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Is Qur'an Understandable?

But the important question which is often asked is whether the Qur'an is understandable by an ordinary reader, or it requires scholarly background to comprehend its meaning?

Has this book been introduced for the purpose of studying and understanding it, or whether it is just for reading and reciting and obtaining reward and blessing? The student of Qur'an, possibly, may wonder at raising of such a question. To him it may appear beyond doubt that the Qur'an is meant for the purpose of knowing and understanding it.

Nevertheless, in view of various undesirable currents, which due to numerous reasons came into existence in the Muslim world regarding the question of understanding of the Qur'an, and which had an important role in bringing about the decline of Muslims, I shall discuss the necessity of studying and understanding the Qur'an in brief.

Is the purpose of Qur'an to obtain thawab only?

There are some people who think that the Qur'an is to be read merely for the purpose of obtaining spiritual reward (thawab) without need of understanding anything of its contents. They continuously recite the Qur'an, but if they are even once asked: "Do you understand the meaning of what you are reading?" they cannot answer. To recite the Qur'an is essential and good, being regarded as the first step necessary for comprehending its contents; and not merely as a means for gaining Divine reward.

Regrettably, the roots of those degenerate and dangerous notions still persist in our societies. So I consider it necessary to elaborate on this topic.

Qur'an must be read and studied with the intention of educating oneself. The Qur'an itself clarifies this point:

"A book We have sent down to you, blessed, that men possessed of mind may ponder its signs and so remember". (38:29)

One of the functions of the Qur'an is to instruct and to teach. For this purpose, the Qur'an addresses human reason and speaks in logical and demonstrative terms.

In fact, not only the believers and the faithful, but even the infidels are invited by it to contemplate over its verses. The Qur'an demands that its verses should be first contemplated over, before forming any adverse opinion against them. Addressing the opponents, it says, why they don't ponder over the Qur'an, what sort of hearts they possess, they are as if shut close and sealed:

“What, do they not ponder the Qur'an? Or is it that there are locks upon their hearts?” (47:24)

The Qur'an also says in one of its verses:

“(This is) a Book We have revealed to you abounding in good, that they may ponder upon the verses”.

That is, We have not sent the Qur'an to be kissed, embraced and put on the niche to gather dust, but for men to read and to contemplate about its contents:

That those endowed with understanding may ponder its signs and so remember. (38:29)

Ayatullah Murtadha Mutahhari says: “Scores of verses in Qur'an emphasize the importance of contemplation in the Qur'an and interpretation of the Qur'anic verses, although not an interpretation based on personal caprices and bias, but a just, truthful and balanced interpretation free of all traces of selfish interests.

“If we try to comprehend the Qur'an in an honest and unbiased way, it is not at all necessary to solve all problems that we find in it. In this regard the Qur'an is similar to Nature. In Nature, too, a number of mysteries have neither been solved yet, nor can they be solved in present conditions, yet are likely to be solved in the future. Moreover, in studying and understanding nature, man has to tailor his ideas in accordance with Nature itself. He is forced to interpret Nature in accordance with its reality. He cannot define Nature in terms of his own caprices and inclinations.

“The Qur'an, like the book of Nature, is a book that has not been sent for a specific age and time. Had it been otherwise, all the secrets of the Qur'an would have been discovered in the past; this heavenly Book would not have presented its charm, freshness and vitality. But we see that the possibility of contemplation, reflection and discovery of new dimensions is inexhaustible in the case of this Holy Book”.

This is a point that has amply been emphasized and clarified by the Prophet and the Imams. In a tradition, it is related from the Prophet (S) that the Qur'an, like the sun and the moon, will present its movement and continuity; that is, the Qur'an is not static or monotonous.

In 'Uyun akhbar al-Ridha, from Imam Ridha (as), it is quoted that Imam Ja'far Sadiq (as) was asked

about the secret of it that as the time passes and the more it is read and recited, the Qur'an increases in its novelty and freshness day by day. The Imam Sadiq (as) answered: **“Because the Qur'an is not for an exclusive age or for an exclusive people”**.

The Qur'an is for all – the learned as well as the ordinary person

The Qur'an has been sent for all ages and for all human beings. It is so composed that inspite of changes in knowledge, outlook and approach through various times and ages, it surpasses all learning and knowledge in all ages. While it encompasses mysteries and abstruse intricacies for the reader of every age, at the same time it presents a great feast of meanings and ideas that can satiate the needs of every one and every time in accordance with the capacity of that particular age”.

Thus the Qur'an is for all : the learned as well as the ordinary reader. To make this concept clear, we can compare the Qur'an to an ocean. The less earned, like children, collect pebbles and shells from its shores. The Scholars and thinkers, like pearl divers, bring out from it the highest philosophy, wisdom and rules of perfect way of living.

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