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A Glimpse of Tafsir Al-Mizan: The Miracle of the Qur'an

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Abstract

In verse 2:23 in the Qur'an, God challenges the unbelievers to bring a book like the Qur'an, or to bring ten chapters or even one chapter like it. This all-inclusive challenge directed to both the layman and elite is not limited to its style and eloquence, but also takes into consideration its morality, spirituality, just legal code, and proof of the unseen. The claim that the Qur'an is a miracle verifies both the occurrence of miracles, and that the Qur'an is one of those miracles.

This article is a synopsis of Allamah Tabatabai's interpretation of verse 2:23 in his Tafsir al- Miziin where he focuses on the five qualities that render the Qur'an a miracle: It's a) knowledge b) unschooled recipient c) prophecies d) consistency and e) eloquence. Additionally, Allamah responds to objections raised about abrogation and the miraculous nature of speech.

The Qur'an is a continuation of the teachings of earlier prophets and considers every topic relevant to one's spiritual and social life – such as morality and jurisprudence – that will remain valid and guide humankind until the end of the world. Prophet Muhammad (s), an untaught person, suddenly conveyed a Book unsurpassed in its eloquence, knowledge, predictions, and knowledge of the unseen.

Its superiority in all the above-mentioned aspects astonished the pre-Islamic Arabs who were unrivalled in linguistic excellence by their contemporaries. This led some to venerate the Qur'an and act upon its teachings, while others who were resentful falsely accused the Prophet of having been educated by third parties. The knowledge it contains is reserved for Allah, and this renders people incapable of producing a piece similar to its perfectly arranged words that require expertise in eloquence, intelligence, and understanding – all qualities that categorize writers and speakers into different levels.

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وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ فِي رَيْبٍ مِمَّا نَزَّلْنَا عَلَىٰ عَبْدِنَا فَأْتُوا بِسُورَةٍ مِنْ مِثْلِهِ وَادْعُوا شُهَدَاءَكُمْ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

And if you are in doubt concerning what We have sent down to Our servant, then bring a surah like it, and invoke your helpers besides Allah, should you be truthful. [1]

In the above verse, God challenges the unbelievers to bring something “like it” – i.e. a Qur’anic chapter. In other verses, God challenges the believers to bring ten chapters. An alternative interpretation takes the expression “like it” to refer to bringing the like of the Qur’an written by someone like Prophet Muhammad (s) given that he was untaught by any teacher.

The assertion that the Qur’an is a miracle that challenges its adversaries not only verifies the occurrence of miracles, but also confirms that the Qur’an is one of those miracles. Allamah Tabatabai first approaches this subject by proving that the Qur’an is a miracle, which in turn proves the prophet hood of Prophet Muhammad (s) and inevitably verifies the reality of miracles. Afterwards, Allamah delves into the concept of miracles to answer the probing question: How can something that is contrary to the universal law of cause and effect occur?

The miracle of the Qur’an is universal, whereas other miracles are temporal, and limited by time and space. This all–inclusive challenge is not merely restricted to its eloquence and style; rather, its morality, just legal code, and evidence of the unseen are also included. It also assuredly includes unforeseen events of the past and future; people generally do not have the courage to bring about a book that claims to have knowledge of the unseen.

The Qur’an is a miracle for people of all academic fields and spiritual ranks – sages, poets, sociologists, psychologists, linguists, politicians, layman and elite, Muslim and non–Muslim alike – all are considered and invited towards guidance. It addresses itself to all of humankind:

قُلْ أَيُّ شَيْءٍ أَكْبَرُ شَهَادَةً ۖ قُلِ اللَّهُ ۖ شَهِيدٌ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكُمْ ۖ وَأُوحِيَ إِلَيَّ هَٰذَا الْقُرْآنُ لِأُنْذِرَكُمْ بِهِ وَمَنْ بَلَغَ ۚ أَئِنَّكُمْ لَتَشْهَدُونَ أَنَّ مَعَ اللَّهِ آلِهَةً أُخْرَىٰ ۚ قُلْ لَا أَشْهَدُ ۚ قُلْ إِنَّمَا هُوَ إِلَٰهٌ وَاحِدٌ وَإِنَّنِي بَرِيءٌ مِمَّا تُشْرِكُونَ

"...this Qur'an has been revealed to me that I may warn thereby you and whomever it may reach...," [2]

وَمَا هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ لِلْعَالَمِينَ

"Yet it us just a reminder for all the nations" [3]

إِنَّهَا لَإِحْدَى الْكُبَرِ نَذِيرًا لِلْبَشَرِ

"Indeed it is one of the greatest* [*signs*] *– a warner to all humans."[4]

The qualities that render the Qur'an a miracle are five: 1) the knowledge it holds 2) the illiteracy of its messenger 3) predictions and knowledge of the unseen 4) its consistent nature and 5) its eloquent style.

