

“Books” as mentioned in the Holy Quran

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 29 January 2021

ذَلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ

“This Book, in which there is no doubt, is a guide to those who keep their duty”
(The Quran, 2:2)

This is the well-known verse at the opening of chapter 2 of the Holy Quran. Its placement here shows the logical arrangement of the Quran. This placement refutes the criticism that the Quran is not organised in an orderly, systematic way, and that its verses move haphazardly from one subject to another without any connection or reason. Now the first chapter of the Quran contains a prayer right in the middle of it:

“Guide us on the right path” إِهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ

The verse in chapter 2, following on from the prayer for guidance, says that it is this book which contains that guidance. When this verse was revealed it was just after the *Hijra*. The Quran did not then exist in a book form, written down as a compiled book. Much of it had not even been revealed. It was not clear to people if the Holy Prophet would succeed in his mission or if he and his followers would be destroyed by their enemies. So it was a prophecy at that time that the Quran would become a book. But that prophecy would not have been very meaningful or of much significance to its Arab hearers because they had little concept of the importance of books. Before the Quran, although Arabic writing existed, there weren't any written books in Arabic. Its literature was mostly oral poetry which was recited and memorised. Only a few documents were written down. No importance was attached to writing books in the sense that we understand what a book is. The Quran was the first Arabic book as such and soon after the death of the Holy Prophet its written copies were made.

So apart from the prophecy here that the Quran would become a book soon, this verse also shows the importance of books, because a book was being made a guide for

people. This itself was a prophecy about the distant future because the importance of books has come to be more realized in the world in the last, say, three hundred years than ever before. Just as the “book” is mentioned at the beginning of the Quran in its present arrangement of *Surahs*, reading and writing were mentioned in the very first revelation to the Holy Prophet. That revelation is now in chapter 96 of the Quran:

اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ ۝۱ خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ ۝۲ اقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ ۝۳ الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ ۝۴ عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ ۝۵

“Read in the name of your Lord Who creates —creates man from a clot (of blood, or clinging substance) — read and your Lord is most Generous, Who taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know.” (96:1–5)

This begins with the command to “read” (*iqra*) and in fact the name “Quran” is derived from this word and means that it is a book to be read. Here the attainment of knowledge by reading and writing is mentioned along with the development of a full-fledged human being from a single cell embryo. What is the connection between the two? One meaning is that just as a human being reaches its full bodily development starting from an embryo, that physically-developed human being is again like an embryo, and this new embryo needs nourishment from knowledge in order to reach its full development and become a real human being. And God was now revealing that knowledge to the Holy Prophet and also revealing the ways of acquiring more and more of it. But we can also look at it in another way. When these verses were revealed, the Quran itself was in the embryonic state. It had only just started being revealed. What these five verses might be saying is that just as the embryo develops into a human being, similarly that revelation would develop into a complete and perfect book. Hence when the revelation of the Quran was complete twenty-three years later, the following well-known verse was revealed:

“This day have I perfected for you your religion and completed My favour to you and chosen for you Islam as a religion.” (5:3)

It is mentioned in these verses that God taught man by the pen, taught man what he did not know. It is, of course, not meant that God used a pen and wrote out something for man to read. It is human beings who wield the pen and it is the law of God that that action by man brings him knowledge which he did not know before. But how can just writing something give you knowledge? When you write something, you have to think and organize your ideas, and that very act of putting it in writing clarifies it in your mind. You may well need to look up and consult something else while writing. By the time you finish a piece of writing, you have more knowledge of that matter than you did when you started.

In science we were taught in school the great importance of making notes of our observations and experiments. Data collection and recording data enables us to draw conclusions from it, which we cannot do otherwise, and it provides us with knowledge which we didn't know before. Only by recording Covid-19 deaths, for example, do we know whether they are rising or falling, and we can compare figures for different periods, different populations and different countries. Of course, the Quran is concerned primarily with knowledge that strengthens our faith in God and improves our moral behaviour. But that religious knowledge cannot be separated from knowledge of the world around us which is studied in sciences of various kinds, whether they are physical and natural sciences or social sciences. To be able to act on the religious teachings of Islam, if you merely studied books of the religion this would be inadequate and insufficient. So the statement of the Quran that God “taught man what he did not know” includes every branch of knowledge. But God taught man by giving him *the means* by using which he can learn what he doesn't know.

