



## Recognition of the Theory of the Prophet of Islam as an «Ummī» Person and Its Historical Analysis, with a Critical Approach to Orientalists' Views

Alireza Kavand

Assistant Professor, University of Qur'anic Sciences and Knowledge, Qom, Iran

Email: kavand@quran.ac.ir

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### Abstract

One of the important points in the field of prophecy of the Prophet (PBUH) is his "being *Ummī*<sup>1</sup>". The word "*Ummī*" used in the Qur'an as an attribute of the Prophet (PBUH) is one of the miraculous signs of the heavenly Book descended upon him and the rightfulness of his mission. "*Ummī*" usually means "illiterate", which is accepted by almost all Muslim scholars. But Western scholars studying Islam, or the same Orientalists, have offered different views on the meaning of "*Ummī*" and the ability of the Prophet (PBUH) to read and write. In this research written with a descriptive-analytical approach, we have found the following results: 1- Literally and due to the interpretative and narrative sources, "*Ummī*" means "illiterate". 2- According to the historical and *hadith* sources, it can be said that the Prophet was not capable of reading and writing before *Bi'tha*<sup>2</sup>, but after *Bi'tha* he was able to read, but he did not write anything. 3. Orientalists have also offered different views on this subject, which, given the available evidences, the view of individuals (such as Montet, Amari, Kazimirski, and Henri de Castri) who believe that "*Ummī*" means "illiterate" seems correct. Also, the view of those Orientalists (such as Durant, Carlyle, Armstrong, Henri de Castri, and Davenport) who believe that the Prophet (PBUH) was incapable of reading and writing before *Bi'tha* is correct.

**Keywords:** Ummī; Illiterate; Reading; Writing; People of the Book; Orientalist

### 1- Introduction

Undoubtedly, the greatest miracle of the Prophet (PBUH) is the bringing of the Holy Qur'an; because before *Bi'tha*, he had not learned reading and writing in the presence of anyone and this is a wonderful miracle. One of the important points in the area of his prophecy is his "being *Ummī*". This word, which is mentioned as the attribute of Prophet Muhammad with this term "*al-Nabī al-Ummī*" in the Qur'an, (*A'rāf*/157-158), means "illiterate" that it is widely accepted by all Muslim scholars. But Western scholars of the Islamic religion or the same orientalists have offered different views on the meaning of "*Ummī*" and the ability of the Prophet

<sup>1</sup>. His illiteracy and that he was not able to read or write.

<sup>2</sup>. *Bi'tha* means selection of prophet by God for guidance of people.

(PBUH) to read and write, and we will criticize their views here. This article has two parts. The first part proves the true meaning of "*Ummī*", and the second part, focusing on the first part, reviews the Orientalists' point of view.

## 2- The Meaning Of The Word

### 2-1. "*Ummī*" in Glossaries:

Two lexical roots have been mentioned for the word "*Ummī*": "*Umm*" and "*Ummah*";

A) The word "*Umm*": the meanings of the word "*Umm*" in addition to the sound O are as follows: 1- Principle 2- Reference place (*Ibn Fāris*, 1420 AH: 1/19) 3- Tight and stable (*ibid*, 20) 4- Boss (*ibid*, 24, *Ibn Manẓūr*, 1388 AH: 12/24; *Zamakhsharī*, ND: 9) 5- Mother (*Rāghib Isfihānī*, 1381 HS: 86); also the word "*Umm*" with the O sound means "be intent on someone" (*Jawharī*, 1990 AD: 5/1990 AD; *Zamakhsharī*, ND: 9) and "break someone's head" (*Rāghib Isfihānī*, 1381 HS: 88); the word "*Umm*" is also used with the O sound, the most famous meaning of which is "mother", since "mother" is the principle and origin of the children and they are born through her.

B) The word "*Ummah*": The meanings of "*Ummah*" pronouncing with the O sound are as follows: "The group and tribe and congregation" (*Ibn Manẓūr*, 1388 AH: 12/26, *Ibn Anbārī*, 1407 AH: 270; *Jawharī*, 1990 AD: 5/1864) "One who alone has one religion" (*Ibn Anbārī*, 1407 AH: 270), "A righteous, benefactor person who takes the lead in doing good deed" (*ibid*, 269), "religion, creed and sect" (*Ibn Fāris*, 1420 AH: 22, 1; *Jawharī*, 1990 AD, 5/1864; *Firuzabadi*, 1419 AH: 1076), "the body and face of human being" (*Ibn Fāris*, 1420 AH: 1/22, *Firuzabadi*, 1419 AH: 1076), "Obedience" (*Ibn Fāris*, 1420 AH: 1/22, *Firuzabadi*, 1419 AH: 1076), "A scientist and scholar" (*Ibn Fāris*, 1420 AH, 1/22), the most famous meaning of which is "the congregation and group of tribe", which have a very similar traditions and beliefs and are considered as a single set.

