

Ulema see SCHOLARS

Umar see CALIPH; COMPANIONS OF THE PROPHET

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Ummī

A Qur'ānic epithet for the prophet Muḥammad that acquired significantly different interpretations in the course of Islamic history. Traditionally, Muslims understand *ummī* as “illiterate” and as unequivocally identifying Muḥammad as “the illiterate Prophet” (*al-nabī l-ummī*) — a view that has come to constitute an article of orthodox faith and spirituality in Islam (see ILLITERACY). Recent research, however, recovering some of the earliest exegetical glossing, has suggested that *ummī* in the Qur'ān signifies the ethnic origin (being an Arab, Arabian) and the originality of the Prophet of Islam (coming from among a people, the Arabs [q.v.], who had not yet received a revelation; see REVELATION AND INSPIRATION).

Terms in the Qur'ān and their interpretations

The term *ummī* occurs only in Q 7:157 and 158; its plural, *ummiyyūn*, is found in Q 2:78; 3:20, 75 and 62:2. In Q 7:157 and 158, God proclaims:

My mercy (q.v.),... I shall ordain it for those who are God-fearing,... those who believe in our signs (q.v.; Q 7:156), [those] who follow the messenger (q.v.), the *ummī*

Prophet, whom they find mentioned in their [own scriptures, the] Torah (q.v.) and the Gospel (q.v.; see also SCRIPTURE AND THE QUR'ĀN), who bids them to what is just (see JUSTICE AND INJUSTICE) and forbids them what is reprehensible (see VIRTUES AND VICES, COMMANDING AND FORBIDDING; FORBIDDEN), and who makes lawful for them the good things and unlawful for them the corrupt things... (Q 7:157; see LAWFUL AND UNLAWFUL; GOOD AND EVIL). Say: “O humankind, I am the messenger of God to you all...” Therefore, believe in God and in his messenger, the *ummī* Prophet who believes in God and his words. Follow him! Perhaps, you will [then] be guided (Q 7:158; see ERROR; ASTRAY).

In commenting on these verses, the classical Muslim exegetes (see EXEGESIS OF THE QUR'ĀN: CLASSICAL AND MEDIEVAL) offer several interpretations for *ummī*, including “unable to read (and write; see LITERACY; ORALITY AND WRITING IN ARABIA),” Arab/Arabian (derived from *umma*, “nation, the people of the Arabs”), Meccan (from *umm al-qurā*, “Mother of all Cities,” an epithet for Mecca [q.v.]), and, “pure, natural,” like a newborn from its “mother” (*umm*), thus incorporating the notions of being “unlettered,” “untaught,” “intellectually untouched” (see KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING), and “spiritually virgin,” by virtue of which Muḥammad became the receptacle for the divine revelation. (For references and discussion of these and the following derivations, see Günther, Illiteracy, esp. 493-9; and id., Literacy, esp. 188.) Despite these various possible meanings, the classical commentators stress that *ummī* in the two verses characterizing the prophet Muḥammad means “unable to read (and write).” Presenting a threefold argument, they suggest (1) that *ummī* most likely relates to *umma*, “the people of the Arabs” who, (2) at

the time of Muḥammad, were mostly an “illiterate nation” (*umma ummiyya*), “neither reading nor writing,” and, (3) since Muḥammad belonged to this nation, he neither read nor wrote, or was unable to do so.

Western scholars have contested, in particular, the idea that *ummī* means “illiterate.” While some scholars suggest the meaning of “ethnically Arab/Arabian,” others argue in favor of “untaught” or “ignorant” (of the scriptures, as opposed to being “learned,” “knowledgeable” about them) or “not having received a revelation” and, strictly speaking, “pagan” and “heathen,” or “gentile” (see Günther, *Illiteracy*, 496; see POLYTHEISM AND ATHEISM; SOUTH ARABIA, RELIGIONS IN PRE-ISLAMIC).

