



The Inimitable Qur'an: The Revelation to Prophet Muhammad

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In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Grantor of Mercy.

In this final installment of the Proofs of Prophethood series, some miraculous aspects of the Qur'an are featured, and some of the commonly cited alternative explanations of the Qur'an's origins are evaluated.

The inimitable Qur'an

The inimitable nature of the Qur'an continues to be the most compelling proof that Muhammad ﷺ was, in fact, the final prophet of God. He ﷺ said, “There was no prophet except that he was granted signs that caused the people to believe in him, but what I have been [uniquely] granted is a revelation that Allah has inspired me with, and thus I am hopeful to have the most followers among them on the Day of Resurrection.”¹ This does not mean that he ﷺ had no other signs (such as performing [physical miracles](#)), just as it does not mean that the previous prophets had no revelation. Rather, the implication here is that the Qur'an would be uniquely effective in guiding people to faith over the passage of time. It should not surprise us that a permanent living miracle that can be experienced firsthand by successive generations would outperform a miraculous event witnessed by a limited group at some moment in history. What does astound many, though, is how any “mere work of literature” could ever qualify as otherworldly in its origins.

The Qur'an presents itself as the literal speech of God (9:16) and asserts that nothing like it will ever be produced (17:88). This inimitability is multidimensional and we have chosen four of those dimensions for this paper while addressing “alternative explanations” posited by some critics in their attempts to deny the Qur'an's divine origins.

Dimensions of inimitability

1. A literary masterpiece

¹ Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Beirut: Dār Ṭawq al-Najāh, 2002), no. 6846; Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabīyah, 1955), no. 152.

Whether we consult the highest authorities of the Arabic language in early Arabia, or its foremost experts among academics today, there is consensus on the literary uniqueness of the Qur'an. Professor Martin Zammit, the author of *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qur'anic Arabic*, says, "Notwithstanding the literary excellence of some of the long pre-Islamic poems... the Qur'an is definitely on a level of its own as the most eminent written manifestation of the Arabic language."²

During the Prophet's ﷺ time, Arabs were people who valued language almost as much as life itself.³ Before Islam, they would derogatorily call non-Arabs 'ajam (literally: silent or speechless), implying that others were not equally alive, or were deficient, since they could not articulate with the same lucidity and emotiveness. To further illustrate the "language = life" paradigm they held to, the 11th-century poet Ibn Rashīq (d. 463 AH) says,

Whenever a poet emerged in an Arab tribe, other tribes would come to congratulate, feasts would be prepared, the women would join together on lutes as they do at weddings, and old and young men would all rejoice at the good news—for this was a shield for their honor, a defense of their lineages, and an immortalization of their triumphs. The Arabs used to congratulate each other only on the birth of a child and when a poet rose among them.⁴

Such festivities were expected since "old Arabic poetry is a highly complex phenomenon. The vocabulary, grammatical idiosyncrasies, and strict norms were passed down from generation to generation, and only the most gifted students fully mastered the language. A person had to study for years, sometimes even decades, under a master poet before laying claim to the title of poet."⁵ Everyone else was validated by what they retained in memory of these odes and speeches that captured the history, morals, and wisdoms of this otherwise primitive desert civilization.

² Martin R. Zammit, *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qur'anic Arabic* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 37.

³ See Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), chap. 6, sec. 58.

⁴ See Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī, *al-'Umdah fī maḥāsīn al-shi'r wa-ādābih* (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1981), 1:65.

⁵ Navid Kermani, "Poetry and Language" in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 108.

Thus was the historical context within which the Qur'an was revealed; it descended in the midst of people at the pinnacle of rhetorical expression. Virtually overnight, these same people experience a Qur'an from Muhammad ﷺ that is pure in its Arabic, unprecedented in its eloquence, but mysteriously independent of the poetry or prose they knew and mastered. The prideful Arabs could not explain how they collectively failed its challenge to produce a single chapter with merely "similar" literary features, according to their own biased judges, when its shortest chapter is only ten words (108:1-3), when they were the masters of Arabic, and when Muhammad ﷺ brought over 6,000 verses of it. But that was not all. What dealt the killer blow to the Prophet's opponents in this standoff, leaving absolutely no room for further doubt, was the fact that he ﷺ was illiterate to begin with. As Allah says, "And you did not recite before it any scripture, nor did you inscribe one with your right hand. Otherwise, the falsifiers would have had [cause for] doubt." (29:48) It was an utter enigma, one that ultimately forced the Prophet's ﷺ detractors to settle on the accusation of him being a magician (74:24), unwittingly conceding that there was something, in fact, supernatural about this Book.

Some critics like Arthur J. Arberry argue that while the Qur'an is a literary masterpiece, this does not mean that it is supernatural. His claim is that every civilization has its unequalled works of literature, such as Shakespeare's *Sonnets* in English and Homer's *Iliad* in Greek, and the Qur'an is no different. However, this conflation overlooks a myriad of hugely consequential differences between the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and Shakespeare:⁶

1. Unlike the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, Shakespeare was school-taught both Greek and Latin and had, alongside his mentors, access to libraries of books that he built on for his own writings.
2. Shakespeare then earned a living as a professional playwright and continued refining his craft with each novel production, while the Prophet ﷺ was never reported to utter a single full couplet of poetry in his entire life,⁷ nor

⁶ See: Sāmī 'Amerī, *Barāhīn an-Nubuwwa* (London: Takween Center, 2018), 222–28.

