

Section Sixty Four

The Miracles of the Qur'ān

Many scholars have dedicated special works to this topic, among them: 'I-Rummānī, 'I-Zamlakānī, 'I-Imām 'I-Rāzī, Ibn Surāqa, the judge Abū Bakr 'I-Bāqillānī, and Ibn 'I-'Arabī. And nothing comparable to the latter's work has been compiled.

Know that a miracle is defined as any act that contradicts the laws of nature, is the result of some challenge, and is free of contradiction. A miracle is either perceptible or rational. Because of their stupidity and their lack of insight most miracles produced for the benefit of the Children of Israel were perceptible to the senses. And because of their substantial intelligence, and their mature intellect, most of the miracles of this community have been rational. Furthermore, given the longevity of the sharī'ah, and the fact that it will endure till the Day of Resurrection, it was the rational miracle that was chosen as its accompaniment. Bukhārī reports the Prophet (s) as saying in this regard: "Every one of the prophets was given that which induces faith in human beings. I was given revelation which God had revealed to me. I am optimistic that I will have the most followers of them all."

It has been suggested that this means that the miracles of the prophets terminated with the termination of their tenures; thus only those present at the time were witness to them. But the miracle of the Qur'ān will endure till the Day of Resurrection. It is its style, its rhetoric, and its supply of information pertaining to the unseen that defies convention; in every epoch some of this information emerges and thus validates its claims.

This may also mean however, that past, manifest, miracles were all perceptible and perceived by the eye. This includes the miracle of the she camel of Saleḥ, and the staff of Moses. The miracle of the Qur'ān however, is perceived with insight, which is why its followers are more plentiful. Also, that which is perceived with the organs of perception disappears when the perception itself ends, whilst that which is perceived by the intellect endures, and is observed uninterruptedly by those who succeed the initial observers. group.

The following appears in the work *Fatḥ 'l-Bārī*. “Reconciling these two views is possible because their goals are not contradictory.” And the intelligentsia are unanimous that the Book of God is a miracle, whose challenge no person was able to meet. The Almighty says: “wa in aḥad min ‘l-mushrikīn istajāraka fa ajirhu ḥatta yasma`a kalām Allāh” ¹(9:6) If not for the fact that listening to the Qur’ān was a prerequisite it may count against them their fate would not have been made contingent on such listening. Also, the Qur’ān was not a miracle it would not have been used as argument against them. ????

¹“And if some polytheist seeks your protection then grant him such protection, so that he may be able to listen to the Word of God.”

The Almighty says: “wa qālū laulā ‘unzila `alaihi āyāt min rabbihī; qul innamā ‘l-āyāt `inda Allāh wa innamā ana nadhīr mubīn; a wa lam yakfihim annā anzalnā `alaika ‘l-kitāb yutlā `alahim.”² (29:50-51) He gives notice that the Book is among His signs, providing ample evidence, substituting for the miracles of others besides him, and a sign of the miracles given to the other prophets. The Prophet (s) brought this to them at a time when they were the most articulate of communities, the most eloquent of orators, and he challenged them to bring the likes of it. They however, were unable to do so, even after several long years of grace. Thus, the Almighty says: “falya’tū bi ḥadīth mithlihū in kānū sādiqīn”³(10:38) And in the verse: “am yaqūlūna iftarāhu; qul fa’tū bi `ashar suwar mithlihī; muftarayāt wa ‘ud`ū man istata`tum min dūn Allāh in kuntum sādiqīn; fa in lam yastajībū lakum fa`lamū annamā ‘unzila bi `ilm Allāh”⁴(11:13-14) He challenged them to produce ten chapters like unto it. And in the verse: “am yaqūlūn iftarāhu; qul fa’tū bi sūrat mithlihī” (10:38)⁵ He then challenged them to produce a single chapter. The challenge is then repeated in the verse: “wa in kuntum fī raib min mā nazzalnā `alā `abdinā fa’tū bi sūrat mithlihī”⁶(2:23) When, despite their legions of orators and rhetoricians, they failed to meet the challenge, or to produce a single comparable chapter, they were called upon to confess their own inability and the inimitability of the Qur’ān. It thus says: “qul la’in ijtama`at ‘l-ins wa ‘l-jinn `alā an ya’tū bi mithli hādihā ‘l-Qur’ān lā ya’tūna bi mithlihī;

²“They said: “If only a sign from his Lord was sent to him! Say: “All signs are from God, and I am no more than a manifest warner. Does it not suffice them that We send to you the Book which you recite unto them!”

³“Let them bring a discourse like unto it, if they are truthful.”

⁴“Or do they say that he fabricated it! Say: “Bring then, ten forged chapters like it, and seek help from whomsoever you want to besides God, if it is that you are truthful. If they respond not, then know that it was indeed revealed with God’s knowledge.”

⁵“Or do they say that he fabricated it! Say: “Bring then a single chapter like it.”

⁶“And if you are in doubt about that which We revealed to Our servant, then bring forth a single chapter like it.”

wa lau kāna ba'duhum li ba'd zahīra" ⁷(17:88) These were the eloquent antagonists, much desirous of putting out his light, and subverting his message. Had they been up to the challenge they would certainly have focused their energies on clinching this argument. But no reports exist of any one contemplating or taking up this task. Instead, they were belligerent at times, and demeaning at others. On occasion they called it magic, at others, poetry, and at others still, ancient fables. This was all the result of their perplexity and their disorientation. Ultimately, they settled for the judgement of the sword on their necks, the enslavement of their progeny and their spouses, and the confiscation of their property. All of this, and to a proud and chauvinistic people, who would surely have hastened to respond if they felt capable of doing so; this would certainly have been a lot easier on them. Hākīm reports from Ibn `Abbās: "I-Walīd b. 'I-Mughīra approached the Prophet (s) who then recited parts of the Qur'ān to him, which caused him to soften somewhat. This reached Abū Jahl, who went to him and said: "O Uncle! Your people would like to collect money to give to you, so that you may shun what Muḥammad presented to you." He replied: "Quraysh knows that I am of its wealthiest!" He said: "Then say something about him indicating to your people your aversion of him." He said: "What shall I say! By God! None of you knows as much poetry as I do, as much poetic meter, as many odes, and the poetry of the invisible beings. By God! "His words do not, in the least, resemble any of this. By God! That which he speaks has a certain sweetness, a certain elegance, its top section is fruit bearing, its lower section is substantial, it surpasses and is not surpassed, and it shatters everything under it. He said: "Your people will not be satisfied until you say something about him." He said: "Let me think this over." After doing so, he said: "This is harmful magic which he acquires from some other source."

