

The Quran and its Message

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Joseph A Islam www.quransmessage.com

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

WAS THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD ^(pbuh) REALLY ILLITERATE?

Joseph A Islam

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(1) DOES THE QURAN CONFIRM THAT THE PROPHET WAS ILLITERATE (COULD NOT READ OR WRITE)?

Answer - **NO**

(2) SO WHAT TERM IN THE QURAN IS USED TO SUPPORT THE NOTION THAT PROPHET MUHAMMAD ^(pbuh) WAS ILLITERATE?

The term which refers to him as an 'Ummi' as in the following example:

007:157 (Part quote)

"Those who follow the messenger (Arabic: Alladhina yattabi-una l-rasula), the 'Ummiya' Prophet (Arabic: l-Nabiya -Ummiya)..."

(3) WHAT IS THE CLASSICAL ARABIC DEFINITION OF THE TERM 'UMMI'?

The Classic Arabic term 'Ummi' refers to a **gentile** or **someone who is not familiar with the Law of Prophet Moses**. It is not necessarily someone who is illiterate.

أُمِّي (T, M, Mgh, Mṣb, K) and أَمَانٌ (K) [the former a rel. n. from أُمَّة, and thus properly meaning Gentile: whence, in a secondary, or tropical, sense, †a heathen;] †one not having a revealed scripture; (Bd in iii. 19 and 69;) so applied by those having a revealed scripture: (Bd in iii. 60:) [and particularly] an Arab: (Jel in iii. 69, and Bd and Jel in lxii. 2:) [or] in the proper language [of the Arabs], of, or belonging to, or relating to, the nation (أُمَّة) of

the people of El-Ambár. (T.) أُمِّيُونَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ (T.) أُمِّيُونَ (K) in the K̄ur ii. 73, means Vulgar persons, [or heathen,] who know not the Book of the Law revealed to Moses: (Jel:) or ignorant persons, who know not writing, so that they may read that book; or, who know not the Book of the Law revealed to Moses. (Bd.) Moḥammad was termed أُمِّي [meaning A Gentile, as distinguished from an Israelite: or, accord. to most of his followers, meaning illiterate;] because the nation (أُمَّة) of the Arabs did not write, nor read writing; and [they say that] God sent him as an apostle when he did not write, nor read from a book; and this

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [1]

The ignorance of the Law of Moses is not a condition **exclusive** to those who are not of the Jewish tradition. The Quran even refers to some of those from the **Children of Israel** as 'Ummi' implying their general ignorance of their own scriptures.

002.078

"And there are among them 'ummi(yuna)', who know not the Book, but (see therein their own) desires, and they do nothing but guess"

(4) WHAT DOES GENTILE MEAN?

The term Gentile is of Latin origin and from the word '**Gentilis**' which means to be associated with or being part of a particular tribe or clan. It refers to **non-Israelite tribes** and is used to refer to **non-Jews**.

Today, the primary meaning of gentile still remains as someone who is a "**non-Jew**" and is not a reader of the Torah or has any Jewish origins.

(5) WHAT OTHER EVIDENCE FROM THE QURAN DO WE HAVE THAT THE WORD 'UMMI' CANNOT MEAN 'ILLITERATE'?

If one were to translate the word 'Ummi' to mean 'Illiterate' (Cannot read and write), the following Quranic verse would become nonsensical.

003:020

"But if they dispute with you, say: I have submitted myself entirely to God and (so have those) who follow me; and say to those who have been given the Book **and the 'ummiyina'**: Do you submit yourselves? So if they submit then indeed they follow the right way; and if they turn back, then upon you is only the delivery of the message and God sees His servants"

In this verse, God is commanding Prophet Muhammad ^(pbuh) to proclaim the message to the Jews and Christians (recipients) of the previous scriptures and the 'Ummis'. If one renders 'Ummi' here as 'Illiterate' then the verse becomes nonsensical as it appears God is asking the Prophet to proclaim the message to those of the previous scriptures **and the illiterates**. This rendering would unnecessarily exclude those who **could** read and write but would have not received the scripture. The Arabs as a whole were not a nation of illiterates. Rather, it appears from the Quran that the Arabs were a nation who could read and write very well. There are Quranic verses which support such a claim such as verse 80:15, which clearly indicates the literary skills necessary to enable one to be able to pen the Quran.

062.002

"It is He Who has sent among the '**ummiyina**' a messenger from among themselves, to rehearse to them His verses, to sanctify them, and to instruct them in Scripture and Wisdom, although before they had been in manifest error"

If once again one were to assume 'ummi' to mean illiterate in the above verse, this would erroneously imply that God raised a messenger only amongst those that could not read and write. This would clearly amount to a nonsensical rendition of the verse.