⁷ Muṣṭafaá Šādiq al-Rāfi'ī, *I'jāz al-Qur'ān wa-al-balāghah al-nabawīyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Arabī, 1973), 308.

was it possible for him to retract any word of the Qur'an for quality control once it was spoken to his vast Muslim and non-Muslim audiences.

3. Sonnets were known and used for centuries before Shakespeare, while the Qur'an had a unique compositional structure that departed from every rubric of writing or speech used by Arabia's master poets.
4. Unlike Shakespeare, whose hallmark style and vocabulary permeate all his writings, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ brought a Qur'an whose style even departs from the Hadith tradition—the everyday statements of Muhammad ﷺ. This was easily noticed by his contemporaries, but more than a dozen experiments have since been conducted to stylometrically analyze this objectively. These statistical findings forced researchers to accept that it would be impossible for any human being to employ such extensive policing of their language for a lifetime. For instance, they found that 62% of the words from *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, a voluminous collection of Hadith, do not appear in the Qur'an, and 83% of Qur'anic terms do not exist in Hadith.⁸
5. Shakespeare's sonnets were not uniformly eloquent, but instead had segments of distinct brilliance. In contrast, the Arabs who took great pride in their *naqd* (literary critique) tradition, a genre in which they brutally scrutinized each other's poetry to identify “suboptimal word choices,” never identified a single passage in the Qur'an that could be bettered.⁹
6. Shakespeare and his peers never considered his work beyond the reach of human effort; it was but the champion—to some—in an arena of worthy competitors. In fact, Professor Hugh Craig of Newcastle University ranked Shakespeare as the seventh-greatest English-speaking playwright, behind Webster, Dekker, Peele, Marlowe, Jonson, and Greene.¹⁰ In contrast, the

⁸ Halim Sayoud, “Author Discrimination between the Holy Quran and Prophet's Statements,” *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 27, no. 4 (2012): 427–44.

⁹ When the masters of Arabic could not identify a suboptimal choice (let alone a mistake) in the Qur'an, it makes clear the absurdity of later critics who claim that the Qur'an has grammatical errors. Not only was Arabic grammar codified over a century after the Qur'an was revealed, but the method grammarians followed in crafting the discipline was analyzing the Qur'an itself, along with other early texts. The patterns they pinpointed became the “grammatical principles” of Arabic, and thus whenever later linguists—irrespective of their religion—noticed an inconsistency between the Qur'an and one of these principles, they would conclude that the earlier grammarian made an oversight in observation, not that the Qur'an made a mispronunciation. Critics today reverse the process; they dismiss the Qur'an, a linguistic masterpiece heralded as the measuring stick of the language, in light of a fallacious assessment.

¹⁰ Hugh Craig, “Shakespeare's Vocabulary: Myth and Reality,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2011): 53–74.

Qur'an shamed its deniers and challenged them at every turn to try to create anything that merely resembled it (52:33-34); and this challenge has never been met. As Allah says, “And if you are in doubt about what We have sent down upon Our servant [Muhammad], then produce a *sūrah* the like thereof and call upon your witnesses other than Allah, if you should be truthful. But if you do not—and you will never be able to—then fear the Fire, whose fuel is men and stones, prepared for the disbelievers” (2:23-24).

7. Shakespeare enjoyed the creative liberties of fictional storytelling. As for the Qur'an, entertainment was not its goal. It addressed theology, philosophy, history, and law—stiff technical discussions that do not ordinarily have mass appeal. The Qur'an asserted complex existential truths and taught a nuanced morality with a remarkable blend of precision and graceful elegance. It deconstructed prevalent wrongs that had become normalized and revealed the hypocrisy within—all uncomfortable narratives that would not be expected to garner widespread embrace. The Qur'an also repeats its themes quite often (to inculcate and reinforce its value system), another hurdle of eloquence that skilled authors try to avoid to elude redundancy, but with such artistic variation each time that leaves its rhetorical richness unblemished.
8. Unlike the entertainment suitable for a stage in London in the 17th century, the Qur'an as a religious text had to resonate with the young and the old, the pre-modern and post-modern mind, the eastern and western personality, and the spiritually versus intellectually inclined. When analyzing the effect of the Qur'an on the vast spectrum of hearts and minds, across the globe and across generations, it continues to gain momentum until today.
9. Shakespeare had decades of deliberation to decide what to include and omit from his works. Contrast this with the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, who would convey verses from the Qur'an in response to people's unscripted inquiries. For instance, there are 13 passages in the Qur'an that begin with “And they ask you [O Muhammad] about... Say...” (e.g., 2:189). Furthermore, he ﷺ would bring his followers fresh Qur'an in the most stressful conditions, at times while bleeding from attack or mourning his killed relatives, specifically pertaining to events that had just taken place. Should not such

spontaneous “productions” of the Qur'an necessitate a disparity in eloquence between them and those written under serene candlelight, after the events have unfolded and the initial reactions have quieted?

10. Shakespeare wrote his works in a linear fashion, building from the ground up, just as any author would, and was free to decide from the onset how each drama would begin and end. The Qur'an, however, was “puzzled” together over 23 years, in that the order of the Qur'an today does not reflect the chronology of its descent, but rather the later designated location for each passage within its respective chapter. This means that the Qur'an did not just exhibit fascinating consistency in its structure,¹¹ despite being spoken not written, but was somehow designed with interspersed additions, of various themes and lengths, many of which addressed unpredictable external events impromptu, and yet all this never sabotaged its seamless tapestry.

