

ANSWER: Cave Ḥirā/Jabal an-Nūr

SŪRAH AL-‘ALAQ: VERSES 1-5

Read with the name of your Lord who created (every thing), [1]

He created man from a clot of blood. [2]

Read, and your Lord is the most gracious, [3]

who imparted knowledge by means of the pen. [4] He taught man what he did not know. [5]

COMMENTARY

Beginning of The Qur'ānic Revelation

It is universally agreed that the first five verses of Sūrah Al-'Alaq or Iqra' mark the very beginning of Qur'ānic revelation. [Baghawī]. Bukhārī, Muslim, other authentic sources and overwhelming consensus of scholars, ancient and modern, all concur on this point. However, some scholars state that Sūrah Al-Muddaththir was the first Sūrah to be revealed, and yet others say that Sūrah Al-Fātiḥah [The Opening] was revealed first. It is possible to reconcile between these different views as follows: After the revelation of Sūrah Al-'Alaq or Iqra', there was a temporary break in the revelation during which the Holy Prophet ﷺ used to be very sad, but after some time, the Angel Jibra'īl appeared to him once again, and he faced the same situation as he faced when the first verses of Sūrah Iqra' were revealed to him. On this occasion, the opening verses of Sūrah Al-Muddaththir were conveyed to him by the angel. From this point of view, it may be said that the first Sūrah to be revealed after the temporary break was Sūrah Al-Muddaththir. Some of the Companions held the view that Sūrah Al-Fātiḥah was the first Sūrah to be revealed. They probably meant to say that this was the first Sūrah to be revealed in a complete form. Undoubtedly, some verses (of Sūrahs Al-'Alaq or Iqra', Al-Muzzammil and Al-Muddaththir) were revealed earlier, but the rest of the verses of those Sūrahs were revealed at later dates. Al-Fātiḥah is the first Sūrah that was revealed to the Holy Prophet ﷺ in its entirety, all seven verses at once. [Maḏharī]

The Holy Prophet's ﷺ First Experience of Revelation

In a lengthy narration, as recorded in the Ṣaḥīḥs of Bukhārī and Muslim, the Mother of the Faithful, Sayyidah ‘Ā’ishah raḍī'allāhu ‘anhā says that revelation to the Messenger of Allah ﷺ was started by true dreams. Whatever he saw in a dream would happen in reality as clearly as the light of dawn. Then solitude became dear to him, and he used to seclude himself for worship in the cave Ḥirā, (a cave in the mount known today as 'Jabal-un-Nūr, which is clearly visible in front of Jannat-ul-Ma'lā, the famous graveyard of Makkah) and therein he devoted himself to Divine worship for several nights before he came back to his family and took provisions for his retirement; then he would return to the Mother of the Faithful, Sayyidah Khadijah raḍī'allāhu ‘anhā and take more provisions for a similar period. (The period of his stay in the cave is mentioned differently by different reports, but the report of ṣaḥīḥain maintains that it was a month, the whole month of Ramaḍān. Authentic traditions are silent about the mode of worship he

adopted during this period. Some scholars have opined that he used to worship according to the Sharī'ah of Nūh, Ibrāhim and 'Isā 'alayhim salām, but neither any authentic report supports it, nor is it likely, because he was an 'ummiyy (unlettered). It is, therefore, more likely that his worship was concentration and reflection on Allah Almighty and His omnipotence until the Truth, that is, the revelation came to him while he was in the cave of Ḥirā; so the angel came to him and said, '*Read*'. The Holy Prophet ﷺ replied, '*I am not the one who can read*'. (The Holy Prophet ﷺ was under the impression that he was directing him to read a written document. Since the Holy Prophet ﷺ could not read or write, he replied accordingly.) Then the angel embraced him and pressed him so hard that he felt extreme pain, then he released him and said, '*Read*'. The Holy Prophet ﷺ replied, '*I am not the one who can read*'. Then he embraced him and pressed him a second time so hard that he felt extreme pain, then he released him again and said, ﷺ. The Holy Prophet ﷺ replied, '*I am not the one who can read*'. Then he embraced the Holy Prophet ﷺ and pressed him a third time, then he released him and said, '***Read with the Name of your Lord Who created [everything], He created man from a clot of blood. Read, and your Lord is the most gracious, who imparted knowledge by means of the Pen. He taught man what he did not know.***'

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ returned with this message [of five verses] while his heart trembled and he came to Sayyidah Khadījah raḍī'allāhu 'anhā, saying '*wrap me up, wrap me up*', and she wrapped him up, until the awe left him. (It should be noted that the fear felt by the Holy Prophet ﷺ was due to the great responsibility delegated to him, and due to the unusual event of seeing an angel in his original form.)