Jāhīz has said: "God had commissioned Muḥammad (s) at a time when no one was more advanced in poetry and oratory than the Arabs; theirs was a language most insightful, and a vocabulary, most substantial. He invited both great and small to the

⁷"Say: "if all human beings and all invisible beings joined forces to bring forth something similar to this Qur'ān they would not bring the likes of it; not even if they supported each other."

oneness of God and to the affirmation of his commission as messenger. He invited them with such arguments that eventually disposed of all excuses, and removed all doubts. It was their chauvinism and their caprice that impeded their acknowledgment, and not their perplexity or ignorance. He then made them realize their fate by way of the sword: he declared war on them and they did the same. He killed their prominent members, their notables, their uncles, their cousins, all the while arguing against them by way of the Qur'ān, and inviting them night and day to contradict him by producing a single chapter or a few verses, if indeed he was a liar.

The greater his challenge, the greater his censure of their inability, the more their inadequacies which had been concealed, began emerging. And when they ran out of excuses and arguments they said to him: "You know events of past communities which we do not, and you are thus able to produce things which we cannot." He then said: "Then make up some thing!" But no orator took on that task, nor did any poet incline to it. Had he so inclined it would surely have been feigned, and as such this would have been patently evident. And if this became evident then he would have encountered those who nonetheless, approve of , protect, and try to deceive, and who assert that such a person had indeed, provided prosody, and had confronted and contradicted the Qur'ān.

This would then indicate to an intelligent person the helplessness of these people, notwithstanding the breadth of their language, its sweetness, their facility over it, their numerous poets, many of whom had lampooned him, challenged the poets in his company, and the orators of his community. One single chapter or a just a few verses from them would have effectively nullified his assertions, undermined his mandate, and it would have clearly falsified him, quickly separated him from his followers without much effort. It would also have exiled him and stopped all financial assistance.

This was indeed, a significant measure hardly unknown even to those considerably less accomplished than Quraish and the Arabs in thinking and intelligence. They on the other hand, were purveyors of unusual odes, wonderful poetic meters, long eloquent orations, and pithy anecdotes, and they were adept at formulating words that rhymed, were muzdauj!!!, or were prosaic.

And after exposing the inability of those nearby he went on to challenge those far

afield. It is thus incomprehensible that all these persons would have fallen folly to something as self evident as this. That these people, who were most haughty, and boastful, for whom discourse was the preeminent pursuit, failed in their moment of need--that need which itself spawns stratagems for inscrutable situations--how could it not have done the same in the case of something as obvious as this! It is also incomprehensible that they could have shut their eyes to, or abandoned a falsity that was of immense utility to them, for twenty three years; it is incomprehensible that those who had knowledge of this genre, and who had the means to deal with it, that they would not have taken up this challenge!”

Section

Now that it is established that the Qur’ān is indeed a miracle of the Prophet (s) it is incumbent that we turn attention to the actual areas of its inimitability. People have explored this a great deal , some appropriately, others wrongly. One group asserted that the challenge was inherent in the eternal language, an attribute of the godhead, that the Arabs were thus encumbered with that which was beyond their capabilities, and that this is what incapacitated them. This is to be rejected because that which cannot be determined cannot be considered a challenge. The truth is in the statement of the majority who say: “It inheres in that which alludes to the Eternal, in the words as such.”

‘I-Nazzām claimed that the miracle was in the act of distraction: God distracted the Arabs from taking up the challenge and stripped them of their intelligence. They certainly had the ability to meet the challenge, but as with all other miracles, extraneous factors prevented them from doing so.” This view is unsound because the verse: “qul la ‘in ijtama`at ‘l-ins wa ‘l-jinn” ⁸(17:88) points to their failure notwithstanding their ability. If ability was retracted their collaboration would have been futile, and akin to the collaboration of the dead. The failure of the dead is no cause for celebration! Furthermore, seeing that it is the Qur’ān that is unanimously considered a miracle, how could such a claim stand, given that this would infer that there is nothing miraculous about it? In fact, that would then have to be God’s miracle seeing that it was He who

⁸“Say even if all humans and all jinns collaborated. . .’

took away the power to produce something comparable to the Qur'ān. Also, the 'distraction' argument would render the miracle time bound, and thus, inactive after the period of the challenge. It would strip the Qur'ān of the element of the miraculous, and destroy the unanimity of the community that the greatest miracle of the Prophet (s) is everlasting, and that no other miracle apart from the Qur'ān is similarly everlasting.

Abū Bakr, the judge, said: "Also nullifying the 'distraction' argument is the fact that if the challenge would have been met if not for the distraction, then the Word of God could not be considered a miracle. Rather, it becomes so because of hindrance. Thus the Word in and of itself would enjoy no special status over other works". He said: "This is no more surprising than the view of some among them that any one is able to produce something similar; they were slow to take up the challenge because they had no knowledge of its arrangement. Had they been equipped with the said knowledge they would certainly have met the challenge. This is also no more surprising than the view of some others who maintain that: 'The inability afflicted them alone; as for those who follow, they do have this ability to produce something similar.'" None of this is worth considering seriously.

One group stated: "It is miraculous in that it prophecies the future, and this was outside the capabilities of the Arabs." Another group stated: "It refers to all the information it incorporates pertaining to the legends of all past and future communities, as reported by those contemporaries who witnessed it."

Another group stated: "It refers to the information it incorporates pertaining to the state of their minds, which was not manifested through their words or their deeds. It thus says: "idh hammat tā'ifatān minkum an tafshalā" ⁹(3:122), and: "wa yaqūlūna fī anfusihim lau lā yu`adhdhibunā Allāh" ¹⁰(58:8)

Abu Bakr, the judge stated: "It is miraculous because of its arrangement, composition, and structure, and because it is unlike all the conventional speech patterns of the Arabs, and different from their forms of address. He said: "It is for this reason that

⁹" . . .when two groups among you had almost lost heart."

