



The Inimitable Qur'an: The Revelation to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ

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

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, 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 a particular moment in history. What does astound many 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,² and asserts that nothing like it will ever be produced.³ This inimitability is multidimensional, and this paper will simply provide a taste and overview of some of these dimensions, while addressing “alternative explanations” posited by some critics in their attempts to deny the divine origins of the Qur'an. For a deeper exploration of this topic, readers can avail themselves the expansive genre of books dedicated entirely to it.⁴

A Literary Masterpiece

According to both the highest authorities of the Arabic language in early Arabia, and its foremost experts 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

¹ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 9:92 #7274; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:134 #152.

² The Qur'an 9:6, Saheeh International Translation.

³ The Qur'an 17:88, Saheeh International Translation.

⁴ See: Gibril F. Haddad, “Tropology and Inimitability: Ibn Ashur's Theory of Tafsir in the Ten Prolegomena to Al-Tahrir wa'l-Tanwir,” *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 21.1 (2019): 50-111.

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."⁵ Arthur J. Arberry (d. 1969), a British scholar of Arabic literature, wrote in his popular translation of the Qur'an, "The rhetoric and rhythm of the Koran are so characteristic, so powerful, so highly emotive, that any version whatsoever is bound in the nature of things to be but a poor copy of the glittering splendour of the original."⁶

During the Prophet's ﷺ time, Arabs were people who valued language almost as much as life itself.⁷ 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 this belief that "language equals life," the eleventh-century poet Ibn Rashīq (d. 999) says,

Whenever a poet emerged in an Arab tribe, other tribes would come to congratulate, feasts would be prepared, the women would play 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.⁸

Ground for such festivities were understandable, since, as Navid Kermani says,

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.⁹

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

⁵ Martin R. Zammit, *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qur'anic Arabic* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 37.

⁶ Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted: A Translation* (Simon and Schuster, 1996), 24.

⁷ Ibn Khaldūn & Franz Rosenthal (trans.), *The Muqaddimah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), chap. 6, sec. 58.

⁸ Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī, *Al-'Umdah fī Maḥāsīn al-Shi'r wa-Ādābih* (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1981), 1:65.

⁹ Navid Kermani, "Poetry and Language" in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*, edited by Andrew Rippin (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 108.

desert civilization. This was the historical context within which the Qur'an was revealed. It descended amid people at the pinnacle of rhetorical expression. Virtually overnight, these same people experienced a Qur'an from Muhammad ﷺ that was pure in its Arabic, unprecedented in its eloquence, but mysteriously independent of the poetry or prose they knew and had mastered. Dr Bassam Saeh explains,

...the miraculousness of the Qur'an lies in this very paradox: the paradox of its being truly Arabic, and its being, at one and the same time, a new language. This might appear to be illogical. However, the logic of miracle inheres in precisely the fact that it surpasses logic. A miracle that rests on logic ceases to be a miracle.¹⁰

The prideful Arabs could not explain how they collectively failed the Qur'anic 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,¹¹ 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 unlettered 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.*"¹² It was an utter enigma, one that ultimately forced the Prophet's ﷺ detractors to settle on the accusation of him being a magician,¹³ unwittingly conceding that there was indeed something supernatural about this Book.

Muhammad or Shakespeare?

Some critics argue that while the Qur'an is a literary masterpiece, this does not mean that it is supernatural. They claim that every civilization has its unequalled works of literature, such as Shakespeare's *Sonnets* in English and Homer's *Iliad* in

¹⁰ Bassam Saeh, *The Miraculous Language of the Qur'an: Evidence of Divine Origin* (Virginia: IIIT, 2015), 21.

¹¹ The Qur'an 108:1-3.

¹² The Qur'an 29:48, Saheeh International Translation.

¹³ The Qur'an 74:24.