Its Knowledge

One way that Allah challenges the unbelievers is through the knowledge contained in the Qur'an. He revealed the Qur'an

وَيَوْمَ نَبْعَثُ فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ شَهِيدًا عَلَيْهِمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِهِمْ ۖ وَجِئْنَا بِكَ شَهِيدًا عَلَىٰ هَٰؤُلَاءِ ۚ وَنَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ تِبْيَانًا لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً وَبُشْرَىٰ لِلْمُسْلِمِينَ

explaining clearly everything[5]

and takes into consideration every topic, regardless of its scope:

وَعِنْدَهُ مَفَاتِحُ الْغَيْبِ لَا يَعْلَمُهَا إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ ۚ وَمَا تَسْقُطُ مِنْ وَرَقَةٍ إِلَّا يَعْلَمُهَا وَلَا حَبَّةٍ فِي ظُلُمَاتِ الْأَرْضِ وَلَا رَطْبٍ وَلَا يَابِسٍ إِلَّا فِي كِتَابٍ مُبِينٍ

…nor is there a grain in the darkness of the earth, nor anything fresh or withered but it is in a manifest Book.[6]

It offers the most comprehensive path of guidance, in terms of a person's spiritual and social life. Fundamental teachings based on both monotheism and human nature have been offered for which its details are relevant to one's life and character, such as moral virtues and religious laws covering worship, social regulations, and penal codes taught by the Prophet:

مَا أَفَاءَ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ رَسُولِهِ مِنْ أَهْلِ الْقُرَىٰ فَلِلَّهِ وَلِلرَّسُولِ وَلِذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسَاكِينِ وَابْنِ السَّبِيلِ كَيْ لَا يَكُونَ دُولَةً بَيْنَ الْأَغْنِيَاءِ مِنْكُمْ ۚ وَمَا آتَاكُمُ الرَّسُولُ فَخُذُوهُ وَمَا نَهَاكُمْ عَنْهُ فَانْتَهُوا ۚ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ

Take whatever the Apostle gives you, and relinquish whatever he forbids you…[7]

Moreover, it not only contains the knowledge of previous divine books but also puts the finishing touches on them as it is a continuation of the teachings of earlier prophets:

شَرَعَ لَكُمْ مِنَ الدِّينِ مَا وَصَّىٰ بِهِ نُوحًا وَالَّذِي أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ وَمَا وَصَّيْنَا بِهِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَمُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ ۖ أَنْ أَقِيمُوا الدِّينَ وَلَا تَتَفَرَّقُوا فِيهِ ۚ كَبُرَ عَلَى الْمُشْرِكِينَ مَا تَدْعُوهُمْ إِلَيْهِ ۚ اللَّهُ يَجْتَبِي إِلَيْهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَهْدِي إِلَيْهِ مَنْ يُنِيبُ

He has prescribed for you the religion which He had enjoined upon Noah and which we have [also] revealed to you, and which We had enjoined upon Abraham, Moses and Jesus. [8]

The Qur'an's perfect knowledge is eternal; it will remain valid until the end of the world and will continue to guide mankind with relevance to human needs:

{إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِالذِّكْرِ لَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ ۖ وَإِنَّهُ لَكِتَابٌ عَزِيزٌ 41}

{لَا يَأْتِيهِ الْبَاطِلُ مِنْ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَلَا مِنْ خَلْفِهِ ۖ تَنْزِيلٌ مِنْ حَكِيمٍ حَمِيدٍ 42}

…and most surely it is a Mighty Book: Falsehood shall not come to it from before it nor from behind it; a revelation from the Wise, the Praised One. [9]

In other words, the Qur'an is beyond the reach of the law of change and development; it will never be affected by abrogation. Some people question whether such a book is capable of giving guidance. They argue that there are many changes that occur over time, and thus the laws and regulations controlling society must change to cope with fluctuations in society. Therefore, how can the Islamic law (shari'a) continue to apply to all generations without any change or abrogation?