Books are mentioned in another early revelation in the Quran as follows:

وَإِذَا الصُّحُفُ نُشِرَتْ ۖ وَإِذَا السَّمَاءُ كُشِطَتْ ۖ وَإِذَا الْجِبَالُ سُعِّرَتْ ۖ وَإِذَا الْجَنَّةُ أُزْلِفَتْ ۖ

“and when the books are spread, and when the heaven has its covering removed, and when hell is kindled, and when the Garden is brought near”

(81:10–13)

What we have translated as “when the books are spread” is generally taken as meaning that on the Day of Judgment the records of the deeds of people will be laid open before them. But the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement explained that verses of the Quran relating to the Day of Judgment often refer also to events to happen in this world. He took this verse as being a prophecy that a time will come when: “means of publication and distribution of books will come into existence. This refers to the printing press and the postal service, prophesying that these will be commonplace in the latter days.” And it is a fact that starting in the last four or five hundred years, i.e., a thousand years after Islam came into the world, due to the invention of modern printing techniques, the production of books, magazines and journals and their availability increased to an enormous scale, previously unimaginable. It was due to this spread of knowledge that the heaven had “its covering removed”. People thought that the sky was a covering over the earth and it was a solid dome which they called the “firmament”. With the development of knowledge, through the spread of books, it was discovered that there is no such solid dome. So the covering of heaven was removed. Man can now travel right through what looked to him like a solid sky.

Then we have the verses: “and when hell is kindled, and when the Garden is brought near”. Through the advancement of knowledge, by means of the spread of books, hell and the garden of heaven have appeared before us together at the same time. For example, when atomic energy was first developed, it was done in order to make and explode an atomic bomb in the Second World War. Those explosions brought hell before people’s eyes. But the same atomic energy is used to produce vast amounts of electricity, bringing people all kinds of comforts. So the garden of heaven is before their eyes as well; in fact, we live in it. The same research which led to the production of the first atomic bomb also led to the production of what are called radio isotopes used in medical treatment for cancer. Then, at the same time that we hear dire predictions of the destructive effects of climate change, we continue to see inventions and technology which saves our lives as never before and makes our lives more comfortable than ever before. So hell and heaven are both before us, and it is because of advancement of knowledge, science and technology.

The word for “books” in the verse “when the books are spread” is *ṣuḥuf*. The same word is used in the Quran for religious scriptures in the verse *ṣuḥufi Ibrāhīma wa Mūsā*, meaning “the scriptures of Abraham and Moses” (87:19). If we take “books” in the verse “when the books are spread” as being religious scriptures, it is certainly true that these became widespread in the world in the 1800s and 1900s to an extent that could not be imagined before. The Bible was spread all over the world by Christian organizations such as the British and Foreign Bible Society, and not only in English but it was translated into a vast number of other languages. And this was not only with the Bible. A German professor of languages, F. Max Muller, along with other scholars, undertook a massive project around the year 1880 to publish all the scriptures of eastern religions translated into English. They produced a series of 50 volumes under the title *The Sacred Books of East*. This series includes scriptures of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism etc. and also a translation of the Quran.

As regards the Quran itself, only a hundred years ago Muslim Ulama considered it forbidden to translate it. Today, just in English there are more than thirty-five translations by Muslims themselves, and this is not counting other languages. So the Quran too has spread more widely than ever before.

The people to whom the Quran conveyed this prophecy, about books being spread, had hardly seen any book, they had no idea of the importance of books, had no interest in them and they did not know what revolution for mankind could be achieved through books. The Holy Prophet Muhammad belonged to the same community and society, and he could not have made up this prophecy through his own human knowledge because a human being in his situation had little concept of the role of books. This goes to show that the Quran was indeed a revelation from God and not something made up by the Holy Prophet from his own ideas and mind.

بَارَكَ اللهُ لَنَا وَنَاوَكُمُ فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعَنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-