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# Quran strategy on its Own Preservation Part 2

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## Abstract

For Muslims, the Qur'an is the unchallengeable word of God. Its inimitability, eloquence, outstanding use of the Arabic language, and scientific accuracies has been the subject of many discussions among Muslims and non-Muslim scholars alike. And given the issue of alteration in other divine scriptures, the discussion of *tahrif* (alteration) has also been examined. Has the Qur'an been changed like other divine books?

Moreover, how is God a preserver over the Qur'an? As God challenges human beings to bring forth a text that resembles the Qur'an, is this due to its magnificent nature, or that humans are incapable due to God's divine intervention at every endeavour?

The previous part explored the practical measures taken to ensure the Qur'an's survival as an unadulterated text, exploring the following areas to display these strategic stylistic methods, namely 1. The odd placement of controversial verses, and 2. The omission of names of contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad. This part explores the Qur'an's easy and accurate memorization, omission of details, and scientific ambiguity.

## 3. Easy and Accurate Memorization

One of the features of the Qur'an that has been discussed in detail in scholarly texts is its exquisite rhyme, structure, and internal melody. This is usually discussed to prove its inimitability – that none is capable of bringing forth a text as magnificent as the Qur'an in this regard. However, beyond this, the very fact that it rhymes and flows in many places is a characteristic that makes it easier to remember.

The relative ease by which human beings can memorize the Qur'an can also be seen as strategic; the very nature of the Qur'an allows its readers to memorize it with ease and recall its details and intricacies

with precision. This is a technique that has been used in several oral traditions and the Qur'an – although it exists now in the form of a book – was originally an oral tradition meant to be spoken, recited, and memorized. One of the oft- repeated verses of the Qur'an which seems to allude to this ease of remembrance reads as follows:

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا الْقُرْآنَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِنْ مُدَّكِرٍ

***Certainly We have made the Qur'an simple for the sake of admonishment. So is there anyone who will be admonished?*** [*54:17*]

This verse has been repeated four times in Surah al-Qamar (verses 17, 22, 32, and 40). The translation used here for the Arabic word dhikr is 'admonishment,' although, the term is often translated as 'remembrance' (as an example, this is the Arabic term used when one remembers God, one does His dhikr). As such, the verse points out that the Qur'an has been made easy for remembrance.[1]

In his exegesis entitled, *Majma' al-Bayan*, Allamah Tabarsi quotes Sa'eed ibn Jubayr as saying that the verse means that the Qur'an was "made easy for memorization and recitation by heart so that all of it can be recited by heart- and no other book, amongst the other divine books, is such that it is entirely apparently recited."[2]

The Qur'an is indeed easy to remember and memorize due to its literary structure, melody, rhythm, and rhyme. These are features that increase the human capacity to memorize and preserve oral tradition. In this way, the beautiful rhyming schematic of the Qur'an can be seen as a strategy to ensure its own preservation.

## 4. Omission of Details

Another interesting feature of the Qur'an is that unlike its predecessors, it does not mention dates, times, and ages in detail. In fact, its general pattern is to avoid mentioning insignificant details like, how long individuals lived, when they were born, and when they passed away. It does mention various durations, but this is rather rare.

For example, it mentions that Noah preached for 950 years, but does not mention how long he or any of the other prophets lived. On the other hand, the Old Testament notes how long it took for him to build the Ark and even mentions the Ark's dimensions in addition to the precise ages of various prophets and how long they spent in different places. As oral traditions, it only makes sense that the more precise and numerous the details were, the more likely that narrators would confuse, misattribute, change, or delete them. It could be argued that this lack of detail also aids in the preservation of the Qur'an, simply based on the decreased probability of the alteration of details. In fact, the Qur'an is more concise than the Old Testament; it is approximately four-fifths its size.[3]

The Qur'an also explicitly mentions that details, like numbers, are unimportant for its goal in providing lessons and guidance. It does this in the story of the Sleepers of the Cave:

سَيَقُولُونَ ثَلَاثَةٌ رَابِعُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ وَيَقُولُونَ خَمْسَةٌ سَادِسُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ رَجْمًا بِالْغَيْبِ وَيَقُولُونَ سَبْعَةٌ وَثَامِنُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ قُلْ رَبِّي
أَعْلَمُ بِعِدَّتِهِمْ مَا يَعْلَمُهُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ فَلَا تُمَارِ فِيهِمْ إِلَّا مِرَاءً ظَاهِرًا وَلَا تَسْتَفْتِ فِيهِمْ مِنْهُمْ أَحَدًا