While it may be difficult for many people to fully grasp how any work of language can be miraculous, al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013 AH) argues in his book, *I'jāz al-Qur'ān* (The Inimitability of the Qur'an), that it suffices to consider the reaction of the Qur'an's first audience. Instead of outperforming the unlettered man in what was their greatest forte, thereby ending his religion in its infancy by “simply” responding to his challenge of producing something like the Qur'an, they spent fortunes trying to smear his name and worked tirelessly to prevent a single Qur'anic verse from reaching the ears and hearts of visitors to Mecca. They disavowed their codes of chivalry and tribal honor—a massive undertaking for early Arabs—to starve his followers, torture his supporters, and ultimately wage wars and assassination attempts against their fellow clansmen.¹² Failed by their words, they felt compelled to reach for their swords. It was not just because their greatest poets like Labīd ibn Rabī'ah were now converting to Islam and retiring

¹¹ On the thematic symmetry in *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, formally known as ring composition, Dr. Raymond Farrin says: Indeed this chapter exhibits marvelous justness of design. It is precisely and tightly arranged, as we have seen, according to the principles of ring composition; even the section lengths fit perfectly in the overall scheme. Moreover, the precise structure serves as a guide, pointing to key themes in the chapter. These occur, according to the logic of the pattern, at the centres of individual rings and, particularly, at the centre of the whole chapter. At the centre of the chapter, again, one finds instructions to face Mecca—this being a test of faith; identification of the Muslims as a new, middle community. Raymond K. Farrin, *Sūrat al-Baqarah: A Structural Analysis* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Seminary, 2010), 30.

¹² Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī, *I'jāz al-Qur'ān* (Egypt: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1997), 1:20.

from poetry, but due to them echoing in private that rivaling the Qur'an was evidently impossible for human beings. When al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah—a staunch enemy of Islam until his death—was asked to critique the Qur'an, he responded, “And what can I possibly say? There is not a single man among you who is more versed in poetry than I, or in prose, or in the poems of even the jinn. And by God, what he says bears no resemblance to any of these things. By God, his statement which he utters has a sweetness to it, and a charm hovers over it; its highest parts (surface meanings) are fruitful and its depths gush forth without end. It dominates and cannot be dominated, and it will certainly crush all that is beneath it.”¹³

2. A historical wonder

Despite engaging the questions of its first audience, which infinitely compounds the required on-hand expertise, the Qur'an is remarkably accurate about lost history. It should be noted that, in contrast to the Bible, no discrepancy exists between the oral transmission of the Qur'an and its earliest manuscripts. This decentralized dissemination of the Qur'an made it impossible for anyone to later modify its content, unlike the “authorized revisions” of the Bible that continue being issued until the present day. The following are some examples of the perplexing historical precision regarding ancient Egypt found in the Qur'an:

1. While the Bible also states that the Pharaoh of Moses drowned, the Qur'an asserts that God will make an example of him for later oppressors by saving his corpse—on that same day—from being lost at sea. Allah says, “And We took the Israelites across the sea, and Pharaoh and his soldiers pursued them in tyranny and enmity until, when drowning overtook him, he said, ‘I believe that there is no deity except that in whom the Israelites believe, and I am of the Muslims.’ Now? And you had disobeyed [Him] before and were of the corrupters? So today, We will save you in [terms of] your body that you may be to those after you a sign. And indeed, many among humanity are heedless to Our signs” (10:90-92).

¹³ Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥākīm, *al-Mustadrak ‘alā asl-ṣaḥīḥayn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 1990), 2:550; al-Ḥākīm deemed it authentic therein according to the criteria of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.

For nearly twelve hundred years after the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, until the invasions of Napoleon Bonaparte, knowledge of ancient Egypt was scarce at best. It was only after the discovery of a tablet called the Rosetta Stone, in 1799, that the discipline of Egyptology was born, the hieroglyphics were deciphered, and reliable source material about this perished civilization became available. Among the team of researchers sent from France to explore these newfound tombs was Dr. Maurice Bucaille, who published on this project his great work, *Mummies of the Pharaoh: Modern Medical Investigations*. Therein, he championed that Merneptah—son of Ramses II—was in fact the Pharaoh who drowned chasing Prophet Moses (peace be upon him). Among his fascinating finds was that by observing a small piece of the mummy's muscle under a microscope, we can assert that he did not remain in the sea for long. X-rays of this mummy also revealed that many of its bones were shattered by external blows (the crashing waves) before his death, not by tomb raiders as earlier researchers had once theorized.¹⁴ Bucaille presented all these findings in 1976 to the French Institute for Forensic Medicine and received multiple national awards in France for this groundbreaking work.

2. After describing their demise, the Qur'an then says about Pharaoh and his troops, "And the heaven and earth wept not for them, nor were they reprieved" (44:29). While maintaining the coherence of this verse at face value, a recently unearthed pyramid text has granted us new depths to its meaning. Therein, Pharaoh is described as ascending at death to claim supremacy of the heavens; the ancient hieroglyphics read, "The sky weeps for thee; the earth trembles for thee... when thou ascendest to heaven as a star, as the morning star."¹⁵ In other words, the Qur'an was issuing a direct response to these specific mythological adulations, over one thousand years before the vaults hiding them were unlocked.