003.075

"Among the People of the Book are some who, if entrusted with a great amount of wealth / hoard of gold, will (readily) pay it back; others, who, if entrusted with a single coin, will not return it unless you constantly stood demanding. That (is) because, they say, "We have no duty / accountability to the 'umiyina'" And they tell a lie against God, and (well) they know it"

In the above verse we note that some from the People of the Book asserted that they had no accountability to those who were not from the People of the Book (i.e. gentiles). Once again, it would make no sense to render 'umiyina' to imply illiterate here either.

(6) DOES THE QURAN SUPPORT THE VIEW THAT PROPHET MUHAMMAD^(pbuh) WAS AN 'UMMI' i.e. NOT A READER OF ANY SCRIPTURE BEFORE AND NOT OF JEWISH ORIGIN?

ANSWER - YES

042:052

"And thus did We reveal to you an inspired book by Our command. You did not know (Arabic: ma kunta) what the Book was (Arabic: ma-lkitab), nor the faith (Arabic: la imaanu), but We made it a light, guiding thereby whom We please of Our servants; and most surely you show the way to the right path"

مَا كُنْتَ تَدْرِي مَا الْكِتَابُ وَلَا الْإِيمَانُ

la-imaanu

ma-lkitab

ma kunta

Illustration - Joseph Islam

029.048

"And thou (O Muhammad) was not a reader of any scripture before it, nor did you write it with your right hand, for then might those have doubted, who follow falsehood"

NOTE:

The reference to not being able to 'write it with your right hand' is **not** a reference to the Quran. This is clearly a reference to the **previous** scriptures which is deduced by context. The verse informs the reader that the Prophet Muhammad^(pbuh) was **neither** a reader **nor** writer of the previous scriptures and hence had **no knowledge** of its contents, begging the question, so where did he get his

knowledge from? It also lends credence to the view (contrary to popular belief) that the Prophet had both the ability to read and write.

If the Prophet could not read or write, why would a statement informing people that he did not read or write anything of the 'previous scriptures' be stated? Similarly, in English if one makes a statement that X did not read book Y specifically, it shows the ability of X to actually read, the only exception being in this context of course, that book Y was not read by X.

The Prophet even had no expectation that he would become a Prophet.

028:086

"You had no hope that the Scripture would be inspired in you; except as a mercy from thy Lord, so never be a helper to the disbelievers"

(7) IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE THAT SUPPORTS THE CASE THAT PROPHET MUHAMMAD ^(pbuh) WAS NOT ILLITERATE?

ANSWER - YES

EVIDENCE 1 - Disbelievers accused the Prophet of writing down the scripture with his own hands.

025:005

'And they say: Fables of the men of old which he has written down **(Arabic: ik'tatabaha)** so that they are dictated to him morning and evening'

- This verse causes commentators some difficulty to translate as it implies that the Prophet could write. This verse also forms part of a bigger accusation that is being levelled against the Prophet (That he wrote fables). Many differing versions of this translation are hence given. The problem has its roots in the fact that at one side some traditions hold that the Prophet was illiterate and in this verse the Arabic is indicating (as part of the bigger accusation) that he could indeed write.

The Arabic gives us the root of the term 'iktatabaha' as K-T-B

Kaf-Ta-Ba = he wrote it, prescribed, appointed, ordained, to dictate it, judged, decreed, drew, brought together, collected, conjoined, a thing in which or on which one writes, record, registered writ.

وَقَالُوا أَأَسْلَطِيرُ الْأَوَّلِينَ أَكْتَتَبَهَا فَهِيَ تُمَلَّى عَلَيْهِ بُكْرَةً وَأَصِيلاً

ik'tatabaha

Illustration - Joseph Islam

kataba vb.

iktataba is the perfect active verbal form of *kataba*

Therefore the verb means that either the Prophet had the Quran written down or he himself wrote it down.

[one] to dictate it (اِسْتَمْلَاهُ): (K:) اِكْتَبَهَا in the Qur, xxv. 6, signifies he hath written them (S) for himself: (Bd:) or he hath asked [one] to write them for him, or to dictate them to him.

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [2]

The word '**aktaba**' is arguably a better candidate for usage if the intention was to imply that he 'caused others to write it' or 'had it dictated' exclusively.

اِكْتَبَ 4. He dictated. (S, K.) Ex. اِكْتَبْنِي اِكْتَبْ— هذه القصيدة Dictate to me this ode. (S.)

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [3]

The word '**iktataba**' is actually used (Most likely referring to the fact that the Prophet **himself** wrote it). In this way, the disbelievers were also well aware of the Prophet's ability to both read and write.

Please see related article [1] below.

