

Knowledge and its Possessors According to the Qur'ān

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Abstract: The Qur'ān has repeatedly emphasised the importance of knowledge (*ilm*) and praised those who know (*alladhīna ya'lamūna*). Meanwhile, knowledge in the Qur'ān should not be mixed with the everyday or dictionary meaning of the term, much less with science or information. We should keep in mind that the Qur'ān has its own definition and usage of terms, which also includes knowledge and those who possess it. This paper clarifies what the Qur'ān considers as knowledge and its people.

The Qur'ānic context

The Qur'ān has used the term knowledge and its derivatives – especially when as a verb – in a variety of contexts and meanings. For example, many verses talk about God teaching (*ta'lim*) matters pertaining to true beliefs and beneficial practices to Adam, various messengers, the Prophet, and all people.¹ Given that God takes credit for being the teacher of how to write, it can be deduced that all knowledge is attributable to God and He is the only source of knowledge according to the Qur'ān.

¹ 2:31, 2:239, 2:251, 2:282, 3:48, 4:113, 5:4, 12:6, 12:37, 55:2, 96:4-5

Knowledge in the Qur'ān most often refers to knowledge of God's scriptures and revelations.¹ Therefore, sometimes the Qur'ān refers to the idolaters as *"Those who have no knowledge"*, distinguishing them from the People of the Book. Among the principle missions of all prophets, especially the Prophet Muḥammad, one was to recite the signs of God to the people, and teach them (*ta'lim*) the Book and wisdom.² These verses specify that the Prophet teaches them what they could not know otherwise, and without which they were in manifest error: *He teaches you what you were not to know* (2:151); *And earlier they had indeed been in manifest error* (3:164, 62:2). However, this knowledge, though necessary, is not enough for one's salvation unless it is complemented by another role of the prophets: *"to purify them."*³ Otherwise, *"The example of those who were charged with the Torah, then failed to carry it, is that of an ass carrying books. Evil is the example of the people who deny Allah's signs, and Allah does not guide the wrongdoing lot"* (62:5). The element of purification transforms the mental accumulation of facts into an inner realisation, which would be inseparable from acting upon those teachings. Otherwise, Satan is indeed a very knowledgeable creature.⁵

The Qur'ān also specifies that the Prophet was unschooled (*ummi*) and did not read or write.⁶ This confirms the above idea that schooling, reading and writing are not exclusive conditions for acquiring knowledge in its laudable Qur'ānic sense. In fact, they are not even enough conditions as the Qur'ān says: *"The example of those who were charged*

¹ 3:7, 13:19, 17:107, 22:54, 29:49, 47:16

² 2:113, 2:118, 45:18

³ 2:129, 2:151, 3:48, 3:79, 3:164, 4:54, 6:89, 62:2

⁴ 2:129, 2:151, 3:164, 62:2

⁵ Ṣādiqī Tihrānī, *Al-Furqān fī al-Tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān*, 25/298.

⁶ 7:157-158, 29:48, 62:2

with the Torah, then failed to carry it, is that of an ass carrying books. Evil is the example of the people who deny Allah's signs, and Allah does not guide the wrongdoing lot" (62:5). A similar example can be seen in verses 7:175-177. The connection between knowledge, scripture and God's guidance is best summarised in the following verse, addressed to Prophet Muḥammad: *"You did not know what the Book is, nor what is faith; but We made it a light that We may guide by its means whomever We wish of Our servants"* (42:52).

The knowledge that we accumulate / Is a burden on our
back;

It's not ours to stay, / But we think we have no lack.¹

The attributes of the people of knowledge

The advantage of the people of knowledge over others is expressed rhetorically in the verse: *"Say, 'Are those who know equal to those who do not know?'"* (39:9). Based on the context of this very verse, knowledge here concerns knowledge of God and His attributes and is not separable from fear of the Hereafter, hope in God's mercy and observing night vigils in worship: *"Is he who is humble in the watches of the night, prostrating and standing, apprehensive of the Hereafter and hoping for the mercy of his Lord . . . ? Say, 'Are those who know equal to those who do not know?' Only those who possess intellect take admonition"* (39:9). It is also implied that the advantage of 'those who know' over 'those who do not know' is assuming that all other things are equal (*ceretis paribus*), meaning that neither side has any advantage over the other side in other traits and arenas. This is confirmed by the idea that those believers who

¹ Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, vol. 2, line 2335.

are blessed with knowledge are elevated more in rank than *other believers* (58:11). The same can be said about the famous hadith about the ink of the scholars outweighing the blood of the martyrs on the Day of Judgement: It is assuming equal conditions and the equality of the two groups otherwise.¹

Following the above, there are many verses that censure the Jewish and Christian scholars for their defiance, corruption, and lack of submission to the truth. These scholars are contrasted with those People of the Book who have the same qualities as those mentioned in verse 39:9 above: *Among the People of the Book is an upright nation; they recite Allah's signs in the watches of the night and prostrate. They have faith in Allah and the Last Day, and bid what is right and forbid what is wrong, and are active in [performing] good deeds. They are among the righteous. And whatever good they do, they will not go unappreciated for it, and Allah knows best the Godwary* (3:113-115). This shows that knowledge alone is not a virtue, unless it is coupled with faith and good deeds. It also shows that the qualities mentioned in this verse are universal virtues that are not bound to Islam and the Muslims, as Imām al-Ḥasan al-‘Askarī said, “Indeed, reaching God, Mighty and Majestic is He, is a journey that cannot be achieved except by using the night as a mount.”² Worship and contemplation in the night is among the key elements of spiritual growth in all religions and schools of spirituality.