3. The Qur'an identifies the ruler of Egypt as "Pharaoh" sixty-five times, but only in the story of Moses (peace be upon him). Not a single time is Egypt's earlier king during the time of Joseph (peace be upon him), called a "Pharaoh" in the Qur'an.

¹⁴ Maurice Bucaille, *Mummies of the Pharaohs: Modern Medical Investigations* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 15:156–60.

¹⁵ Samuel Alfred Browne Mercer, trans., *The Pyramid Texts*, 1st ed. (New York: Longmans, Green, 1952), 222, <https://www.sacred-texts.com/egy/pyt/pyt33.htm>.

This differs from the Old Testament which uses the label for both of these rulers (see: Genesis 40:7, 41:15/31/46, 50:7), though it has since been established that the term “Pharaoh” was first coined during the reign of Thutmose III (d. 1436 BC), the 18th dynasty of ancient Egypt.¹⁶ Historians have further discovered that during the era of Joseph, the 15th to 17th dynasties of Egypt were an invading force from Palestine, and hence they were called the *Hyksos* (literally: foreign kings). Since “Pharaoh” meant “great house” or “elite bloodline,” and since the Hyksos were occupiers and not indigenous rulers, they were naturally ineligible for the honorific title—had it even existed.¹⁷ Dr. Bucaille writes,

I must confess that when the Qur'an was first being conveyed to people, the ancient Egyptian language had vanished from the collective memory of humanity for over two centuries, and remained that way until the nineteenth century. Therefore, it was impossible for us to know that the king of Egypt should be called anything other than the title mentioned in the Holy Bible. The subtle word choice of the Qur'an on this matter is thought-provoking.¹⁸

The historical accuracy of the Qur'an is not just confirmed by recent archeological excavation; it astonished many early Jews and Christians just the same. The fact that Muhammad ﷺ could simply speak of personalities across different cultures like [Abraham](#), Joseph, Moses, Jesus, Dhū al-Qarnayn, and others, with such detail was inexplicable. Similarly, the fact that he ﷺ could extensively illustrate scenes from the hereafter just as their earlier scriptures did was unbelievable for them, as Allah said, “Over it (Hellfire) are nineteen. And We have not made the keepers of the Hellfire but angels, and We have not made their number except as a trial for those who disbelieve (i.e., will they mock nineteen as few?), and so that those who were given the Scripture [prior] would be certain...” (74:31).

Some Jews in Madīnah conceded that Muhammad ﷺ was, in fact, a true prophet, then resisted his message under the indefensible claim that it only applied to the Arabs. This was due to their inability to contest its divine origin, for they

¹⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “pharaoh,” accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/pharaoh>.

¹⁷ Muḥammad Bayyūmī Mahrān, *Dirāsāt tārikhīyah fi-al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Nahḍah Publishers, 1988), 2:121–22.

¹⁸ Maurice Bucaille, *Moïse et Pharaon: Les Hébreux en Egypte: quelles concordances des livres saints avec l'histoire* (Paris: Pocket, 2003), 210–11. Cited in *Barāhīn al-Nubuwwah*, 505.

knew there was no access to any semblance of this history in the Arabic language whatsoever. As Allah says, “That is from the news of the unseen which We reveal to you, [O Muhammad]. You knew it not, neither you nor your people, before this” (11:49). Some of the toughest critics of the Qur'an today, like William Tisdall, confirm this: “There seems to be no satisfactory proof that an Arabic version of the New Testament existed in Muhammad’s time.”¹⁹ In a similar vein, Pope Tawadrus II of Alexandria writes, “The first Arabic translation surfaced towards the end of the eighth Gregorian century and more than one hundred years after Islam. It was done by Bishop John of Seville in Spain. It was a partial translation that did not include the entire book, and was insufficiently circulated.”²⁰ As for the Torah, there is near consensus among Orientalist scholars that even incomplete translations of the Old Testament into Arabic did not exist until the 10th century.²¹

Some detractors of Islam argue that none of this history is remarkable, let alone miraculous. They claim Muhammad ﷺ either learned these accounts directly from the mouths of his contemporaries or that he plagiarized them from manuscripts of the Bible that have since been lost. The accusation of being spoon-fed by others existed during the Prophet’s ﷺ life, but it quickly disappeared, and until today most serious Qur'an critics avoid citing such a ludicrous proposition because it risks their being perceived as desperate. First of all, this would be contrary to the historically indisputable integrity of Muhammad’s [character](#). Secondly, the suggestions that Muhammad’s ﷺ knowledge of previous prophets and nations came from a Roman blacksmith in Mecca (a layman), or from a passing midday encounter with Bahīrah the Monk, or to a single conversation with a dying Waraqah ibn Nawfal, are simply implausible. Sensible people realize that the bulk and veracity of what the Prophet ﷺ brought could

¹⁹ William St. Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur'an* (London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1911), 140.

²⁰ Pope Tawadrus II, *Miftāh al-'ahd al-jadīd* (Cairo: Batrirkkiyyat al-Aqbāt al-Urthudux, 2013), 27.

