

Prophecy and Illiteracy: The Meaning of *ʔummij* in the Holy Qur'an

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Abstract

The epithet *ʔummij* (as well as the plural form *ʔummijūn*) that appears in the Holy Qur'an six times does not mean 'illiterate' or 'unlettered' in the Qur'anic context, as conventionally claimed by main Qur'anic interpreters and scholars (for example Al-Qurtubi [d. 671/1223]; Al-Suyūṭi [d. 911/1505]; Ibn Kaṭīr [d. 774/ 1373]; Al-Tabari [d. 310/922]). Rather, it denotes, as this paper argues, the lack of theological knowledge of heavenly scripture. This epithet is used to describe people in the Arabian Peninsula who lack theological knowledge in Allah's sacred doctrine and to introduce Prophet Muḥammad as Allah's messenger who receives prophecy and becomes Allah's messenger without having theological pre-knowledge of heavenly scripture. This reasoning helps us resolve the apparent complexities caused by the orthodox views of this epithet and provides a solid footing for understanding several Qur'anic verses where Prophet Muḥammad, rather than any other prophet, is either warned or taught by Allah to conduct specific tasks.

Keywords: Lexicography; textual analysis; Holy Qur'an; illiteracy; theology; Prophet Muḥammad.

1. Introduction

The Arabic word *ʔummij* which literally means 'an illiterate; someone who is unable to read or write' is used to describe and mark Prophet Muḥammad in the Holy Qur'an (see Q. 7:157-8) alongside his people (being *ʔummijūn*) among whom he is a messenger (see Q. 62:2).¹ This definition, when pursued, views both Prophet Muḥammad and his people as illiterate; nevertheless, the main corpus of pertinent research focuses on how Prophet is *ʔummij* but does not fully explore or resonate the association between the epithet *ʔummij* and Prophet Muḥammad's nation (see Günther 2002). The inclination to emphasize Mohammed's illiteracy rather than his people's illiteracy is justified by most Islamic historians and Qur'an exegetes and expositors in terms of the validity of Mohammad's prophecy and the true divinity of the Holy Qur'an. Emphasizing such a correlation, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209) states (Günther 2002: 11):

If he [Muḥammad] had mastered writing and reading, he possibly would have been suspected of having studied the books of the ancestors. Hence, he would have acquired all these branches of knowledge [ʔuluūm] through this reading [muṭālaʔah]. When he passed on this mighty Qur'an...without having had any learning and reading [min ḡayr taʔallum wa la muṭālaʔah], this was one of the miracles [muʔjizāt] 'of his prophethood'. Muḥammad 'had not learned from a master [ʔustād], and he had not studied any book or attended any lecture of a scholar, because

Mecca was not a place of scholars. And he was not absent from Mecca for a long period of time, which would make it possible to claim that he learned [so] many sciences during that absence. God [Allah] did open for him the gate of knowledge and realisation [of his prophethood], even though [he was unlettered].

Similarly, Badawi (1995) elaborates on the meaning of *ʔummij* in the Holy Qur'an and associates Prophet Muhammad's illiteracy with reading and writing. He declares (1995: 25):

The fact that God [Allah] has chosen an illiterate Arab, who was neither a Jew nor a Christian, to carry this noble message does, by no means, justify the tremendous energies spent by Jewish or Christian orientalist or missionaries to belittle his mission by all means [...] Any fair and logical study of Muḥammad's history and characters would leave no room to doubt of any ulterior motive to fabricate his claim of prophet hood and divine revelation. It does not stand to reason to say that the book (the Qur'an), that caused a far-reaching spiritual, moral, social, economical, and political revolution that changed the course of history, was a product of convulsive epileptic seizures!

Such a conventional interpretation and viewpoints are explored by Günther (2002) who piles up most of what has been said by Qur'an exegetes and expositors about *ʔummij* and *ʔummijjūn* in the Holy Qur'an. Günther concludes that most Muslims praise Prophet Muḥammad's reading/writing-based illiteracy as it implies that:

Muḥammad is Prophet who communicated God's [Allah] revelation to humankind completely and authentically. The underlying point here is the belief that, in conveying the revelation, Muḥammad was not influenced by any knowledge that he could possibly have gained through readings in previously revealed scriptures, or from anything or anyone other than God [Allah].

