

# Topics Relating To The Qur'an: I'jaz, Grammarians & Jews

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*Assalamu-alaikum wa rahamatullahi wa barakatuhu:*

I have been researching on the topic of I'jaz (or inimitability) of the Qur'an giving more attention to what is there in the orientalist's books. The information that is available in these books is miniscule as compared with what is available in the Arabic books. Most of the issues of I'jaz al-Qur'an have been dealt long time ago. Muslim scholars and grammarians have systematically analyzed the pre-Islamic (or jahiliyyah) poetry and compared it with the Qur'an and tested whether the concept of I'jaz is true. This resulted in great deal of work by the Arab grammarians who dealt with the issue of linguistics, etymology of the words when analysing the Qur'an. The Jews also say that their own scholars were heavily influenced by the Arab grammarians and this will be discussed later in this post, *Inshallah*.

The division in this post is like this: The first part deals with the people who attempted to take up the Qur'anic challenge. It also deals with their own views which may be philosophical or religious to show their background. The second part, which is short, deals with the view of orientalist's who studied the Arabic grammar and its history which progressed rapidly due to the advent of the text of Qur'an. The third part deals with the Arab grammarians who influenced the Jews in interpretation of their Hebrew Bible.

## **A Brief History Of People Who Attempted To Take Up The Qur'anic Challenge**

I have tried to quote as many references as possible to avoid the views of the author who is writing about this topic. The main source that I used to cross check was [Encyclopedia of Islam](#) published by E J Brill, Leiden. This is definitely a monumental source for most of the information regarding the biographies of the people. So here we go:

**Ibn Al-Mukaffa'**: In the [Encyclopedia of Islam](#) we see that:

One highly individual aspect of the spiritual interests of this (i.e., Ibn al-Mukaffa') writer is finally revealed by the fragments (if they are authentic, as we believe) of a religious work, a Manichaean apologia, preserved in the refutation made a century later by Zaydi Imam al Qasim b. Ibrahim, in a treatise published by M Guidi. We are already familiar with the charges brought against Ibn

al-Mukaffa' of having attempted to make an "imitation" of the sacred book of Islam: The work refuted by al-Qasim appears rather in our view, to be an attack on Muhammad, the Kuran and Islam in the name of another faith, namely the Manichaeen faith which several of the friends of Ibn al-Mukaffa' had adopted and of which the writer himself was suspected. [[1], pp. 885]

The reference [2] gives a brief review of his work:

The prominent Arabic prose writer of Iranian descent who was cruelly put to death in 139/756, is said to have tried to imitate the Qur'an at the behest of the group of heretics, but he had to abandon this endeavour because it proved too difficult. This is of course a legend. But Ibn al-Mukaffa' did compose a polemic in which he took issue with Islam, and especially with the Qur'an from a Manichaeen standpoint. Fragments of this polemic have come down to us in a refutation written by Zaydi Imam, al-Qasim b. Ibrahim (d. 246/860). The first four words of this polemic - and they alone - are obviously modelled on the first four words of the Qur'an. They read: "In the name of Compassionate and Merciful light - a Manichaeen variation of the familiar Islamic basmalah which must strike any Muslim as blasphemy.

Now does that strike any of us as copying from the Qur'an or producing a better verse than that of the Qur'an?

and to complete the thoughts on Ibn al-Mukaffa':

It is possible that the celebrated Iranian convert, the great stylist Ibn al-Mukaffa', actually try his hand at such a mu'arada, but found it impossible to complete his task - a fate shared by some other writers to whom tradition imputes the same ambition. [[1], pp. 1019]

On Ibn al-Mukaffa''s attempt to match the Qu'ran, we read:

When Ibn al-Muqaffa' arrived at the passage Sura 11:42-46 he realized that it was impossible for any human being to equal the book. So, he desisted from his mu'arada and tore up what he had done. [[3], pp. xiv]

**Musaylimah:** During the time of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) there arose a man called Musaylimah who started claiming the Prophethood. So, he also started saying "revelatory pronouncements". His revelatory pronouncements resembled:

The form of these sayings correspond to a large extent with that of the earliest surahs, and they are in part prefaced by strange oaths, just like the surahs. It is however questionable whether Musaylimah was in fact the source of any of these sayings. Perhaps they were all invented at a later date and ascribed to him as a clumsy imitator of Muhammad. One of the sayings is modelled in a particularly obvious fashion on the mode of expression of the Qur'an. it runs:

"The elephant. What is the elephant? And who shall tell you what is the elephant? He has a ropy tail and a long trunk. this is a [mere] trifle of our Lord's creations." [[2], pp. 212]

**Concerning the style of his speech:**

He followed the *kahin* style of rhymed prose, and of the pronouncing of oaths. One such, swearing by mountain goat, the black smooth-skinned wolf and dark night are suggestive of animals symbolic of the pagan gods. [[2], pp. 127-128]