²¹ See Thomas Hughes’s *The Dictionary of Islam* (London: W. H. Allen, 1859) 516; Albert Isteero’s “Abdullah Muslim Ibn Qutayba’s Biblical Quotations and Their Source: An Inquiry into the Earlier Existing Arabic Bible Translations,” (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1990), 236; Ira Price’s *The Ancestry of Our English Bible* (Philadelphia: The Sunday School Times Company, 1920), 108; Geoffrey Bromiley’s *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Michigan, 1999), 242; *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: The Universal Knowledge Foundation, 1913), 15:369; and Thomas Hartwell Hornes’s *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* (New York: Carter & Brothers, 1854), 1:274. Cited from *Barāhīn an-Nubuwwa*, 329–32.

only be attained with decades of apprenticeship that would be impossible for him to hide. “Say, ‘If Allah had willed, I would not have recited it to you, nor would He have made it known to you, for I had remained among you a lifetime before it. Then will you not reason?’” (10:16). As for the second accusation, that of plagiarism from the texts of Judeo-Christian scholars, only someone with a strong confirmation bias would consider this possibility, for two major reasons:

- As shown earlier, the Qur'an escapes the Bible's minefield of historical inaccuracies unscathed. Therefore, in order for the unique Qur'anic narrative to be plagiarized from an earlier scripture, this would necessitate that the Prophet ﷺ somehow had access to the accurate version from the thousands of variant manuscripts. Moreover, this version would have existed only in 7th-century Arabia of all places, in a foreign language Muhammad ﷺ secretly learned, then vanished without a trace, never to be recovered again.
- Even if this bizarre hypothetical were true, it only accounts for the source of this incredible precision and ignores the miraculous nature of the end-product. The Qur'an responds to this notion, asserting, “And We certainly know that they say, ‘It is only a human being who teaches him [the Prophet].’ The tongue of the one they refer to is foreign, and this Qur'an is [in] a clear Arabic language” (16:103).

3. Preserved as promised

The preservation and incorruptibility of the Qur'an were boldly promised therein; “Indeed, it is We who sent down the Qur'an and indeed, We will be its Guardian” (15:9). One marvels at how a book primarily committed to memory and documented on disjointed bones and leathers over the span of 23 years, could survive—let alone without incongruity. People would learn some Qur'an from the Prophet ﷺ or his Companions, then travel back to their homelands and autonomously teach it to their family, friends, and students, who would then relay it onwards to others. These separate oral transmissions continued independently for centuries, all across the earth, and somehow all 1.8 billion Muslims today still

recite the Qur'an exactly as it was taught to the Prophet's Companions and written in the original Uthmanic codex (the Islamic tradition has also documented a wealth of information on pre-Uthmanic [variant readings](#)). Even competing theologies (i.e., Sunni, Shiite, Kharijite) recite the same Qur'an. And yet, a millennium and a half later, we not only find zero incompatibility between all these oral traditions worldwide but even between them and the Qur'an in printed form. To accept that such consistency could be mere coincidence, or that global collusion on a spoken version of the Qur'an has taken place, or that a conspiracy of this magnitude was even logistically possible, is outright irrational.

It is also remarkable that the Qur'an in written form today perfectly matches the original manuscripts of the Qur'an compiled by the Prophet's Companions رضي الله ت عنهم. Abu Zakariyya explains,

While spell-check and similar features afforded by modern technology have mitigated many lapses in our writing, our emails and text messages still fall prey to spelling and grammatical errors. Now consider the premodern scribal tradition; rewind before technology, before the printing press, before erasers, before literacy of the masses. It should not surprise us to have hundreds of thousands of misaligned manuscripts for the religious texts of the past—irrespective of whether this was done innocently or maliciously, and irrespective of whether originals of that text were available for cross-verification. But with the Qur'an, there were no variant versions due to the original being preserved, its mass-memorization, its strong poetic rhythm which facilitates that, and its daily usage in a Muslim's life, which together constitute a genius reinforcement mechanism unrivaled in history.²²

Some people are dismissive of the claim that the Qur'an has been uniquely preserved, retorting that it was initially codified by a central authority, one that was early enough to preempt the spread of non-conforming manuscripts. They contend that it would be gullible to trust the compilation of Abū Bakr and standardization of 'Uthmān (may Allah be pleased with them), and naively assume that these rulers did not purge whatever early manuscripts they arbitrarily deemed undesirable. Being suspicious of government agendas is often warranted, especially for an

²² Abu Zakariyya, *The Eternal Challenge* (London: One Reason, 2015), 35–40 (paraphrased and approved by the author).

audience whose Bible was inaccessible to the laity until William Tyndale (d. 1536 CE) first translated it to English (for which he was burnt at the stake for heresy). But since the transmission of the Qur'an does not hinge solely on written records, this allows for measuring the written against the oral to ensure that the documentation and dissemination processes were scrupulous. In other words, it is the “memorized by heart track” which immortalizes this undistortable scripture above all else, as Allah says, “Rather, the Qur'an is distinct verses [preserved] within the chests of those endowed with sacred knowledge, and none rejects our verses but the wrongdoers” (29:49).