Then he said to Sayyidah Khadījah raḍī'allāhu 'anhā while he related to her what had happened: "I feared for myself." Sayyidah Khadījah raḍī'allāhu 'anhā said: '*Nay, by Allah, Allah will never expose you to disgrace, because you unite the ties of kinship, and bear the burden of the weak, and earn for the destitute, and offer hospitality to the guests, and help (people) in real distress.*'

Then Sayyidah Khadījah raḍī'allāhu 'anhā took him to her cousin, Waraqah Ibn Naufal. He was a man who had adopted Christianity (which was a true religion at that time) during the days of Ignorance, and he used to write the Hebrew script, and translate it into Arabic. He was a very old man who had turned blind. Sayyidah Khadījah raḍī'allāhu 'anhā said to him, '*O Uncle's son! Listen to your brother's son*'. Waraqah asked him, '*My brother's son! What have you seen?*' So the Messenger of Allah ﷺ related to him what he had seen. Waraqah said to him, '*This is the very same confidant [angel Jibra'īl 'alayhis salām] whom Allah sent to Holy Prophet Mūsā 'alayhis salām; would that I were a young man at this time - would that I were alive when your people would expel you!*' The Messenger of Allah ﷺ asked in surprise, "*Will they expel me?*" He replied. '*Yes; never has a man appeared with the like of that which you have brought, but he has been held in enmity; and if your time finds me alive, I shall help you with the fullest support*'. After that, not much time had passed before Waraqah died, and the revelation broke off temporarily. [Bukhārī and Muslim]

The temporary break of revelation, according to Suhailī, lasted for about a year and half. Other reports say that it lasted to about three years. [Maḏharī]

Verse [1] (Read with the Name of your Lord, Who created [everything]) In the prepositional phrase *bismi rabbika* [with the name of your Lord], the addition of the word *ismi* is significant in two ways [1] that whenever the Qur'ān is being recited, the reader should begin by reciting the formula "**With the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the Very-Merciful**". When Jibra'īl Amīn 'alayhis salām suddenly appeared to the Holy Prophet ﷺ and said '*iqra*' (read), he tendered apology that he is unable to read or recite, because he is unlettered. The phrase *bismi rabbika* points to the fact that under present circumstances you, O Holy Prophet ﷺ, may be '*ummiyy*' or unlettered, but Allah has the power to grant you the highest level of knowledge, the most elegant style of oration and eloquence, so that you would surpass and subdue the most educated or literate people, as it became manifest later on. [Maḏharī]. [2] Allah has many Beautiful Names, but the blessed name *rabb* is particularly chosen in the verse here probably because it supports and emphasizes the theme that Allah cherishes and sustains the Holy Prophet ﷺ through all the different stages of his development, until he is fully consummated. He can make him read and recite, despite being unlettered. In the relative clause *al-ladhī khalaqa* [**Who created**], particularly contains the Divine attribute of *takhīq* [creating] presumably because the first Divine favor is wujūd or 'existence' as a result of His drawing out beings from the realm of non-existence into the realm of existence. Many other favors of His follow. The verb *khalaqa* [**created**] is transitive and it requires an object that is absent here. This indicates the verb is used absolutely, and it signifies that the Creator has created the entire universe and every existent thing it contains.

Verse [2] (Created man from a clot of blood) The previous verse referred to the creation of macrocosm, the large or entire universe in general. In this verse, the phrase is *khalaqa'l-insān* which refers to the creation of microcosm 'the best, noblest or most honourable creation', Man. If analysed carefully, we notice that man is the epitome of macrocosm or the large universe. He is a small scale representation, analogue, or miniature of the large and complex universe. Another reason why man has been particularly mentioned is that the purpose of Prophet-hood, messenger-hood and revelation of the Qurān is the implementation of Divine ordinances, injunctions and laws and acting upon them: This is the essential peculiarity of mankind. The word '*alaq*', being the plural of '*alaqatun*', means 'congealed blood'. The creation of man has passed and passes through various phases. His primordial creation is from the four major elements, that is, earth, water, fire and air. His procreation is from an insignificant and humble state, the sperm which then transforms into congealed blood. This is the primary state of the embryo which happens after the conception. Then it takes the shape of a lump of flesh and then the skeletal structure is created. '*Alaqah*' is the middle phase in the whole process of creation. The specific mention of '*alaqah*' covers the initial stage and the final stage of the process of creation.