(1)

The same correlation between Prophet Muḥammad's hypothetical reading/writing-based illiteracy and the divinity of the Holy Qur'an is stressed by Abu Zayd (2003) who states that 'as an attribute of the Prophet, being illiterate is a complementary quality which Allah reserved for him to complement the wondrous nature of the Qur'an in terms of its scientific and intellectual inimitability and as yet one further proof of his Prophethood' (84). Likewise, Ghiloni (2016) examines the many definitions associated with *ʔummij* by different scholars and concludes that 'Muslims conceive a positive dimension of Muḥammad's illiteracy: Qur'anic revelation could not have been influenced by previous scientific, religious, or cultural knowledge Muḥammad may have learned from Greeks, Jews, or Christians' (292). Prophet Muḥammad's reading/writing-based illiteracy demonstrates that he cannot bring a full-fledged book like the Holy Qur'an from his own, which provides a piece of evidence for the genuineness of his prophethood and for the Holy Quran being a divine rather than a man-made book.

While this noble motivation and goal, that is to prove the divinity of Holy Qur'an, is praiseworthy and pleasing for Muslims all over the globe, we view the traditional interpretation of *ʔummij* as a straw

man argument that can be easily undermined. We also view it as a fallacy that underlies an attack against Prophet Muḥammad himself and his prophecy and causes a confusion that blurs the true meaning of *ʔummij*. Accordingly, we believe that Prophet Muḥammad's *purported* inability to read and write has nothing to do with the divinity of Holy Qur'an; rather, it should be interpreted in terms of theological pre-knowledge.

To achieve this, the paper proceeds as follows. In section two, we discuss the many traditional interpretations of the epithet *ʔummij* in the Holy Qur'an and how the illiteracy of Prophet Muḥammad (being unable to read and write) is conventionally taken by Qur'an scholars and interpreters as a proof of Muḥammad's prophecy as well as the divinity of the Holy Qu'ran. In section three, we show how, in comparison to other prophets like Moses and Joseph, Prophet Muḥammad had not had the required theological knowledge before being declared as a prophet; thus, his illiteracy (being *ʔummij*) is better analysed with respect to the theological knowledge that predates prophecy. Afterwards, in section four, we investigate some relevant verses that are associated with Prophet Muḥammad (rather than any other prophet) and provide our evidence that *ʔummij* in the Holy Qur'an bears a specific meaning that describes someone who does not have theological pre-knowledge of heavenly scripture. This reading is totally different from several orientalist's conclusions who attempted to prove that the prophet Mohammad is *literate* to conclude that Qur'an is not a holy product but written by Mohammad himself. Our analysis draws on a key theme of lexicography and textual analysis in that a meaning of a word is decided based on its occurrences in its text (Fairclough 2003). Section five shows how this argument does elegantly account for several occasions and content of certain Qur'anic verses. Such an account makes available inclusive cognizance of Prophet Muḥammad's prophethood and its unique properties which are not common among other messengers' prophethood. Section six concludes the paper and directs for further future research.

2. *ʔummij* in the Qur'anic tradition

The main interpretations of the Qur'anic verses that refer to Prophet Muḥammad as *ʔal-nabijʔal-ʔummij* take in *ʔummij* as the attribute of being unable to write and/or read.² As stated by Ibn ʔAbbās (d. 68/687-8),³

(Those who follow the messenger) the religion of the Messenger, (Prophet who can neither read nor write) [that is] Muḥammad (whom they will find) with his traits and description (described in the Torah and the Gospel (which are) with them. He will enjoin on them that which is right) Allah's divine Oneness and moral excellence (and forbid them that which is wrong) disbelief and hurting others. (He will make lawful for them all good things) he explains to them the lawfulness of that which is in the Scripture such as the meat and milk of camels, sheep and others (and prohibit for them only the foul) he explains to them the unlawfulness of what is in the Scripture such as carrion, the meat of swine and other things; (and he will relieve them of their burden).

This excerpt reflects the dominantly conventional interpretation of *ʔummij* in terms of reading and writing. This seems feasible unless Chapter Al-ʔalaq (96) is considered seriously. In this Chapter, Allah addresses Prophet Muḥammad thus, 'Recite [read] in the name of your Lord who created... Recite [read] and your Lord is the most Generous' (Q. 96:1-3). Is it possible that Allah who affirms that He himself 'does not charge a soul except [with that within] its capacity' (Q. 2:286) asks a person who cannot read or write to recite? This is impossible and illogical; therefore, to define Prophet Muḥammad's illiteracy in terms of reading and writing is nonsensical.