According to Allamah, although aspects such as food and technology change over time, the basic need for happiness is universal. Islam offers a set of laws that governs human nature and provides for our essential needs. For instance, it advises people to eat and drink as they please, but warns against eating and drinking harmful products such as pork and wine. Likewise, it instructs people to dress as they like within the boundaries of dressing modestly.

The Qur'an has built its laws on the foundation of monotheism and morality that stem from a healthy human nature. However, those who believe laws controlling society must change in relation to vicissitudes in society overlook the spiritual side of monotheism and morality, and instead focus entirely on the material advancement of society.

The Receiver of Revelation

Without having been taught or trained by an educator, nor having delivered a lecture or even created a single line of poetry, Prophet Muhammad (s) suddenly conveyed a Book whose words and meanings are perfect, dumbfounding the giants of literature with its unique eloquence and unmatched style. Nonetheless, adversaries who harbored envy and malice in their hearts accused him of having learned

such truths from third parties. These allegations are as follows:

First allegation: The Prophet learned the stories in the Qur'an from Christian monks during his business travels to Syria.

Response: Having gone to Syria only twice – once with his uncle Abu Talib and another time with Khadija's slave Maysara – neither traveling companion reported any such meeting with a teacher. But if he did meet with someone, who was it that taught him divine monotheistic knowledge? How did he receive such wisdom? And how did he learn unsurpassed elocution and eloquence?

Second allegation: The Prophet learned these truths from a Roman blacksmith.

Response: Allah replies to this allegation in the Qur'an:

وَلَقَدْ نَعْلَمُ أَنَّهُمْ يَقُولُونَ إِنَّمَا يُعَلِّمُهُ بَشَرٌ ۗ لِسَانُ الَّذِي يُلْحِدُونَ إِلَيْهِ أَعْجَمِيٌّ وَهَٰذَا لِسَانٌ عَرَبِيٌّ مُبِينٌ

And certainly we know that they say: 'Only a mortal teaches him.' The tongue of him whom they are inclined to blame for it is barbarous, and this is clear Arabic language." 10

The Qur'an was revealed in the Arabic language, whereas the language of the man to whom they ascribed it is Roman. Furthermore, this verse demonstrates that the miracle of the Qur'an is not limited to its content; its eloquence is also beyond man's capability.

Third allegation: The Prophet gained this knowledge from Salman al-Farsi who was apparently well-versed in religions and sects.

Response: Salman converted to Islam after meeting the Prophet in Medina while a major portion of the Qur'an was revealed in Mecca beforehand.

Predictions and Unconventional Knowledge

The verses concerning the unseen are divided into four categories: 1) information relating to previous prophets – such as Prophet Joseph and Prophet Jesus – and their nations,11 2) foretelling future events, for instance, that the Romans will avenge their defeat as well as the signs that will appear before the Day of Judgment,12 3) verses about scientific phenomenon that were not yet discovered13 such as the formation of clouds and rain, and 4) verses that refer to major events that would occur in the Islamic community and the world after the death of the Prophet.14

Its Consistent and Eternal Nature

The Qur'an does not include the slightest discrepancy. Allah says:

أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ ۚ وَلَوْ كَانَ مِنْ عِنْدِ غَيْرِ اللَّهِ لَوَجَدُوا فِيهِ اخْتِلَافًا كَثِيرًا

Do they not then meditate on the Qur'an? And if were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy. 15

This material world is governed by law, change, and development; human beings constantly undergo change and development as they struggle to upgrade themselves, realizing with every passing hour the mistakes committed in the past hour. However, the Qur'an – with all its universal spiritual knowledge, ethics, and laws – was brought piece by piece during the course of twenty–three years, in Mecca and Medina, through thick and thin. Had such a book been revealed from other than Allah, it would have undoubtedly contained flawed eloquence and style, and many inconsistencies.

More importantly, the Qur'an is not only free from contradiction, but there is no difference in the complexity of ideas over time. An author's first edition may not bear any contradictions, but it is able to improve over time. The next editions are usually more polished, as they require improvements and modifications, especially after authors gain further knowledge and experience. However, the Qur'an is kept intact, never improving and is thus in no need of editing or revision.