**And**

When Musaylimah met the Prophetess Sajah they parleyed in rhymed prose, Musaylimah being credited with the use of "Islamic" turns of phrase such as '*Alay-na min salawati ma'shari abrar, ... yaqumuna 'l-layla wa-yasumuna 'l-nahar, li-rabbi-kumu'l-kubbar, rabbi 'l-ghuyumi wa 'l-amtar* (Upon us are the blessings from a company of dutiful men ... The night they spend in vigil; during the day they fast for your great Lord, Lord of the cloud and rains.) [[2], pp. 128]

**al-Baqillani, who systematically analyzed the poetry of Musaylimah (apart from Imru' al-Qais and others) has been quoted:**

The pieces reported to have been composed by Musaylimah are so ridiculously poor in style that nobody could seriously compare them with the Qur'an. [[4], pp. 221]

**Abu'l-'Ala Al-Marri:** According to 'Ali Dashti:

It is widely held that the blind Syrian poet Abu'l-'Ala ol-Ma'arri wrote his *Ketab ol-Fosul wa'l-Ghayat*, of which part survives, in imitation of the Qor'an. [pp. 48, [5]]

This statement is an unfinished thought. If we look at Rudy Peret's article, we see that:

It was also reported of a sceptic and writer of the 5th/11th century, the blind Abu'l-'Ala' al-Ma'arri who died in 449/1057, that he tried to produce the imitation of the Qur'an. The accusation refers to his compendious work *al-Fusul wa-'l-Ghayat*, only the first seventh of which has survived, a supreme example of the art of poetry and rhyme that was based on the classical Arabic literary language, and of which the author was the master. It is written in elaborate rhyming prose, and individual sections of stanzas occasionally open with archaic oaths such as: "I swear by him who created horses and the yellowish white [camels] who lope along in ar-Ruhayl....." These incantations are reminiscent of early Qur'anic texts (e.g. lxxv. 1-2) which in turn go back to ancient Arabic oracles; presumably they are indeed modelled on the Qur'anic texts. [pp. 213, [2]]

And further more the author went on to say:

But this is not to say that al-Ma'arri intended his work as a whole to be an imitation of the Qur'an, let alone surpass it. Furthermore, by the time al-Ma'arri was writing, rhyming prose had long since being accepted as a stylistic device characteristic of elevated language, so that it could be employed without second thoughts. If we look beyond the elaborate torrent of words and try to establish the theme of the work, the subject matter amounts to little more than songs of praise of God and religious and ethical admonitions (with pessimistic undercurrents). [pp. 213, [2]]

In another reference:

Kremer endeavoured to disprove in his latest writing about the noble free-thinkers, and to explain as a misunderstanding of later literary historians, the assumption that Abu'l-'Ala' al-Ma'arri wrote an imitation of the Koran. For the sake of completion it may be pointed out that al-Zamakhshari also presupposes that Abu'l 'Ala' intended to imitate the Koran. It is likely that he has the title of Abu'l 'Ala's work in mind when he says in the introduction to his *Kashshaf: wa-mayyaza baynahunna bi fusul wa-ghayat*. In his commentary to Sura 77:30-3 he expresses the opinion that Abu'l 'Ala' wished to excel the beauties of this passage in a verse which he wrote in order to compete with God's word. In those verses of the Koran the infidels are addressed:

"Go then in shade (of the smoke of hell) which rises in three columns, verily it is not shady there and there is no protection from the hell fire. Verily, it throws sparks as big as palaces, as if they were reddish-yellow camels."

Abu'l 'Ala' in the verse in which he is said to imitate this passage of the Koran does not speak of the hell fire but of the fires burning in hospitable houses in order to invite the tired traveller. Of this fire he says:

"A red one, with hair (rays) which float far in the darkness, and throws sparks as big as tents."

This verse is in fact contained in a dirge and consolation which the poet addressed to the family of the 'Alid Abu Ahmad al-Musawi after his death. Fakhr al-din al-Razi reproves al-Zamakhshari for suggesting that Abu'l-'Ala' intended this as an imitation of the Koran; but he declares that, as a parallel was suggested, he is obliged to show in how many respects the expression of the Koran is superior to that of the poet. After giving twelve proofs he concludes:

"These points came to me in a flash, but if we were to beseech God to help us in search for more, he would undoubtedly offer us as many more as we could desire." [pp. 364-365, [6]]

**Yahya b. Al-Hakam al-Ghazal:** He was a belletrist in Andalus, Spain in 3rd century.

...the Andalusian belletrist Yahya b. al-Hakam al-Ghazal, called by his biographers the 'The sage of al-Andalus, its poet and oracle', dared to attempt to produce a pendant to surah 112 containing the Islamic credo. 'But he has overcome by terrible fear and shuddering when he embarked upon this work and thus returned to God.' [[6], pp. 364]

**Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad (Also known as Bab):** A work from the middle of the nineteenth century by Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad from Shiraz, known as Bab, the founder of the Babi sect (which survives to this day in the Bahai sect) deserves to be mentioned.