Trying to resolve the aforementioned self-contradicting interpretation, Al-Qurtubi, one of the most authoritative interpreters of Qur'an, believes that Prophet Muḥammad is introduced in the Holy Qur'an as *ʔummij* because he is sent as a messenger to a nation that neither reads nor writes (or which does not teach writing or reading). This viewpoint interestingly secures Prophet Muḥammad from the charge of being unable to read and/or write; nevertheless, it is completely based on a sort of historical fallacy. Al-Qurtubi's viewpoint demands that Prophet Muḥammad's target people have been almost incapable of reading and/or writing. While this seems true as the percentage of illiteracy has been high, it is hard to deny that the literary life of Prophet Muḥammad's people has been very prosperous before Islam (Ali 1996; Rahim 2003). Pre-Islamic poetry and then-spread genealogies are strong evidence that speaks clearly for the ability of Arabs then to compose literature and have a rich literary life. Although most poets could not write or read, they were adept at composing high-profile poetry. The annually-held literary Arabic festivals that have been known among Arabs embody the great literary Arabic movement at the time (Rahim 2003; Nicholson 2014). In short, to apply the modern concept of illiteracy to the sort of illiteracy that has been widespread among Arabs before Islam is specious because illiterate Arabs before Islam (for example Imrul Qays and Zuhair bin Abi Sulma) have been the masters of Arabic literature and language as well as the pillars of modern Arabic literacy.

Moreover, the pre-Islamic Arabic nation to which Prophet Muḥammad is sent is not very different from other nations at the time with respect to literacy, which has never been a hallmark of any past nations or people. The inability to write and read was a property of other nations around and before Arabs, including Persia and the Roman Empire. Relevant historical-biographical sources do not mention that such nations had any system of teaching their locals writing and/or reading. Also, it is hard to propose that Noah's people, Ibrahim's people, and so on were literate. No reliable historical evidence is available that clearly reveals that literacy was spread among certain nations in the antiquity. If illiteracy is tied to the inability of writing and reading, then it is beyond the question that all such nations were illiterate like Arabs at the time. With this being the case, neither Prophet Muḥammad can be distinguished from other community members nor can his nation be distinguished from other nations in terms of reading-writing illiteracy. That is to say, what distinguishes Arabs (where Prophet Muḥammad is a messenger) from other nations is not (il)literacy; therefore, to interpret *ʔummij* and its plural form *ʔummijjūn* as reading-writing-based illiteracy distorts their unique functionality as a distinguishing factor or attribute of Prophet Muḥammad and his nation.

In a related vein, Günther (2002) reports that Prophet Muḥammad has had the basic knowledge of writing and reading, a matter that adds credence to our approach that dissociates the meaning of *ʔummij* from reading/writing-based literacy. Günther (2002: 18) writes:

The early Arabic sources on the history of Islam do provide evidence that Prophet Muḥammad -especially in the second half of his career when acting as a statesman in Medina- used scribes to correspond with the tribes. Likewise, though infrequently rather than constantly, he had scribes write down (on separate pages, not yet in one single book) parts of the Divine revelation. In the most widely accepted (Sunni) collections of Prophetic tradition ('The Nine Books', al-kutub at-tisʿa), which represent not only a historical source, but also - as one could say - the 'collective memory' of the medieval Muslim community, there are two different views evident: one tends to suggest that Muḥammad had (basic) knowledge of reading and writing; the other strictly denies this.

To articulate that substitution, we argue in the next section that *ʔummij* has a specialized terminological meaning in the Holy Qur'an.⁴

3. Prophet Muḥammad and other prophets in terms of *ʔummij*

It is evident in the Holy Qur'an that there are some prophets/messengers who are knowledgeable of Allah Almighty or have received knowledge from Allah Himself before they are declared as messengers (that is asked to deliver Allah's message to their nations). This point is clear in the following Qur'anic verse:

[Moses] said, 'That is [established] between me and you. Whichever of the two terms I complete - there is no injustice to me, and Allah, over what we say, is Witness.' (Q. 28:28)

This verse demonstrates that Moses is aware of Allah Almighty before he has been declared as a messenger (sent to Pharaoh). He refers to Allah as the eyewitness to his agreement with the father of the two women for whom he waters the flock. According to the Holy Qur'an, the period between the agreement held between Moses and the father of the two girls has been at least 8 years, something that strongly indicates Moses' knowledge of Allah before prophecy time. This duration is explicitly stated in the following verse which shows that Moses met Allah Almighty (and became a messenger) after he has fulfilled the agreement:

And when Moses had completed the term and was traveling with his family, he perceived from the direction of the mount a fire. He said to his family, 'Stay here; indeed, I have perceived a fire. Perhaps I will bring you from there [some] information or burning wood from the fire that you may warm yourselves' (Q. 28:29)

Moses' pre-knowledge of Allah Almighty is also confirmed by the following verse that reports the accident when Moses accidentally has killed a man of Pharaoh's people: 'He said, "My Lord, indeed I have wronged myself, so forgive me," and He forgave him. Indeed, He is the Forgiving, the Merciful'. (Q.