Some use the following verse to show the many instances of abrogation in the Qur'an:

مَا نَنْسَخْ مِنْ آيَةٍ أَوْ نُنْسِهَا نَأْتِ بِخَيْرٍ مِنْهَا أَوْ مِثْلِهَا ۗ أَلَمْ تَعْلَمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

Whatever signs We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring one better than it or like it; 16

وَإِذَا بَدَّلْنَا آيَةً مَكَانَ آيَةٍ ۙ وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يُنَزِّلُ قَالُوا إِنَّمَا أَنْتَ مُفْتَرٍ ۚ بَلْ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

and when We change (***one***) ***communication for*** (***another***) ***communication, and Allah knows best what He reveals...*** 17

Thus, abrogation is misunderstood as being a change in opinion, an inconsistency, or a contradiction.

However, abrogation is not to be viewed as a discrepancy. A rule is abrogated when the society or rule changes to the extent that the underlying wisdom of the rule is no longer effective. But the Qur'an contains verses to demonstrate that a given order was temporary, and that it would soon be abrogated. For example, there was a time when Muslims were asked to give charity when they wanted to whisper to the Prophet. This rule was temporary. Another instance was when marital relations were temporarily prohibited during the Month of Ramadan. The verses that mention a rule that was abrogated indicate that these rules were not permanent.

Furthermore, abrogation may be a mere legislation following another. It may also be used to test people

or to prepare them for a future law. Indeed, God does not change His plan, and although a given ruling may appear to be a firm decision, His real decision is known beforehand.

Its Eloquence

The Qur'an addresses both jinn and man when it challenges its adversaries to bring a written or spoken piece resembling its eloquence. The challenge is to produce a similar book, ten chapters,[18] or even a single chapter like it.[19]

Prophet Muhammad (s) conveyed the divine message when the society's predominant talent and focus revolved around eloquent speech and beautiful poetry. Pre-Islamic Arabs took great pride in carefully articulating their language, and did not allow any other nation to surpass them in this regard. Linguistic structure played a vital role in their lives, since Arabic was mainly a spoken language with memorization as the primary means of preserving their literature. Their oral literature consisted of poetry and prose that entailed the most elegant expression, style, and flow, and it was widely accepted that they had reached the highest level of eloquence, incomparable to previous and contemporary nations.

Allah revealed the Qur'an during this era, when its unique and bewildering linguistic excellence surpassed the highest literature. The revelation of the Qur'an astounded the Prophet's contemporaries who were not only articulate in their language, but revered others who held high linguistic abilities. They were so hopeless in competing with the Qur'an that they labeled the Prophet either mad or a magician given that it provided linguistic excellence unparalleled in the history of the Arabic language, as it was revealed in the most eloquent, articulate, and elaborate style.

The Qur'an's challenge to the nation provoked anger in its opponents, who hid themselves to avoid hearing its recitation: "Now surely they fold up their breasts that they may conceal from Him; now surely, when they put their garments as a covering, He knows what they conceal and what they make known."[20]

Objections

The following objections have been made regarding whether or not language can be considered a miracle:

Objections: Speech cannot become a miracle or rise above human ability because language is created by people to meet their social needs and to convey their thoughts and feelings. Even if it reaches a high level, the Qur'an entails various styles and structures. Not all styles are miraculous; thus, one type would fall short of that standard.

Response

Counter-argument: Some scholars held that it is Allah who renders man unable to produce something like the Qur'an to preserve and protect the sanctity of prophet hood; the miracle was in Allah's power to prevent people from bringing its like. However, this theory is invalid. The challenge is meant to prove that the Qur'an is a revelation that is revealed by Allah's knowledge, rather than being forged by the Prophet or produced by Satan.

The knowledge contained in the Qur'an is humbling, since true knowledge is reserved for Allah:

{أَمْ يَقُولُونَ افْتَرَاهُ ۖ قُلْ فَأْتُوا بِسُورَةٍ مِثْلِهِ وَادْعُوا مَنِ اسْتَطَعْتُمْ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ {38

بَلْ كَذَّبُوا بِمَا لَمْ يُحِيطُوا بِعِلْمِهِ وَلَمَّا يَأْتِهِمْ تَأْوِيلُهُ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ كَذَّبَ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ ۖ فَانْظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الظَّالِمِينَ

Or, do they say: 'He has forged it?' Say: 'Then bring a chapter like this and call whom you can besides Allah, if you are truthful.' Nay, they have rejected that of which they have no comprehensive knowledge, and its final interpretation has not yet come to them... 21

It is Allah's knowledge that renders people unable to bring something like it. People simply lack this knowledge; it is not that they initially possessed this ability and God prevented them from undertaking the task. According to the Qur'an, both human beings and jinn are unable to develop a piece that is entirely free of inconsistencies.22

Response: The invention of words for particular meanings does not teach man how to perfectly arrange, plan, draft, and deliver the speech to reveal its meaning; this requires intelligence, deep knowledge, and aptitude in eloquence and delivery. Both skill and knowledge is what places writers and speakers at different levels.

