

Beyond Eloquence: Rediscovering the True Miracle of the Qur'an

***Reclaiming the Real Field of I'jāz from Linguistic
Rhetoric to Eternal Guidance***

By His Eminence Shaykh Ḥasan al-Gharāwī al-Kāshānī (HA)



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Some may ask: how can a non-Muslim – or even someone who grew up among Muslims – truly be convinced that the Qur'an is miraculous? Especially when they are simply told that its inimitability lies in its eloquence and rhetoric, as though the matter were already settled in advance.

This way of presenting the issue can appear weak, particularly because most Arabs today are Muslims by inheritance: they regard the Qur'an as a miracle naturally and without debate. That, however, does not provide a persuasive proof for someone who examines matters with a critical eye or comes from a different intellectual or religious background.

The matter becomes even more complicated when the argument is supported by citing the stance of the Qurayshite polytheists who acknowledged the Qur'an's inimitability – such as what is narrated from al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra: “By God, I have just heard from Muhammad words that are neither the words of humans nor the words of jinn...” and so on. Relying on such historical reports – which, by their nature, were transmitted by Muslims – opens the door to questions and doubts in the mind of anyone who is looking for an objective proof, whether a non-Muslim or even a Muslim who is not satisfied with transmission alone and seeks a conviction grounded in broader criteria and deeper evidence.

The Distortion of the Course of the Qur'anic Challenge and Its Role in Redirecting Religious Authority

The issue of the Qur'an's inimitability and the field in which it challenges humanity was significantly affected by the policies of the caliphs who took charge of the affairs of the Muslims after the passing of the holy Prophet Muhammad (may God bless him and his family). They undertook a radical redirection of the Qur'anic challenge.

The Qur'an itself had emphasized that the locus of challenge lay in its knowledge and teachings, which it describes as light, insight, clarification, criterion, healing, and admonition. The Qur'an attributed to itself these perfect qualities, then called upon people to bring forth something comparable to what it possesses of those unique attributes.

Although the Qur'an is indeed inimitable in its eloquence and rhetoric as well, the core of the challenge fundamentally lies in its lights that give life to hearts, awaken the sound innate disposition (fiṭra), and in its ever-renewed knowledge that does not perish with the passage of time but remains fresh and new every day.

However, the ignorance of those rulers concerning the Qur'an's knowledge and sciences, and the difficulty they faced in containing this form of challenge – which embarrassed them, for they would be asked about the Qur'an's knowledge and knew virtually nothing of it, while this reality reinforced the authority of the Ahl al-Bayt (peace be upon them) in unlocking the Qur'an's sciences – drove them to restrict the dimension of the challenge to eloquence and rhetoric alone.

In doing so, they shifted the reference point for understanding the Qur'anic challenge from the Ahl al-Bayt (peace be upon them), who were the true possessors of knowledge of God's intent in His Book, to the scholars of the Arabic language.

The Distinct Nature of Qur'anic Knowledge as Opposed to Human Knowledge

To understand the Qur'an's challenge and inimitability, one needs little more than reflection upon its admonitions, alerts, and sciences. For the reflective person soon realizes that the nature of this knowledge is fundamentally different from human knowledge, and that this difference testifies that the Qur'an is not human speech.

Human knowledge, by its very nature, is in a constant state of growth and renewal. Human sciences continually pass through stages of development, refinement, and perfection. Yet this development is always bounded by the emergence of new theories and disciplines that replace earlier ones, thereby diminishing the validity of what came before and rendering previous formulations ill-suited to the data and conditions of the present.

For example, if we compare what humanity has reached today in the field of physics with what it possessed a hundred years ago – or even just ten years ago – we find a vast gulf between the two bodies of knowledge. The same applies to the empirical sciences, the human and social sciences, as well as to collections of sermons, ethics, wisdom, and knowledge, all the way up to doctrinal principles and theologies concerning origin and return (al-mabda' wa'l-ma'ād). All such human corpora are subject to change and development over time, and they lose their adequacy as science advances and experience accumulates.

But when a person encounters a corpus of knowledge that stands at the very opposite pole from human sciences – such that the more human learning advances, the more he discovers that the earlier knowledge in that corpus was actually more mature and more complete, and that each passing day reveals new secrets in it which had previously remained hidden – then he can know with certainty that this corpus is not of human making. Humans, by their nature, uncover the secrets of the sciences over the course of time; so if a body of knowledge defies this pattern, it cannot be their product.