Greek, and the Qur'an is no different. However, this view ignores a myriad of major differences between the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and Shakespeare:¹⁴

1. Unlike the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, Shakespeare was educated in both Greek and Latin and had, alongside his mentors, access to libraries of books that he built on for his own writings.
2. Shakespeare earned a living as a professional playwright and continued refining his craft with each dramatic production, while the Prophet ﷺ was never reported to utter a single full couplet of poetry in his entire life,¹⁵ nor 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 produced for centuries before Shakespeare, while the Qur'an had a unique compositional structure that differed from every pattern of writing or speech used by Arabia's master poets.¹⁶
4. Unlike Shakespeare, whose hallmark style and vocabulary permeate all his writings, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ brought the world a Qur'an whose style differs from the Hadith tradition—the everyday statements of Muhammad ﷺ. While this was noticed by his contemporaries, more than a dozen experiments have since been conducted to establish this objectively. Stylometry is the statistical analysis of variations in literary style to discriminate between one writer and another. It has been utilized to distinguish between the authentic and pseudonymous letters of Paul in the New Testament, and to prove that the Hadith and the Qur'an must have had two different authors. Researchers of the latter were forced to accept that it would be impossible for any human being to employ such extensive self-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.¹⁷
5. Shakespeare's sonnets were not uniformly eloquent, but instead had segments of distinct brilliance. In contrast, the Arabs who took great pride in

¹⁴ Sami Ameri, *Barāhīn al-Nubuwwah* (London: Takween Center, 2018), 222–28.

¹⁵ Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq al-Rāfi'ī, *I'jāz al-Qur'ān wal-Balāghah al-Nabawīyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Arabī, 1973), 308.

¹⁶ See: Gerhard Bowering, *Islamic Political Thought: An Introduction* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 186.

¹⁷ Halim Sayoud, "Author Discrimination between the Holy Qur'an and Prophet's Statements," *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 27, no. 4 (2012): 427–44.

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 improved.¹⁸

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.¹⁹ In contrast, the Qur'an shamed its deniers and challenged them at every turn to try to create anything that merely resembled it;²⁰ 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.*²¹

7. Shakespeare enjoyed the creative liberties of fictional storytelling. As for the Qur'an, entertainment is not its goal. It addresses 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), a technique that

¹⁸ 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 contains 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 involved 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 contained an error. Critics today reverse the process; they dismiss the Qur'an, a linguistic masterpiece heralded as the measuring stick of the language, based on a fallacious assessment.

¹⁹ Hugh Craig, "Shakespeare's Vocabulary: Myth and Reality," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2011): 53–74.

²⁰ The Qur'an 52:33-34.

²¹ The Qur'an 2:23-24, Saheeh International Translation.

skilled authors generally try to avoid, 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 seventeenth century, the Qur'an as a religious text had to resonate with the young and the old, the premodern and postmodern 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, no other text in human history has fascinated such a wide range of people. In America today, for instance, a Qur'an recitation competition will be attended by all segments of the Muslim community. On the other hand, an English play by Shakespeare will find almost no appreciation among the common man and only attract the college-educated middle-to-upper class elite.
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 thirteen passages in the Qur'an that begin with "*And they ask you [O Prophet] about... Say...*"²² Furthermore, he ﷺ would receive fresh Qur'anic revelations in the most stressful conditions, at times while bleeding after an attack or mourning his deceased 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 emotional turbulence has quieted?
10. Shakespeare must have written 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 assembled like a jig-saw puzzle over twenty-three years. The order of the Qur'an today does not reflect the chronology of its revelation, 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,²³ despite being spoken not written, but was somehow designed

²² The Qur'an 2:189, author's translation.

²³ 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."

with interspersed additions, of various themes and lengths, many of which addressed unpredictable external events impromptu, and yet all this never disrupted its seamless tapestry.

While it may be difficult for many people to grasp how any work of language can be miraculous, al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013) 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 strongest suit, 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 against their fellow clansmen.²⁴ 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 from poetry, but due to them echoing in private that rivaling the Qur'an was impossible. 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 prose or poetry than I, or in the poems of even the jinn. 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.²⁵

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.