Analysis of the Qur’ānic expressions *ummiyyūn* and *umma* (the latter being the noun from which *ummī* is most likely derived, as both classical exegetes and contemporary scholars agree) highlights above all two things. First, *umma* in the Qur’ān means “a people” or, more specifically, “the nation [of the Arabs]” (notwithstanding its other meanings, which are not relevant here; see Günther, *Illiteracy*, 496-8). Second, the term *ummiyyūn* in the Qur’ān identifies “Arabs who have not [yet] been given a divinely inspired scripture” (cf. Q 3:20, 75; 62:2). On one occasion, however, a certain group among the Jews (see JEWS AND JUDAISM) is called *ummiyyūn*, “not knowing the scripture,” or “not being well-versed in the book [q.v.; because they are not reading in it]” (Q 2:78). When the terms *ummī* and pl. *ummiyyūn* are examined in conjunction with the previous two remarks, it becomes clear that in the Qur’ān they do not represent a single meaning. Rather, they suggest a spectrum of ideas, which includes (a) someone belonging to a people (*umma*) — the Arabs — who were a nation without a scripture as yet; (b) someone without a scripture and thus not read-

ing it; and (c) someone not reading a scripture and, therefore, not being taught or educated [by something or somebody] (cf. Günther, *Muḥammad*, 15-16).

Although this spectrum of ideas does not include the meaning of “illiterate” as such, it apparently formed the basis upon which the idea of *ummī* meaning “illiterate” was developed.

The dogma of the Prophet being ummī, “illiterate”

The fact that questions surrounding the possibility of Muḥammad’s literacy were already an issue of considerable significance at the time of the revelation seems to be evident, for example, in Q 25:5. This passage echoes attempts made by “unbelievers” (polytheists in Mecca) to discredit Muḥammad by claiming that he was not communicating divine revelations, but “stories taken from writings of the ancients (*asāfir al-awwalīn*; see GENERATIONS), which he has written down (see WRITING AND WRITING MATERIALS; OPPOSITION TO MUḤAMMAD) and which were dictated to him (*tumlā ‘alayhi*) at dawn (q.v.) and in the early evening” (q.v.; see also Günther, *Illiteracy*, 492-3). In contrast, Q 29:47-8 states: “We have sent down to you [Muḥammad] the book (*al-kitāb*)... Not before this did you read (*tallū*) any book, or inscribe it with your right hand...” (for *talā* referring to “reading [the holy scriptures],” see Günther, *Literacy*, 190).

The concept of the Prophet’s illiteracy, however, “seems to have evolved in some circles of Muslim learning not before the first half of the second century of the *hijra* (see EMIGRATION; CALENDAR),” i.e. the first half of the eighth century C.E. (Goldfeld, *Illiterate prophet*, 58). Furthermore, it seems that Muḥammad’s illiteracy had already become dogma by the end of the third/ninth century when al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) summed up much of the

learning of previous generations of Muslims (see Goldfeld's research into certain exegetical works, which al-Ṭabarī used as sources and quoted in his comments on *ummī* and *ummiyyūn*; see THEOLOGY AND THE QUR'ĀN). The famous theologian al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), for example, advocates this creed on numerous occasions in his *The revival of the religious sciences* (*Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*), his greatest and most authoritative work. Here he states that: "He (the Prophet) was *ummī*; he did not read or write.... God [himself] taught him all the virtues of character, the praiseworthy ways of behaving and the information about the ancients and the following generations" (*Ihyā'*, ii, 364 [ch. 11]).