The three aspects of human speech include:

Knowledge of language: having comprehensive knowledge of language without being able to articulate it.

Elocutionary skill: being a good speaker without necessarily being knowledgeable.

Knowledge of realities: being knowledgeable without being able to clearly express one's views.

Knowledge of language is invented by man's social instinct whereas elocutionary skill and knowledge depend on intellectual refinement.

Human intelligence is limited; it cannot comprehend each and every detail of an event or fact. Thus, no

person can ensure that his or her knowledge is flawless because people's perceptiveness naturally shifts from deficiency to perfection. The same holds for any person's speech; it cannot be guaranteed that is it completely free of flaws, or that its knowledge and skill is on the same level as the earlier or future speech. Given this observation, the perfection of both eloquence and knowledge in the Qur'an cannot be the result of a human being's effort.

Moreover, language being invented by people does not necessarily prove that only they can produce the best piece of literature. An inventor of an object does not guarantee his or her expertise in using it. For example, the inventor of the paintbrush will not necessarily be the best painter.

Thus, miraculous eloquence is not merely a product of words alone. The Qur'an's perfect eloquence consists of language that is in harmony with the proposed meaning, and this meaning must be in conformity with the established fact. Its words are sweet, its style flowing, its sentences concise, its meaning applicable, and its ideas factual.

Conclusion

The all-encompassing challenge directed towards both the layman and elite to bring a literary piece similar to the Qur'an is not restricted to its style and eloquence; instead, it takes into account morality, spirituality, a just legal code, and proof of the unseen. The five characteristics that render the Qur'an a miracle are its a) knowledge, b) unschooled recipient, c) prophecies, d) consistency and e) eloquence.

The Qur'an is not only a continuation of the wisdoms of earlier prophets; it also includes every important aspect of a person's social and spiritual life, with its moral and religious laws remaining valid and applicable until the end of time. Moreover, it was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (s), an untaught individual.

The Qur'an's superiority in all the above-mentioned aspects amazed the Prophet's contemporaries, many of whom excelled in the field of prose and poetry. While some respected the Qur'an and valued its teachings, others showed animosity, and consequently accused the Prophet of having been secretly taught by holy men and academics.

The knowledge it contains is reserved for Allah, rendering anyone incapable of bringing something like it, complete with flawless word arrangement that can only be produced by intelligence and eloquence that is beyond human capacity.

1. Qur'an, 2:23
2. Qur'an, 6:19
3. Qur'an, 68:52
4. Qur'an, 74:35-36
5. Qur'an, 16:89
6. Qur'an, 6:59
7. Qur'an, 59:7

8. Qu'ran, 42:13
9. Qur'an, 41:41–42
10. Qur'an, 16:103
11. Qur'an, 11:49 – after the story of Prophet Yusuf; 12:102 & 3:44– regarding the story of Lady Mariam; 19:34 – regarding Prophet Jesus.
12. Qur'an, 30:2–4 – Romans would avenge their defeat;
28:85 – The Prophet would return to Mecca after his hijrah;
48:27 – The vision of the Prophet would come true;
48:15 – regarding the future behavior of a group of Muslims;
5:70 – no one would be able to harm the Prophet;
5:19 – the Qur'an will remain under Allah's protection;
21:95 – 7; 24:55; 6:65 – Signs appearing before the Day of Judgment
13. Qur'an, 15:22; 15:19; 78:6–7 – verses based on scientific realities unknown during revelation and discovered after research
14. Qur'an, 5:54; 10:47–50; 30:30–32 – verses that refer to the future events of the Islamic community, or in the world in general, after the death of the Prophet
15. Qur'an, 4:82
16. Qur'an, 2:106
17. Qur'an, 16:101
18. Qur'an, 17:88; 11: 12–3
19. Qur'an, 2:23; 10:38
20. Qur'an, 11:5
21. Qur'an, 10:38–39
22. Qur'an, 4:82

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