¹⁰"And they said to themselves: 'Why does God not punish us!'"

they were unable to take up its challenge.” He said: “There is no way of recognizing the inimitability of the Qur’ān through the various styles of metaphor that they inserted into poetry, because the latter was not extraordinary. Rather, it is to be recognized through knowledge, experience, and through compositions such as poetry readings, oratory, prose writing, and proficiency in rhetoric. These are all paths well trodden, whereas the arrangement of the Qur’ān is without precedence, and without a master who may be followed. Thus there is unanimity that it is without parallel.” He said: “We believe that in parts of the Qur’ān the inimitability is more obvious, whereas in other parts it is obscure and subtle.”

The Imām Fakhr ‘I-Dīn has said: “It is inimitable because of its eloquence, its unique style, and because it is free of error.” And ‘I-Zamlakānī has said: “Its inimitability can be traced to particular sections thereof rather than to the Book as a whole. Its word structures for instance, are in perfect harmony with their corresponding scales, and the meaning of its phraseology is unsurpassed, such that every linguistic category is unsurpassed in the case of every single word and phrase.

Ibn `Atiyya said: “The correct opinion with regard to inimitability, as held by most scholars and the intelligentsia, is that it is to be found in its arrangement, its correct meanings, and its eloquent sequence of words. Just as God encompasses everything with His knowledge, so too, does He encompass all discourses with His speech. Thus, no sooner is a word of the Qur’ān coined than God knows, by way of His omniscience, the appropriate word that must follow and the appropriate meaning that must be added. This is the case for everything from the beginning to the end of the Qur’ān. Human beings however, are generally ignorant, forgetful, and distracted, and it is thus, self evident, that no human being can encompass all of the foregoing. This is how the style of the Qur’ān attained the pinnacle of linguistic purity.

This also puts to rest the view of those who say: “The Arabs certainly did have the potential to respond in kind, but were distracted therefrom.” The truth is that no one had this potential, in the least. Thus, do you find that an eloquent person would spend an entire year polishing a poem or an oration, during which he would carefully scrutinize it and make the necessary changes, whereas if even a single word from the Book of God

were to be removed it would not be substituted by something better, even after a close scrutiny of the entire Arabic language. As for us, much of its brilliance is obvious to us, but in some places it remains obscure, and this is because we have less literary taste, and less excellence in improvising than the Arabs of that era.

Thus, have the Arabs, the masters of eloquence and the only worthy adversaries, provided proof against the entire world, just as the magicians had done with the miracles of Moses, and the physicians with that of Jesus. God does indeed, produce the miracles of the prophets in the most acclaimed pattern during their respective eras. Thus magic had reached its pinnacle of advancement during the era of Moses, medicine during the era of Jesus, and eloquence during the era of Muḥammad (s).

Hāzīm had this to say in the work *Minhāj 'l-Bulaghā'* "The inimitability of the Qur'ān resides in the fact that clarity and eloquence in all their forms suffuse every part of it, without any disjuncture. Nor can any human being match it. As for the speech of the Arabs and of those others who spoke their language, eloquence and clarity were not consistent throughout even the loftiest of such speech, except in the case of a handful of examples. Thereafter, this human speech was subject to human weakness, which caused the discontinuance of the beauty and the splendor of the language. The eloquence was not suffused in all of it, but was to be found in bits and pieces of it.'

And 'l-Marākishī had this to say in the work *Sharḥ 'l-Misbāḥ*: "The inimitability of the Qur'ān is known through a scrutiny of the science of rhetoric. It has been defined by one group as the instrument whereby mistakes, and incoherence are avoided during the delivery of meaning. It is by way of this discipline as well, that the modalities of eloquent speech are known, when such modalities are applied scrupulously to disparate situations." This is because inimitability lies not in vocabulary alone, for in such a case the miraculous would have been present even before revelation. Nor does it lie in composition, for then all compositions would have been miraculous, nor in its use of grammar, for then, all speech that uses grammar correctly, would have been miraculous, nor yet in its style, for then, even elementary poetry could be construed as being miraculous. If the word *uslūb* referred to just any style then even the drivel of Musailima would be considered a miracle. Also, inimitability occurs without style as well,

as is the case with the verses: “fa lammā istay’asū minhu khalasū najiyyan” ¹¹(12:80) and: “fa isda` bi mā tumar” ¹²(15:94)

The Qur’ān’s inimitability does also not lie in their distraction from meeting the challenge, because they were in fact enthralled by its eloquence, and because the likes of Musailimah, Ibn ‘l-Muqaffa`, ‘l-Ma`arrī and others did indeed engage the Qur’ān, but were nonetheless unsuccessful in producing anything substantial, only that which the ears would reject, and from which human nature would recoil. Their attempts at duplicating its patterns of composition would have been scoffed at, patterns as had incapacitated the rhetoricians and muted the articulate.

There is general evidence of its inimitability in the fact that the Arabs, whose language this was, were unable to meet the challenge, and so those besides would be even less likely to succeed. More specifically, a careful scrutiny of its unique composition, would show up the fact that it has been revealed by the One whose knowledge encompasses everything.

¹¹“And after having despaired of him they conferred in private.”

¹²“Proclaim openly as you have been directed.”

