

The Truth about the History of Writing

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Conventionally, it is believed that all writing originated in Mesopotamia, around 3000 BC. From there, the invention spread via cultural diffusion to other parts of the world.

Some believe, moreover, that writing evolved independently more than once. It did, apart from Mesopotamia, in some other conducive civilizations, such as in Egypt (also around 3000 BC) and China (around 1200 BC).

However, this assessment is part of the sociocultural evolution, which, in turn, stems from the theory of evolution.

It is integral to Darwinism, relating biological evolution to sociocultural evolutionism.

Since many aspects of Darwinism are outright wrong, and others most seriously problematic, the same holds true concerning the theories of sociocultural evolution as its derivative.

That includes the idea of the origins and evolution of writing as well.

It is true that much of the understanding in relation to the matter is empirical. But it is evident at the same time that not all knowledge can be covered by empirical systems and methods.

Because life is shrouded in infinite mysteries and obscurities – empirically speaking – the role of the revealed knowledge and guidance is indispensable.

Integrating the two is the only way forward.

The pen and writing as heavenly entities

So important is writing in the Islamic revealed message that both the pen and writing feature prominently as well as permanently in the heavenly realm – regardless of the exact natures of theirs.

For example, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said that the pen (*al-qalam*) - an instrument of writing - was the first thing Allah had created.

He said: “Verily, the first thing to be created by Allah was the pen. Allah instructed it to write, so it wrote all that will exist until the end” (Jami’ al-Tirmidhi).

Abdullah b. ‘Umar said that four things Allah created with His hand: the pen, the Throne, the Garden of Eden (*Jannah ‘Adn*) and Adam. The rest of creation He created by saying to them “Be” and they were.

There is a chapter (*surah*) in the Qur’an that is called “the Pen” (*al-qalam*). In its first verse (*ayah*), Allah swears by the pen and by that which angles write in the records of people: “By the pen and what they inscribe” (al-Qalam, 1).

Allah also says: “No disaster strikes upon the earth or among yourselves except that it is inscribed in the Book of Decrees before We bring it into being - indeed that, for Allah, is easy” (al-Hadid, 22).

The Prophet (pbuh) said, bringing to mind the message of this verse: “The pens (*aqlam*) have been lifted and the pages (*suhuf*) have dried” (Jami’ al-Tirmidhi).

Furthermore, some angels have been entrusted with watching over people and recording their deeds.

The Qur’an says about them: “And indeed, (appointed) over you are keepers (guardians), kind and honourable - writing down (your deeds)” (al-Infitar, 10-11).

Yet other angels are sent by Allah to write down four things while people are still in their mothers’ wombs: their livelihood, their death, their deeds, their fortune and misfortune (Sahih Muslim).

The pen and writing as the necessities of man

When speaking about the creation of man, Allah says that He had taught him the writing by – or the use of - the pen (al-‘Alaq, 4).

Allah’s words, following the above “verse of the pen”, that He had “taught man that which he knew not” (al-‘Alaq, 5) to many scholars denote “teaching to write”.

Allah likewise says that He had taught the first man and prophet on earth, Adam, the names of all things (al-Baqarah, 31). Adam then passed that knowledge on to his descendants.

According to the majority of the commentators of the Qur’an, the first person who had been taught writing and the use of the pen was Adam himself.

Others say it was Idris (*Khanuj* or Enoch), the third prophet and the great-grandfather of Prophet Nuh (Noah).

There is “the Book of Enoch” as an ancient Hebrew religious text which is traditionally attributed to Enoch. Generally, though, both in the Jewish and Christian circles, the book is regarded as non-canonical or non-inspired.

In any case, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) explicitly said that Adam, his third son and also prophet, Seth – the brother of Qabil (Cain) and Habil (Abel) – and Idris, were the first ones who wrote using the pen (*awwal man khatta bi al-qalam*) (Ibn Hiban; Abu Na’im).