In the course of time, the notion of the illiterate Prophet of Islam came to be a central argument in defending Islam against opponents who attempted to discredit the prophet Muḥammad and his message. Moreover, for the exegete al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), and other orthodox Muslim scholars in medieval and modern times, this concept also underscores the inimitability and uniqueness of the Qur'ān in terms of content, form and style (*i'jāz*; see INIMITABILITY), its miraculous nature (*mu'jiza*; see MIRACLES) and the outstanding place Islam and its Prophet deserve within the canon of the monotheistic religions (see LANGUAGE AND STYLE OF THE QUR'ĀN; FORM AND STRUCTURE OF THE QUR'ĀN). In other words, Muḥammad's illiteracy came to be seen as a particularly excellent sign and proof of the genuineness and nobility of his prophethood (see al-Rāzī's lengthy statement in Günther, Illiteracy, 495-6). The Ṣūfī (see ṢUFISM AND THE QUR'ĀN) 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Baghdādī, known as al-Khāzin (d. 741/1340), for example, says:

The Prophet was *ummī*; he did not read, write, or count.... His being *ummī* is one of

the greatest and most magnificent miracles. Had he mastered writing and then come forward with this magnificent Qur'ān, he could have been accused of having written and transmitted it from others (*Lubāb*, ii, 147).

To expand on this tenet could result in trouble, as seen in the example of Abū l-Walīd al-Bājī al-Mālikī (d. 474/1081), a distinguished theologian and man of letters in eleventh-century Spain. The controversy began in the city of Denia, during a teaching session on al-Bukhārī's (d. 256/870) famous collection of "Sound prophetic traditions," which includes an account of the events in 6/628 at al-Ḥudaybiya, when a peace treaty was agreed on between Muḥammad and the Meccan tribe of Quraysh (q.v.). As al-Bukhārī has it: "the messenger of God took the document and wrote this (his name)," *fa-akhadha rasūl Allāh... al-kitāba fa-kataba hādha* (no. 2700), although "he did not write well..." *wa-laysa yuḥsinu yaktubu* [sic] *fa-kataba hādha* (no. 4251; Dārimī, *Sunan*, no. 2507; *wa-laysa yuḥsinu an yaktuba fa-kataba...*, Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, no. 18,161). Al-Bājī explained the significance of the event and stated furthermore that this tradition was authentic and a proof that the Prophet wrote on that day. Because of his explanation, al-Bājī was accused of heresy and atheism. At a specifically organized public disputation, however, he convinced the learned audience that his opinion did not contradict the Qur'ān — and its notion of the *ummī*/illiterate Prophet — because Q 29:47-8, as al-Bājī argued, indicates (only) that Muḥammad did not write any scripture before he received the revelation (*al-kitāb*) and became a prophet. Al-Bājī later wrote an epistle on this subject to justify his doctrinal position (edited in Bājī, *Tahqīq*, 170-240), which in turn gave rise to trea-

tises, for and against his position, written by Muslim scholars in Spain, north Africa and Sicily (cf. Bājī, *Tahqīq*, 115-16, 119; Abū Ḥayyān, *Baḥr*, vii, 155; Sprenger, *Mohammad*, ii, 398; and esp. Fierro, *Polémicas*, 425). A similar argument is made by the influential Twelver-Shīʿī scholar (see SHĪʿISM AND THE QURʾĀN) and legal authority (see LAW AND THE QURʾĀN), ‘Allāma Majlisī (d. 1110/1698), after he surveyed for his Persian readership the various interpretations of *ummī* common among Muslim scholars. Basing himself also on Q 29:47-8, he supports the idea that Muḥammad was “never taught to read and write” before he became a prophet. He says, however:

whether [or not] he [actually] read and wrote after he became prophet, ... there can be no doubt of his ability to do so, inasmuch as he knew all things by divine inspiration, and so by the power of God was able to perform things impossible for all others to do.... How could the Prophet be ignorant [of reading and writing] when he was sent [by God] to instruct others (cf. Majlisī, *Ḥayāt*, ii, 155).