EVIDENCE 2

If we read surah 96.1, there are some interesting points to consider:

096.001-5

"Read in the name of your Lord Who created. He created man from a clot. Read and your Lord is Most Honourable, Who taught (to write) with the pen (Arabic: Alladhi allama bil-qalami). Taught man what he knew not"

Note the use of 'Iqra' in conjunction with the teaching by the Pen.

compare *أَرَجَزَ* from *الرَّجَزُ*, and *أَرَمَلَ* from *الرَّمَلُ*, &c.]. (O. [See also 8.]) = *أَقْرَأَهُ*, (L, K, TA,) inf. n. *أَقْرَأَ*, (TA,) *He* (a sheykh, or preceptor, L, TA) made him, or taught him, to read, or recite; (L, K, TA;) [and so *قَرَأَهُ*, inf. n. *قُرِئَ*, as shown before:] see 1, last quarter. One says, *أَقْرَأَهُ* لِقُرْآنٍ (S, O, L, TA) and *الْحَدِيثِ* (L, TA) He made him, or taught him, to read, or recite, the Kur-án and the tradition. (L, TA.) Hence *أَقْرَأَهُ السَّلَامَ*: (AHát, TA:) see 1, near the end. — See also what next follows.

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [4]

(8) SO WHAT INFORMS US THAT PROPHET MUHAMMAD^(pbuh) COULD NOT READ OR WRITE?

Answer: [Islamic secondary sources](#).

This is where Islamic historians and commentators derive this interpretation. However, there are many contradictions within these sources themselves regarding this matter. Some sources state that he could read and others inform us that he could not.

Contradiction in Islamic Secondary sources: (Sources that imply that the Prophet was literate)

If one is to use traditions as an argument (as it is **only** our traditions that claim the Prophet's illiteracy) then Islam's **earliest historian** from which an extant biography is derived (via al-Bakkai - Ibn Hisham; Salm ul-Fadl-Tabari) records the Prophet Muhammad^(pbuh) responding to Musaylima's

(false Prophet) letter. The tradition records that the Prophet could indeed, both read and write. This historian is drawing from traditions nearly a **century** before Imam Bukhari collates his traditions.

(i) GABRIEL BROUGHT A COVERLET OF BROCADE WITH WRITING FOR MUHAMMAD^(pbuh) TO READ

Ramadhan in which God willed concerning him what He willed of His grace, the apostle set forth to Hira as was his wont, and his family with him. When it was the night on which God honoured him with his mission and showed mercy on His servants thereby, Gabriel brought him the command of God. 'He came to me,' said the apostle of God, 'while I was asleep, with a **coverlet of brocade whereon was some writing**, and said, '**Read!**' I said, "What shall I read?" He pressed me with it so tightly that I thought it was death; then he let me go and said, "**Read!**" I said, "What shall I read?" He pressed me with it again so that I thought it was death; then he let me go and said "**Read!**" I said, "What shall I read?" He pressed me with it the third time so that I thought it was death and said "**Read!**" I said, "What then shall I read?" - and this I said only to deliver myself from him, lest he should do the same to me again. He said:

"Read in the name of thy Lord who created,
Who created man of blood coagulated
Read! Thy Lord is the most beneficent,
Who taught by the pen,
Taught that which they knew not unto me"

So I read it, and he departed from me. [5]

(ii) MUSAYLIMA'S LETTER AND THE APOSTLE'S ANSWER

A Shaykh of Ashja' told me on the authority of Salama b. Nu'aym b. Mas'ud al-Ashja'i from his father Nu'aym: I heard the apostle saying to them **when read his letter** 'What do you say about it?' They said that they said the same as Musaylima. He replied, 'By God, were it not that heralds are not to be killed I would behead the pair of you!' **Then he wrote to Musaylima:** 'From Muhammad the apostle of God to Musaylima the liar. Peace be upon him who follows the guidance. The earth is Gods. He lets whom He will of His creatures inherit it and the result is to the pious. This was at the end of the year 10. [6]

The explanation later historians provide to the obvious conflict in the above narrative that clearly indicates that the Prophet could indeed write, is that the Prophet had the letter written by someone else. This is clearly not indicated by the text which suggests that the Prophet could both read and write.

