

The Quran and its Message

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

DO WE HAVE TO PRAY IN ARABIC?

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This is a question many non-Arab Muslims who 'inherit' their religion from their forefathers sometimes don't dare ask themselves. Instead, they incline to blindly follow their beliefs and rituals without a second thought or attempting to understand them from a Quran's perspective.

Others, who clearly recognize the validity of the question, don't dare to raise the matter due to fear of being rebuked by the common mass, established clergy or indeed, due to any form of reprisals.

The problem however is accentuated with many who leave their particular doctrines and faiths to come within the folds of Islam with little or no understanding of the Arabic language. Mostly having communed with their concept of God in their own native tongues, to them the connection with their Lord is usually instantly lost as they grapple with an alien tongue and attempt commune with God via a medium that they have no understanding, or feel for.

Complaints and concerns are seldom voiced, but are undoubtedly felt.

Some common complaints are as follows:

- (i) Lack of understanding which often leads to lack of focus in prayer.
- (ii) Feeling of ritualised prayer and an absence of connection.
- (iii) Feeling of automation or robotic behaviour, lack of depth and lack of proper dialogue with God.
- (iv) Apathy from prayer altogether.

Our Lord undoubtedly knows what He has created and would never be unjust to any soul or put any soul at a disadvantage especially when it is He who has created all languages and modes of expression. It is He who has created humans and spread them out into diverse tribes and nations with differing languages.

030:022

“And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours: indeed in that are Signs for those who know”

SOME VERY BASIC QUESTIONS ONE SHOULD BE ASKING WHEN SEEKING GUIDANCE FROM THE QURAN ON THIS MATTER

(i) What language did Prophet Moses ^(pbuh) pray to his Lord? - This certainly was not Arabic, possibly an archaic Egyptian vernacular (being raised in the house of Pharaoh) or a Semitic language of Aramaic / Hebrew Origin.

(ii) What language did Prophet Jesus ^(pbuh) pray in? - This certainly was not Arabic, possibly Aramaic, albeit he probably also had knowledge of the language of the authorities of 1st century Palestine and Rome that spoke Greek and Latin.

(iii) What language did Prophet Zechariya ^(pbuh) pray to God when he asked his Lord in secret “My Lord! Infirm indeed are my bones, and the hair of my head does glisten with grey: but never am I unblessed, O my Lord, in my prayer to You!” (19.4)? Was this Arabic?

(iv) What language did the wife of Pharaoh in Egypt pray to God when she implored "My Lord! Build for me a home with thee in the Garden, and deliver me from Pharaoh and his work, and deliver me from evil-doing folk" (66.11)? Was this Arabic?

(v) In fact, what language did any of the great prophets and messengers, Saleh, Hud, Lot, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, David, Solomon ^(pbuh) or indeed any prophet or messenger before Prophet Muhammad ^(pbuh) pray in?

014:004

“And We never sent a messenger except with the language of his folk, that he might make (the message) clear for them. Then God sends whom He will astray, and guides whom He will. He is the Mighty, the Wise”

042:007

“And thus have We revealed to you an Arabic Quran, that you may warn the mother city and those around it, and that you may give warning of the day of gathering together wherein is no doubt; a party shall be in the garden and (another) party in the burning fire”

Please note above the remit of the **Arabic Quran** which does not extend to **humanity**. No doubt the **message** of the Quran is for all humanity, but the ambit of the message in the **Arabic tongue** is clear. The Prophet was asked to warn **the mother city with it and those around it** (who understood the dialect). No doubt, if the message was to be delivered to someone in China, the message would need to be translated.

WHAT LANGUAGE DID YOU AND I TESTIFY IN BEFORE OUR BIRTHS?