Orientalist Alford T. Welch writes,

For Muslims, the Qur'an is much more than scripture or sacred literature in the usual Western sense. Its primary significance for the vast majority through the centuries has been in its oral form, the form in which it first appeared, as the “recitation” (kur'an) chanted by Muhammad to his followers over a period of about twenty years... The revelations were memorized by some of Muhammad's followers during his lifetime, and the oral tradition that was thus established has had a continuous history ever since, in some ways independent of, and superior to, the written Qur'an... Through the centuries the oral tradition of the entire Qur'an has been maintained by the professional reciters, while all Muslims memorise parts of the Qur'an for use in the daily prayers. Until recently, the significance of the recited Qur'an has seldom been fully appreciated in the West.²³

4. An extraordinary potency

Sophistication, accuracy, and preservation aside, simply hearing the Qur'an continues to have a unique and extraordinary effect on people. As al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 998 AH) writes in *Bayān I'jāz al-Qur'an*,

The inimitability of the Qur'an has yet another dimension, one which people tend to overlook, and is unrecognized except by a sparse few individuals—namely what it generates in the hearts and impresses onto the souls. Aside from the Qur'an, you do not hear of any discourse, neither

²³ Alford T. Welch, R. Paret, and J. D. Pearson, s.v. “Al-Qur'an,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs, Brill Reference Online.

poetry nor prose, that upon reaching one's ears provides such immediate pleasure and sweetness, and at other times such awe and intimidation, like [the Qur'an] does.²⁴

He then proceeds to describe how the Qur'an has historically exhibited a unique potency for invigorating the spirits with optimism, rattling the conscience to wakefulness, and uprooting from people their most deeply entrenched false convictions. Is there nothing remarkable, he asks, about multiple murderous Arabs who each neared the Prophet ﷺ to assassinate him, only to be disarmed by hearing his recitation of the Qur'an, and transformed at once from enemies to allies, and from staunch disbelievers to the sincerest devotees among the faithful?

In a rigorously authenticated report, Jubayr ibn Mu'īn (Allah be pleased with him) narrates that upon arriving in Madinah as a pagan idolator, to ransom his clansmen who were captured at the Battle of Badr, he found the Prophet ﷺ reciting *Sūrat al-Ṭūr* during the Maghrib prayer. He said, "Once he reached the verses, 'Were they created out of nothing, or are they the creators [of themselves]? Or did they create the heavens and the earth? No, they are not certain. Or have they the repositories of your Lord, or are they the controllers [of them]?' (52:35-37), my heart nearly took flight."²⁵ In another narration, "This was the moment that faith first settled in my heart."²⁶ Similarly, Ibn 'Abbās (Allah be pleased with him) narrates that one night, while the Muslims were still in hostile Mecca, the Prophet ﷺ recited in his prayer: "Then at this statement (the Qur'an) do you wonder? And you laugh and do not weep? While you are proudly sporting? So prostrate to Allah and worship [Him]" (53:59-62). Upon uttering these verses, Ibn 'Abbās says, both the believers present and several eavesdropping pagans fell into prostration along with the Prophet ﷺ.²⁷ Their enrapture by the recital compelled them to involuntarily comply—albeit only for a few moments until their prideful obstinacy resurfaced. But many opponents of the Prophet ﷺ did eventually submit to what the Qur'an stirred within them. These were not just the adversaries who once drew

²⁴ Muḥammad Khalaf-Allah Ahmad Muḥammad Zaghul Sallam, eds., *Three Treatises on the I'jâz of the Qur'ân*, trans. Issa J. Boullata (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2014), 46 (modified to refine the translation).

²⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4573.

²⁶ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4023.

²⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 1071.

their swords against him, but even people whose parents had fallen in battle against the Prophet ﷺ. It is difficult to find anyone who exhibited greater enmity to Muhammad ﷺ than Abū Jahl ibn Hishām, Umayyah ibn Khalaf, and al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah—yet their sons (‘Ikrimah, Ṣafwān, and Khālīd) embraced the Qur’an after their fathers’ demise at the Prophet’s hands. These are but some early examples of how the potent nature of the Qur’an transformed the hearts of listeners, and until now many of those who may not even understand its words find themselves unable to resist the magnetic power of its recitation.

Nasreddine Dinét (d. 1929 CE, born Alphonse-Étienne Dinét), a French painter and writer on Islam, said,

The miracles wrought by earlier Prophets had been transient, so to say, and for that very reason, rapidly forgotten, while that of the Verses may be called ‘The Permanent Miracle.’ Its activity was unceasing. Everywhere and at all hours, each believer, by reciting the Verses, helped to realise the miracle, and in this can be found the explanation of many sudden conversions, incomprehensible for the European who knows nothing of the Qur’an, or judges it by cold and inaccurate translations.²⁸

The truth of Dinét’s words can be demonstrated even today, particularly how much of the western world is oblivious to the Qur’an and its mesmerizing charm. Search engine results in English will usually [reflect](#) that the Bible is the most read book of all time, with ~4 billion copies sold in the last fifty years. The second (*Quotations from Mao Tse-Tung*) and third (the Harry Potter Series) *combined* only sold 25% as many copies as the Bible. While this disparity between the Bible and other works seems staggering, it is eclipsed by the innumerable millions of Muslims today who do not merely purchase or read, but *memorize* the entire Qur’an by heart. They not only recall each of its ~600 pages, 114 chapters, 6,236 verses down to the letter and vowel sound, but in the original Arabic form, and while observing the *tajwīd* rules that govern Qur’anic pronunciation, despite that usually not being their native tongue. As Allah said, “And We have certainly facilitated the Qur’an to be remembered, so is there anyone who will remember?” (54:17) There are also

²⁸ Etienne Dinét and Sliman Ben Ibrahim, *The Life of Mohammad, the Prophet of Allah* (Paris: Paris Book Club, 1918), 3:37.

countless others who are adamant about concealing their commitment of the Qur'an to memory, fearful that their motive for disclosing this achievement may involve insincerity with God or conceit with oneself. With regards to this aspect of the Qur'an's inimitability, that of its riveting allure, does any other book in all of human history begin to compare?