Thus, the word "*Ummī*" can be rooted from "*Umm*" or "*Ummah*"; if the word "*Ummī*" is a name ascribed to the term "*Umm*", it means that the person has remained on the original birth from his mother and doesn't know any writing, and if the word "*Ummī*" is a name ascribed to the term "*Ummah*", it means that the person belongs to the nation, and since public folk are illiterate and have a low level of culture, and usually, not always, they have some habits like bad-temper, abusive and reckless, the "*Ummī*" person means a person who has a low level of social culture and tradition and lives as a public and his highest relation is with common folk, not the educated or scholar ones. However, the word "*Ummī*" can be used in these three meanings: 1- One who has remained on the origin of his creation from his mother and cannot write (*Rāghib Isfihānī*, 1381 HS: 87; *Ibn Manẓūr*, 1388 AH: 12/34; *Firuzabadi*, 1077) 2- Someone who cannot write (*Rāghib Isfihānī*, 1381 HS: 87; *Ibn Fāris*, 1420 AH: 1/22; *Firuzabadi*, 1419 AH: 1077) 3- A stupid, rude, bad-tempered, abusive and reckless person (*Firuzabadi*: 1419 AH, 1077). By the way, "*Ummī*" is from the root "*Umm*" or "*Ummah*", so whatever the meaning of these two terms is, it will influence the meaning of "*Ummī*" because "*Ummī*" is at least ascribed to one of them. It seems that "*Ummī*" means "illiterate", that is, one who has not learned from anyone to read or write and is not capable of reading and writing. The proof for the validity of this theory is the same as the literal meanings of the roots of this word that was mentioned before. It is worth noting that the third literal meaning that *Firuzabadi* had stated, though it may apply to the Arabs

of the time of the Prophet of God, but never applies to the Prophet, whose attributes were the contrary and he has high moral virtues and dignities.

## 2-2. "Ummī" in the Interpretative and Narrative Resources:

According to the interpretive sources "Ummī" can have these meanings:

1. A person who is illiterate and unfamiliar to reading and writing (*Ṭūsī*, ND: 2/559; *Ṭabarsī*, 1382 AH: 1/145; *Qurṭubī*, 1387 AH: 2/5; *Ibn al- Kathīr*, ND: 1/175; *Ālūsī*, 1420 AH: 1/409; *Abū Ḥayyān 'Andulusī*, 1422 AH: 4/402; *Burūsawī*, 1421 AH: 1/213)
- 2- An idolatrous Arab person who does not have a scripture (*Rāghib Isfihānī*, 1381 HS: 87; *Tureyhī*, 1375 HS: 6/11; *Hirawī*, 1419 AH: 1/108)
- 3-A person attributed to "Umm al-Qurā" means "Mecca" City (People of Mecca) (*Rāghib Isfihānī*, 1381 HS: 87; *Ālūsī*, 1420 AH: 1/409; *Qurṭubī*, 1387 AH: 7/299; *Abū Ḥayyān 'Andulusī*, 1422 AH: 4/402; *Burūsawī*, 1421 AH: 1/64)
- 4-Non-People of the Book (*Burūsawī*, 1421 AH: 9/600; *Quṭb*, 1368 AH: 8/93; *Maturidi*, 1425 AH: 5/126; for more information see: *Scheib*, 1423 AH: 71).

Among these four views, only the first one is true and the other three are wrong. Because none of them is the exact meaning of the word "Ummī". The second meaning is, in fact, an example of the illiterate, not the meaning of 'Ummī', for the polytheistic Arabs without a heavenly Book are the external symbol of 'Ummīyūn' which is the plural of 'Ummī'. The third meaning is also incorrect because according to this meaning, the "Ummī" person is someone who is from Mecca and since the city of Mecca is referred to as "Umm al-Qurā" [the mother of villages], this person is considered "Ummī", while "Ummī" cannot mean a person attributed to the city of Mecca, because "Umm al-Qurā" as a public name - not a specific name - applies to the city of Mecca.

Therefore, it is not specific to the city of Mecca to make a specific adjective from it (*Motahhari*, 1376 HS: 42). The fourth meaning is also incorrect because, according to the original lexical sources, the word "Ummī" cannot have such meaning.

- 2- In *hadith* sources, according to some narratives, the Prophet (PBUH) as an "Ummī" person means that he read, but did not write, "Prophet PBUH could read the Book but couldn't write" (*Sadūq*, 1408 AH: 1/153; *Majlisī*, 1403 AH: 16/132). (16/132); due to some other it means that he was from Mecca: "Prophet PBUH was called "Ummī" since he was from Mecca and Mecca was the "Umm al-Qurā" (*Saffar*, 1412 AH: 220; *Mufīd*, 1414 AH: 263; *Sadūq*, 1410 AH: 53-54); due to some others it means that he did not read and did not write: "The Messenger of Allah said: I belong to an "Ummī" nation, we don't read and don't write" (*Ibn Abi Hātam Rāzī*, 1419 AH: 9/3071; *Bukhārī*, 1401 AH: 2/230 AH; *Irbilī*, 1421 AH: 1/35) According to another narration, the Prophet read and wrote, "The Prophet (PBUH), could read and write and read what was not written" (*Saffar*, 1412 AH: 221).

Among these narrations, only those narratives are true that says the Prophet (PBUH) did not read and did not write. The narrations that says he was called "Ummī" since he was from Mecca, are false; one because of what mentioned before and the other that these narratives have a weak *sanad* (document). For example, in one *sanad* there is a person like *Ja'far ibn Muhammad Sūfi* that is an unknown person whose name has not been mentioned in any *rijālī* and *tarājimī*

books. Those narrations which says he did not write but read, such reading probably means he recited the Qur'an, otherwise it would be in contradiction to the explicit text of other narrations which reject both reading and writing of Prophet. The narration that says he could read and write is probably made by those who believe the Prophet (PBUH) should not be deprived of this two attributes, though they have not known that this was a way to prove the miracle of the Qur'an and the validity of his prophecy. In the *sanad* of this narration, there is Ahmad ibn *Hilāl*, who is considered an exaggerator from the point of view of *Najjāshī* (*Najjāshī*, 1418 AH: 83) *Tūsī* (*Tūsī*, 1417 AH: 83; *ibid*, 1381 AH: 410), and *Hillī* (*Hillī*, 1417 AH: 320), and Imam Hasan Askari (AS) blamed him.