Bab felt that he had been called upon to replace Muhammad as a Prophet and to replace the outmoded Islam with a new religion. In the Bayan he summed up his doctrine. The mode of expression is prosaic, the arrangement of the material unsystematic despite the division into eleven

units (*Wahid*) of the nineteen chapters (*bab*) each. The work was designed not to outdo the Qur'an in rhetorical power but to supercede it as a sober statement of the new faith. Yet it accords with the Qur'an in one respect - that the revelations derive from God himself. Moreover, there are several points, both in the subject matter and in the formulation, which are not only inspired by the Qur'an but modelled on it, consciously or unconsciously. [[2], pp. 213]

**Ibn al-Rawandi:** He was a Mutazili and a heretic, born in the beginning of 3rd/9th century. At first he was an adherent of Mutazilism, then left his friends and attacked them mercilessly.

In the [Encyclopedia of Islam](#) we read:

The plentiful extracts from the K. al-Zumurraudh provide a fairly clear indication of the most heterodox doctrine of Ibn al-Rawandi, that or which posterity has been least willing to forgive him: a biting criticism of prophecy in general and of the prophecy of Muhammad in particular; he maintains in addition that religious dogmas the not acceptable to reason and must, therefore be rejected; the miracles attributed to the Prophets, persons who may reasonably be compared to sorcerers and magicians, are pure invention, and the greatest of the miracles in the eyes of orthodox Muslims, the Kuran, gets no better treatment: it is neither a revealed book nor even an inimitable literary masterpiece. In order to cloak his thesis, which attacks the root of all types of religion, Ibn al-Rawandi used the fiction that they were uttered by Brahmans. His reputation as irreligious iconoclast spread in the 4th/10th century beyond the borders of Muslim literature. [[1], 905]

Very tersely, Ibn al-Rawandi's attitude has been put as:

He resembled somewhat the so-called free lance journalist of these days and could write for or against the same cause without any scruple. [[4], pp. 232]

**Bassar bin Burd, Sahib Ibn 'Abbad & Abu'l - 'Atahiya:** I am clubbing both of them together because they both seem to have claimed that their composition is better or slight less better than the Qur'an. I crossed checked their work in the [Encyclopedia of Islam](#) but there is no mention of their composition against the Qur'an.

Bassar bin Burd rates some of his verses superior to surah 59. Towards the end of the 10th century the Sahib

Ibn 'Abbad could still publicly accept the compliment made to him by a Jew from Isfahan that the style of the Koran was only slightly superior to his own. [[3], pp. xiv]

Or in another reference:

Bashshar b. Burd is quoted as freely comparing to its disadvantage Kur'anic with contemporary verse and as having boasted of having personally surpassed surah LIX; a similar statement is attributed to Abu'l-'Atahiya with reference to surah LXXVII. [[1], pp. 1019]

Bashar did in fact praise one of his own poetic products when he heard recited by a singing girl in Baghdad as being better than the Surah al-Hashr. [[6], pp. 363]

But the surprising thing is that al-Baqillani in his *I'jaz al-Qur'an* compares the work of Bassar bin Burd and others with the Qur'an and there is no mention of Bassar bin Burd's work being better than the Qur'an!! Reference [2], which is a rather comprehensive book on Arabic literature pre-Islamic as well as post-Islamic, also mentions about Bassar bin Burd being a great post-Islamic poet who introduced new ideas in the poetry. Again there is no mention by Rudy Paret about he surpassing the style of the Qur'an.

In the article *Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur'an: I'jaz and related topics*, Issa J Boullata deals with the modern writers who dealt the Qur'an from a literary point of view. One such work of A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman who goes by the pseudonym of Bint Sha'ati has received a lot of attention. It is said that her work will provide new insights on the concept of I'jaz of the Qur'an. Issa Boullata says:

A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman studies inductively other aspects of Qur'anic usage and offers fresh ideas and new interpretation, uncovering certain consistencies never observed before, such as those regarding the use of passive voice in the Qur'anic scenes of the day of resurrection, which in her view, emphasize the passivity of the universe and the spontaneity of all creation in obeying the overwhelming events of the day. These and other observations of hers transcend traditional Arabic syntax and rhetoric as she attempts to capture the reality that lies behind Quranic expression. Her conclusion is that the Qur'an, being neither prose nor verse, is a literary genre of its own that is of the highest eloquence and of matchless stylistic perfection. [[7], pp. 154]