Without a doubt, writing is a great divine blessing. It makes mankind complete, unlocking infinite possibilities.

Without it - as per al-Qurtubi and other exegetes - neither religion nor life at large could be accomplished.

Writing is a means by which Almighty Allah realized His objective for existence and mankind in particular.

Knowing the character and significance of man’s honourable mission on earth, no phase of his productive existence could be imagined without a form of writing. Man and writing are indivisible.

Allah's gifts for mankind

When Allah taught man writing, when He taught him intelligible speech (al-Rahman, 4), when He taught him all the names, and when He assigned unto him the faculties of hearing, seeing, feeling and understanding (al-Mulk, 23) – Allah perfected thereby His gifts for mankind.

Hence, Man became ready and qualified to be the vicegerent (*khalifah*) and to face the impending challenges on earth. He was ready to generate legacies.

That is to say, positively, man was created to know. He was created to be “civilized” and “enlightened”, in the innermost meaning of the terms. He did not evolve to become thus.

Man's only task afterwards was to stay the course and to continue sustaining his condition. He as well needed to keep refining the material dimensions of life as necessitated by the vicissitude of its fundamental laws.

It was but Allah who intended for man the distinction of light, wisdom, guidance and authentic progress, whereas all other alternatives were bent on destroying man and dragging him to the abyss of darkness, ignorance, delusion and regression.

The role of revelations

In addition, all prophets were given revelations, some of which were in the form of scriptures (sacred books or writings).

Allah says, for example: “Indeed, this is in the former scriptures, the scriptures of Ibrahim (Abraham) and Musa (Moses)” (al-A'la, 18-19).

Also: “Has there not come to them evidence of what was in the former scriptures?” (Ta Ha, 133).

To most exegetes, the message in those and similar verses is general, encompassing all prophets, for they all brought the same monotheistic faith.

To further corroborate the point, in a *hadith* (tradition) the Prophet (pbuh) said that there were 104 holy books.

Apart from the four major books: Tawrat, Zabur, Injil and al-Furqan (Qur'an), there were also minor scriptures (*sahifah*, plural *suhuf*).

The latter were given in different quantities to Adam, Seth (Adam's son), Idris, Ibrahim, and perhaps Musa before the revelation of Tawrat (Ibn Hibban; Abu Na'im).

In passing, Prophet Ibrahim was born and lived for some time in Mesopotamia almost four millennia ago when, according to the conventional scholarship, writing had already taken off and had started to spread elsewhere.

Once again, it was impossible to have revealed scriptures without any type and degree of writing.

Minor scriptures given especially to the first prophets are called *suhuf*, which means “pages”, “sheets” and “(news)papers”. Even in everyday life and in the minds of ordinary people, such notions are unavoidably associated with the concepts of writing and reading.

As a matter of fact, the prophets and their revelations always served as prime movers in pursuing true knowledge (written and oral) and existential refinement.

Where is evidence?

One must wonder why there is no concrete evidence supporting this belief.

The following are the likely reasons:

First

On account of their rejection and ill-treatment of prophets, Allah destroyed most of the earlier nations. As a sign to posterity, destructions were at once severe and complete. In most cases, no vestiges whatsoever were left: "Do you see any remnants of them?" (al-Haqqah, 8).

Second

Earlier nations were relatively small and their legacies limited. Sturdiness and durability were not their forte.

Third

If nothing has been found so far, that by no means implies that there is absolutely nothing that might be unearthed one day. Extremely little of the earth has hitherto been properly searched, excavated and examined. This lack of knowledge induced a scientist to remark that we know more about the surface of Mars than we do about the ocean floor.

Fourth

Allah may simply withhold some evidences from man as a way of testing him and his trust in the revealed knowledge. Just as He promised to save Pharaoh's body as a sign (evidence) for future generations (Yunus, 92), He likewise could do the former. The earth, life and people are Allah's possessions, so He is free to do whatever He wills in accordance with His unbounded wisdom and benevolence.