²⁴ Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī, *I'jāz al-Qur'ān* (Egypt: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1997), 1:20.

²⁵ Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥākim, *Al-Mustadrak 'alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, 1990), 2:550 #3872; authenticated by al-Ḥākim according to the criteria of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.

Knowledge of the Inaccessible Past

The Qur'an is also remarkably accurate about historical events that would have been impossible for the Prophet ﷺ to have known about. The following are some examples of the historical precision regarding ancient Egypt found in the Qur'an:

i. Pharaoh's Body Will Survive

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 of Our signs.²⁶

Since the preservation of mummies is quite uncommon, and the fact that Muhammad could not have known about this particular Pharaoh surviving in mummified form given the knowledge of his day, this Qur'anic assertion about the Pharaoh of Moses is mindboggling. Furthermore, while the Qur'an mentions many perished nations punished by God for their rebellion, and that their accounts are a lesson for later people, Allah never stated that He would save their bodies as signs for those future generations. The sole exception in the Qur'an is that Pharaoh's corpse which happens to remain available until today in the Egyptian Museum of Cairo.

For several centuries before, and nearly 1,200 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

²⁶ The Qur'an 10:90-92, author's translation.

deciphered, and reliable source material about this perished civilization slowly became available. Over a century later, a team of researchers was sent from France to explore these newfound tombs, among which was Dr. Maurice Bucaille, who published on this project his great work, *Mummies of the Pharaoh: Modern Medical Investigations*. Bucaille presented his findings in 1976 to the French Institute for Forensic Medicine and received multiple national awards in France for this groundbreaking work.

The Heavens Did Not Grieve for Pharaoh

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.*"²⁷ A recently unearthed pyramid text has granted new depths to the meaning of this verse. In it, 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."²⁸ In other words, the Qur'an was issuing a direct response to these specific mythological adulations, over 1,000 years before the vaults hiding them were unlocked.

Joseph's King Wasn't a Pharaoh

The Qur'an identifies the ruler of Egypt as "Pharaoh" sixty-five times, but only in the story of Moses (as). Not a single time is Egypt's earlier king during the time of Joseph (as) called a "Pharaoh" in the Qur'an. This differs from the Old Testament which uses the title for both rulers, and even for the ruler of Egypt during the earlier time of Prophet Abraham (as).²⁹ However, 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.³⁰ 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

²⁷ The Qur'an 44:29, Saheeh International Translation.

²⁸ Samuel Alfred Browne Mercer (trans.), *The Pyramid Texts*, 1st ed. (New York: Longmans, Green, 1952), 222.

²⁹ See: Genesis 40:7, 41:15, 41:31, 41:46, 50:7 for the era of Joseph, and 12:10-20 for the era of Abraham.

³⁰ "Pharaoh," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Accessed February 5th, 2020.

occupiers and not indigenous rulers, they were naturally ineligible for the honorific title—had it even existed.³¹ 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.³²

The historical accuracy of the Qur'an is not just confirmed by recent archeological excavation. It astonished many early Jews and Christians as well. 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. So was the fact that he ﷺ could extensively illustrate scenes from the hereafter just as their earlier scriptures did, as Allah said,

*Over it (the 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, and so that those who were given the Scripture [prior] would be certain...*³³

Some Jews in Madinah 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 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.*”³⁴

Some of the toughest critics of the Qur'an in the past century, like William Tisdall (d. 1928), confirmed this. He writes, “There seems to be no satisfactory proof that

³¹ Muḥammad Bayyūmī Mahrān, *Dirāsāt Tārīkhīyah fil-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Nahḍah, 1988), 2:121–22.

³² Maurice Bucaille, *Moïse et Pharaon: Les Hébreux en Egypte: quelles concordances des livres saints avec l'histoire* (Paris: Pocket, 2003), 210–11. Cited in Ameri, *Barāhīn al-Nubuwwah*, 505.