Al-Bāqillānī calls us²⁹ to pause and consider the Qur'an as a standalone historical phenomenon; we all witness how every society and civilization, upon becoming fond of a novel idea or artform, naturally imbibes it, competes in it, and then builds on it—or purges it when it becomes mundane. But with the Qur'an, none of this took place; it never ushered in a new genre of creative literature or spoken word. The Qur'an, unlike any other book, seems to have frozen in time the excitement of its debut and retained the fixation of its admirers forever. Never venturing beyond it, they are fulfilled with its recitation, memorization, and contemplation for an entire lifetime. In an attempt to explain the psychology behind this one-of-a-kind attachment, Ibn Taymīyah (d. 1328 AH) says, “Whoever listens carefully to the words of Allah, and the words of His Messenger with his mind and ponders over them with his heart, he will arrive through them at certain meanings, sweetness, guidance, remedy for the hearts, blessings, and benefits that he would never find in any other words, whether poetry or prose.”³⁰

Dr. Muhammad Drāz (d. 1958 AH) penned a similar explanation for the far-reaching embrace of the Qur'an and its inimitableness in his acclaimed work, *al-Naba' al-'Azīm (The Great News)*. Therein, he argues that of the secrets behind the potency of the Qur'an is its perfect combination of persuasive arguments and emotive forces. Drāz argues that human expression never fails to disturb this balance. When scientists and philosophers levitate into their technical discourses, their language orbits in the intellectual stratosphere that struggles to accommodate the warmth of emotion. When poets and writers embark on their journeys to evoke the thrill and passions of their audience, they quickly swerve from reality to fantasy and feel forced to stretch facts to escape “the cold truth” which works against their

²⁹ al-Bāqillānī, *I'jāz al-Qur'ān* (Egypt: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1997), 1:248.

³⁰ Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymīyah, *Iqtidā' al-ṣirāt al-mustaqīm fī mukhālafat aṣḥāb al-jahīm* (Beirut: Dār 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1999), 2:270.

objective. As for the Qur'an, it fuses truth and beauty in a way that only The Almighty can; its rhetorical depth appeals to the eloquent, and its enjoyability appeals to the masses, but neither facet detracts from the other. As Drāz beautifully puts it, we all hear words that are clearly the fruit of an impressively critical thinker, and others that are clearly the fruit of someone with peak emotional intelligence, but to find both fruits stemming from the same branch is truly remarkable. Only the Lord of the worlds can offer such a powerful elixir, he says, that is “pure and salient for all those who drink it” (16:66). Only He can allot humanity “a decisive statement” (86:13) in its accuracy, and yet still one that “causes the skins of those who fear their Lord to shiver, then their skin and hearts soften at the mention of [the mercy of] Allah” (39:23).³¹

Switching gears to the civilizational aftermath of the Qur'an, al-Bayhaqi (d. 1066 AH) quotes in the preface of his seminal work, *Dalā'il al-Nubuwwah (The Proofs of Prophethood)*, al-Ḥalīmī as saying, “Whoever depends on the likes of this (Muhammad plagiarizing from Ibn al-Ḥaḍramī's two slave-boys) will accept anything to accuse him with.” He then justifies this by the fact that this charge not only ignores the inimitable language of the Qur'an but fails to explain the secret behind its potency and impact. Consider the thousands of volumes of intellectual sciences,³² laws, and ethics extracted from, or sparked by, this concise Qur'an. No single work—man-made or divine—has ever caused people and societies to thrive in such a holistic way. On the spiritual, moral, social, and civilizational levels, it breathed new life into the world and illuminated it (and continues to illuminate it) for centuries. “And thus We have revealed to you a spirit of Our command. You did not know what the Book or [what] faith was, but We have made it a light by which We guide whom We will of Our servants. And indeed, you [O Muhammad] guide to a straight path, the path of Allah, to Whom belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth. Unquestionably, to Allah do all [matters] evolve” (42:52-53).

Echoes of the Prophet ﷺ

³¹ Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh Drāz, *al-Naba' al-'azīm* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 2005), 1:148–51.

³² See Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Boston: Brill, 2007) for an informative book documenting how Islamic societies intellectually thrived after the advent of the Qur'an.

Muslim theologians point out that people who simply familiarize themselves with the biography of Muhammad ﷺ ascertain that he could not have forged the Qur'an. This happens by observing his flawless integrity, which even [non-Muslim historians assert](#), but also by witnessing how the Qur'anic corpus consistently subordinates Muhammad ﷺ in various ways. While this may not be a dimension of inimitability, it is included as an addendum here to bring our discussion full circle. If the Prophet ﷺ was, in fact, the author of the Qur'an, would it be expected that he taught the world the following?