Verse [3]; (Read, and your Lord is the most gracious.) The command *iqra'* [**Read**] has been repeated in this verse for two reasons: The first command in verse [1] was for the Holy Prophet ﷺ himself to read or recite. The second command in this verse is to proclaim, convey, communicate and teach or preach. It is not inconceivable that the command *iqra'* is repeated by deliberate design for emphasis. The Divine attribute *al-Akram* '**the Most Gracious**' signifies that Allah did not create the world or man for any ulterior motive, for selfish motivation or for His own benefit. He has done it out of His infinite grace, generosity and magnanimity. He endowed upon the universe the great favour of existence without asking for it.

Verse [4] (Who imparted knowledge by means of the Pen.) The preceding verse spoke of the creation of man. The current verse speaks of man's education or literacy, because knowledge, as part of education and literacy, distinguishes man from all other animals and creatures, and occupies the position of the crown of creation. There are two means, methods or media through which knowledge is imparted: [1] oral or spoken method or by word of mouth; and [2] Pen or written method. The command *iqra'* [**read**] at the beginning of Sūrah refers to the oral or spoken method. However, the current verse, which speaks more explicitly about imparting knowledge, speaks of the written method of recording and transmitting knowledge from generation to generation.

Pen and Writing: The First and Most Important Means of Transmitting Knowledge

An authentic narration of Sayyidnā Abū Hurairah raḍī'allāhu 'anhu reports that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: *"When Allah created the creation, He inscribed a document which is with Him above the Throne: Indeed My mercy has preceded My anger."*

In another narration, the Messenger of Allah ﷺ is reported to have said: *"The first thing Allah created was the pen. He told it to write, so it wrote what was to take place till Doomsday. This is with Allah on His Throne."* [Qurṭubī]

Three Types of Pen

Scholars have said that there are three types of pen in the world: [1] a Pen that Allah created with His own hand and instructed it to write the decree of the universe; [2] the pen of the angels who record the events that are to occur and their magnitude, they also use it to record the deeds of human beings; and [3] the pen of human beings, which they use to reduce their speech to writing. Writing, in fact, is a kind of speech [or a manifestation of it]. Humans are biologically programmed by Allah for speech, and it is thus natural, inborn and innate faculty. [Qurṭubī] The leading authority on Tafsīr, Mujāhid, cites from Abū 'Amr that Allah created four things in the entire universe with His own Creative hand, and the rest of the creation came into being by His cosmic command of kun [be] and they became. The four things are: [1] the pen; [2] The Divine Throne; [3] the Garden of Eden; and [4] Holy Prophet 'Ādam 'alayhis salām.

Who was First Trained in the Writing Skill and Art?

Scholars have differed on this question. Some say the art and skill of writing was first imparted to the father of mankind, i.e. the prophet 'Ādam 'alayhis salām and he was the first one to write. [Ka'b Aḥbār]. Others say that this art was first taught to the Holy Prophet Idris 'alayhis salām and he was thus the very first scribe. [Daḥḥāk]. Some others have observed that the art and skill of writing is the Divine knowledge given as a gift to anyone whom Allah wills.

Writing Skill and Art: A Great Divine Gift

Sayyidnā Qatādah raḍī'allāhu 'anhu has stated that Pen is a great Divine gift. If Allah had not granted man the art and skill of writing with pen, it would not have been possible for him to preserve or protect the religion in its pristine form, nor would it have been possible for him to conduct his worldly affairs in the proper manner. Sayyidnā 'Alī raḍī'allāhu 'anhu has stated that it is a great generosity that Allah has granted His servants knowledge of things they did not know. He drew them out from the darkness of ignorance and brought them into the light of knowledge. He urged them to acquire the art and skill of writing as it accrues great benefits. Only Allah is able to keep count of the benefits of writing. All sciences and philosophies are codified by means of pen. The history of the former and latter nations are compiled by means of pen. Their chronicles and monographs are preserved in writing. The Divinely revealed Books are committed to writing, and shall be preserved till the world lasts. 'The pen' is thus able to make great contribution towards the propagation and dissemination of spiritual sciences and Divine secrets revealed by the Qur'ān and of physical sciences to which the study of the Qur'ān imparted a great stimulus. Without the pen, all worldly and religious works will come to a standstill.

Writing Skill and Art: Attitude of Scholars in All Ages

Scholars of the former and the latter times have always realised the stupendous role pen plays in the preservation and transmission of knowledge, as a result they made a great use of it and left behind a huge legacy of books and writings. It is regretful to notice that in this age students and scholars have ignored the importance of this skill and art. As a result, scarcely a few people in a few million people have mastered the art, or developed the skill, of writing. To Allah do we direct our complaint!