28:15) One may object here saying that Moses' pre-knowledge of Allah Almighty is natural as he is Jewish at the time. While this seems true, it is necessary to notice that Jews are a race whose religion is Judaism, which is delivered as a sacred message by Moses. This implies that Moses' pre-knowledge of Allah Almighty is present before he is announced as a prophet; therefore, he is not in this respect theologically *ʔummij*. On the contrary, there is no evidence whatsoever in the Holy Qur'an that states that Prophet Muḥammad has had a similar knowledge of Allah Almighty before he is announced as a messenger, which makes of him *ʔummij* in this respect.

By the same token, Prophet Muḥammad's pre-knowledge of Allah is not comparable to other prophets' whose belief in Allah Almighty has been pre-dated to their religious duties that are related to calling humankind to obey and follow the Holy Scripture. For instance, the Holy Qur'an mentions that Jacob has had knowledge (that Allah Almighty taught him):

Jacob: And when they entered from where their father had ordered them, it did not avail them against Allah at all except [it was] a need within the soul of Jacob, which he satisfied. And indeed, he was a possessor of knowledge because of what We had taught him, but most of the people do not know. (Q. 12:68)

Likewise, Prophet Muḥammad's pre-knowledge of Allah Almighty is not equivalent to John's knowledge who has received it as a child, as reported in the following verse, '[Allah] said, "O John, take the Scripture with determination". And We gave him judgement [while yet] a boy' (Q. 19:12). Obviously, prophets' pre-knowledge of Allah Almighty before they are declared as messengers is not inherited or acquired from humans but given to them from Allah Almighty (in)directly. This knowledge is introduced in the Holy Qur'an as *ʔal-ḥukum*, which is translated as (judgement) in the previous verse. Otherwise, it would become mysterious why a son of a prophet like John has not received this knowledge from his father who is a prophet as well.

It is noteworthy here that several prophets (apart from Prophet Muḥammad) have been endowed with theological knowledge before they are declared as Allah's messengers. That theological knowledge consists of two main stages of teaching: (*ʔal-ḥukum*; lit. judgement) and (*an-nubuwwah*; lit. prophecy). These two stages occur consecutively with other messengers where teaching precedes prophecy, yet they occur simultaneously in the case of Prophet Muḥammad who has received no prophecy-related teaching before he is declared as Allah's messenger. Prophet Muḥammad lacks the theological knowledge given to prophets like Moses and Joseph before being assigned as Allah's messenger, thus he is *ʔal-rasūl ʔal-nabij ʔal-ʔummij* (lit. the illiterate prophet messenger).

4. Muḥammad *ʔal-rasūl ʔal-nabij ʔal-ʔummij* (lit. the illiterate prophet messenger)

As reported in Chapter Al-Aʿrāf (7:157 & 158), the sacred books before Islam (for example the *Torah* and the *Gospel*) indirectly notify people about the coming of *al-rasool al-nabi al-ʔummij* (lit. the illiterate prophet messenger) in the future. Verse 157 of Chapter Al-Aʿrāf(7) says,

Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered prophet, whom they find written in what they have of the Torah and the Gospel, who enjoins upon them what is right and forbids them what is wrong and makes lawful for them the good things and prohibits for them the evil and relieves them of their burden and the shackles which were upon them. So they who have believed in him, honored him, supported him and followed the light which was sent down with him - it is those who will be the successful.

Considering that there has been no prophet/messenger after the time of Jesus other than Prophet Muḥammad, Verse 157 of Chapter Al-Aʿrāf as well as verse 158 singles out Prophet Muḥammad apart from other messengers by pointing out his illiteracy.⁵ The phrase *ʔal-rasūl ʔal-nabij ʔal-ʔummij* constitutes the distinguishing attribute of Prophet Muḥammad, which implies that the epithet *ʔummij* in the Holy Qur'an exclusively refers to Prophet Muḥammad rather than any other prophet. Analogically, when *ʔummijjūn/ʔummijjīn* (the plural of *ʔummij*) is used, it necessarily refers to Prophet Muḥammad's nation (that is people and tribe), as evident in the second verse of Chapter Al-jumuʿa (62).⁶ That is to say, what distinguishes Prophet Muḥammad from other prophets is his lack of any theological knowledge, education, and training before being declared as a prophet and messenger by Allah,⁷ which makes of him *ʔummij*.

Moreover, relying on various Islamic references like *Saḥīḥ Buxāri* (d.846), *Sunan Abu Dawūd* (d. 817), and Ibn Hishām (d. 833), Sina (2008) reports Prophet Muḥammad's reaction to meeting Gabriel the Angel in the cave for the first time thus,

One day, at the age of forty, after having spent many days in a cave by himself, Muḥammad had a strange experience. He started having rhythmic muscle contractions, abdominal pains, as if someone was squeezing him violently, fasciculation (muscle twitching), involuntary movement of head and lips, sweating, and rapid heartbeat. In this agitated state he heard voices and had a vision of a ghost. (Sina 2008: 15)

Prophet Muhammad ran home terrified, shivering and sweating: 'Cover me, cover me,' he pleaded with his wife. 'O Khadijah, what is wrong with me?' He told her everything and said, 'I fear that something may happen to me.' He thought he had become possessed by demons again. Khadijah reassured him and told him not to be afraid, that he was visited by an angel and was chosen to be a prophet.