***They will say, '[They are] three; their dog is the fourth of them,' and say, '[They are] five, their dog is the sixth of them,' taking a shot at the invisible. They will say, '[They are] seven, their dog is the eighth of them.' Say, 'My Lord knows best their number, and none knows them except a few.' So do not dispute concerning them, except for a seeming dispute, and do not question about them any of them.*** [***Q18:22***]

Thus, the Qur'an has not brought forth these seemingly unimportant details because they were in fact unimportant. In reality, this verse is one of the few verses where numbers are mentioned. Logically, the more details it had, the more difficult it would be to preserve. Therefore, this strategy worked in the Qur'an's favour in terms of protecting it from alteration and mankind's forgetful nature.

This brevity and simplicity, in addition to being an aid in its preservation, has also helped the Qur'an maintain its status as the ultimate truth for Muslims – something the Old Testament has not been as successful in achieving. A prime example of this is again, in the story of Noah. Because of the precise dating method used in the Old Testament, it is said that the flood would have taken place in approximately 2350 B.C.[4]

However, this precise dating has led to much skepticism as there is considerable debate about the lack of evidence in the fossil record suggesting that a global flood occurred in this time frame. This has caused much debate, controversy and skepticism over the Bible's accuracy. However, due to the Qur'an's silence on the matter, and the fact that it does not provide an exact timeline or details on whether the flood was global or local, Muslims have comfortably been able to bypass the question – as there is no contradiction with modern findings.

As Shaykh Rizwan Arastu notes in God's Emissaries: Adam to Jesus, "Unlike the Bible, the Qur'an places no timeline on Noah's flood, neither does it indicate that the flood covered the entire earth, so we need not limit our search for geological evidence of the flood to the last 5–7 millennia, and we need not search for a global flood."[5]

This lack of detail is strategic in the sense that it saves the Qur'an from scrutiny in light of archaeological or other discoveries which may bring scrutiny to certain details, had they been mentioned. Further, when the Qur'an made predictions, it never noted the timeline or date in which something would occur, leaving it open for the future (e.g. victory and defeat of the Romans in Surah al-Rūm).

In this way, even if someone was well-intentioned and wanted to omit details from the Qur'an so that it

could be in accordance with supposed fact, they would not need to, as the Qur'an had no contradictions with reality to begin with. Perhaps a clearer articulation of this point can be understood in the example of the Isr'lliyyt, or "traditions fabricated and inserted into Islamic literature from Biblical origins."[6]

Had the Qur'an explored these Biblical stories in more depth and detail and contradicted the Bible more, perhaps the Qur'an, like the *ahadith* literature, would have been in more danger to be exposed to insertions and omissions so as to make it in accordance with Biblical thought and facts. The general vague tendency of the Qur'an when discussing Biblical stories was to omit details and stories that were perhaps inaccurate, as opposed to verbally negating them. For example, it does not mention explicitly that Eve was created from Adam's rib, how the children of Adam procreated, or a wide range of stories mentioned in the Bible about the various prophets.

The times where it openly and directly contradicts the Biblical tradition is when it comes to beliefs like the misattribution of Jesus as the son of God. As such, it could be argued that its brevity in most stories and omission of others served a strategic purpose on many levels. Inserting details into a text that was otherwise vague in its story-telling would have been obvious to anybody reading it, and there was no reason to delete anything as it did not seem to be explicitly in contradiction with the Bible. The *ahadith* literature which are not so vague do not share the same fate as the Qur'an, and include several fabricated traditions and insertions (as we can see from the Isr'lliyyt).

## 5. Scientific Ambiguity

The last stylistic feature that we would like to explore which seems to have pragmatically aided the Qur'an in its preservation is its scientific ambiguity. Taking God as the author of the Qur'an, who is omniscient of His creation, there should be no scientific contradictions in the Qur'n. However, while God has always known what the reality of His creation is, His creation is too far behind science continues to progress and make new discoveries every day. This progress and advancement has meant that until science reaches a certain point of certainty, many realities are misunderstood. What was once accepted as fact is dismissed with scientific progress and new observations.