³³ The Qur'an 74:30-31, author's translation.

³⁴ The Qur'an 11:49, Saheeh International Translation.

an Arabic version of the New Testament existed in Muhammad's time."³⁵ 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.³⁶

This holds true for the Torah as well. The most authoritative academic researchers in this space largely agree that no written Arabic text of substantial length, be it scriptural or poetry, original or translated, can be traced back to the pre-Islamic period.³⁷

Was Muhammad Spoon-Fed Biblical History?

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 appears desperate. First, this would be contrary to the historically indisputable integrity of Muhammad's character. Second, the suggestions that Muhammad's ﷺ knowledge of previous prophets and nations came from a Roman blacksmith in Mecca (a layman), or from an unverifiable, passing midday encounter with Baḥīrah the Monk, or to a single conversation with a dying Waraqah ibn Nawfal (rA), are simply implausible. Sensible people realize that the bulk and veracity of what the Prophet ﷺ brought could only be attained with decades of apprenticeship that would be impossible for him to hide. Allah says in the Qur'an, "*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*

³⁵ William St. Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur'an* (London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1911), 140.

³⁶ Pope Tawadrus II, *Miftāḥ al-'Ahd al-Jadīd* (Cairo: Batrirkyyat al-Aqbāṭ al-Urthudux, 2013), 27.

³⁷ See: Sidney H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the "People of the Book" in the Language of Islam* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 41 and 114-118.

before it. Then will you not reason?’’³⁸ 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:

Firstly, as established earlier, the Qur’an does not contain the many historical inaccuracies found in the Bible. Therefore, for the unique Qur’anic narrative to have been 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 seventh-century Arabia of all places, in a foreign language Muhammad ﷺ secretly learned, then vanished without a trace, never to be recovered again.

Secondly, 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.”³⁹*

Preserved as Promised

“Indeed, it is We who sent down the Qur’an and indeed, We will be its Guardian.”⁴⁰

The preservation and incorruptibility of the Qur’an were boldly promised therein. One should wonder how a book primarily committed to memory and documented on bones, palm leaves, and leather scraps over the span of twenty-three years could survive. People would learn some Qur’an from the Prophet ﷺ or his Companions, then travel back to their homelands and teach it to their families, friends, and students, who would then relay it to others. These separate oral transmissions continued independently for centuries, across the earth. Despite that, all 1.8 billion Muslims today somehow still recite the Qur’an exactly as it was taught to the Prophet’s ﷺ Companions and written in the original Uthmanic

³⁸ The Qur’an 10:16, Saheeh International Translation.

³⁹ The Qur’an 16:103, Saheeh International Translation.

⁴⁰ The Qur’an 15:9, Saheeh International Translation.

codex. Even competing denominations (i.e., Sunni, Shiite, Kharijite) recite the same Qur'an. And yet, a millennium and a half later, we do not find contradictions in meaning between all these oral traditions worldwide. As for the established variant readings of some verses, they only add to the beauty of the text's multi-layered meanings.⁴¹ 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 irrational. Italian Orientalist Laura Vaglieri (d. 1989) of Naples Eastern University attests in her book, *An Interpretation of Islam*, "We have still another proof of the divine origin of the Quran in the fact that its text has remained pure and unaltered through the centuries from the day of its delivery until today."⁴²

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. Even the few scribal differences reported from some of the Companions were reconciled during the reign of Islam's first four caliphs, accepted by all the Companions, and conformity with one copy won their consensus. To fully appreciate this, impartial consideration should be given to the fact that while spell-check and similar features afforded by modern technology have mitigated many lapses in our writing today, our emails and text messages still fall prey to spelling and grammatical errors. Then consider the premodern scribal tradition, rewinding to a world before the printing press and before mass literacy. 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, this was averted due to that Uthmanic codex being preserved, in addition to its mass-memorization, its strong poetic rhythm that facilitates memorization, and its daily usage in a Muslim's life, which together constitute a genius reinforcement mechanism unrivaled in history.⁴³

⁴¹ The Islamic tradition has a wealth of documented information on pre-Uthmanic readings. In a nutshell, the Prophet ﷺ had permitted his Companions to adopt these variant readings and dialectical pronunciations in their recitation. See: Ammar Khatib and Nazir Khan, "The Origins of the Variant Readings of the Qur'an," *Yaqaen Institute for Islamic Research*, August 23, 2019.