In his exegesis 'I-Isfahānī said: "Know that the inimitability of the Qur'ān has been discussed in two ways: firstly, as an intrinsic inimitability, and secondly, by way of distracting people from taking up the challenge. The first is concerned either with its eloquence, its rhetorical devices, or its sense. As for eloquence, and rhetorical devices, this type of inimitability is not related to its substance, which comprises of words and meanings. Its words are after all, their words, as the Almighty has said: "Qur'ānan `arabiyyan" ¹³(12:2) and "bi lisānin `Arabiyyin" ¹⁴(26:195) Nor is it related to meaning,, because much of it exists in previous scriptures, as the Almighty has said: "wa innahū la fī zubur 'l-awwalīn" ¹⁵(26:196) As for the miracle of the transcendental knowledge contained in the Qur'an, of the knowledge pertaining to the dawn of creation and the resurrection, and of matters pertaining to the unseen, this is not exclusive to the Qur'ān as such. What is exclusive is the fact that all of it came from nowhere and is thus, without precedent. Tidings about the unseen are just that: tidings, regardless of whether they are arranged one way or another, appear in Arabic or in any other language, are explicitly mentioned, or are simply alluded to. Thus the specific composition is the form of the Qur'ān whilst the words and the meanings are its essence. It is a change in form and not in essence, that changes the status of an object as well as its denotation. Take, for example, the ring, the earring, or the bracelet: it is a change in their forms which causes a change in their names, and not a change in their essence, which may be gold, silver , or iron. A ring made of gold, silver or iron is still called a ring, even though their essences differ. A ring, earring or a bracelet made of gold will be named differently based on their varying forms, even though their essences are the same."

He said: "It thus emerges from this that the inimitability specific to the Qur'ān is related to a particular composition. That this particular composition is inimitable must be explained through reference to compositions as such, and then to the fact that the

¹³" . . .an Arabic Qur'ān"

¹⁴"In the Arabic language"

¹⁵"And it is indeed, in the scriptures of former communities."

composition on hand, is indeed, unique.

The composition of speech occurs at five levels:

1. Where individual letters are arranged side by side with each other such that they form any one of three kinds of words: the noun, the verb and the particle.
2. Where words are arranged side by side with each other such that they form useful sentences, of the kind that people generally use in their conversations, and in fulfilling their needs. This is also called prose.
3. Where such words are arranged side by side such that they act as openings and pauses, and additions and omissions. All of this is termed “arranged” (*‘l-manzūm*).
4. Where the endings of the foregoing structures are rhymed, and this is called “rhymed prose” (*‘l-musajja`*).
5. Where allowances are made in such structures for scale and meter, and this is called poetry (*‘l-shi`r*).

That which is arranged is either in dialog form in which case it is referred to as an oration, or in written form, in which case it is referred to as a treatise (*‘l-risāla*)

Communication is thus limited to the foregoing forms, each having a specific format, whilst the Qur’ān encompasses the best of all formats, but in a way that is unique to it. This is attested to by the fact that it whilst it too, is a form of speech, it may however, not be referred to as a treatise, poetry, or as rhymed prose. When an articulate person hears this he is able to distinguish between it and all other forms. It is for this reason that the Almighty has said: “wa innahū la kitāb `azīz; lā ya`tīhi ‘l-bātilmin min baini yadaihi wa lā min khalfihī” ¹⁶(41:41-42). This is to announce that its composition does not conform to the conventions of human beings, such that it may be added to or subtracted from, as is the case with all other books.”

He said: “As for the miracle of distracting people from taking up the challenge, this too is clear upon reflection. Every creative activity, both praiseworthy and blameworthy, is in some subtle and affective manner, related to a community. A person

¹⁶“It is a impose scripture. Falsehood comes not near it from the front or from behind.”

preferring one vocation over another, does so with his heart intimately attached thereto, and his energies pressed into serving its calling, and he accepts such an assignment with an open heart, and devotes himself wholeheartedly to it. When God invited the rhetoricians, and the orators who flitted in the valley of meanings through their elocution, to confront the Qur'ān's challenge, and when He incapacitated them, and caused them to fail to meet the challenge, all intelligent people at the time knew that this was due to some divinely decreed distraction. What miracle could be greater than where all the rhetoricians were outwardly incapable of taking up the challenge, and inwardly distracted from doing so.

'L-Sakākī had this to say in the work *l-Miftāḥ*: "Know that the inimitability of the Qur'ān may be perceived but it will not be described, just as the right weight is perceived without being described. This is similar to perceiving the right amount of salt, or the right voice for a particular song. In addition, this inimitability is recognized only by those with the correct aptitude, or those steeped in the knowledge of and experienced in eloquence and rhetoric."

Abū Hayyān 'l-Tauḥīdī has said: "Bundār 'l-Fārisī was asked of the place of inimitability in the Qur'ān, and he replied: 'This is a question which imposes an injustice on the meaning, and is tantamount to your saying: 'How does one man determine the existence of another?' No man determines any other. Rather, when reference is made to him in his entirety then he is identified, and his essence is made manifest. The same is true for the Qur'ān: as a token of its loftiness nothing referred to in it is not in and of itself also a sign, a miracle in comparison to things around it, and a guidance to one who utters it. Fully comprehending God's purpose through His speech, and His secrets through His Books is beyond human capacity, and it is this which perplexes the mind, and beguiles the senses.

'l-Khaṭṭābī has said: 'Whilst most theoreticians are of the opinion that the element of inimitability in the Qur'ān pertains to rhetoric, illustrating this was problematic for them, and they therefore reduced this to individual predilections." He said: "Close scrutiny suggests that speech appears in many forms, each of which varies depending on the level of discourse. There is the eloquent, composed, and pure style, the formal,

unusual and moderate style, and the adequate, uninhibited, and relaxed style. These then are the preferred, and praiseworthy forms of communicating: the first is the best of them, the second is average, and the third is the lowest and the most accessible of them. The rhetoric of the Qur'ān includes parts of all three these forms, and takes a portion from each of them. The arrangement of these three forms has fashioned the kind of discourse that brings together the qualities of courtliness and charm, which when separated, are by description like opposites. Charm after all, does result from a relaxed style, whilst purity and succinctness are used to mediate various forms of harshness. The convergence of these two forms in its arrangement, notwithstanding their incompatibility, is a quality specific to the Qur'ān. It serves as a manifest sign of His Messenger (s).

Human beings however, face difficulties composing something comparable, and for many reasons.