Writing Skill and Art: The Reason Why the Holy Prophet ﷺ was not Taught

It is really very significant that mention should have been made of 'Pen' in a Book which was revealed to a person, the Final Messenger ﷺ who himself did not know how to read and write. The reason for this is the profound Divine wisdom underlying it. Allah had willed that the dignity and status of the Final Messenger should be far above the thinking of the general populace. Allah placed the Holy Prophet ﷺ in an environment which was not favourable for any spontaneous accomplishments, nor was it conducive to any achievements by natural exposure. His birth-place was the rugged and rocky mountainous terrain. The desert of Arabia had fewer plants apart from the date-palms, little water apart from the *zam zam* well and

the weather was always dry, far away from civilisation, and completely cut off from the cradle of knowledge and wisdom. The communications system or network was inaccessible; as a result, the people of Arabia had no contact with Syria, Iraq, Egypt and other civilised areas of the world. Hence, all the Arabs were referred to as 'unlettered' who generally had no respect for knowledge, wisdom and writing. Very rarely people had the opportunity to learn knowledge or to acquire the art and skill of writing. The Holy Prophet ﷺ was born in such bare region, among such illiterate tribes and in such harsh environment. He was never given the opportunity to become literate. It was inconceivable that a person born in such a surrounding will be gifted with knowledge, wisdom and high morals. He was, however, suddenly granted the cloak of Prophet-hood, together with incessant flow of knowledge and wisdom. The greatest of poets and orators of Arabia were subdued by the eloquence of the unlettered Holy Prophet ﷺ. This was his open and overt miracle. Every open-minded person should be able to see with his eye of certainty that his attainments were not the result of acquisition by his own efforts or human exertion, but they were the result of the invisible generosity of Allah Who endowed him with the Prophetic gift. This is the Divine wisdom underlying the reason why the Holy Prophet ﷺ was not trained in the skill and the art of writing. [Adapted from Qurṭubī]

Verse [5] (Taught Man what he did not know) The preceding verse was concerned with a particular means of teaching, namely, 'pen', the written method.

Many other Means of Teaching

The present verse purports to say that the real teacher is Allah, and He has innumerable ways and means, besides pen, to impart knowledge. Therefore, the verse says that Allah taught man things with which he was unacquainted previously. The verse does not mention 'pen' or any other means of teaching. The reason for that is man is taught from the very inception of his life. First, he is gifted with intellect, the greatest means of receiving knowledge. Man, by the right use of intellect, is able to understand many things. Further, his entire environment is the manifestation of the perfect power of Allah and studded with the evidence of Divine power by witnessing which he is able to recognise his Creator. Revelation and inspiration are other means of knowledge. The knowledge of many essential things are learnt intuitively. Intuition is the God-given ability to know or understand things through feelings, rather than by considering facts or evidence. As a result, there is no need for tongue or pen. When a baby is born, it is not conscious of how its environment operates. However, it instinctively reaches out for the mother's breast, when it feels hungry and feeds itself. Who teaches it and who can teach it? Allah has taught it the 'skill' of crying since its birth. The cry of the baby is the means of satisfying all its needs. When it cries, it becomes a cause of concern for the parents to find out what is wrong. The baby's cry satisfies its hunger, thirst, heat and cold. Who teaches the new-born baby how to cry? All this is instinctive knowledge with which Allah has programmed every living organism, especially man. After the instinctive knowledge, man's knowledge continues to increase by word of mouth, and then by the supra-rational organ of intuition,

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called the heart. Apparently, there was no need to say (... **what he did not know**) because normally knowledge is imparted of things that are not known. It is explicitly stated here, probably because man may not assume that the God-given knowledge and skills are the results of his own efforts and exertion. The concluding phrase "**what he did not know**" has been added in order to make man realise that there was a time when he knew nothing, thus in [16:78] we came across (**And Allah has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs when you knew nothing...**). This shows that knowledge is not an ingrained personal excellence of man. It is the gift of the Creator and the Master. [Mazharī]. Some scholars interpret the word 'man' to be referring to the Holy Prophet 'Ādam 'alayhis salām because he was the first man to whom knowledge was imparted, thus in [2:31] (**And He taught 'Adam the names, all of them...**). And others say the reference is to the Final Messenger ﷺ whose knowledge embraces the knowledge of all the previous Prophets.

As stated earlier, these five verses of this Sūrah represent the very beginning of the revelation of the Qur'ān. Verses [6-19] of the Sūrah are of much later date.

This concludes the commentary for Day 25.