

THE LIGHT OF THE QURAN LITERACY IN ISLAM

The Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (S.A.W.) was alone fasting and praying in a cave outside the city of Mecca. He always sought truth and justice. But at this time of fasting, he felt a special longing for some sign of mercy from the God he was worshipping.

Suddenly the following verses - the first words from the Holy Quran was revealed to him through the archangel Gibrael:

Read - In the name of thy Lord Who created
He created man from a clot
Read and your Lord is most Honourable
Who taught to write with the pen
Taught man what he knew not
(Quran 96: 1- 5)

This revelation confirms two things:

- 1) That Muhammad is the Prophet of Islam
- 2) The pre-eminence and importance of reading and writing in Islam.

This was a commandment from God for the literacy of all people. Thus began the first literacy campaign in Islam 1400 years ago.

As is well known, Muhammad (S.A.W.) was unable to read and write, this shortcoming is seen in a positive light in Islam. The Prophet's mind was unencumbered and uninfluenced by word phrases thoughts or philosophies he might have read. Therefore his mind was pure and free, ready to receive the message of God.

Also, how could a man unable to read and write be accused of 'composing' a book, much less such a book as the Quran.

" And you (o' Muhammad) was not a reader of any book before it, nor did you write one
with your right hand, for then could those who say untrue things have doubted."
(Quran 29:48)

Thus, we see the fact that the Prophet was illiterate actually increases his credibility as a Prophet and at the same time emphasizes the miracle of the Holy Quran as a word of God.

The Prophet is the "seal of the Prophets" or the last Prophet in a long line of Prophets beginning with Adam. No one else is expected to be like him. Consequently, throughout his leadership of the first Islamic Community, in obedience to the first commandment of God ("Read") did his best to encourage learning and literacy among his followers.

Once the Prophet (S.A.W.) entered the mosque in Medina before the prayer time. He found two groups in the mosque. One group was busy with its own acts of worship. Some were reading from the Quran while others were supplicating. The other group was in a corner busy Learning. They learnt how to read and write and discussed the teachings of Islam and their application to their daily lives. Looking at both, the Prophet said:

“They are both engaged in useful pursuits. But I am a teacher. I shall join the group assembled to learn.”

And so he sat with the group of students engaged in learning.

It is also related that after a battle in which the Muslims gained prisoners, the Prophet granted freedom to any prisoner who was literate and agreed to teach a muslim how to read and write.

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