⁴² Laura Veccia Vaglieri, *An Interpretation of Islam* (Washington: American Fazl Mosque, 1957), 41.

⁴³ See: Abu Zakariya, *The Eternal Challenge* (London: One Reason, 2015), 35-40.

Some people claim that the Qur'an was initially codified by a central authority, and this happened early enough to make preempting the spread of non-conforming manuscripts possible. They contend that the compilation of Abū Bakr (rA) and standardization of 'Uthmān (rA) could have purged whatever early manuscripts they arbitrarily deemed undesirable. Such a suspicion is not unexpected, given that the Bible was kept secret by government-enforced dictates and remained inaccessible to the laity until 1,500 years after Jesus Christ (as), following the Protestant Reformation. However, the Qur'an's unique decentralized dissemination 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. Furthermore, since this transmission of the Qur'an does not solely hinge on the written records, this allows for measuring the written against the oral to ensure that the documentation and dissemination processes were scrupulous. Hence, its preservation in the hearts of those who memorized it that is what has immortalized it, 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."*⁴⁴

Orientalist Alford T. Welch writes,

For Muslims, the Qur'ān 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'ān) 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'ān... Through the centuries the oral tradition of the entire Qur'ān has been maintained by the professional reciters, while all Muslims memorise parts of the Qur'ān for use in the daily prayers. Until recently, the significance of the recited Qur'ān has seldom been fully appreciated in the West.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ The Qur'an 29:49, Saheeh International Translation.

⁴⁵ Alford T. Welch, R. Paret, and J. D. Pearson, "Al-Qur'ān," in *Encyclopedia of Islam: 2nd edition*, edited by P. Bearman, et al (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

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-Khattābī writes in *Bayān I'jāz al-Qur'ān*,

The inimitability of the Qur'an has yet another dimension, one which people tend to overlook, and is unrecognized except by a sparse few—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 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.⁴⁶

He then proceeds to describe how the Qur'an has historically exhibited a unique potency for invigorating spirits with optimism and wakefulness, and uprooting the 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 Muṭ'im (rA) 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 narrates:

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]?*,”⁴⁷ my heart nearly took flight.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Muḥammad Khalaf Allāh Aḥmad (ed.), Muḥammad Zaghlūl Sallām (ed.), and Issa J Boullata (trans.), *Three Treatises on the I'jāz of the Qur'ān* (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2014), 46; slightly modified to refine the translation.

⁴⁷ The Qur'an 52:35-37, author's translation.

⁴⁸ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 6:140 #4754.

In another narration, he said, “This was the moment that faith first settled in my heart.”⁴⁹ Similarly, Ibn ‘Abbās (rA) 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].*”⁵⁰ Upon uttering these verses, Ibn ‘Abbās says, both the believers present and several eavesdropping pagans fell into prostration along with the Prophet ﷺ.⁵¹ 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 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 hands of Muslims. These are but some early examples of how the potency 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 Dinet (d. 1929, born Alphonse-Étienne Dinet), a French 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.⁵²

⁴⁹ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 5:86 #4023.

⁵⁰ The Qur’an 53:59-62, Saheeh International Translation.

⁵¹ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 2:41 #1071.

⁵² Etienne Dinet and Sliman Ben Ibrahim, *The Life of Mohammad, the Prophet of Allah* (Paris: Paris Book Club, 1918), 3:37.