(وما كُنْتَ تَتْلُو مِنْ قَبْلِهِ مِنْ كِتَابٍ وَلَا تَخُطُّهُ بِيَمِينِكَ)

“And thou wast not) able (to recite a Book before this) Book came (, nor art thou) able (to transcribe it with thy right hand: In that case, indeed, would the talkers of vanities have doubted” (*Ankabūt*, 48)

This verse also indicates that these two (reading and writing) have not occurred before *Bi'tha*, and not that the Prophet (PBUH) was not capable of doing so. But on one hand, since we have no historical witness to prove that he has read or written something or not and on the other hand, the explicit meaning of "*Ummī*" is the lack of ability in reading and writing, so we assume that the Prophet was unable to read and write before *Bi'tha* and before the revelation of the *Qur'an*. And about after *Bi'tha*, some verses show that the Prophet (PBUH) has read some material. Especially due to the explicit text of the narration of *Bazanfī* from Imam *Sadiq* (AS) who says that the Prophet received the letter of his uncle, Abbas, about the movement of Abu *Sufyān* towards Uhud and read it (Sadūq, 1408 AH: 1/152-153) and according to the narration that says the Prophet (PBUH), at the night of *Mi'raj*, has read the writing on the door of Paradise (Ibn Mājah, ND: 2/812, quoted by Anas ibn Malik from the Prophet , *Hillī*, 1411 AH: 459, quoted by Ibn Abbas from the Prophet ), so he was able to read after *Bi'tha*. About his ability to write, there is also a narrative that proves his familiarity to writing; according to which he said: "Put a cotton in the ink; cut the pen in a curved form; draw the letter" *bā* " [in] *Bismillāh ar-Rahmān ar-Rahīm*"]; write "*Sīm*" openly; don't write *Mīm* with a belly; write "*Allāh*" in a good way; stretch *Rahmān*; write "*Rahīm*" beautifully... "*(Majlisī*, 1403 AH: 2/152; *ibid*, v. 34, 89; *Suyūṭī*, 1421 AH: v. 1,10). Therefore, he has been able to write but has never written. Some traditions approve his ability to write, like the one that says the Prophet (PBUH) on the day of his martyrdom, asked a pen and a paper to write: "Bring me a pen and a paper to write something not to be seduced after me at all." (*Mufīd*, ND: 406)

And a narrative saying that he had written the Treaty of *Hudaybiyyah*: "So the Prophet took the book and although he could not write well, he wrote it himself".

But this narrative cannot prove that the Prophet has written this treaty because in the first case, he was likely to ask someone to write the text, not himself. On the other hand, he has been confined to the bed of illness and it is not reasonable for the patient to write himself despite his physical inability. There are other quotes about the Treaty of *Hudaybiyyah* that explicitly identifies Imam Ali (as) the author of the peace treaty (*Kulaynī*, 1363 AH: 8/326; *Rāvandī*, 1409 AH: 1/116; *Ṭabrisī*, 1415 AH: 9/199; *Majlisī*, 1403 AH: 2/335, 357 and 368), and the number of these narratives is much more and strengthens our suspicion that the Prophet himself has not written the treaty. Therefore, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) wasn't capable of reading and writing before the *Bi'tha*, but after *Bi'tha* he has been able to read and write, but only his reading ability was realized.

### 3- Critique and Review Of Orientalists' Viewpoints

In this section, we are going to examine and criticize the Orientalist s' viewpoint on the meaning of "*Ummī*" and the issue of reading and writing of the Messenger of God (PBUH); since we have already proved that "*Ummī*" means "illiterate", we examine the Orientalists point of view, relying on the proven view in part 1, and discuss the rejection or acceptance of their view. Let me begin by pointing out that the phenomenon of Orientalism, so-called, refers to a series of studies on the Orient, whether these studies turn into nations or religions. Thus studies of Iranology, Arabology, Indology, Chinology and Turkology, and Islamology, or Religious Studies, and ancient Eastern traditions such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, etc. all fall into this category. Of course, although the Orientalists are not only Westerners, most of them are Westerners (Akhavan Sarraf, 1382 HS: No. 4, 81). Edward Said writes about the definition of Orientalism: "Orientalism is a field that talks, writes and teaches about the East. In other words, Orientalism is the field of activity of someone who studies about the East and leaves his findings to others... Orientalism is the science that judges the East and examines its realities." (Said, 1361 HS: 5-6). Therefore, anyone who is looking for Orientalism and Oriental knowledge is referred to as the Orientalist. The timing of Eastern studies is not exactly known by Westerners. Some have searched its veins in the ancient Greece and have described the "Herodotus" history as an Orientalism. Occasionally, Orientalism has been known as the heir of curiosities and studies that Christians began after the end of the Crusades against Islamic culture...; but it can be said that Orientalism was seriously formed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, and in the seventeenth century it was revealed by assigning some seats in Arabic language education in France, England, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy... (Sahab, ND: 12). Regarding the motivations of Orientalists, it should be said that they can be divided into three categories: 1) evangelical motives; 2) colonial motives and purposes; 3) scientific motives (Saghir, 1372: 17). Now that we have spoken a great deal about Orientalists and their motives, we now critique the Orientalists' view on the meaning of "*Ummī*" and the subject of reading and writing of the Prophet (PBUH). Since we have proved earlier that "*Ummī*" means "illiterate", here we compare the Orientalists' view with the earlier proven point of view, and reject or accept their view in case of the disagreement or agreement of the Orientalists' view with our opinion. Among the Orientalists who have studied this attribute of the Prophet (PBUH), some have addressed the meaning of "*Ummī*", some have discussed the ability or inability of the Prophet (PBUH) for reading and writing, and some have discussed both issues. So here, we will discuss the meaning of "*Ummī*" from their point of view and then discuss the ability or inability of the Prophet (PBUH) to read and write from their point of view.