It appears that Q 29:47-8 was instrumental in harmonizing the doctrinal concept of Muḥammad’s “illiteracy” with the data given, for example, in historical and biographical sources (see SĪRA AND THE QURʾĀN), according to which Muḥammad seems to have had (some) knowledge of reading and writing at a later stage of his life. Nonetheless, the well-attested incident that reportedly took place on Thursday, June 4, 632 C.E. — i.e. four days before Muḥammad’s death — also provides no conclusive answer to the question as to whether or not the prophet Muḥammad was able to read and write at the end of his life. The accounts given by Ibn Saʿd (d. 230/845) relate that the prophet Muḥammad was lying on his sick-bed

when he said: “*‘itūnī* [sic] *bi-dawāt wa-ṣaḥīfa aktubu lakum kitāban lā taḍillū ba’dahu*,” which seems to mean, “Bring me writing instruments and a piece of parchment (or papyrus). I will write (i.e. dictate?) a will for you, after which you will not go astray,” rather than, simply, “... I will draft for you a writing....” (cf. Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, ii, 244-5; for the entire passage, see pp. 242-55, the chapter entitled *al-Kitāb alladhī arāda rasūl Allāh an yaktubahu li-ummatihī*; see furthermore Ghédira, Ṣaḥīfa; Sprenger, *Mohammad*, ii, 400-1; for *kataba* [li] meaning in the Qurʾān also “to decree, to ordain [a will, or law],” see Günther, *Literacy*, 190-1; similarly, Lane, vii, 2590; on the verbal use of the root *k-t-b* in the Qurʾān in general, see Madigan, *Qurʾān’s self-image*, 107-24; on the importance that writing and political documents generally had for Muḥammad in Medina [q.v.] after he had become a statesman, see Hamidullah, *Six originaux*, 23-38, 48-51; Margoliouth, *Mohammed*, 5; see POLITICS AND THE QURʾĀN; for the frequent occurrence of the expressions *al-nabī l-‘arabī*, “the Arab/Arabian Prophet,” in biographical and historical Muslim sources, see for example Wāqidi, *Futūḥ*, ii, 42, 54, 164; Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 19, 259; Dhahabī, *Sīyar*, i, 375; Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, 3; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, ii, 16, 85; Maqqarī, *Nafḥ*, vii, 340, 427; Kātib Chelebi, *Kashf al-zunūn*, ii, 1523 and 1718). In conclusion, one notes two things: While the meaning of the terms *ummī* and *ummiyyūn* in the Qurʾān can be determined as indicated above, the question as to whether or not the prophet Muḥammad knew how to read and write (at the end of his life) is another matter that cannot be decided conclusively on the basis of the textual evidence available today.

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‘Umra see PILGRIMAGE

Unbelief/Unbelievers see BELIEF AND UNBELIEF; POLYTHEISM AND ATHEISM; FAITH

Uncertainty

Questioning the truth or existence of something. In the Qur‘ān, this is a quality often attributed to those peoples, past and present, who do not believe or trust the messengers (see MESSENGER) or signs (q.v.) of God (see LIE; BELIEF AND UNBELIEF; OPPOSITION TO MUḤAMMAD; TRUST AND PATIENCE). And, like its first auditors, Islamic tradition (and certainly non-Muslims) has grappled with how to understand — and interpret — the word of God (q.v.).

According to the tradition, Islam began with Muḥammad’s uncertainty and panic (*fa-akhadhatnī rajfa; al-nashi’ ‘an al-ru‘b; Suyūṭī, Itqān*, i, 93; see FEAR) after a very early revelation (most authorities claim that Q 96:1-5 was the first revelation; see Zarkashī, *Burhān* [Naw‘ 10], i, 264; followed by Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, i, 93; see REVELATION AND INSPIRATION) in, or shortly after leaving, the cave (q.v.) of al-Ḥirā’ (see SĪRA AND THE QUR‘ĀN; CHRONOLOGY AND THE QUR‘ĀN; OCCASIONS OF REVELATION; for the archetypical theme of the mythic hero and the cave, see Jung, *Memories*, 160-1; Dreifuss