

How to Read Beyond a Book

Lectures by Shaykh Amin Kholwadia presented by Hussam Bteibet

In these lectures, Shaykh Amin challenges the popular understanding of the word “*iqra*” in *Sūrat al-‘Alaq* by pointing out that the object of the command is omitted, leaving it to the reader to fill in. He demonstrates the flexibility of the English word “read”, then reflects that flexibility and creativity to the Arabic. He then explains that the reader must fulfill three foundational prerequisites before being able to read *wahī*. Furthermore, he outlines the four levels of reading that represent a person’s scholarship within a field, which is an actionable takeaway that students must work towards.

The first verse revealed to the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, was a command to read. Read with the Name of your Lord who creates. [*al-‘Alaq* 96:1] What does a command to read mean to the *ummī* Rasul? And why does the Rasul say he cannot oblige? The superb creativity of Arabic allows for the object of *iqra*’ to be omitted and leave it to the reader to fill in the blanks, thus allowing for multiple interpretations. However, the conventional meaning of reading a book is necessarily excluded due to the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, being the *ummī* Prophet. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī understands it to be a command to bring recitation into existence, thus making the omitted object a *maf‘ūl muṭlaq*. At this point, the Prophet is unable to recite due to the prerequisite *nūr* required to begin reciting. Allah describes the Quran itself as “*qawlan thaqīlā*”. [*al-Muzzammil* 73:5] *Wahī* is weighty, so much so that a mountain would have crumbled had the Quran been revealed to it. It’s not a standard human ability to receive *wahī*, so Jibrīl, peace be upon him, gradually transfers his *nūr* to the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, in three embraces such that the Prophet can then receive revelation and recite. This explanation proves the indispensable nature of and the depth and value in understanding what *wahī* meant to the initial addressee of the Quran, the Prophet himself, peace and blessings be upon him.

In this first revelation, one can also infer a relationship between reading and creating. This is gleaned from the attribute Allah describes Himself with after He commands towards reading. We see the Prophet was commanded to bring his recitation into existence, and Allah commands the Rasul to recite with the Name of His Lord who creates. This can allude towards the creative nature of revelation, in that it must create and be creative. So when the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, recites, he creates his recitation and everything his recitation creates, so much so that the creation of man mentioned in the second verse of *Sūrat al-‘Alaq* would fall under the command of *iqra*’. This displays the Prophet’s superlative introduction to *wahī*. The Prophet’s recitation is much more powerful than our own. His recitation healed the sick. The sunnah is to try to emulate him, peace and blessings be upon him, while knowing that we can’t reach his level of recitation. How’s that for modernism’s theory on progress?

Even in English, the word “read” can have many objects. Aside from reading a book, one can read another person’s emotions on their face, one can read body language, one can read the room, one can read between the lines, one can read a dream by interpreting it, and so on. So, the

tafsīr applicable to our time would be to read everything that is readable. As an academically inclined group, students of al-Amin Ethics should not keep their understanding of Islam at the level of community work. Once one elevates their understanding of “*iqra*”, the command doesn’t seem as easy to execute as it sounds.

In order to elevate one’s understanding of Islam, one must be able to read *wahī*. There are three tools required to read *wahī*. The first is Divine *Nūr*, exemplified by Jibrīl, peace be upon him, embracing the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him. *Nūr* is transferred from person to person. *Nūr* can also be acquired by worship. Thus, if one sees a ‘*ālim* who is not into *nafl ‘ibādah* and who shoots from the hip when he speaks, one should now follow him. If that ‘*ālim* is sinning, his knowledge is useless. He may as well literally flush it down the toilet.

This theory corroborates Shaykh Amin’s position of *ijtihād muṭlaq* being *zamānī* (era-based). A prerequisite to *ijtihād* is having the *nūr* of the Prophet. The Prophet’s *nūr* was transferred to his Companions, who transferred it to their students, the *Tābi‘īn*, who transferred it to their students. These three generations comprise the foundational level of Muslim scholarship and understanding, the *mutaqaddimīn*, upon which the *muta’akhirīn* built but did not change.