These include:

1-Their knowledge does not encompass all nouns of the Arabic language and their conventions; these two elements encapsulate meaning. Their comprehension does not encompass the entirety of the objects to which such names refer. Nor does their knowledge fully comprehend all circumstances that warrant their composition, or their coming together. They are thus unable to compose something similar by choosing the best from that which is good. To establish speech the following three things are required: a preexisting word; a meaning upon which the word is based, and a common denominator regulating the two. Careful examination would suggest that the Qur'ān is in this regard, most prestigious and highly esteemed, so much so, that nothing compares to the purity, clarity, and sweetness of its words, nor to the integrity of its composition, and nothing more appropriate or even equal exists. As for meaning, every intelligent person will testify to its superiority in this area, and to it being of unsurpassed standards. These three qualities are to be found separately in a variety of communications, but they do not appear together, as part of a single composition, except in the utterances of the Omniscient, the Omnipotent. From this then emerges the fact that the Qur'ān is indeed inimitable, coming as it does, with the choicest of words, in the finest

composition that incorporates the best meanings. These pertain to God Almighty's oneness, His loftiness in His attributes, a summons to His obedience, the manner in which He ought to be worshiped, a description of things lawful, things unlawful, things prohibited, and things permissible, advice and corrections, an enjoinder of that which is good and a prohibition of that which is evil, and an exhortation to emulate the best forms of character, and to avoid bad behavior. Each of these things has been placed in its appropriate location such nothing better or even equal to can be visualized by the intellect. In place are the parables of past centuries and of the examples that God made of those among them who were obstinate. It admonishes future generations with arguments and justifications, and with proofs for and against. All of this is meant to add emphasis to his call, and to apprise them of the significance of that which he commands, and that which he forbids.

Producing and compiling such disparate material in an organized and harmonious fashion is beyond the strength and ability of human beings. People have thus failed to meet this challenge by replicating it, or to confront it on the level of structure. Critics were therefore left claiming that it had to be poetry, because it was versified, or magic because it had the ability to incapacitate. It made a huge impression on them, smiting their consciences, frightening them and perplexing, so much so that they failed to control the urge to acknowledge, and to say: "It does indeed have a sweetness, and it does indeed have an elegance!" At one point, out of ignorance, they went so far as to say: "asāṭir 'l-awwalīn; iktatabahā fahiya tumlā `alāhi bukratan wa asīlan" ¹⁷(25:5) This they uttered knowing full well that its recipient was himself unlettered, with no one close by capable of dictating or writing down material of this nature, that provokes such animosity, ignorance, and incapacity."

He then said: "I have also spoken of an aspect of inimitability that people have overlooked, which is its effects on the heart and its impact on the conscience. Apart from the Qur'ān no other speech, in poetic or prose form, reaches the ears and sends

¹⁷"Ancient folklore! He writes them down, as they are dictated to him, morning and afternoon."

to the heart, both sweetness and beauty on some occasions, and fear and awe on other occasions. God Almighty says: “lau anzalnā hādha ‘l-Qur’ān `alā jabal la ra’aitahū khāshī`an mutasaddī`an min khashyat Allāh” ¹⁸(59:21) and: “Allāh nazzala aḥsana ‘l-ḥadīth kitāban mutashābihan mathāniya taqsha`irru minhu julūd alladhīna yakshāuna rabbahum” ¹⁹(39:23)

Ibn Surāqa has said: “Scholars differ as to the reasons why the Qur’ān is inimitable, and they have mentioned, in this regard, several such reasons, all of which are sound and correct. But together, these reasons still don’t add up to even one tenths of one thousandths of its inimitability. Whilst one group has ascribed this to its brevity and lucidity, another has done so to its elucidation and its eloquence, and another still, to its integrity and its arrangement. Some have said that it is because it is outside the scope of Arab discourse which comprises of verse, prose, oratory, and poetry. This, despite its usage of letters from their language, meanings common to their addresses, and words that belong to their mode of communications. It nonetheless, in essence, belongs to a genre of discourse different from theirs, and to an altogether unique category separate from theirs. So much so that one who tries to preserve its meaning whilst changing its vocabulary will take away its radiance, and one who tries to preserve its vocabulary whilst changing its meaning will destroy its purpose. All of this then, is a manifest testimony to its inimitability.

One scholar has said: “It lies in the fact that no matter how often it is recited its reader never tires of it and its listener never wearies of it”. Another has said: “It lies in its narration of past events.” Another has said: “It lies in its contents pertaining to the unseen, and its definitive pronouncements on other matters.” One scholar has said: “It is because it encompasses the kinds of knowledge that require exhaustive commentaries, but which are still not entirely comprehended.”

¹⁸“Had We revealed this Book on to a mountain then you would surely have seen it fearful, splitting apart in awe of God.”

¹⁹“It is God who frequently sends down the best of discourses as a divine writ, in repetitive pairs, and which causes the skin of those who hold Him in awe to shiver. . .”

‘L-Zarkashī had this to say in the work *‘l-Burhān*: “Experts are of the opinion that it is inimitable for all the foregoing reasons, and not for any single one of them as such. It encompasses all of this, and there is therefore no point ascribing inimitability to just one category. In fact there are others that have not been mentioned. These include:
a-It fills the ears and the hearts of its listeners with awe, those who endorse it as well as those who deny it.

b-It is forever fresh and original to the ears of the listeners and the tongues of the reciters.

c-It combines opposing qualities such as purity with sweetness which are usually not combined in human discourse.

d- It was made the last of the scriptures , and thus independent of all other scriptures, whilst the previous scriptures are dependent on it for clarification. Thus, the Almighty says: “inna hādha ‘l-Qur’ān yaqussu `alā banī Isrā’īl akthara alladhī hum fīhi yakhtalifūn”²⁰(27: 76)

And ‘l-Rummānī says: “The inimitability of the Qur’ān is manifested by the fact that despite a huge number of claimants and a dire need to respond, the challenge was not taken up. It is also manifested in its ability to address all and sundry, its allure, its eloquence, its foretelling the future, its breaking of habits, and the fact that it has been compared to all other miracles.” He said: “This breaking of habits (*naqd ‘l-`ādat*) refers to the fact that there was already in place an abiding tradition of language, including poetry, rhyme, oratory, letters, and the kind of prose that is common to human discourse. The Qur’ān then introduced a unique style, quite unlike that tradition, and with a level of beauty that surpassed all others patterns of speech, and with a diction that was the best.” He said: “As for its “comparison to other miracles”, the miracle here is in the fact that the parting of the sea, the transformation of the string to a snake, and other such miracles are but a single manifestation of inimitability. They contradict natural law and prevent humanity from taking up the challenge.