THE PRIMORDIAL CONTRACT

007:172

“When thy Lord drew forth from the Children of Adam - from their loins - their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves, (saying): **"Am I not your Lord (who cherishes and sustains you)?"**- They said: **"Yea! We do testify!"** (This), less you should say on the Day of Judgment: **"Of this we were never mindful"**

Was the primordial contract you and I made in Arabic? Or was it even in a mother tongue that we hadn't even learnt yet? How was God able to understand our testimonies and in what language did we speak to Him when we declared this testimony? There is absolutely no ambiguity in the verse. We did testify and we spoke.

GUIDANCE FROM THE QURAN

004:043

"O ye who believe! Approach not prayers with a mind befogged (Arabic Sukara), until ye can understand all that ye say.."

Modern commentators unnecessarily restrict and divert from the general meaning of the term 'Sukara' to its popular modern Arabic rendering 'drunken intoxication'.

This is despite the fact when clearly in both Quranic and classical usage the term 'sukara' has always had a much wider purport. This includes any state in which a mind loses clarity whether it is anger, rage, confused thought or judgment, distraction, or any state in which there is mental disequilibrium.

(See related article [3] below)

The word specifically for 'intoxication/drink' is 'Khamar' which is **not the word** which is used in the above verse **but is** the warning given in 5:90.

005:090

"O ye who believe! Intoxicants (Arabic: Khamru) and gambling, (dedication of) stones, and (divination by) arrows, are an abomination,- of Satan's handwork: so shun / avoid such (abomination), that ye may prosper"

The Arabic word 'Khamar' specifically for 'intoxication / drink' is also used in 2:219; 5:91; 12:36 (The account of the prisoner's dream of pressing wine is recalled to Prophet Joseph) ^(pbuh) and repeated in 12:41.

Needless to say, that due to the unwarranted restriction of interpretation on 'intoxication' with the regards verse 4.43 where the term 'sakar' is being is used, the whole purpose of the verse is at best misunderstood and at worst, lost.

The verse clearly forbids one to approach their prayers in a state where one's mind is not clear due to the fact they will not know what they are saying, the focus being of course on the point **to know what you are saying.**

The reason for the prohibition is the focus of the verse and not the nature of the cause.

How many Muslims today approach their prayers without knowing what they are going to utter? Are they not falling foul of the essence of this verse? Is one's mind not befogged or without clarity when one utters a dialogue without any understanding or meaning of what they say?

GOD UNDERSTANDS ALL LANGUAGES

017.044

"The seven heavens and the earth, and all beings therein, declare His glory: there is not a thing but celebrates His praise; And yet ye understand not how they declare His glory! Verily He is Oft-Forgiver, Most Forgiving!"

The above verse powerfully underscores the theme of this article. Our Lord is not restricted to any language. He is the creator of all languages and understands all expressions and emotions. His creation within the whole universe hymns His praises in their own ways. Even on Earth, God understands the dialects of all His creation down to the birds and ants. This was even a gift he endowed Prophet David and Solomon. ^(pbut)

027.016

"And Solomon was David's heir. He said: "O ye people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and on us has been bestowed (a little) of all things: this is indeed Grace manifest (from God.)"

Solomon even understood the language of the Jinns (27:39) and the ants (27.19)

In what language did the birds hymn the praises of their Lord with Prophet David in 21:79 neither of which spoke Arabic?

021.079

"So We made Solomon to understand it; and to each one We gave wisdom and knowledge; and We made the mountains, and the birds to celebrate Our praise with David; and We were the doers"

MUSLIMS IGNORANCE TO CLASSICAL DISCUSSIONS

This is not a 21st century thought. Any ardent researcher of the Quran and Islamic history would be aware of some (if not all) of the concerns raised in this article. Unknown to many Muslims, this is a matter that has been discussed since the age of classical Islam and throughout Islamic history to the modern era.