Obviously, Prophet Muḥammad was afraid of something that had happened to him in the cave. Taking into consideration that the cave was well-known to Prophet Muḥammad, what happened in the cave must have been something unexpected and peculiar for him, thus causing him 'rhythmic muscle contractions, abdominal pains, as if someone was squeezing him violently, fasciculation (muscle twitching), involuntary movement of head and lips, sweating, and rapid heartbeat' (Sina 2008: 15). The Prophet's reaction, as most Muslim scholars and historians confirm, is caused by meeting Gabriel the Angel and being named as a prophet and messenger to all people (Islam 1995). We agree with other scholars on this; nevertheless, we believe that if Prophet Muḥammad was not *theologically* illiterate, his reaction to meeting Gabriel the Angel would have been totally different.

In fact, almost all Islamic resources report that Prophet Muḥammad has been truly astonished and afraid when he has received the first revelation. This is reported in the following excerpt (Azzam1999:22):

Read: In the Name of thy Lord who createth, Createth man from a clot. Read: And thy Lord is the Most Generous Who teacheth by the pen, Teacheth man that which he knew not.' (Kor 96, 1-5) Muḥammad [...] repeated these verses, just as the Archangel had said them. When the Archangel was sure Muḥammad [...] knew them by heart, he we away. Now that he was alone Muḥammad [...] could not understand what had happened to him. He was terribly afraid and rushed out of the cave. Perhaps the cave was haunted? Perhaps the devil had taken a hold of his mind? But he was stopped by a voice from heaven which said; 'O Muḥammad [...] you are the Messenger of Allah, and I am Gabriel.' He looked up at the sky and wherever he turned he saw the Archangel Gabriel. In a state of confusion he returned home to Khadijah. When his wife saw him she became very worried as he began to shiver, as though in a fever. He asked her to wrap him in blankets, which she did. After a while he recovered sufficiently to tell her what had happened at Hira'. Khadijah believed all that he told her and with great respect said: 'Be happy, O son of my uncle and be confident. Truly I swear by Allah who has my soul in His hands, that you will be our people's Prophet.' Muḥammad [...], the Messenger of Allah, was eased by her faith in him, but after all that had happened he was exhausted and felt fast asleep.

Prophet Muḥammad's first reaction to revelation should not be replete with stress and fear, if he has had any pre-knowledge of how to deal with Allah Almighty and what to do in such occasions. This becomes feasible if we compare Prophet Muḥammad's *fearful* reaction for meeting Gabriel the Angel for the first time to Prophet Moses's *fearless* reaction for talking to Allah directly for the first time.⁸

Comparing Prophet Muḥammad's stressful reaction to that of Moses when receiving the first revelation, one may understand the difference between having and not having theological pre-knowledge. When talking directly to Allah for the first time, Moses, according to the Qur'anic context, has not panicked or got startled of what is happening; rather, he asks Allah Almighty to make his brother Aaron a prophet as well. This is evident in Chapter Taha (20:11-13), 'And when he came to it, he was called, O Moses, indeed, I am your Lord, so remove your sandals. Indeed, you are in the sacred valley of Tuwa. And I have chosen you, so listen to what is revealed [to you]'... [Moses said] 'Appoint for me a minister from my family –Aaron, my brother'. (Q. 20:11-3; 29-30) This indicates that Moses does not have only the knowledge of who is Allah, how to deal with the revelation, and how to deliver the holy message to people. Rather, he has had the knowledge of how to address Allah and ask Him for personal preferences. Moses does not take the holy assignment and revelation innocently; instead, he directly expresses to Allah his personal perspective of how to fulfil such a task by asking Him to appoint Aaron as Moses' minister. This great difference between Prophet Muḥammad's and Moses' initial reaction to the first revelation is robustly indicative of the nature of (the size of) their theological pre-knowledge. Moses has that knowledge and behaves accordingly, whereas Prophet Muḥammad lacks it then.

This is not to devalue or criticize Prophet Muḥammad's prophecy but to clearly state that what distinguishes him from other prophets is his theological illiteracy, which makes of his sacred mission an outstanding miracle by itself.⁹ In other words, despite his theological illiteracy, Prophet Muḥammad has succeeded in revealing Allah's message to people as decreed by Allah, a fact that is confirmed in Chapter Al-Māida (5:3). A relevant point to mention here is that our interpretation of the term *ʔummij* in the Holy Qur'an in terms of the lack of any theological pre-knowledge of the heavenly scripture does not contradict with the fact that Mohammad may be truly illiterate in terms of reading and writing.