#### A) The meaning of the word "*Ummī*"

Orientalists have mentioned 5 meanings for the word "*Ummī*": 1) the idolater 2) someone unfamiliar to the former religions 3) illiterate 4) incapable of reading and writing 5) the person unrelated to Jews.

Now we will mention the orientalist's views respectively:

#### 1. The idolater

Some Orientalists agree on this meaning; for example:

## 1-1- Springer

ALOYS SPRINGER – The Austrian Orientalist who died in 1893 AD- in the first volume of his book, titled "Life and the belief of Muhammad (Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammed)" states that the people of Arabian Peninsula, Prior to Muhammad, were divided into two groups: "the people of the Book" and "the idolaters"; "the people of the Book" was made up of Jews, Christians, and Mandaeans, and they were tribes that had been received the revelation, while the "idolaters" enjoyed no heavenly revelation (Springer, 1861 AD: 1/301). In the second volume of his book, he says that in fact "*Umam*" or people is a word used for "non-Jews". Even in the Christian language it has a more precise meaning and is therefore non-Christian or the same idolaters (Springer, 1862: 2/224). In Volume Three of the same book, he has said that some people think that "*Ummī*" means a man who can read but cannot write, but this is not true [because "*Ummī*" means "idolater"]. (Springer, 1865: 3/401, quoted by: Badawi, ND: 14)

## 1-2- Blachère

*Regis Blachère* is a French Orientalist, who died in 1973 AD, also believes that the word "*Ummīyīn*" in this verse (*Jumu'ah/2*), and in many other verses, means "Pagan Arabs", who, unlike Jews and Christians, were not beneficent the revelation, and for this reason they had a high degree of ignorance and unawareness toward the *Shari'ah* of God; he believes that there is a great deal of news in the *Tafsīr Ṭabarī* attributed to 'Ibn Abbas', which confirm this meaning, then he concludes that '*Al-Nabī al-Ummī*' (*A'rāf/158*) does not mean the ignorant, illiterate Prophet, but it means the Prophet of idolaters; *Blachère* then states that the adjective "*Ummī*", is derived from the Arabic word *Ummah*, meaning the Hebrew word "*Ummat ha Olam*", meaning "*Umam al-Ālam*" (the nations of the world), meaning idolaters who are known by Jews and Christians. (In this subject refer to: *Blachère*, 1376 HS: 21-22). Springer, throughout his book, has clearly reaffirmed his beliefs about the meaning of the word "*Ummīyīn*" and "*Ummī*" and considers the meaning of both of them, respectively, as "idolaters" and "idolater"; he believes that "idolaters" are the opposite of "people of the Book", and unlike "people of the Book", no "heavenly revelation" has been revealed to them; but this is not true, since the meaning of "*Ummī*" is illiterate and its example can be the idolater. However, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is not an idolater before *Bi'tha*, and we never believe in it.

*Blachère*, while rejecting the common meaning of the word "*Ummī*" in the commentary, states that the word "*Ummīyīn*" in verse 2 of the Surah *Jumu'ah* means Arab idolaters who had not benefited from revelation and thus are ignorant to God. But this is not true because "*Ummī*" means "the illiterate".

"Arab people" are one of the instances of "*Ummīyīn*" and the instance of "*Ummīyīn*" is not only "Arab people" of that time. This Orientalist has pointed out a very important point, and that is the Hebrew word (*Ummat ha Olam*); this Hebrew word - as *Blachère* has pointed out - in Persian means "the nations of the world" and in Arabic it means "*Umam al-Ālam*". The singular of this word is '*Ummat*', which is the same Arabic word '*Ummah*', which is the root of the word '*Ummī*' or '*Ummīyīn*'. According to *Blachère*, "*Ummī*" means "idolater"; but it is incorrect because if "*Ummī*" means "idolater", it is never compatible with its literal use in the Arabic language, as we said in rejecting the words of *Lakhḍar Shayib* when referring to Paul the Apostle, his instance, refers to the non-people of the Book-based as *Blachère* was saying, the

"idolatrous" congregation, not its meaning, and the meaning of "*Ummī*" is the same "illiterate." "Non-people of the Book" can be used for an illiterate person who has converted to idolatry because of a lack of knowledge of the heavenly revelation, but is not necessarily from the "Arab people", to monopolize the term "*Ummī*" in the "Arab person". He could not be from the "Arab people", but *Blachère* monopolizes "*Ummī*" in the "Arab person" and this is somehow problematic.