²⁰“This Qur’an does indeed, relate to the Children of Israel parables about which they mostly dispute.”

Qādī `lyād had this to say in the work *‘l-Shifā’*: “Know that the Qur’ān comprises of multiple forms of inimitability, which may be summarized in the following four forms:

- I. Its excellent composition, its appropriate word usage, its eloquence, its multiple forms of brevity, its extraordinary rhetoric, unheard of among the Arabs who themselves were doyens of the language, and masters of this science.
- II. Its unusual arrangement, and peculiar style that was out of keeping with the literary style of the Arabs. Also unique was the poetic and prosaic structure with which it came, upon which are based its verse endings, and the rhymes of its vocabulary. Nothing comparable existed before and after it. He said: “Each one of its forms—brevity, rhetoric, and a peculiar style—are distinct categories of inimitability none of which the Arabs were able to match. These were beyond their capabilities, distinct from their type of eloquence and linguistic style. This is in contrast to those who hold that its inimitability lies in the totality of its rhetoric and its style.
- III. The reports it contained, the fact pertaining to the unseen, and the prophecies that eventually came to be.
- IV. The information it provides with regard to past events, previous communities, and bygone legal systems, of which nothing was known except for scattered reports from the People of the Book. Entire lifetimes were spent studying these reports, whereas the Prophet (s), who was unlettered and thus unable to read or write, was able to reproduce them, as is, and in accordance with the material evidence that existed.

He said: “These then are the clear, incontrovertible aspects of its inimitability. And the following are examples that fall outside this category.

1-Verses revealed to incapacitate a community with regard to some matter, and to inform them that they will never be able to perform. Consequently, they are in fact incapacitated, and unable to act in this regard. The Jews for instance, are told: “fa tamannau ‘l-maut in kuntum sādiqīn; wa lan yatamannauh abadan” ²¹(2:94-95)

²¹Yearn for death, if you are indeed truthful. But they will never yearn for death.”

Consequently, no one among them ever yearned for death. This genre is incorporated into the third category.

2-The terror that fills the heart of its listeners, and the awe that seizes its readers. On listening to one such verse, a group did in fact, come to believe, just as did Jubair b. Muṭ`im when he heard the Prophet (s) recite the chapter *ʾl-Tūr*. He said: “When he reached the verse: “am khaliqū min ghair shay’in am hum ‘l-khāliqūn. . .’l-musaitirūn”²²(52:35-37) My spirits began to soar! He said: “This was the moment when Islam first took hold of my heart.” One group actually succumbed to death on hearing its verses. They were subjects for publication. Then he said: “Another element of its inimitability is that it is an eternal sign to be preserved by God Himself.

3-Its reciter is not made weary by it, and its listener is not dismissive of it. If anything, its pursuit intensifies its sweetness, whilst its repeated recitations increase devotion to it. Other literature, when repeated, tends to cause discomfort and boredom. Thus, the Prophet (s) described the Qur’ān as: “That which does not degenerate because of constant application.”

4-It encompasses, quite succinctly, and with an economy of words, the kind of knowledge and information not found in any other book, nor comprehended by any individual. He said: “This is included in the category on rhetoric, and should therefore, not be counted as a separate category of inimitability. The previous categories however, are singled out, not for their inimitability as such, but for their uniqueness and their special attributes. The essence of its inimitability is to be found in the previous four categories, which should therefore serve as the frame of reference.”

Note

²²“Were they created without a cause, or did they create themselves. . .in charge.”

1. Opinions differ as to the extent to which inimitability exists in the Qur'ān: whilst some Mu`tazilites hold that it suffuses the entire Qur'ān, the two foregoing verses disproves their claims. The Judge (Abū `Iyādh) has said: "Inimitability is always linked to chapters, both the short ones as well as the long ones." In this regard he depends on the words of the verse: "bi sūrat"²³ On another occasion he has said: "It is attached to a chapter or the equivalent of a chapter, such that variations of its rhetorical power are manifest. He said: "If it is a single verse then its words would be equivalent to a chapter, at least equal to the length of *'I-Kauthar*. Only then is it inimitable." He said: "No evidence exists of their failure to produce less than this length." One group maintains that multiple verses are required to pose a challenge, and that a single verse will not suffice. Another group is of the opinion that the following verse supports the view that inimitability applies to both small and large parts of the Qur'ān: "fa Iya'tū bi ḥadīth mithlihī; in kānū sādiqīn"²⁴(52:34). The Judge responded: "The verse proffers no such proof, because the sense of a complete discourse cannot be communicated in less than a single short chapter."
2. Opinions differ as to the whether the inimitability of the Qur'ān is self evident. The Judge said: "Abū 'I-Hasan 'I-`Ash`arī maintains that knowledge of its appearance to the Prophet (s) is considered self evident, whereas the actual inimitability is inferred. I am of the opinion that a non Arab, as well as one not familiar with rhetorical language, is not likely to know its inimitability except through inference. As for one familiar with rhetoric, with the multifarious linguistic traditions of the Arabs and with peculiar constructions, both his own incapability as well as that of those around him would be self evident to him."
3. Whilst agreeing that the Qur'ān expresses the highest forms of rhetoric they differ as to whether it is uniformly eloquent. Thus, would there exist verbal structures

²³" . . .by way of a single chapter."

²⁴"Let the produce then, a single discourse like unto it, if it be that they are truthful."

more suitable and symmetrical for the transmission of some given meaning? The Judge disagrees, and maintains that each of its words represents the apex of meaning, even though some may be more perceptive of this than others. Abū Nasr 'l-Qushairī prefers the view that it does indeed vary. He thus says: "We make no claims that everything in the Qur'ān is of the purest eloquence. Others have also said the Qur'ān comprises of material that is both eloquent as well as most eloquent. The scholar 'Izz 'l-Dīn b. 'Abd 'l-Salām has inclined to his view, and posed this question: "Why is the Qur'ān not most eloquent in its entirety? The master, Mauhūb 'l-Jazarī furnished a reply which in essence states that the Qur'ān, structured in this way, would have contradicted the conventional speech patterns of the Arabs which combines both eloquent and most eloquent discourse. The challenge as such would have remained incomplete. Thus, it followed their speech patterns so that their inability to meet its challenge could be manifest. And this then precluded them from countering: "You produce that over which we essentially lack ability! This is tantamount to a seeing person saying to the blind: I have overcome you by way of my sight. The blind one will simply respond: "Your victory would be complete only if I too was able to see, and your sight was stronger than mine! But seeing that I am totally deprived of sight, how is it possible to take up the challenge!