Here is one example which should be easy for readers to source:

Source: Is the Qur'an Translatable? - Early Muslim Opinion (A.L.Tibawi)

"...It was Abu Hanifah (b. about 81 A.H.) who started a new and more serious controversy by his declaration that it was permissible to recite the Qur'an in Persian in prayer, whether the reader knew Arabic or not. His followers extended this permission to Turkish, Hindi, Syriac,

Hebrew and other languages of the non-Arabs.¹⁸ To interpret the Qur'an in its own language, or in any other, was from the days of the Prophet up to the days of Abu Hanifah generally allowed and widely practiced. This is a safe inference not only from the injunction of the Qur'an itself,¹⁹ but also from the increasing number of non-Arabs, with different racial and linguistic backgrounds, who embraced Islam.²⁰

Abu Hanifah's Persian origin cannot alone be the explanation of his daring opinion. It seems that genuine religious concern and practical considerations combined to shape his opinions. Let us not overlook the fact that he did not pronounce on the translation of the Qur'an as a whole; he merely tried to solve an obvious difficulty of non-Arab believers who were required to recite in prayer certain short chapters or verses only.²¹ Unfortunately Abu Hanifah's opinion on this matter, and indeed on other matters, is known only through the gloss of his followers.²² But neither of his two chief disciples, Abu Yusuf and ash-Shaibani, went as far as their master whose licence was unconditional.²³ They both made the permission to recite the translated Qur'an in prayer conditional on the inability to recite it in Arabic.²⁴ Since prayer was communion with God - so the Hanafi argument goes - it was lawful either through God's Word for those able to recite it in the original, or through the translated meaning for those unable to do so, since "obligation is according to ability."²⁵

Notes:

¹⁸ Cf. Nasafi, *Kanz ad-Daqa'iq* (Dehli, 1309), I, 53.

¹⁹ Cf. *Surah V*, 71 : "O Messenger, deliver that which has been sent down to thee from thy Lord." Cf. *Surah XVI*, 46, 60.

²⁰ Cf. contemporary practice of teachers of the Qur'an to the Berbers in Morocco, a practice which has been handed down from generation to generation since early times: the meaning is first explained in local dialect, and then the Arabic text is taught. Memorizing the Arabic is not required before the meaning has been explained. *Majallat al-Azhar*, VII, No.3, 192.

²¹ It is related that al-Habib al-'Ajami, an associate of al-Hasan al-Basri (b. 21 A.H.) used to recite the Qur'an in Persian in prayer "owing to speech difficulty in Arabic":

لعدم انطلاق لسانه باللغة العربية

²² In the *fiqh* books, chiefly under the subject of prayer (see next note), but not as a rule in other works. Thus *bab as-salat* in al-Khawarizmi, *Jami' Masanid al-Imam al-A'zam* (Hyderabad, 1332), I, 293 ff. prescribes the recital of the Fatihah in prayer, but contains nothing about the permission to recite it in Persian or other languages.

²³ Some of Abu Hanifah's followers even said that he approved reading something of the Torah, the Gospel or the Psalms in prayer provided the reader was certain it was not corrupted (*muharraf*). See al-Kashani, *Bada'i' as-Sana'i* (Cairo, 1327) I, 113. [1]

Is one who does not understand Arabic expected to cry to their Lord and plead to Him with purpose, expression and heartfelt sincerity in a language they barely comprehend?

What languages did the great prophets (including Prophets Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus^(pbut)) and the righteous people pray in before the advent of the final scripture in 6th century Arabia? Were their prayers not listened to? Are the praises of all God's creation including the angels, creatures in the Universe and the Jinn not listened to because they are not in Arabic?

Is it not the spirit and purpose of the prayer from a Quran's perspective which is paramount and not the language in which it is delivered in?

Something to think about for those who do not understand Arabic when they rise up for prayer.

Related Articles:

- (1) [Is Arabic a Holy or Superior Language?](#)
- (2) [Why was the Quran revealed in Arabic?](#)
- (3) [Are Intoxicants Forbidden \(Haram\) in the Quran?](#)

REFERENCES

[1] TIBAWI. A.L, The Muslim World Volume 52, Issue 1, pages 4-16, January 1962, Citation * Paper read at the XXVth International Congress of Orientalists on Friday 12th August, 1960, in the University of Moscow.

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