the years of the Prophet. Some scholars believe that the Prophet clarified all the Qur'an for the Companions (al-Dhahabi 49). Furthermore, many of the Companions added the explanations to the margins of their *muṣhafs* (=codices). These explanations existed up to the time of the first caliphs, since which time they were gradually forgotten.

### **The Heirs of the Prophetic Knowledge**

After the Prophet, the most knowledgeable about the Qur'an are the *Ahl al-Bayt*. During his life, the Prophet acknowledged not only their political qualifications, but also their knowledge.

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For instance, the hadiths "I am the city of knowledge, and Ali is its gate" and "I am the house of knowledge and Ali is its gate." (al-Tirmidhi 596) are definite proofs for Imam Ali's knowledge.

The Shia believe that the knowledge of the holy Imams has a heavenly and divine root, and is not confined to learned information. But even if one does not accept this, undeniably, among the Companions, Ali was the closest to the Prophet and partook of the latter's knowledge. Ibn Is'hāq, one of the earliest Sunni historians, writes, "One of God's favors on Ali was that

he was reared by the Prophet, since his childhood before Islam" (Ibn Hishām, 262). During this time, he was under the Prophetic knowledge and he inherited it. Imam Ali says, "My relation to the Prophet was in a way that when I asked, he answered and when I was silent, he began to speak" (al-Tirmidhī 595).

Under the interpretation for "and that ears (that should bear the tale and) retain its memory should bear its (lessons) in remembrance", the great interpreter al-Ṭabrisī writes that those ears are Ali's. Then he quotes Imam Ali "When this verse was sent down, the Prophet told me, 'I have asked God to give you ears that bear the tale' and because the Prophet's prayer, I never forgot what the Prophet told me" (al-Ṭabrisī vol. 10:519).

In his life, Imam Ali talked repeatedly about the Prophet's teachings and his learning from him. Take for instance this hadith: Once Ali predicted some future events in a way that his companions were surprised. "Someone said to him 'O Amirul Muminin! You have been given the knowledge of the unknown?' Amirul Muminin laughed and said to the man, who belonged to the tribe of Bani Kilab, '[...] these matters

have been acquired from him (namely the Prophet) who knew them. ' "(al-Seyed al-Radi, sermon 126).

Many times, Imam Ali said, "Ask me before losing me" (Suyūfī vol.4:233). About his Qur'anic knowledge, he said, "Ask me about the Book of God. By God, there is no verse except that I know it is revealed in day or night, in the plain or the mountain" (ibid). The great Companion Abdullah b. Mas'ud said, "The Qur'an has seven aspects. Each aspect has a surface and a depth. The surface and depth of Qur'an are all in Ali"(ibid).

Anyway, Imam Ali's knowledge, to which all the Companions testified, is a good reason for referring to him as the best person, after the death of the Prophet. But, more significantly, there is the position it assigns the *Ahl al-Bayt*.

### **The Position of *Ahl al-Bayt***

In both the Sunni and Shia books we read that the Prophet has said, "I leave among you two precious things—the Book of God and *Ahl al-Bayt*. As long as you grasp them, you will never go astray. And they will not be separated until they will come to me at *hawd al-kawthar*." This hadith, according to hadith scholars, is a definite and frequently-related (*al-mutawātir*)<sup>1</sup> hadith. In his book *'Abaqāt al-Anwār*, the great Shia scholar Mīr-Hāmid Husain al-Hindī has related it from about 200 Sunni scholars.

We believe that this hadith is a proof for all the Muslims till the Day of Judgment and can lead to valuable results regarding the position of the *Ahl al-Bayt*. Here are some of those results:

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<sup>1</sup> A hadith which has been related by so many reliable people that it has become reliable./Translator

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- 1) The Qur'an and *Ahl al-Bayt* are strongly bound together and this bond will last till the Day of Judgment.

Considering this bond, the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) guaranteed the guidance and salvation of the Muslims in grasping to both the Qur'an and *Ahl al-Bayt*. Grasping only the Qur'an and turning away from the *Ahl al-Bayt* is considered a kind of transgression and causes straying.

- 2) The requirement for grasping to the *Ahl al-Bayt* is the Muslims' referring to them, and their accepting the guides and commands of these two items.
- 3) The word and deed of the *Ahl al-Bayt* is just like the Qur'an; because the guidance of the Muslims is guaranteed in grasping them.
- 4) The *Ahl al-Bayt* are *ma'ṣūm* (infallible) because the authenticity of their word and deed depends on this.

Obviously, these results depend on two basic qualities in the *Ahl al-Bayt* -- *ilm* and *iṣmat*. These attributes have been indicated by Allah in the Qur'an (33:33, 56:78). Therefore, every Muslim has to follow the *Ahl al-Bayt*.

Praising the knowledge of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, the Prophet Muhammad said, "Do not teach them anything because they know more than you" (al-Kulayni 287). Regarding their infallibility, he said, "Beware that my family [that is, *Ahl al-Bayt*] do not take you away from the way of truth and they do not lead you astray." (ibid).

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