## 2. The person unfamiliar to the previous religions

Some Orientalists believe in this issue; for example:

### 2.1 Nöldeke

German Orientalist Theodor *Nöldeke* died in 1930 AD. His famous book is "the History of the *Qur'an*" (*Geschichte des Qorans*), the oldest available book on the history of the *Qur'an*, and even though it has been nearly a century since its publication, it is still being criticized a lot for his extremist views. *Qur'anic* scholars believe that all the research that has been written after *Nöldeke* on the Holy *Qur'an* has been somehow influenced by his ideas and viewpoints (Famil Rabiei Astaneh, 1380 HS: No. 30, 118-119). *Nöldeke*, also known as *Sheikh al-Mustashriqīn*, and his view about "*Ummī*" as the attribute of the Prophet (PBUH) has been somehow the foundation of the view of later people in this field, but he has not mentioned much materials on the issue of the "*Ummī*" Prophet (PBUH), though his student, *Blachère*, has discussed this issue more. However, the book "History of the *Qur'an*" holds that the word "*Ummī*" - as the attribute of the Prophet (PBUH) - does not indicate that he was unfamiliar to reading and writing, but that he had no knowledge about the books of previous religions and had not read them. (*Nöldeke*, 1860: 14) Sebastian Gunther believes that *Nöldeke* is aware of the fact that the terms "*Ummī*" and "*Ummīyīn*" have always mentioned in the holy *Qur'an* as the opposite of "People of the Book", namely "those who have a heavenly Book", which know it and have become an expert in it (Gunther, 1386 HS: No. 54,183-184).

### 2-2- Lewis

Also, Bernard Lewis, an English historian and orientalist born in 1916 AD, says: "Muhammad had not read [the Bible] before *Bi'tha*" (Lewis, 1984 AD: 56; refer to: Marwah, 1424 AH: 44 and 80; Taybawi, 1411 AH, 99).

In reply to *Nöldeke*, it should be said that "*Ummī*" as the attribute of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) here means 'illiterate' rather than 'one who is not familiar with the previous religious books and has not read them' which is not acceptable. Nevertheless, his idea that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has not read the books of previous religions is accepted. As we can see, Lewis also believes that Prophet has not read the Bible before *Bi'tha*. This view is correct, as according to verse (48) of the surah *Ankabūt*, the Prophet (PBUH), has not read or write anything before *Bi'tha*.

### 3. An Illiterate Person

Some Orientalists agree on this issue; for example:

#### 3-1- Virgil Gheorghiu

Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu - Romanian Orientalist, Killed in 1992 AD- in the book "Mohammed, a Prophet who must be known again" (La Vie de Mahomet) states that Prophet s who brought the scripture before Mohammed, were not "*Ummī*", that is, they were not illiterate, so the Divine Book was revealed to them once, but Prophet Muhammad was "*Ummī*" and therefore the *Qur'anic* verses were gradually revealed to him so that he could memorize them. Virgil Gheorghiu, 1376 HS: 68). He also emphasizes that the reason that the Qur'an was gradually revealed - as mentioned in the Qur'an in surah "*Al-Furqān*", verse 32 - is that Prophet Muhammad can memorize the *Qur'anic* verses and remember them. Another point is that the verses of the *Qur'an* was revealed, by the time, events and required new laws (Virgil Giorgio, 1376: 68).

#### 3-2- Armstrong

Also, Karen Armstrong, a British Orientalist, born in 1944 AD, states in her book "The Biography of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)" that the *Qur'an* calls Muhammad (PBUH). "*Ummī*" means "illiterate", but the purpose of the *Qur'an* for calling the Prophet as "*Ummī*", is to inspire that the divine message is a revelation (Armstrong, 1383 HS: 113).

#### 3-3- Gostave Le Bon

Gostave Le Bon, the French Orientalist who died in 1931 AD, states in the book "Civilization of Islam and Arab" (La Civilization des Arabes) that it is known that the Prophet (PBUH) has been "*Ummī*" and that it is also analogous, because if he knew science, the relation of the contents of the *Qur'anic* verses would probably be better, and it is also analogous that if the Prophet (PBUH) was not '*Ummī*', he could not build and propagate a new religion, because the '*Ummī*' is more familiar to the ignorant people and is better able to bring them to the right path. However, whether the Prophet (PBUH) is "*Ummī*" or "non-*Ummī*", there is no doubt that he had the last degree of intelligence and wisdom (Le Bon, 1884: 106). Undoubtedly the belief of *Gheorghiu* that the *Qur'anic* verses were gradually since it was revealed by time, the events and the new required laws, is a true claim, but the Prophet (PBUH) as an "*Ummī*" person could not be another reason for the gradual revelation of the Qur'an because the *Qur'an* itself has explained the reason of its gradual revelation in verse (106) of surah *Isrā'*:

(وَقُرْآنًا فَرَقْنَاهُ لِتَقْرَأَهُ عَلَى النَّاسِ عَلَىٰ مُكْتَبٍ وَنَزَّلْنَاهُ تَنْزِيلًا)

"(It is) a Qur'an which We have divided (into parts from time to time), in order that thou mightest recite it to men at intervals: We have revealed it by stages."