Our understanding of Prophet Muḥammad's illiteracy in terms of theological pre-knowledge accounts for several occasions that are reported in several Qur'anic verses. Taking in *ʔummij* in the Holy Qur'an to denote theological illiteracy explains why Prophet Muḥammad is warned by Allah several times to do or not to do certain things, as evident in Chapter Aal-i-Imrān (2:162), Chapter Al-Anfāl (8:67), Chapter Al-Ahzāb (33:52), and so on.

5. Manifestations of *ʔummij* in the Holy Qur'an

The first manifestation of *ʔummij* is implied in Allah Almighty's instruction of Prophet Muḥammad after declaring him as a messenger on how to deal with the heavenly revelation. This is evident in Chapter Al-Qiyamah (75:16-18), 'Move not your tongue with it, [O Muhammad], to hasten with recitation of the Qur'an. Indeed, upon Us is its collection [in your heart] and [to make possible] its recitation. Thus, when We have recited it [through Gabriel], then follow its recitation'. This excerpt indicates that Prophet Muḥammad has not had any knowledge of how to deal with the heavenly revelation before being declared as Allah's messenger. These verses directly warn Prophet Muḥammad against reciting the Holy revelation rapidly, as doing that may result in complicating it. The speaker, Allah in this case, demands that Prophet Muḥammad patiently complies with the gradual revelation of the Holy Qur'an, which is totally controlled by Allah Himself, as stated in the aforementioned verses. This implies that Prophet Muḥammad has not been allowed to recite, read, or explain Holy Qur'an to people until he is told to do that by Allah. If Prophet Muḥammad has had the theological pre-knowledge endowed to other prophets like Moses and John, then there would have been no need for such a warning or sort of teaching.

The second manifestation of *ʔummij* is associated with the interview between Prophet Muḥammad and the Jews of Medina who have come to examine the prophecy of Muḥammad. Hirschfeld (1897: 104) reports:

Some Jews went to Mohammed soon after he had come to Medina and said to him: 'Answer four questions, we will then believe in thee.' 'Will you take the covenant of Allah, if I give you the information you require?' 'Yes.' 'Ask your questions'. They asked: -

- (1) What makes the child resemble its father or its mother?
- (2) How is thy sleep?
- (3) What has Israel forbidden itself?

(4) What is the Spirit?

Responding to these queries, Prophet Muḥammad provides the Jews with answers to the first three questions relying on the Holy Qu'ran. Hirschfeld (1897: 104-106). For the last one, he promises them to provide the answer the next day without saying *inshallah* (if Allah wills). As a consequence, the revelation to Prophet Muḥammad has stopped for a while, which makes him unable to handle the situation and respond to the Jews. Hirschfeld writes, 'He [Prophet Muḥammad] was greatly perplexed, not being able to give a suitable reply, and asked them to return on the morrow. But fifteen days passed ere the angel Gabriel came with a revelation. Mohammed reproached the angel for this delay, but the latter pleaded the divine command. He then revealed to the Prophet the eighteenth chapter of the Quran' Hirschfeld (1897: 101). The verses flow thus,

And never say of anything, 'Indeed, I will do that tomorrow, except [when adding], 'If Allah wills'. And remember your Lord when you forget [it] and say, 'Perhaps my Lord will guide me to what is nearer than this to right conduct'. (Q. 18:23-4)

These two verses inform Prophet Muḥammad that he should depend on Allah Almighty on everything and say *inshallah* (if Allah wills) when talking about the future. The question is why does Allah Almighty inform this to Prophet Muḥammad? Should not the prophet be aware of such a basic tenet of treating matters? For us, Prophet Muḥammad has not had the knowledge of the significance of saying *infallah* 'if Allah wills' and the catastrophic consequences of not saying such a phrase when making promises and future plans. Accordingly, Allah Himself has got involved in that occasion and revealed to Prophet Muḥammad Chapter Al-Kahf (18), which directly informs the prophet of what to do in such occasions.

Interestingly, the revelation of Chapter Al-Kahf (18) has happened after fifteen days of Prophet Muḥammad's promise to the Jews of Medina (Hirschfeld 1897). This delay of the revelation, which may be viewed by some people as a punishment of the prophet for committing such a mistake, is a lesson for the prophet on how to express his full reliance on Allah in every single act. Prophet Muḥammad is not punished for this deed because he has not been educated by Allah regarding such a thing. It is one of Allah's promises for all humans, including prophets, that He would never charge them for what they are not informed about. Chapter Al-Baqara (2:286) reports, 'Allah does not charge a soul except [with that within] its capacity'. This implies that Prophet Muḥammad has not been educated before this incident about the significance of saying *inshallah* (if Allah wills) when talking about the future.