4. It is said that absolving the Qur'ān of metered poetry, despite its superiority over unmetered poetry lies in the fact that the Qur'ān is the fountainhead of verity, and the epicenter of truthfulness. The poet in contrast, exerts all effort construing falsehood as truth, hyperbole as praise, exaggerated rebuke and offense, without revealing the truth and affirming sincerity. God therefore, has absolved His Apostle of this. And because poetry is notoriously false the author of the work '*Burhān* has designated analogies that frequently lead to falsehood and fabrications as poetry. One sage has thus said: "No pious, truthful person has been known to have been adept in poetry. As for the metered verses of the Qur'ān, the explanation for them is that such material is not called poetry. This is because intent is a requirement for composing poetry. If such material is

considered poetry then all such speech as happens to be metered should also be regarded as poetry, in which case all people would be poets. Hardly any speech is without such material, which in their case, appeared on the tongues of the articulate as well. And given their obsession with criticizing the Qur'ān, if such material was considered poetry, they would surely have hastened to oppose and criticize it. In reality, such material emerges when language reaches the pinnacle of harmony. It has also been said that a single verse, or something similar in meter, is not considered poetry, for the latter requires at least two verses or more. Another view is that material composed in the *rajaz* form is in the first place, not called poetry. Another view is that to be considered poetry the *rajaz* form requires at least four stanzas, and this in no way appears in the Qur'ān.

5. One scholar has said: “The challenge was put to human beings and not to the *jinn*s, because the latter were not members of the Arabic speaking community whose form the Qur'ān emulated. As for the verse of the Qur'ān: “*qul la 'in ijtama`at 'l-ins wa 'l-jinn*”²⁵(17:88) it is couched in such terms to exalt its inimitability, because language encompassing groups is imbued with a potency not found in language restricted to individuals. If both species are considered part of this challenge, and if their failure is to be expected notwithstanding their collaboration, then the failure of a single group is all the more likely. Another scholar has said: “It was put to the *jinn*s, and the angels are intended as well, because they too are incapable of producing the likes of the Qur'ān. In his work *Gharā'ib 'l-Tafsīr 'l-Kirmānī* has said: “Only human beings and the *jinn* are mentioned in the verse because the Prophet (s) had been dispatched to these two groups and not to the angels.

²⁵“Say: If all human beings and all jinns. . .”

6. Ghazzālī was asked about the verse: “wa lau kāna min `ind ghair Allāh la wjadū fīhi ikhtilāfan kathīran” ²⁶(4:82) He replied: “Inconsistency (*’-ikhtilāf*) is a word encompassing several meanings. In this case differences in people’s opinions is not what is being denied, but rather, differences inherent in the Qur’ān itself. When some statement is said to be contradictory, then the reference may be to the fact that it is not uniformly eloquent, or that it makes contradictory claims. Thus some of its sections may stress elements of the sacred whilst some others may stress elements of the secular. Or it may comprise of conflicting styles: sections thereof may be poetic, or lackluster, or pursuing a particular purity of style, or something totally different. God’s speech is absolved of such contradictions because it follows a single format in its arrangement, one that is uniform from start to finish, and uniformly eloquent. It does not comprise of language that is good, as well as bad, and in addition, it tracks of inviting creatures to turn to God Almighty, and to turn attention away from the secular and towards the sacred. Human discourse is indeed open to such conflicts. Thus if the language of the poets and prose writers is evaluated it will show contradictions in arrangement, in degrees of eloquence, if not in the art of eloquence itself. It will thus comprise of language that is both good and bad, and no two letters or poems will be equal. A single poem will comprise of stanzas that are both eloquent as well as fatuous. The *qasīda* genre, and poetry will also reflect the same inconsistencies, all because poets and the literati have a tendency to roam confusedly through all kinds of valleys. On occasion they laud this world, whilst on others, they remain scornful of it. On occasion they laud cowardice as exemplifying discretion, and on others they revile it as weakness. On occasion they praise courage and call it rigor, and on others, they revile it and call it rashness. Human language is never free of such contradictions because it is driven by competing objectives and purposes. And the human condition itself

²⁶“If it had come from anyone other than God then they would have found many inconsistencies therein.”

varies: eloquence complements its moments of joy and happiness, and encumbers its moments of strife. And so too do his objectives change: at times he is inclined to one thing, and at others, to some other thing. This therefore causes changes in his language. That some human being therefore, could speak for twenty three years, the period in which the Qur’ān was revealed, with such consistency, is no fluke. The Prophet (s) was a human being himself who lived through changing circumstances, and if this had been his speech, or that of any other human being, then one would certainly have found therein many variations.”

7. The Judge has said: “To the question: “Do you also maintain that the other words of God, like the Torah and the Gospels, are also inimitable? we say: There is nothing inimitable therein with regard to arrangement and structure, although, they too, like the Qur’ān, are inimitable in terms of their contents that deal with the Unseen and with past events. It is not considered inimitable because God did not describe them as He had did the Qur’ān, and because we know that it was not presented in the way of a challenge, as is the case with the Qur’ān. Furthermore, these languages are devoid of those elements of eloquence that lend themselves to a challenge. In the work *‘l-Khāṭiriyāt* Ibn Jinnī said that in the verse: “qālū yā Mūsā! immā an tulqiya wa immā an nakūna naḥnu ‘l-mulqīn”²⁷(20:65) the words *wa immā an nulqiya* were not used for two reasons. The first pertains to word usage, and more particularly, to its coupling with the opening words of the verse. The second pertains to meaning, and to the fact that the Almighty wanted to convey the passion of the magicians and the arrogance they showed towards Moses. He thus ascribes to them words that fully and comprehensively ascribes these acts to them. He then poses this question: “We know that the magicians did not speak the (Arabic) language. Should we then, hold them to the same linguistic standards!” He replies: “All narratives in the Qur’ān pertaining to past people who were not native speakers have been

²⁷“They said: ‘O Moses! Either you throw first, or we will be the first to throw.”