On the other hand, the meaning of the word "*Ummī*" is nothing more than "illiterate" and *Gheorghiu*, Armstrong, and Gostave Le Bon have chosen the meaning "illiterate" for "*Ummī*"



which can be said that they mean the same unlettered. Gostave Le Bon has also made a big mistake and insulted the Holy *Qur'an* by saying that the *Qur'an's* sentences could be better. In reply to him, it should be said that none of the verses of the *Qur'an* are the words of the Prophet (PBUH), but they are the word of God, and therefore, whether the Prophet (PBUH) is illiterate or not has nothing to do with the weak links between the *Qur'anic* verses, because Prophet was conveying the divine word and message, and he has added or removed no word to *Qur'an* at its own discretion.

So this comparison is erroneous (the comparison between the literacy and the illiteracy of the Prophet (PBUH) and the weakness or strength of the verses and the relation between them.) His second comparison is also wrong and it has nothing to do with illiteracy and bringing a new religion, because the literate person is aware of all the needs of the various sections of society, and not just the illiterate, and this person is more proper for prophecy.

#### 4- The Person Incapable of Reading and Writing (Illiterate)

Some Orientalists believe in this idea, for example:

##### 4-1- Montet

Edward Montet, a French Orientalist who died in 1927 AD, believes that the word "*Ummī*" as one of the attributes of the Prophet (PBUH) means "the Prophet incapable of reading and writing" (Blachère, 1376 HS: 21, quoting Montet).

##### 4-2- Amari

Michele Benedetto Gaetano Amari, an Italian Orientalist who died in 1889 AD, believes that the word "*Ummī*" means "a person incapable of reading and writing" (Blachère, 1376 HS: 21, quoted from Amari).

##### 4-3- Kazimirski

The view of "Albert de Biberstein Kazimirski", the Polish Orientalist, who died in 1887 AD - about the meaning of the word "*Ummī*" is the same as that of "Edward Montet" and "Michel Amari" (Blachère, 1376 HS: 21, quoted from Kazimirski)

##### 4-4 Henri de Castri

Count Henri de Castri, a nineteenth-century French Orientalist, argues: "Certainly Muhammed did not read and write, but he was "*Ummī*" (Henri de Castri, 2005 AD: 50).

Montet, Amari, Kazimirski believe that '*Ummī*' means 'the person incapable of reading and writing', this view is certainly true; Henri de Castri also understood the meaning of '*Ummī*'

well because, as it was said, "*Ummī*" means "illiterate", or in other words, "a person incapable of reading and writing."

## 5. A Non-Jewish Person

Some Western scholars believe that the purpose of calling the Prophet as "*Ummī*" is not his own illiteracy, but rather to refer to people who do not have a Book; thus, the word "*Ummī*" means "non-Jewish". Armstrong, 1383 HS: 113). For example, Hamilton A.R. Gibb, a Scottish Orientalist who died in 1975 AD, about describing the Prophet as "*Ummī*", believes that "*Ummī*" means a non-Jewish Prophet, who later [This word] has been interpreted by the Muslim public as a Prophet who was illiterate. (Gibb, ND: p. 79)

This view of such Orientalists about the meaning of the word '*Ummī*' does not seem correct, because the word '*Ummī*' in the language of the Jews and even the Christians means "illiterate" which refers to the non-Jews and non-Christians. Gibb points out that, in the post-Qur'anic periods, Muslims have mistakenly adopted the word "*Ummī*" in the sense of the Prophet incapable of reading or writing, while in the contrary, they have chosen the right meaning for it, because it is the same meaning of Jews and Christians.

(B) The ability or inability of the Prophet (PBUH) to read and write

Here we mention and study the views of the Orientalists discussing the ability or inability of the Prophet (PBUH) to read and write:

### 1- Capable of Reading and Writing

Some Orientalists accept this view, for example:

1-1- Sprenger

Sprenger, according to the Encyclopedia of Islam, believes that the Prophet (PBUH) knew how to read and write, even he had read some books such as "the Myths of the First and the Book of Abraham" about the beliefs, religions and stories of the past. (Gibb, 1974 AD: 4/1016, quoted from Sprenger)

1-2 Weil

Also Gustav Weil - a German Orientalist who died in 1889 AD - who conducted a research on the ability of the Prophet to read and write, believed that due to the Qur'anic verse 48 of surah Ankabūt, Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) was familiar with reading and writing, but has never read the books of Jews and Christians that existed before Bi'tha. (Blachère, 1376 HS: 18 Quoted from Weil).

## 1-3- Blachère

He in his book, "In the threshold of *Qur'an*" (Introduction au Coran) which is in French, mentions this question: whether the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was familiar to reading and writing or not? Then he says that this is an important serious question related to the topic of his discussion. Different answers have been given to his question; then he says that today, the viewpoint among Muslims is that Muhammad has never had such an acquaintance with reading and writing; later he emphasizes that this view is based on an old news, which has been prevalent in the field of interpretation. In this sense, it returns the derivation of the word "*Ummī*" - especially in the interpretation of "*al-Nabī Al-Ummī*" (*A'rāf*/158); in the sense of a person who is unable to read or write (Blachère, 1376 HS: 20). Then, by referring to the Story of *Hudaybiyyah* Peace and the Hadith of Pen and Paper, he tries to prove the ability of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to read and write before *Bi'tha*, but it must be said that his attempt was unsuccessful, because relying on these two narratives to prove the ability of the Prophet before *Bi'tha* is not effective and in the first part it was proved that the Prophet (PBUH) was unable to read and write and he had not learnt it from anyone.

