

The Quran and its Message

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

A DEEPER LOOK AT THE WORD 'IKTATABAHA'

Joseph A. Islam

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Please see the main article: [Was the Prophet Muhammad \(pbuh\) Really Illiterate?](#)

In section (7) of the above article we noted a verse in which disbelievers accused the Prophet of writing down the scripture with his own hands.

025:005

'And they say: Tales of the former people (Arabic: *asatiru l-awalina*) which he has written down (Arabic: *iktatabaha*) and they (Arabic: *Fiha*) are dictated (Arabic: *tum-la*) to him (Arabic: *Alayhi*) morning and evening'

THE CLAIM

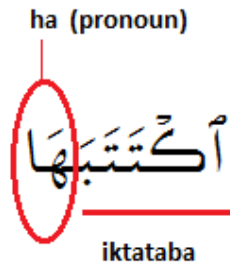
Many commentators provide different renderings of this verse and in particular, how they translate the word 'iktatabaha' .

As the word 'iktatabaha' implies that the Prophet could indeed write which runs counter to the common Muslim belief that he was illiterate, many diverse translations are often found in commentaries.

The problem has its roots in the fact that at one side some [Islamic traditions](#) hold that the Prophet was illiterate. On the other, they imply that he was not. In this Quranic verse however, there is more than a suggestion that the Prophet's accusers knew he could write and in fact, wrote down the 'Tales of the former people' for himself as they were dictated to him.

A LOOK AT THE WORD IKTATABAHA

The word 'Iktatabaha' is made up of (1) a perfect verb and (2) a pronoun



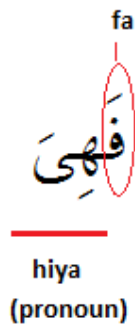
[Illustration - Joseph Islam](#)

- (1) '**iktataba**' is a verb and it is in the 3rd person singular masculine form. It is also a perfect verb.
- (2) '**ha**' is a pronoun and it is an object in the 3rd person feminine singular.

The pronoun object '**ha**' refers to the 'Tales of the former people' (Arabic: 'Asatiru l-awalina')

The verse is further connected with 'Fahiya' (and they) 'tum'la (are dictated) 'alayhi' (to him).

Please note the Arabic word 'Fahiya' which is made up of the **PRONOUN 'hiya'**



[Illustration - Joseph Islam](#)

The pronoun '**hiya**' is again a 3rd person feminine singular object, similar to the '**ha**' in 'iktatabaha' above which again is referring to the tales of the former people. (Asatiru l-awalina')

DERIVATIONAL MORPHOLOGY

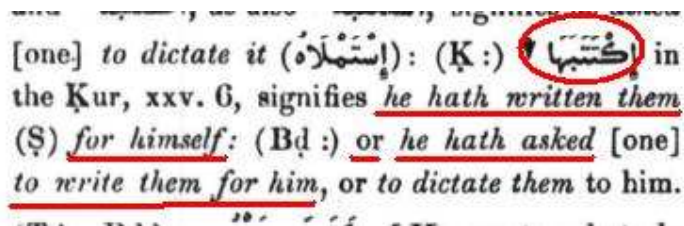
The root word Kaf-Ta-Ba (K-T-B) which forms the word 'Iktataba' also possesses many other forms as shown below.

- Form I (Transitive): kataba – He wrote
 Form II (Causative): kattaba – He caused to write
 Form III (Ditransitive): kaataba – He corresponded
 Form IV (Factitive): aktaba – He dictated
 Form V (Reflexive): takataba – It was written on its own
 Form VI (Reciprocity): takaataba – They wrote to each other
 Form VII (Submissive): inkataba – He was subscribed
 Form VIII (Reciprocity): iktataba – They wrote to each other
 Form IX (Control): istaktaba – He asked to write [1]

Edward Finegan in his book [2] discusses derivational morphology in Arabic of the root word 'K-T-B'. He further notes examples of nouns and verbs containing the same root word K-T-B, with other morphemes interwoven. With regards 'iktataba' we note the following:

kutubii 'bookseller' iktataba 'he had a copy made' [3]

Therefore it appears that the word 'iktataba' can carry the implication that a copy was made **by** the person themselves or that a copy was made **for** the person in question (but at their request). These views seem to be retained in the Arabic lexicon of Edward Lanes which records the two possible renderings.

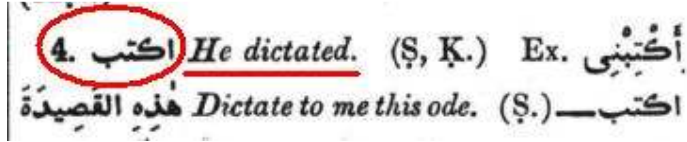


[one] to dictate it (اِسْتَمْلَاهُ): (K:) اِكتَتَبَ in the Qur, xxv. 6, signifies he hath written them (S) for himself: (Bd:) or he hath asked [one] to write them for him, or to dictate them to him.

Source: [Edward Lanes Lexicon](#) [4]

It should be appreciated that comprehensive lexicons such as Edward Lanes provide a wide range of discussions between major grammarian authorities concerning particular words or terms. They also invariably capture the disagreements between the grammarians and the interpretive slants between them which can often be influenced by their own particular theologies.

However, as has already been briefly mentioned in the main article, the word form IV 'aktaba' could have been used if the verse needed to signify the prophet 'dictated' the tales of the ancients.



Source: [Edward Lanes Lexicon](#) [5]

Therefore, given some of the points above, the preference seems to be for the rendering of the term 'iktatabaha' which is consistent with the 'Sihah' (S) and which Edward Lanes has noted as 'He has written them'.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Having had a closer look at the morphology of the verb 'iktatabaha' it appears that the accusation was levelled against the Prophet that in fact 'he was' writing the tales down (as opposed to any other writing on his behalf). In this way, this would amount to further support of the Prophet's ability to write.

REFERENCES

- [1] BHUYAN. S.I & AHMED. R, An HPSG Analysis of Arabic Verb [online], Department of Computer Science and Engineering, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, Available at: <http://eref.uqu.edu.sa/files/eref2/folder6/f214.pdf> [Accessed 13th April 2011]
- [2] FINEGAN. E, Language: Its Structure and Use, 5th Edition.
- [3] Ibid., Chapter 2, Words and Their Parts: Lexicon and Morphology, Page 44.
- [4] LANE. E.W, Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 7, Page 2590

Highlights marked in red on the lexicon excerpt are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[5] Ibid.

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