Arabized; the words used are not literally theirs. No doubt, the eloquence found in the verse: “qālū in hādihāni la sāḥirāni yurīdāni an yukhrijākum min ardikum bi sīḥrimā wa yadhhabā bi ṭarīqatikum ‘l-muthlā” ²⁸(20:63) did not exist in the language of the non Arabs.

²⁸“They said: “These two are but magicians bent on evicting you from your lands by way of their magic, and destroying your well trodden path!

8. At the beginning of his work *Anwār ‘l-Taḥsīl fī Asrār ‘l-Tanzīl* ‘l-Bārizī said: “Know that a single idea may be conveyed using words of varying eloquence. In the same way, two parts of any one statement may be dissimilar in that the one part may express a level of lucidity not warranted by the other part. In all such cases having a sense of the multiple meanings of such statements or of the most appropriate vocabulary is essential, together with a sense of their applicability in any given context. In the case of human beings this, for the most part, is difficult to achieve, but in the case of God, it is immediately forthcoming. This is what makes the Qurān the best and the most eloquent of speeches, even though it too comprises of material of varying quality, both the good and the excellent, the emphatic and the profound. There are examples of this, such as the verse: “*wa jana ‘l-jannatain dān*”²⁹(55:54) In this case if the words *wa thamar ‘l-jannatain qarīb* were used instead, it would not have sufficed because of the assonance between the words *‘l-jana* and *‘l-jannatain*. Also, the word *thamar* does not allude to the fact that the fruit had ripened. Finally, the endings would not then have been dissimilar. Another example is the verse: “*wa mā kunta tatlū min qablihī min kitāb*”³⁰(29:48) where *tatlū* is more appropriate than *taqra`u* because the *hamza* in the latter impedes pronunciation. Another example is the verse: “*lā raiba fīhi*” (2:2) where *raiba* is more appropriate than *lā shakka fīhi* because the contraction of the *kāf* impedes pronunciation. This is also why *raiba* is used more often. Another example is the verse: “*wa lā tahinū*”³¹(3:139) where *tahinū* is preferred for it is more easily pronounced than *tad`ufū* In the case of the verse: *wahana ‘l-`azm minnī*” (19:4) the word *wahana* more appropriate than *da`ufa* because pronouncing the *ā* consonant is easier than the *ū*. Another example is the verse:

²⁹“The fruit of both these gardens will be close at hand.”

³⁰“You were never able to recite scripture previously. . .”

³¹“Be not fainthearted”

“āmana”³²(2:62) which is more easily pronounced than *saddaqa*. This is also why the former appears more frequently than the latter. Other examples are: “ātharaka Allāh”³³(12:91) where *ātharaka* is more easily pronounced than *faddalaka*; the verse: “wa ātā”³⁴(2:177) where *ātā* is more easily pronounced than *a`ṭā*; the verse: “andhara”³⁵(46:21) where *andhara* is more easily pronounced than *khawwafa*; the verse: “khair lakuma”³⁶(2:184) where the latter is more easily pronounced than *afdala lakum*; the verse: “hādhā khalq Allāh”³⁷(31:11) and the verse: “yu`minūn bi ‘l-ghaib”³⁸(2:3) where the infinitives *khalq* and *ghaib* are more easily pronounced than *makhḷūq* and *ghā`īb* respectively; the verse: “tankiḥu”³⁹(2:230) where *tankiḥu* is more easily pronounced than *tatazawwaju*, and this is because words on the scale *taf`ilu* are more easily pronounced than those on the scale *tatafa`allu*. This is also why the word *nikāḥ* is more commonly used.” In the interests of brevity and ease in pronunciation words such as: ‘*l-raḥmat*, ‘*l-ghadab*, ‘*l-ridā*, ‘*l-ḥubb*, and ‘*l-maqt*, are attributed to God even though such attributes do not apply to Him in reality. If the appropriate attributes were used instead then the verses would have become lengthy. A statement could, for example, then appear as: *yu`āmiluhū mu`āmalat ‘l-muḥibb wa ‘l-māqit*.⁴⁰

Figurative speech, because of its brevity and ease in pronunciation, is preferred

³²“He believed”

³³“God has preferred you”

³⁴“And he gives. . .”

³⁵“He warns. . .”

³⁶“Is better for you”

³⁷“This is the creation of God.”

³⁸“They believe in the Unseen.”

³⁹“marry. . .”

⁴⁰“He treats him like a lover or a hater.”

to the literal in such cases. Furthermore, such speech is based on the highest form of rhetoric, as in the case of the verse: “fa lammā āsafūnā intaqamnā minhum” ⁴¹(43:55) This is preferable to statements such as: *fa lammā `āmilūnā mu`āmalat 'l-maghdab* or *fa lammā `atau ilainā bimā ya'tīhi 'l-maghdab*.

⁴¹“SO when they angered Us We took revenge. . .”

9. 'L-Rummānī has said: "That the short chapters may well have contradictions, is said to be inconceivable, because the challenge applied to them as well. The following verse: "Fa'tū bi sūrat" ⁴²(10:38) shows their incapacity, and it makes no distinction between short and long chapters. It may also be said that the interstices of the short chapters may be altered, such that one word may be substituted for another. Would that therefore, be considered a contradiction? No, because one who is not a poet, and who has no faculty to distinguish between that which is rhythmically balanced and that which is not, may nonetheless, still be able to compose lines of poetry. If such a person who is not a poet opts to amend the following lines: *wa qātim 'l-a`māq khāwī 'l-mukhtariq; mushtabih 'l-a`lām lammā` 'l-khafaq; bi kull wafd 'l-rīḥ min ḥaith inkharaq*, by substituting 'l-mumazziq for 'l-mukhtariq, 'l-shafaq for 'l-khafaq, inṭalaq for inkharaq, he may well do so. But that would not render him a poet, because even a novice knows that no such substitution is conceivable in these lines. The same is true for one who changes the interstices.

⁴²"Produce then, a single chapter."