On the other hand, Prophet Joseph's imprisonment for several years as a result of committing the same mistake (that is not saying *inshallah*) indicates that Prophet Joseph has had the required knowledge of how to associate his future plans with Allah's decree and will. Most Islamic sources mention that Prophet Joseph has stayed in the prison for a long period of time because he has forgotten mentioning Allah Almighty while talking about the future (Al-Tabari, entry no.# 19310). This is evident in Chapter Joseph (12:42), 'And he said to the one whom he knew would go free, "Mention me before your master." But Satan made him forget the mention [to] his master, and Joseph remained in prison several years'.

Obviously, Joseph has stayed in prison for a longer period because of forgetting attributing all future events to Allah Almighty, while Prophet Muḥammad has not suffered such a sanction (or similar) although he has committed a similar mistake. This may imply that Prophet Muḥammad is *ʔummij*, whereas Joseph is not.

Another glaring manifestation of *ʔummijis* related to Prophet Muḥammad's stand against the captives. In the aftermath of the battle of *Badr*, Muslims have captured some prisoners and asked Prophet Muḥammad what to do with them. Before deciding, the Prophet consults some of his close companions, including Abu Bakr and ʕumar bin Al-Khattab. In response,

Abu Bakr suggested that he [the Prophet] should ransom them, explaining this by saying: 'They are after all our relatives, and this money would give us strength against the disbelievers, moreover, Allah could guide them to Islam'. ʕumar advised killing them, saying, 'They are the leaders of *Kufr* 'disbelief'. The Prophet (Peace be upon him) preferred Abu Bakr's suggestion to that of ʕumar's (Al-Mubarakpuri 1995: 191)

Undeniably, Prophet Muḥammad's adoption of Abu Bakr's viewpoint reflects the Prophet's inclination to rely on mercy as a way of treating people, including the enemy. Nevertheless, it does not at all stem from a heavenly knowledge. It seems that the Prophet's attitude in this situation does not comply with Allah's law. Therefore, the Prophet is informed that he should reconsider his attitude in such an occasion. This is evident in Chapter Al-Anfāl (8:67):

It is not for a prophet to have captives [of war] until he inflicts a massacre [upon Allah's enemies] in the land. Some Muslims desire the commodities of this world, but Allah desires [for you] the Hereafter. And Allah is exalted in might and wise.

According to almost all Islamic resources (Al-Qurtubi, 403), this verse is a sort of Allah's disapproval and blame of Prophet Muḥammad for keeping some prisoners as captives and taking ransom from some of them. Regardless of why Allah disapproves such an act, this occasion is a piece of evidence that Prophet Muḥammad at that time has not been well-armed with the theological knowledge that is granted to other messengers.

The last manifestation of *ʔummij* is associated with Allah's warning of Prophet Muḥammad against committing any mistakes in terms of delivering the heavenly message and of how prophecy is undertaken. This point is clearly stated in Chapter Al-Hāqqah (69:44-47):

And if Muḥammad had made up about Us some [false] sayings, We would have seized him by the right hand; Then We would have cut from him the aorta. And there is no one of you who could prevent [Us] from him.

These verses imply that Prophet Muḥammad at the time of the revelation has not had the complete knowledge of the consequences of making any major or slight modifications to the holy revelation. Such an informative warning indicates that the Prophet at the time of that revelation has been theologically *ʔummij* regarding this specific issue.

In short, the many manifestations of *ʔummij* in the Holy Qur'an demonstrate that Prophet Muḥammad has been receiving the prophecy and its related preparatory teachings after being declared as a messenger. Consequently, he is *ʔal-rasūl ʔal-nabij ʔal-ʔummij*. Note that no other prophet has received such warnings, a state that proves Prophet Muḥammad has not received any preparatory teaching before he is declared as Allah's messenger.

6. Conclusion

There is abundant evidence that *ʔummij* in the Holy Qur'an does not mean an illiterate in terms of reading and writing; rather, it refers to anyone who lacks theological knowledge of heavenly scripture. This exposition implies that people, including prophets, who have well-established beliefs of the Holy Scriptures, are not *ʔummijjūn*. The Holy Qur'an uses the expression *ʔahl al-kitāb* (the people of the book) as a term for such people including Jews and Christians. It is broadly assumed that the word *al-kitab* (the book) in the expression *ahl al-kitab* (the people of the book) refers to the heavenly scripture. The epithet *ʔummij* thus denotes a lack of knowledge of such books, as is the case of Prophet Muḥammad and people in the Arabian Peninsula. This association between *ʔummij* and the lack of knowledge of the heavenly scripture is corroborated in the Holy Qur'an where *ʔummij* people are those 'who do not know the Scripture except in wishful thinking, but they are only assuming' (Q. 2:78).