- The name of Moses (peace be upon him) appears in the Qur'an 135 times, the name of Jesus (peace be upon him) appears 25 times, while the name of Muhammad ﷺ appears only 5 times. One would assume that a person would avoid citing those he is accused of plagiarizing from, especially when being mocked daily by the Jews of Madīnah and facing them in wars they initiated.
- Mary, the Mother of Jesus (peace be upon them both), is cited by name 34 times in the Qur'an, while the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ own wives and daughters are not named a single time therein. Had he wanted to elevate the status of his family for political clout, for instance, one might think he would have included a tribute, or simply mentioned their names, at least once.
- “O Prophet, why do you prohibit [yourself from] what Allah has made lawful for you, seeking the approval of your wives? And Allah is Forgiving and Merciful” (66:1). If a community leader were to air his inter-family dispute from the altar and charge himself with “just trying to please his wife,” let alone in 7th-century Arabia, how would that be received by the masses? Yet, in this brief chapter of the Qur'an, an entire mini family drama is showcased: two wives are jealous of the third; they devise a scheme; it works; the Prophet ﷺ makes a suboptimal decision; it must be rectified, etc.
- Authors and influencers always brand their “product” as something special and unprecedented, not merely the replica of a prior model, while the Qur'an reminds time and again that it does the exact opposite; while it does bring some novel revelations, its primary function was to recall humanity to a

treasure they once had but long distorted. “Say, ‘I am not something original among the messengers, nor do I know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow that which is revealed to me...’” (46:9).

- Ibn Umm Maktūm, a blind man, interrupted an important meeting which displeased the Prophet ﷺ, but he just frowned silently as not to offend this believer. And yet, the Qur'an reveals the very thing the Prophet ﷺ had tried to conceal, to be recited in prayer until the end of time. “He frowned and turned away when the blind man came to him” (80:1-2). Would a charlatan invent verses that criticize himself?
- “If not for a decree from Allah that preceded, you would have been touched for what you took by a great punishment” (8:68). Following the revelation of this verse, both the Prophet ﷺ and Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq were found weeping from the fear of God. This verse was censuring them for the premature ransoms they accepted to release their captives after the Battle of Badr. If someone's boss scolded him in a private email, would they publicize it to their staff and teach it? Several such passages exist in the Qur'an, yet they never undermined the Prophet's credibility with his Companions who knew he was not threatening himself; these were not his words.
- When Allah ordered the Prophet ﷺ to marry Zaynab once Zayd (his adopted son) had divorced her, the hypocrites pounced on this to accuse the Prophet ﷺ of being a lustful man who circumvents his own laws to marry his daughter-in-law.³³ This accusation would shake those weak in faith and threaten to develop a critical mass of Madīnans to overthrow the head of state. Despite all this, Allah reveals that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was, in fact, hiding a heavy heart about this event, though it was certainly not from guilt, but from knowing that this could easily be misused against him. “And you concealed within yourself that which Allah is to disclose. And you feared the people, while Allah has more right that you fear Him” (33:37). ‘A’isha, said, “If the Messenger of Allah ﷺ were to conceal anything from the Qur'an, he would have concealed this verse.”³⁴

³³ See *Tafsīr al-Qurtubī, Sūrat al-Aḥzāb* surah 33, verse 37.

³⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 7420.

- “Muhammad is not the father of any one of your men” (33:40). Every son of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ died young, and thus it would deeply hurt him every time the pagans called him “*abtar*,” meaning severed from having male descendants. Allah even revealed an entire chapter of the Qur'an (108) in response to this taunting. However, the verse above—revealed to establish that Zayd was not his biological son—indirectly captures this painful past of the Prophet's life and is recited around the clock. There are many verses of this nature, citing the slurs of his critics who called him a madman, a liar, and a sorcerer. Were Muhammad the author of the Qur'an, one would think he would bury what hurt him, not ensure that it be never forgotten.

A person may misperceive God as being cruel to the Prophet ﷺ here, as these verses and their like must have caused him pain. However, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ never received them this way, for the Qur'an was also filled with reassurances of God's unique love and care for him ﷺ, and because he understood that hardships were inseparable from the lofty rank of prophethood. Some of these difficulties were physical, like bleeding on the battlefield, which also served to prove his mortality and his courage, among other wisdoms. Others were emotional, such as some of these verses above, which served to separate him from all notions of authorship. During his life and until the end of time, this genre of verses has done just that: allowed people to realize that these can only be the echoes of an honest prophet of God ﷺ.

In a word

Is it not sufficient for them that We revealed to you the Book which is recited to them? Indeed in that is a mercy and reminder for a people who believe. (Quran 29:51)

It is unbecoming of any objective person to learn about the multidimensional inimitability of the Qur'an and then render it a haphazard stroke of genius. Do its mysterious linguistic form, its perfect blend of persuasive and emotive address, its inexplicable precision about past and future truths, its harmonious theological and legal framework, its gripping transformative allure all not suffice to indicate the

divine origins of this Qur'an? Is it conceivable that an unlettered man from 7th-century Arabia could spend 40 years of his life preoccupied with shepherding and trade and then bring the world—overnight—a linguistic masterpiece with intricate details of lost knowledge from the bellies of books that never existed in his age, and from books that would only be written more than a millennium later? Even the most educated people today, rather all of humanity as a collective, will continue to find it impossible to rival its inimitability. “Say [O Muhammad], ‘If mankind and the *jinn* gathered in order to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce the like of it, even if they were to each other assistants’” (17:88).

Just as the Almighty sent Moses (peace be upon him) with the ability to vanquish the greatest sorcerers combined in their own craft and Jesus (peace be upon him) with the ability to heal in ways that the master physicians combined could never dream to match, so too did He send Muhammad ﷺ with an eternal Word that would challenge the speech of mankind until the end of time. “So where then are you going? It is but a reminder to [all the] worlds. For whoever among you wishes to take the right course. And you do not wish except that Allah wishes—Lord of the worlds” (81:26-28).