For the Love of Poetry

This month, Ann (Umameer) Stock discusses the admiration for poetry that lead ‘Umar ﷺ to Islam.

‘Umar: For the Love of Poetry

‘Umar ﷺ looked like he was sitting on a horse when he was merely standing. He dared anyone to take him on in a fight. Few would accept his invitation and even fewer stood in his way, but his tough demeanour didn’t keep him from appreciating the finer things in life. Among these cultured pleasures, he enjoyed the rhythmic sounds and deep meanings of his ancestors’ poetry. It was this love that had led him to memorise so many of their poems.

He had heard a rumour that Muhammad ﷺ was a poet so when ‘Umar ﷺ entered the Kaba and found the Prophet ﷺ about to begin his prayer, he crept up and hid himself behind the cloth covering of the Ka’bah and decided to listen for a while. He peered out from behind the edge of the cloth and watched as the Prophet ﷺ recited Al-Fatihah. When he heard the Prophet ﷺ recite surah Al-Haqqah, he thought to himself, “Indeed the Quraysh are right! This is poetry.” At that same moment, the Prophet ﷺ recited:

“This is verily the word of an honoured Messenger. It is not the word of a poet, little is that you believe. “This is the Revelation sent down from the Lord of the Alamin.” (Al-Haqqah:42-43)

‘Umar ﷺ was shocked. Had the Prophet ﷺ read his mind? He twisted his moustache in his fingers. “Ah yes,” he thought nodding his head as he stared at the Prophet ﷺ squinting to get a better look. A big grin covered his face. “He is a soothsayer just as they said.” ‘Umar whispered under his breath. Then the Prophet ﷺ recited:

“Is this the word of a soothsayer, little is that you remember? This is the Revelation sent down from the Lord of the Alamin.” (Al-Haqqah:42-43)

‘Umar ﷺ thrust his back against the Ka’bah, quickly pulling the cloth over himself as he gasped. “He’s answering my every thought,” he said to himself as he twisted his moustache between his fingers faster and tighter. He shook his head as he tried to come to his senses. He opened his eyes wide as the reality of the message he had heard sunk into his chest. He must resist these feelings, he thought. The traditions of his forefathers could not be left behind. He decided he had to overcome the doubts that things were not as he had once thought.

Although ‘Umar kept his feelings to himself, the Qur’an entered his heart that day as he later admitted. However, it was after this incident that he actually volunteered during a tribal meeting to kill the Prophet ﷺ. His attempt was foiled as the Qur’an he had read at his sister’s house made its impact. After he purified himself, his sister gave him a copy of surah Tahira that they had been reading. He began to read until he reached:

“Verily! I am Allah’s Lady Hafsa bint Umar (note has the right to be worshipped but I), so worship Me, and perform As-Salat (Dawahat as-Salat) for My Remembrance.” (Tahira:14)

The Qur’an had burst the bubble of disbelief covering his heart. His A#. was taken away by the permission of Allah ﷻ never to reappear again. The Prophet’s du’as had been answered on the very day ‘Umar had planned to kill him. ‘Umar had reached the lowest depths before he rose to embrace Islam with a strength and passion unparalleled by anyone other than Abu Bakr ﷺ.

The Companions of the Prophet were reverts just like many of us. Our stories of reversion are as varied as we are, and the stories of how the Companions came to Islam are no different. Allah ﷻ guided the hearts for some like ‘Umar through the means of His amazing verses. ‘Umar was able to receive this message because he had a deep understanding of the Arabic language, which made his experience of the Qur’an all the more intense. The Companions lived their lives applying the verses and teachings of the Prophet ﷺ as Allah ﷻ had planned.

“We revealed the Qur’an to you so that you may explain to the people what has been sent down to them.” (An-Nahl:144)

In considering why the Ummah of today lacks the dedication of the Companions, it is important to factor in the effects of the Arabic language and the deep understanding of the Qur’an which comes when the language of its revelation is known. Couple the knowledge of Qur’an with access to the Prophet ﷺ for clarification of any ayat which may have been confusing to them, and you have a powerful force for change.

Once the Prophet ﷺ had passed away, the study of tafsir as an essential branch of knowledge was established. The tafsir is even more needed today to spread clarification of the meaning through various angles. Tafsir is explained either using the Qur’an to explain the Qur’an, or using the ahadith of the Prophet ﷺ and the sayings of his Companions, or using the Arabic grammar. This essential knowledge of the Qur’an is a means for us to increase our iman and to purify our souls. Simply, it is still that force for change we are all looking for.

“Allah surely bestowed a great favour on the Muslims when he sent a Messenger to them from among them to recite verses before them, purify them, and to teach them the Book and the wisdom.” (Al-Imran:164)

The Book is the Qur’an and the wisdom is the Sunnah which the Prophet ﷺ lived and left us to follow to this day.

Many times over, my Qur’an teachers have told me, “If you want to understand the Qur’an deeply, you must learn Arabic so that you can read the tafsir in their original Arabic language.” Translations are limited by the language they are being translated into, as well as space, time, experiences and prejudices of the translators. The translators, may Allah ﷻ bless them for their efforts, try their best to put into English or any other language, what they feel is the most important meaning, but the depth, beauty and eloquence of the original Arabic is certainly going to be lost.

To be a scholar or an effective imam or a more informed Muslim, learning Arabic is essential. The more Arabic we learn, the better the position we will be in to increase our faith and to make strong our grip of the rope of Allah ﷻ. ‘Umar’s reversion to Islam is another reminder of the great favour and miracle which lies between our hands. The power of the message contained in our Book is strong enough to melt the thickest layers of ice surrounding any heart, if Allah ﷻ so wills it to be. Let’s begin our journey trailing the footsteps of our great predecessors by learning the language which affected them so much.

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