For instance, the discovery that the earth revolves around the sun was ground-breaking and caused uproar in the church due to its explicit contradiction to the Bible, condemning the now-famed Galileo Galilei. It could be hypothesized that these contradictions only existed in the Old Testament because of man-made alterations that had gone unnoticed. Had these propositions been made by God Himself, they would have been accurate and in accordance with reality. The Qur'an however, using the strength of the Arabic language, discussed scientific realities like the movement of the earth in a somewhat ambiguous manner, such that it could be read in multiple ways. Ayatullah Khu'i points this out in one of his works:

[***It is God***] ***who has appointed the earth as a cradle*** (***Q. 20:53***).

Note the subtle way that this verse alludes to the movement of the earth, which did not become clear until many centuries later. It describes the earth figuratively as a cradle, in which an infant is rocked gently in order for it to go to sleep comfortably and peacefully. In the same way, the earth is the cradle for human beings, suited to them in its rotational and revolutionary motions. And just as the movement of the cradle is intended for the growth of the infant and its repose, so are the earth's daily and yearly motions intended for nurturing mankind, or, rather, all animals, plants, and minerals. The verse alludes to the earth's motion in an implicit, rather than an explicit, way because it was revealed at a time when the consensus of human opinion was that it was motionless, to the degree that this was regarded as an imperative that was not open to doubt.[7]

Before Galileo's discovery, commentators of the Qur'an were very comfortable reading the verses to justify a reading that indicated that the sun was revolving around the earth. Upon further scientific discovery, these readings changed while the text of the Qur'an did not. The ambiguity in the text of the Qur'an on this matter proved to work in the Qur'an's favour as it did not tie Muslims down to a single reading and understanding of science. As science has progressed, so did people's understanding of the Qur'an.

In some ways, this could also be seen as a pragmatic strategy to preserve it from alteration. Had someone felt that the Qur'an was in direct contradiction with what was 'fact', and that it might weaken the faith of the Muslims in Islam, they may have attempted to alter or omit certain verses. With various Muslim empires spanning across the continent over centuries, this would have also served a political purpose as the faith of Muslims in Islam was crucial to their rule and legitimacy as an empire in the eyes of Muslims.

However, the Qur'an's vagueness allowed for various interpretations without the need to change the text itself, and as such, provided a stylistic feature that could have been what protected it. This obscurity removed one of the many reasons that individuals may have been tempted to change the text.

## Remarks

From the five features that we have explored, we have attempted to show the tangible strategy that the Qur'an has implemented and how this may have aided in its own preservation. There is no doubt that the Qur'an is a remarkable text that is perfect in every way. Linguistic experts continue to study it, and there are no bounds to its exquisite beauty and style.

The aspect of the Qur'an that we have explored here is not one that has been explored in detail before (to our knowledge). Its political and stylistic strategy in its own preservation is something that we have postulated from our knowledge that God perfectly measures and is the best of planners. Knowing that these are His qualities, we have applied them to His literary masterpiece and tried to make educated guesses as to how these stylistic features have helped create a book that none would want to alter.

What we have brought forth are simply observations and guesses into the wisdom behind the style of the Qur'an, and we have compared its success in preservation to other divine scriptures like the Old Testament. Nevertheless, we realize that we are incapable of understanding the wonders of God and the depth of His strategy in such a divine book. We pray that we are forgiven for where we have fallen short.

1. It is important to note here that the context of the verse seems to be suggesting that the Qur'an has been made simple/easy for understanding in order to act as an admonishment. The verses in-between and surrounding are describing past nations that have been destroyed. However, this does not negate the possibility that the verse is also alluding to the Qur'an as being easy to remember and memorize, something which the commentary we have cited articulates.
2. Allamah Tabarsi, Majma al-Bayan fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān, Volume 9, p.28, [Accessed with Noor Software, Jami' al-Tafsīr]
3. "The Battle of the Books" The Economist, modified December 19th, 2007, http://www.economist.com/node/10311317 [1]
4. David Wright, "Timeline for the Flood", Answering Genesis, modified March 9, 2012, https://answersingenesis.org/bible-timeline/timeline-for-the-flood/ [2].
5. Shaykh Rizwan Arastu, God's Emissaries: From Adam to Jesus, (Dearborn: Imam Mahdi Association of Marjaeyea, 2014), 107-108.
6. Ibid, 38.
7. Al-Khu'i, 63.

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[1] http://www.economist.com/node/10311317

[2] https://answersingenesis.org/bible-timeline/timeline-for-the-flood/