This is just as nature is not the product of human beings: every day they discover new secrets of nature, and their science and technology advance; how then could nature be man-made when it is nature itself that gradually discloses its secrets to them?

Such is the speech of God. It is always new and ever-fresh, just as He described it: "Then let them produce a discourse like it, if they are truthful" (Qur'an 52:34). It flows through time like the sun and the moon, addressing the human conscience and unveiling to a person the secrets of his own self that were hidden from him.

This Qur'anic reality can only be grasped through fair-minded contemplation of the Qur'an's verses and by comparing them with human sciences, so that the essential difference and the impossibility of the Qur'an being human speech become manifest.

The Depth and Uniqueness of Qur'anic Knowledge Compared to Human Conceptions

Reflection upon divine knowledge across the ages shows that humankind has remained – and still remains – captive to its limited conceptions and illusions when it comes to understanding the realities of existence. People describe the Lord and liken Him to His creation, whereas the Noble Qur'an emphatically insists on declaring God's transcendence above every human description, as in His saying: "Glory be to Him, exalted is He above what they describe" (Qur'an 37:159 and similar verses).

While human beings are trapped in the notion of necessary causality, imagining that God acts by necessity and that actions issue from Him as heat issues from fire, the Qur'an comes to demolish this conception. It states clearly that God's will is absolute and capable of substitution and change, as in His saying: "If He wills, He can remove you and bring a new creation, and that is not difficult for God" (cf. Qur'an 14:19–20; 35:16–17).

As for human acts, the Qur'an negates both compulsion (jabr) and absolute delegation (tafwīd), affirming instead that "the matter is between two matters" – a truth that people in that era were incapable of comprehending, and which many to this day still fail to grasp, oscillating between the doctrines of predestination and absolute free will on the basis of their limited human capacities. Meanwhile, the Qur'an lays down a middle path that unites divine will and human choice, where God says: "And you do not will unless God wills" (Qur'an 76:30).

In the sphere of ethics, the Qur'an establishes a firm structure when it says: "By the soul and He who fashioned it, and inspired it with its depravity and its piety. He has certainly succeeded who purifies it" (Qur'an 91:7–9). It thereby makes clear that the human being possesses an innate understanding of both good and evil, and that moral elevation is contingent upon purifying the soul. This constitutes an integrated moral system that surpasses the shifting, unstable theories produced by human thought.

In the domains of society, family, economics, security, and the other aspects of life, a person will find that the Qur'an has brought forth enduring truths that are not worn down by the passage of time; rather, they become more evident, more luminous, and more radiant as knowledge advances and thought matures. When one reflects upon these interlocking systems, one clearly recognizes that such teachings cannot emanate from a limited human intellect. They are, rather, the speech of God, the All-Knowing Creator, who knows the subtleties of the soul and of society, and who sets down for every time and place a path that keeps pace with human aspirations and secures for them happiness and stability.

Attributing the Qur'an to Magic and What That Implies About Its Inimitability

Citing the story of al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra, who described the Qur'an as magic, is not merely an appeal to a historical report transmitted solely by Muslims. We are, in fact, dealing with a historical reality about which there is no room for doubt: the Qur'an was explicitly labeled as "sorcery."

This is a fact established by the agreement of all people, for the Noble Qur'an itself confirms this attribution in many verses. Had this incident possessed no historical reality, the enemies of the Qur'an would have leapt to deny it, yet that never happened. This proves that the incident is an accepted historical fact.

It is clear that nothing is described as sorcery except something extraordinary that transcends the ordinary course of events and cannot be explained in simple human terms. Such a label is a clear indicator that the impact of the Qur'an on hearts and on reality exceeded the human capacity for explanation and eluded familiar human patterns.

Here the human being is alerted to the necessity of searching for that Qur'anic effect which cannot be accounted for by limited human knowledge. The call is explicit: to examine the Qur'an's sciences, teachings, and admonitions in order to witness firsthand this unique impact.

Thus, the attribution of the Qur'an to magic and the miraculous effect it had on people – even though this is a firmly established historical fact – derives its real value from directing the mind towards the correct way of contemplating the reality of the Qur'an's inimitability. It is not the primary proof of the Qur'an's miraculous nature; rather, it is a sign that urges a person to reflect and ponder upon those aspects of its impact that transcend human explanation. In doing so, one comes to recognize the greatness of the Qur'an and the truth of its inimitability.