(iii) BOOK 19, NUMBER 2993 (SUNUN ABU DAUD)

Narrated Yazid ibn Abdullah:

{Body of Hadith}

We then asked: **Who wrote this document for you? He replied: The Apostle of God** (peace be upon him). [7]

(iv) SAHIH MUSLIM BOOK 13 (BOOK OF BEQUESTS -KITAB AL WASIYYA) NUMBER 4016

"Ibn Abbas reported: When Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) was about to leave this world, there were persons (around him) in his house, 'Umar b. al-Kbattab being one of them. Allah's Apostle (may peace be upon him) said: **Come, I may write for you a document; you would not go astray after that.** Thereupon Umar said: Verily Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) is deeply afflicted with pain. You have the Qur'an with you. The Book of Allah is sufficient for us. Those who were present in the house differed. Some of them said: Bring him (the writing material) so that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) may write a document for you and you would never go astray after him And some among them said what 'Umar had (already) said. When they indulged in nonsense and began to dispute in the presence of Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him), he said: Get up (and go away) 'Ubaidullah said: Ibn Abbas used to say: **There was a heavy loss, indeed a heavy loss, that, due to their dispute and noise. Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) could not write (or dictate) the document for them"** [8]

وحدثني محمد بن رافع وعبد بن حميد قال عبد أخبرنا وقال ابن رافع حدثنا عبد الرزاق أخبرنا معمر عن الزهري عن عبيد الله بن عبد الله بن عتبة عن ابن عباس قال لما حضر رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم وفي البيت رجال فيهم عمر بن الخطاب فقال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم هلم أكتب لكم كتابا لا تضلون بعده فقال عمر إن رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم قد غلب عليه الوجد وعندكم القرآن حسبنا كتاب الله فاختلف أهل البيت فاختموا فمنهم من يقول قربوا يكتب لكم رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم كتابا لن تضلوا بعده ومنهم من يقول ما قال عمر فلما أكثروا اللغو والاختلاف عند رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم قوموا قال عبيد الله فكان ابن عباس يقول إن الرزية كل الرزية ما حال بين رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم وبين أن يكتب لهم ذلك الكتاب من اختلافهم ولغظهم

Source: Hadith in Arabic [9]

Important highlighted areas read:

YELLOW

"faqaala" (**He said**) 'nabi salAllaah alahi wasalam' (may peace be upon him) 'aktab'a lakum kitabun' (**write you a book/ document**) 'la tadhalauna bai'adi' (That you do not err after)

GREY

'Ibn-e Abbas yaqulu' (Ibn abbas says), 'ina raziya kul raziya' (the loss, each loss) 'ma haala baina rasul allah' (Situation between the messenger Allah) 'sallalAllaah ho wasalam' (Peace be upon him) 'wa bayyin an yaqtuba' (**and to write for them**) 'lahum dalika kutaab' (for them that book) 'min' because of 'ikhtalafahum' (differences / disputes?) 'wa' (and) 'lagtahum' (shouting / noise / clamour)

(9) GIVEN THE CONTRADICTIONS, WHAT SOURCE IS THE MOST RELIABLE?

Undoubtedly, the primary source, the Quran - even if it is to be used as the earliest historical source of Islam.

(10) ARE SECONDARY SOURCES INFLUENCING THE INTERPRETATION OF THE QURAN TO DEPICT THE PROPHET AS BEING ILLITERATE?

ANSWER - YES

FINAL THOUGHTS

So in summary, we note the following:

- The classical Arabs understood the word 'Ummi' to mean gentile (non-Jew) **or** someone who was not familiar with the Law of Prophet Moses (Inclusive of Jews 2:78). It was not necessarily someone who was an 'illiterate'.
- If we translate the word 'Ummi' as 'illiterate', Quranic verses become nonsensical as you imply that the whole of the Arab nation or those that the Quran was being delivered to were illiterate (3.20; 62.2).
- The disbelievers at the time of the Prophet accused the Prophet that he wrote down the Quran with his own hands. If he was illiterate, this claim would have been easily rejected and would not have been made.
- It may well be that the Prophet was not able to read or write. However, the Quran does not confirm this when it talks about him being an 'Ummi'. Keeping all evidence in view, there is a strong possibility that he may actually be able to both read and write.

Related Article:

- (1) [A Deeper Look at the Word 'Iktatabaha'](#)

REFERENCES

[1] LANE. E.W, Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 1, Page 92

Highlights marked in red on the lexicon excerpt are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[2] Ibid., Volume 7, Page 2590

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., Volume 7, 2503

[5] GUILLAUME. A, The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah, Oxford University Press, Page 106

[6] Ibid., Page 649

[7] SUNAN ABU-DAWUD, Book 19, Number 2993, University of Southern California Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement [online], Translation available at

<http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/hadith/abudawud/019.sat.html> [Accessed 13th April 2011]

[8] SAHIH MUSLIM, Book 13, Number 4016, University of Southern California Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement [online], Translation available at

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[9] HADITH IN ARABIC [online], Available at [http://hadith.al-](http://hadith.al-islam.com/Page.aspx?pageid=192&TOCID=745&BookID=25&PID=3163)

[islam.com/Page.aspx?pageid=192&TOCID=745&BookID=25&PID=3163](http://hadith.al-islam.com/Page.aspx?pageid=192&TOCID=745&BookID=25&PID=3163) [Accessed 13th April 2011]

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[Joseph Islam](#)

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