The truth of Dinēt's words can be demonstrated even today, given that 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 about 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.⁵³ While this disparity between the Bible and other works seems staggering, it is eclipsed by the numbers 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 each letter and vowel sound, but in the original Arabic form, and while observing the *tajwīd* rules that govern Qur'anic pronunciation, despite Arabic 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 There are also 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 or conceit. 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 us to pause and consider the Qur'an as a standalone historical phenomenon.⁵⁵ 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 fascination of its admirers forever. Never venturing beyond it, they are fulfilled by its recitation, memorization, and contemplation for an entire lifetime. In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, Ibn Taymīyah 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

⁵³ Jennifer Polland, "The 10 Most Read Books in The World [Infographic]," *Business Insider*, December 27th, 2012.

⁵⁴ The Qur'an 54:17, author's translation.

⁵⁵ al-Bāqillānī, *I'jāz al-Qur'ān*, 1:248.

the hearts, blessings, and benefits that he would never find in any other words, whether poetry or prose.⁵⁶

Dr. Muhammad Drāz (d. 1958) penned a similar explanation for the far-reaching embrace of the Qur'an and its inimitable nature in his acclaimed work, *al-Naba' al-'Azīm (The Great Tidings)*. In that book, he maintained that one of the secrets behind the potency of the Qur'an is its perfect combination of persuasive arguments and emotive forces. Drāz argues that human writings never demonstrate this perfect balance of rationality and emotionality. The technical discourses of scientists and philosophers is generally devoid of emotion. Poets and writers, on the other hand, quickly swerve from reality to fantasy and feel forced to stretch facts to escape “the cold truth” which works against their 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 intellect, and its beauty appeals to emotions, but neither detracts from the other. As Drāz beautifully puts it, we all hear words that are clearly the fruit of an impressively critical mind, 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.*”⁵⁷ Only He can allot humanity “*a decisive statement*” in its accuracy,⁵⁸ 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.*”⁵⁹

Al-Bayhaqī, in his famous *Dalā'il al-Nubuwwah*, quotes al-Ḥalīmī as saying, “Whoever depends on the likes of this (Muhammad plagiarizing from Ibn al-Ḥaḍramī's slave-boys) will accept anything to accuse him.” 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, laws, and ethics extracted from, or sparked by, this concise Qur'an. No single work—man-made or divine—has ever

⁵⁶ Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymīyah, *Iqtidā' al-Ṣirāṭ al-Mustaqīm fī Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al-Jahīm* (Beirut: Dār 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1999), 2:270.

⁵⁷ The Qur'an 16:66, author's translation.

⁵⁸ The Qur'an 86:13, Saheeh International Translation.

⁵⁹ The Qur'an 39:23, author's translation; Muḥammad 'Abdullāh Drāz, *Al-Naba' al-'Azīm* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 2005), 1:148–51.

caused people and societies to thrive in such a holistic way.⁶⁰ On spiritual, moral, social, and civilizational levels, it breathed new life into the world, illuminated it for centuries, and continues to do so until today. As Allah, the Mighty and Majestic, proclaims about the Qur'an,

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.⁶¹

Echoes of a Prophet ﷺ

Muslim theologians often point out that people who simply familiarize themselves with the biography of Muhammad ﷺ quickly realize that he could not have forged the Qur'an. Only those consumed by prejudice, or critiquing from a distance, are unable to see this. For others, it is crystal-clear by simply observing his integrity, which even non-Muslim historians attest to (see Chapter 2), as well as the fact that the Qur'an consistently frames Muhammad ﷺ as its human subject and not its writer. While the following anecdotes may not be a dimension of the Qur'an's inimitability, they are included here to bring our discussion full circle. If the Prophet ﷺ was the actual author of the Qur'an, would he have constructed it to contain the following characteristics?

1. The name of Moses (as) appears in the Qur'an 135 times, the name of Jesus (as) appears twenty-five times, while the name of Muhammad ﷺ appears only five times. One would assume that a person would avoid citing the primary personalities of a religious tradition that he is accused of plagiarizing from, especially when experiencing regular mockery by the Jews of Madinah and facing them in warfare.
2. Mary, the Mother of Jesus (as), is cited by name thirty-four times in the Qur'an, while the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ own wives and daughters are

⁶⁰ See: Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Boston: Brill, 2007).