## 1-4- Watt

William Montgomery Watt, a Scottish Orientalist and Islamologist, who died in 2006 AD, in the book "Muhammad, the Prophet and the Politician" (Mahomet, Prophet e Et Homme D'Etat) , believes that despite the fundamental Islam says that Muhammad did not know how to read and write, but modern scholars in the West are doubtful about this subject.... The hypothesis is that an active businessman like Muhammad has repeatedly increased his use of techniques such as reading and writing (Watt, 1962: 37)

As we can see, Sprenger believes that the Prophet (PBUH) had been able to read and write before the *Bi'tha*, but this is not acceptable, because in the first section it was proved that the Prophet (PBUH) has not been capable of reading and writing before *Bi'tha*; On the other hand, it must be said that this Orientalist has made a big mistake, since he thought that the phrase "*Asātīr al-Awalīn*" in verse 5 of *Surat al-Furqān* is the name of a book; Ramyar writes: "Regardless of whether the *Qur'an* mentions that Quraysh, ridiculously, called the Prophet's speech as the myths of the past, if there were some books with these names, the enemies of the Prophet would say again: it is not rational that the Prophet (PBUH) ascribe what [has] been in other books to himself and then mentions the name of those books too." (Ramyar, 1380 HS, 507). Sprenger believes that the Prophet (PBUH) has read the beliefs and stories of the previous nations and religions, but this is inaccurate, because the verse 48 of surah *Ankabūt* shows clearly that the Prophet (PBUH) has not read or written anything before the revelation of *Qur'an*. Weil's argument about the ability of the Prophet (PBUH) to read and write - before *Bi'tha* - means that the "book" in this verse is the "heavenly Book" and the meaning of the verse is that the Prophet (PBUH) – has read no scripture before *Bi'tha* and has written none of them, so it cannot be deduced from this verse that the Prophet (PBUH) was unable to read or write before *Bi'tha*. The answer is that the Prophet (PBUH) had not read or transcribed any scripture before *Bi'tha*. The word "book" does not only mean "book", but in other cases, the Holy Qur'an uses the word "book" but has considered the word "written" for it, such as:

(فَأَمَّا مَنْ أُوتِيَ كِتَابَهُ بِيَمِينِهِ فَيَقُولُ هَذَا مَا أَدْرَأْتُ أَكْتَابِيهِ)

"Then he that will be given his Record in his right hand will say:" Ah here! Read ye my Record!"  
(*Sūrat al-Ḥāqqah/19*)

and verses like this (*Isrā'/71; Naml/29; Nūr/33; An'ām/ 59* and other verses). So the word "book" in verse 48 is not unique to the term "book", but includes any kind of "written" material - either "book" or "written". Therefore, it cannot be inferred from this verse that the Prophet of God has not merely read and transcribed the ancestors' books, but that he has not read and transcribed any book; so the possibility of reading and writing – after *Bi'tha* – and consequently the ability of Prophet to read and write is rejected. As we saw, it has been proven that the Prophet of God (PBUH) was not capable of reading and writing before the *Bi'tha*. Watt believes that the Prophet was able to read and write before the *Bi'tha*; in response to this Orientalist, it must be said that the Prophet (PBUH) was not capable of reading and writing before the *Bi'tha* and the contrary to this idea was proved. On the other hand, there is no relationship between being a merchant and being able to read and write, because the merchant himself gives all his business accounting to others to do, because he is not capable of reading and writing. So it is also conceivable that other people were responsible to do his accounting and the only difference that he had with other businessmen was his inability to read and write.

## 2. Unable to Read or Write

Some Orientalists agree on this issue; for example:

### 2-1- Durant

William James Durant, an American Orientalist, Historian and Philosopher, who died in 1981 AD, in the book "The Story of Civilization" that is an English book, believes that apparently no one thought to teach Muhammad reading and writing; at that time, the art of writing and reading did not seem important to the Arabs, so in the tribe of Quraysh those who knew how to read and write were no more than seventeen people; it is not obvious that Prophet Muhammad has written anything or not, he had a special writer after the prophecy; However, the most famous and well-known Arabic book was flowed in his tongue and he knew the subtleties of things better than the educated people. (Durant, 1950 AD: 4/569)

### 2-2- Carlyle

Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish Historian, Philosopher and Orientalist who died in 1881 AD, in the book "Heroes" (On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History) and (Heroes and Hero Worship) believes that the thing we should not forget is that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) never learned any lesson in the presence of any master; at that time, the writing industry had just emerged among the Arab people, and I believe that the truth was that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was not familiar with reading and writing everything he had learned was the living in the desert and tolerating the difficult conditions of living there. (Carlyle, 1840 AD: 62-63).

### 2-3 Virgil Gheorghiu

He writes that Prophet Muhammad was illiterate and had no teacher. (Virgil Gheorghiu, 1376 HS: 45)

### 2-4- Armstrong

He believes that some Western scholars say that Muhammed, as a businessman, must know reading and writing (Armstrong, 1383 HS: 113). Then further, in the rejection of this notion, he affirms his view by saying that there is no precise historical document that Muhammad could read and write. (Armstrong, 1383 HS: 114)

### 2-5- Henri de Castri

As stated before, Henri de Castri believes that "Certainly Muhammad did not read and write but he was "*Ummī*" (Henri de Castri, 2005: 50).