This understanding of *ʔummij* in the Holy Qur'an demands that 'in arriving at their choice of translation, translators should also pay regard to the meaning of Arabic words at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an' (Abdel Haleem 2018: 51). The question that should be addressed by translators with reference to *ʔummij* is what this word denotes at the time of the Qur'an revelation rather than our modern time. The modern denotation of the epithet *ʔummij* may be different from its past meaning due to sense broadening and narrowing processes, which suggests that further scrutiny, interpretation, and translation of the Qur'anic verses that take account of *ʔummij* and its related forms are deadly needed.

النبوة والأمية: مفهوم كلمة "أمي" في القرآن الكريم

مروان الجراح

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الملخص

تظهر كنية "أمي" وجمعها "أميون" في القرآن الكريم ست مرات، ولا تشير بالضرورة الى أمية القراءة والكتابة، بخلاف ما يعتقد أساتذة القرآن ومفسروه أمثال القرطبي والسيوطي وابن كثير والطبري. نعتقد في هذه الورقة البحثية أن هذه الكنية تشير إلى حالة من عدم الإلمام الكامل بالنص السماوي والعلم اللاهوتي. وعليه، فنناقش في هذه الورقة أن تلك الكنية استخدمت لوصف الناس في الجزيرة العربية في الوقت الذي كانوا فيه غير ملمين بالعلم اللاهوتي وبالشريعة السماوية. وناقش أيضا فكرة ان هذه الكنية استخدمت للتعريف بالنبي محمد كرسول الله الذي تلقى النبوة قبل أن يكون لديه العلم الكامل بالشريعة السماوية وعلم اللاهوت. ومن شأن هذا الطرح أن يزيل اللبس الناتج عن التفسير التقليدي الذي يربط كنية "أمي" بالقراءة والكتابة ويعجز عن تفسير المواطن المتعددة التي تلقى فيها سيدنا محمد بعض التحذير والتعليم المباشر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: علم القواميس، تحليل النص، القرآن الكريم، الأمية، اللاهوت، النبي محمد.

Endnotes

- ¹ The epithet *ʔummij* (and the plural form *ʔummijūn*) occurs in the Holy Qur'an six times (Q. 2:78; 3:20; 3:75; 7:157; 7:158; 62:2). See the appendix for the Qur'an Chapters and their translation. Note that the English translation of the Holy Qur'an throughout this paper is taken from *Al-Qur'an: KSU Electronic Moshaf*.
- ² Besides the dominant belief that the word *ʔummij* (illiterate) indicates the inability to read and/or write, some scholars define *ʔummij* by associating it with the Arabic word *ummah* (nation), *Umm al-Qura* (Mecca), Arabs in general, ignorant Jews, and so on. (Günther 2002).
- ³ <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=2&tTafsirNo=73&tSoraNo=7&tAyahNo=157&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>.
- ⁴ There are several works that have argued that words in the Holy Qur'an may have different denotations and connotations than what they have outside Qur'an (see Abdel Haleem 2018).
- ⁵ (Q. 7:158) flows thus: 'Say, [O Muhammad], "O mankind, indeed I am the Messenger of Allah to you all, [from Him] to whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth. There is no deity except Him; He gives life and causes death." So believe in Allah and His Messenger, the unlettered prophet, who believes in Allah and His words, and follow him that you may be guided'. Considering that this verse is a continuation of the narrative of (Q. 7:157), which basically speaks about Prophet Muḥammad, the narrative of Al-Aʿrāf (7:158) eventually refers to Prophet Muḥammad. This indicates that both occurrences of *al-rasool al-nabi al-ʔummij* are associated with the person of Prophet Muḥammad, rather than any other messenger.
- ⁶ It is He who has sent among the unlettered a Messenger from themselves reciting to them His verses and purifying them and teaching them the Book and wisdom - although they were before in clear error'. (Q. 62:2)
- ⁷ The expression "declared as messengers" is concerned with the time when prophets were assigned to deliver Allah's message to people. For instance, Moses was declared as a messenger when Allah Almighty talks with him for the first time (see Q. 20:11 and subsequent verses).
- ⁸ Moses's first dialogue with Allah is reported in Chapter Taha (20:11-30).
- ⁹ An anonymous reviewer of JJMLL wonders that this lack of theological illiteracy barely comes across with the notion of *al-'brahimijjin*, *as-saabi'a*, and other monotheists in the Arabian Peninsula, especially for tribes from many regions that come to Mecca for pilgrimage. The idea that some tribes in the Peninsula were *'brahimijjin* does not in fact imply that such tribes have solid knowledge of this religion, neither are people of these tribes at the time familiar with all religious tenets.

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