⁶¹ The Qur'an 42:52-53, Saheeh International Translation.

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.

3. *“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.”*⁶² If a community leader were to air his family disputes and charge himself with “just trying to please his wife,” especially in seventh-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, and so forth.
4. *“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...’”*⁶³ 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 bring humanity back to a treasure they once had.
5. *“He frowned and turned away when the blind man came to him.”*⁶⁴ Ibn Umm Maktūm, a blind man, interrupted an important meeting which displeased the Prophet ﷺ but he just frowned silently so as not to offend him. 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. A false prophet would have chosen self-aggrandizement, but the Messenger of God had no choice in the matter.
6. *“If not for a decree from Allah that preceded, you would have been touched for what you took by a great punishment.”*⁶⁵ Following the revelation of this verse, both the Prophet ﷺ and Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (rA) were found weeping from fear of God. This verse was censuring them for the premature ransoms they had 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

⁶² The Qur’an 66:1, Saheeh International Translation.

⁶³ The Qur’an 46:9, Saheeh International Translation.

⁶⁴ The Qur’an 80:1-2, author’s translation.

⁶⁵ The Qur’an 8:68, Saheeh International Translation.

never undermined the Prophet's ﷺ credibility with his Companions who knew he was not threatening himself; these were not his words.

7. When Allah ordered the Prophet ﷺ to marry Zaynab (rAh) after she was divorced by Zayd (rA) (his adopted son), he ﷺ knew the hypocrites would pounce on this “easy opportunity” to accuse the Prophet ﷺ of being a lustful man who circumvents his own laws to marry his daughter-in-law.⁶⁶ This looming storm caused the Prophet's ﷺ heart to become heavy, not from guilt or shame regarding the marriage, but from the pain it would inflict through demonizing him, shaking those weak in faith, and potentially mobilizing a critical mass of Madinans to overthrow their head of state. Despite all this, Allah reveals that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was in fact apprehensive about taking this step and the controversy it would spark: “*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.*”⁶⁷ ‘Āishah (rAh) said, “If the Messenger of Allah ﷺ were to conceal anything from the Qur’an, he would have concealed this verse.”⁶⁸
8. “*Muhammad is not the father of any one of your men.*”⁶⁹ Every son of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ died young, and thus it 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 ﷺ 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 others similar to them 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

⁶⁶ Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi‘ li-Aḥkām al-Qur’ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣrīyah, 1964), 14:188.

⁶⁷ The Qur’an 33:37, Saheeh International Translation.

⁶⁸ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 9:124 #7420.

⁶⁹ The Qur’an 33:40, Saheeh International Translation.

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. As Allah says, *“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.”*⁷⁰

Conclusion

It is unbecoming of any objective person to learn about the multidimensional inimitability of the Qur’an and then say its author was a mortal. Do its mysterious linguistic form, its perfect blend of persuasive and emotive address, its precision about past and future truths, its harmonious theological and legal framework, and its gripping transformative allure all not suffice to indicate its divine origins? Is it conceivable that an unlettered man from seventh-century Arabia could spend forty 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 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. Hence, the Qur’an openly challenges, *“Say [O Muhammad], ‘If mankind and the jinn gathered in order to produce the likes of this Qur’an, they could not produce anything like it, even if they were to each other assistants.’”*⁷¹

Just as the Almighty sent Moses (as) with the ability to neutralize the greatest sorcerers of his period and Jesus (as) 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. Allah asks, *“So where then are you going? It is but a reminder to [all*

⁷⁰ The Qur’an 29:51, Saheeh International Translation.

⁷¹The Qur’an 17:88, Saheeh International Translation.

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.”⁷²

⁷² The Qur’an 81:26-28, Saheeh International Translation.