### 2-6 John Davenport

John Davenport, an English Orientalist who died in 1877 AD, in his book "An Apology for Mohammed and Koran", believes that about education and learning knowledge, as it is common in the world, it is widely believed that Prophet Muhammad was uneducated and learned nothing except what was common in his tribe (Davenport, 1869 AD: 12). As we can see, Will Durant wrote about the problem of "writing" of him: It seems that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has not written anything; this view can be confirmed, both in pre-*Bi'tha* and afterwards. On the other hand, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is the most knowledgeable person in various matters; this opinion is certainly true and there is no doubt about it. In his opening remarks, Will Durant says that the art of reading and writing did not seem important for the Arabs and that among the Quraysh, there were no more than seventeen people able to read and write, but it should be said that this is not true at all, because Arabs like to read and write and those who can read and write Have been more (Ali, 1413 AH: 8/107-108, 141-143); on the other hand, paying attention to the first passage of his word indicates that he believes in the Prophet's inability to read and write, and this view is true. We should agree with Thomas Carlyle in this regard that the holy Prophet has never been a disciple, and on the other hand, we should accept his belief that he did not have the ability to read and write and affirm this view. According to Gheorghiu, the Prophet was illiterate and unable to read or write. The view that proves his inability to read and write is surely true. It is also true that the Prophet (PBUH) was not taught by any teacher. Armstrong believes that those who say that Prophet Muhammad was capable of reading and writing are mistaken since there is no historical evidence to prove this issue; the vies of this Orientalist regarding the pre-*Bi'tha* era is correct but it is not correct regarding the post-*Bi'tha* era, because it has been proven that the Prophet (PBUH) was capable of reading and writing after *Bi'tha*, and there is some narrative proof to his reading. Henri de Castri has not given an exact comment on the fact that he could read and write because, according to his view, The Prophet had been unable to read and write for all his life, while this inability was only acceptable for the pre-*Bi'tha* era and it should be said that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was able to read and write after *Bi'tha*.

Someone might say that this orientalist did not speak about the ability or inability of the Prophet (PBUH), but rather he said that the Prophet has not read or written. In response to this, it must be said that the coming of "*Ummī*" in the word of this Orientalist indicates that his purpose of saying the inability of Prophet (PBUH) in reading and writing was his inability to do so. Because, as we saw, those who believe in the inability of the Prophet (PBUH) to read and write, are using the word "*Ummī*" as a word equivalent to the "a person incapable of reading and writing". Therefore, this Orientalist also meant that the Prophet (PBUH) had been unable to do so during his life. Davenport's statement about the fact that the Prophet (PBUH) was not literate and educated is correct, as the *Qur'an* stipulates, the Prophet (PBUH) has not read or written anything before the *Qur'an* was revealed, i.e. he did not ask anyone to teach him reading and writing.

### **Conclusions**

1. Literally and according to interpretive and narrative sources, "*Ummī*" means "illiterate".
2. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was not able to read and write before the *Bi'tha*, but he was capable of reading and writing after the *Bi'tha*, but only his reading talent was realized.
3. Among the meanings mentioned for the word "*Ummī*" according to the word of Orientalists, only the meaning of "incapable of reading and writing" or "uneducated" or "illiterate" seems correct (such as Virgil Gheorghiu, Armstrong and Gostave Le Bon). Since we proved earlier that this is the most correct meaning for this word. Montet, Amari, Kazimirski, and Henri De Castri agree on this opinion.
4. Other meanings mentioned for the term include: the idolater (some like Sprenger and Blachère agree on this idea), the person unfamiliar to the previous religions (some like Nöldeke and Lewis agree on this issue) non-Jewish person (some like: Gibb believes in this issue) but these meanings do not seem right.
5. Among Orientalists' views on the ability or inability of the Prophet to read and write, the views of some Orientalists such as Durant, Carlyle, Virgil Gheorghiu, Armstrong, Henri de Castri, and John Davenport, who believe in the inability of the Prophet to read and write, seems correct and generally observes his pre-*Bi'tha* era.
6. That view of those Orientalists who believe that the Prophet (PBUH) is capable of reading and writing (such as Sprenger, Weil, Blachère, and Watt) and is about the pre-*Bi'tha* era does not seem true.

**NOTES:**

- 1- So, as you can see, the wisdom of the gradual revelation of the *Qur'an* is to read it with dignity to the people; according to Ayatollah *Ma'rifat*, the wisdom of the gradual revelation of the *Qur'an* is that the Prophet (PBUH) and the Muslims feel always favored by the Lord and their relationship with the almighty God would be connected constantly and their encouragement continues (*Ma'rifat*, 1379 HS: 31); again, the *Qur'an* elsewhere expresses the wisdom of its gradual revelation as follows:

(كَذَلِكَ لِنُنَبِّئَكَ بِهِ فُؤَادَكَ وَرَتَّلْنَاهُ تَرْتِيلًا)

“That We may strengthen thy heart thereby, and We have rehearsed it to thee in slow, well-arranged stages, gradually”. (*Furqān/32*)

This shows that the serenity of the Prophet (PBUH) and stabilizing his hearts is another goal of the gradual revelation of the holy *Qur'an*; this second verse is the one that Virgil Gheorghiu has attempted to give the reason for the gradual revelation of the *Qur'an*, but the phrase «لِنُنَبِّئَكَ بِهِ فُؤَادَكَ», disapprove his interpretation because he believes that the Prophet (PBUH) is "*Ummī*" and cannot read and write and that is why the verses of the *Qur'an* have been gradually revealed to him.

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