Other qualities of the people of knowledge can be deduced from these verses:

¹ Tasnīm, 28, under verses 7:8-9.

² *Biḥār al-Anwār*, 75/380.

- a. *Only those of Allah's servants having knowledge fear Him (35:28).*
- b. *Indeed those who were given knowledge before it when it is recited to them, fall down in prostration on their faces, and say, "Immaculate is our Lord! Indeed Our Lord's promise is bound to be fulfilled." Weeping, they fall down on their faces, and it increases them in humility' (17:107-109).*
- c. *Allah confirms His signs, and Allah is All-knowing, All-wise... That those who have been given knowledge may know that it is the truth from your Lord, and so they may have faith in it, and their hearts may be humbled before Him. Indeed Allah guides those who have faith to a straight path (22:52 and 22:54).*
- d. *Rather, it [the Qur'ān] is [present as] manifest signs in the breasts of those who have been given knowledge (29:49).*
- e. *Those who have been given knowledge see that what has been sent down to you from your Lord is the truth and [that] it guides to the path of the All-mighty, the All-laudable (34:6).*

Overall, knowledge may be found with or without faith. In the former case it magnifies the rank and virtue of the faithful: *"Allah will raise those of you who have faith and those who have been given knowledge in rank"* (58:11). In the latter case, knowledge will only render the person defenceless in God's court of justice, will close all the doors of excuse on him, and will intensify his punishment (42:16). Following one's desire despite having knowledge of the truth will seal one's heart and lead the person astray:

Have you seen him who has taken his desire to be his god and whom Allah has led astray despite his knowledge, and set a seal upon his hearing and his heart,

*and put a blindfold on his sight? So who will guide him
after Allah? Will you not then take admonition?(45:23).¹*

The verses that praise knowledge and those who know pertain to knowledge when accompanied by purification and practice.

Knowledge to a soul that's not clean and clear / Is like a
bandit getting hold of a spear.

It's better to give a sword to a violent goon / Than
teaching knowledge to a soul not in tune.²

How to acquire true knowledge

The inseparability of 'knowledge' from practice and purification is what distinguishes it from 'information'. The mere acquaintance with certain concepts and theories does not make one among "*those who know*". True knowledge is what drives a person to worship in the middle of the night. It is this knowledge which is a light that God throws in the heart of His servants, and which should be acquired by the reality of servitude, as Imām al-Ṣādiq told 'Unwān al-Baṣrī when he asked the Imām to teach him knowledge. The Imām said:

Knowledge is not a matter of education. Rather, it is a light that shines upon the heart of one whom God, Bounteous and Exalted is He, wills to guide. So if you want knowledge, you should first seek out the reality of servitude in yourself. Seek knowledge by acting upon it. Ask God for understanding, and He will grant you understanding.

¹ For narrations about evil scholars, see *Biḥār al-Anwār*, 2/105-111.

² Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, vol. 4, lines 1437-1438.

The Imām then continued to define three components for the reality of servitude:

1. A servant should not see any ownership for himself in what God has bestowed upon him. That is because servants do not have any possessions. Instead, they see wealth as the wealth of God, and they use it as God has ordered.
2. A servant should not make any plans for himself.
3. The sole engagement of a servant should be to observe the prescription and proscription of God, Exalted He is.

Thus, when a servant does not see any ownership for himself in what God has bestowed upon him, it will become easy for him to give charity in a cause that God has ordered. When a servant entrusts the direction and planning of himself to his Director and Planner, the tribulations of this world will become easy for him. And when a servant engages himself in what God has prescribed and proscribed, he will have no time to boast or dispute with the people. When God honours a servant with these three, this world, Satan, and the people will become easy on him [i.e. he will not be troubled by these things]; he will neither seek this world to take pride in, nor [will he seek it] in worldly rivalry with others; he will not seek what the people have for the sake of ascendancy or vainglory; and he will not pass his days in vain. That would be the first degree of self-restraint. God, Bounteous and Exalted is He, said: *“That is the abode of the Hereafter which We shall grant to those who do not desire to ascendancy in the earth nor any mischief, and the outcome will be in favour of the Godwary”* (28:83).¹

¹ Ṭabrisī, ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥasan, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 325-328; Biḥār *al-Anwār*, 1/224-226.

Summary

When knowledge is used as a positive quality in the Qur'ān, its first and foremost application can be interpreted as knowledge of scripture, revelation, and God's guidance. It is not a matter of schooling and formal education, and it is not separable from self-purification, worship, and God-fear. Of course, other forms of knowledge are not wrong or worthless, but they should not make us feel needless of God's teaching and revelation: "*When their apostles brought them manifest proofs, they exulted in the knowledge they possessed, and they were besieged by what they used to deride*" (40:83).

I wish the son of Noah didn't know how to swim; / He
would've had more incentive to embark with him.

I wish like a baby he was completely in need, / So that
like a baby he would cry and plead.

If he was less loaded with apparent knowledge, / The
knowledge of revelation he would accept and
acknowledge.¹

¹ Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, vol. 4, lines 1415-1417.