The second tool needed to read *wahī* is learning the prerequisite sciences. In order to try to understand how the Rasūl understood an *āyah*, one needs to know *sīrah*, *sunnah*, *hadith*, *ṣarf*, *naḥw*, *lughah*, sciences called ‘*ulūm al-Quran*, and other verses related to the verse in question before one can say they’re studying the Quran. Understanding Arabic is not enough. One must go through the mill of studying these sciences, which one will only get in *madrrasah*.

The third prerequisite to reading *wahī* is shedding sin and immorality. This can be done by following the Prophet through his *sīrah* and aiming to emulate him. The negative qualities within oneself, like greed, hastiness, and anger are considered to be metaphysical abnormalities which must be resolved before one can expect to acquire this *nūr*.

There are also four levels of reading that reflect one’s level of scholarship. These levels are attainable in the field Islamic sciences and in other fields as well. The first level is *muṭāla‘ah*. This is the level of being a bookworm and reading everything, within one’s field and beyond. This is not like the casual reading of an article on the internet. It’s an academic level of reading which requires critical engagement with the book. One must read many books in this manner to acquire a baseline level of expertise. In the Islamic sciences, this takes about 30 years.

The second level is *muzāwalah*. At this level, a scholar knows, through his expertise, which book to read for which purpose. One must have this level of familiarity with the texts in their field. In the Islamic sciences, attaining this level is for the seasoned ‘*ālim* who wants to do research at a high level.

The third level is *dhawq*. At this level, the scholar is reading with another faculty: his intuition and experience. When a scholar moves beyond science and enters the ocean of art, he becomes an artist. It must be very clear that one has studied, thought, fought, and struggled enough to get to this level. For example, a *muḥaddith* at this level can sense, by merely hearing a hadith, that it is not established, and a *mufti* can tell by reading the *fatwā* that the ruling is problematic.

The fourth level is *malakah*. This is akin to the *ijtihād* of a *mujtahid*. It's an intellectual ability in the seasoned scholar who has gone through the previous levels, and is gearing himself up to go further in his field. He finds that he's able to theorize and be creative. In the Islamic sciences, we understand that *ijtihād muṭlaq* is *zamānī*, however scholars exist who can plug into *ijtihād* to theorize, like al-Ghazālī, al-Nawawī, and Ibn Taymiyyah.

Keeping the goals of al-Amin Ethics in mind may help us understand where we, as students, should be in these levels of scholarship. To represent Islam, as with other fields, one needs to know the field. That's a given. Beyond that, a goal of al-Amin Ethics is to establish enough academic *wilāyah* to influence industries. If I understand these frameworks correctly, establishing academic *wilāyah* would require practitioners to have *muṭāla'ah* and possibly *muzāwalah* in their fields, along with a requisite amount of training in the Islamic sciences to reputedly represent Islam within one's field. That would mean, for someone like myself in IT, that I should know and read the major works that shape or represent the understanding of IT within the major domains of IT, such as computer architecture, networking, security, distributed systems, and so on. Once I understand this baseline level of scholarship that exists in IT, I would have enough academic backing to be taken seriously and be a productive voice within the field.

In summary, three prerequisites must be fulfilled before being able to read *wahī*. One needs *nūr* from Allah. One needs to learn the sciences related to *wahī*. One needs to shed sin and immorality. Fulfilling these requirements can allow a person to read *wahī*, however they will not elevate someone to the level of *ijtihād muṭlaq* unless they lived during the time of the *mutaqaddimīn*. In the modern day, the applicable *tafsīr* of *iqra'* is to read everything that is readable, which is part of the project of al-Amin Ethics. To contribute to the aims of al-Amin Ethics, the students must develop enough academic authority within their fields to be taken seriously. This would likely require having *muṭāla'ah* and possibly *muzāwalah* within one's field. May Allah allow the aims of al-Amin Ethics to come to fruition and be a great source of *barakah* and *khayr*. *Āmīn*.