'Ali bin Rabban at-Tabari who was Nestorian Christian, and at the age of 70 converted to Islam, asserts that he has never in any language found stylistic perfection equaling that of the Qur'an:

When I was a Christian I used to say, as did an uncle of mine who was one of the learned and eloquent men, that eloquence is not one of the signs of prophethood because it is common to all the peoples; but when I discarded (blind) imitation and (old) customs and gave up adhering to (mere) habit and training and reflected upon the meanings of the Qur'an I came to know that what the followers of the Qur'an claimed for it was true. The fact is that I have not found any book, be it by an Arab or a Persian, an Indian or a Greek, right from the beginning of the world up to now, which contains at the same time praises of God, belief in the prophets and apostles, exhortations to good, everlasting deeds, command to do good and prohibition against doing evil, inspiration to the desire of paradise and to avoidance of hell-fire as this Qur'an does. So when a person brings to us a book of such qualities, which inspires such reverence and sweetness in the hearts and which has achieved such an overlasting success and he is (at the same time) an illiterate person who did never learnt the art of writing or rhetoric, that book is without any doubt one of the signs of his Prophethood. [[4], pp. 222-223]

### **What do Orientalists say about the Arab Grammarians?**

On this issue two quotes will suffice, *Inshallah*:

The Arab grammarians were excellent linguists in both the realm of phonetics and in that of grammar and syntax. Jonathan Owens' [The Foundation of Grammar](#) (1988) as well as a new book just completed by him on medieval Arabic grammar have convincingly demonstrated that, in many ways, the Arab grammarians were way ahead of their time. [[8], pp. 381]

Guillaume in his preface of the book [The Legacy Of Islam](#) writes:

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century there has been a constant recourse to Arabic for the explanation of rare words and forms in Hebrew; for Arabic though more than a thousand years junior as a literary language, is the senior philosophically by countless centuries. Perplexing phenomenon in Hebrew can often be explained as solitary and archaic survivals of the form which are frequent and common in the cognate Arabic. Words and idioms whose precise sense had been lost in Jewish

tradition, receive a ready and convincing explanation from the same source. Indeed no serious student of the Old Testament can afford to dispense with a first-hand knowledge in Arabic. The pages of any critical commentary on the Old Testament will illustrate the debt of the Biblical exegesis owes to Arabic. [[9], pp.ix]

Actually this phenomenon of the use of Arabic words and grammar by Jews goes back to the times of Saadia Gaon.

### **The Qur'an: How It Influenced The Jews and What They Say About it?**

The Jews were greatly influenced by the work of Arab grammarians who analysed the Qur'an. Their influence was primarily on the linguistic and contextual interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Most of the quotes are self explanatory. According to the Jewish scholars:

Jewish scholars in Arab lands for the first time in history acquired the tools for proper contextual study of the scriptures. Islam had spread the tenets of rationalism, mediating in part the philosophical teachings of classical Greece. [[10], pp. 221]

**In addition, Arab grammarians had developed a systematic method for analyzing the style and the structure of classical Arabic, the language of the Koran. This enabled them not only to interpret the Koran but also to compose new works in the strict standards of the classical idiom. [[10], pp.222]**

Jews in Arab lands had the potential to become comparative semitic linguists. [[10], pp.222]

**Jews who studied Arabic language and literature, as well as other academic disciplines, learned the new linguistic science and desired to exploit it in their exegesis of the Bible and the analysis of Hebrew grammar. Only those who knew Arabic grammar developed the proper understanding of the Hebrew verb as the stem built upon three consonants. Hebrew verb stems in which the letters alef, vav and yod appear for example, do not display these weak consonants in all forms. These weak consonants do appear in the various forms of Arabic verb, However. Jewish scholars with linguistic sophistication realized that the weak consonants were part of the Hebrew verb even where they are not evident. Jewish exegetes, such as those in France, who did not read Arabic, failed to comprehend the triconsonantal basis of the Hebrew verb-**

stem and as a result, confused certain stems and misinterpreted them. C'est la vie. Characteristic of the Spanish Jewish scholars was their superior interest and training in linguistic analysis, a benefit of having grown up in an Arabic milieu. [[10], pp. 222]

His (Rabbi Saadiah) Arabic translation of the Bible, however continues in use as the official version of Jews from Arab lands. It is also a mine of original insight into the meaning of difficult Hebrew words and phrases in the Bible, of which the modern scholars have barely taken advantage. [[10], pp.222-223]

(Ibn Janah's) two-volume analysis of biblical vocabulary, grammar, and style remains the most brilliant and valuable contribution of all time to the study of biblical language. The two volumes *The Book of Roots* and *The Book of Embroidery* (his figure for grammar) exist only in the original Arabic and a medieval Hebrew translation. [[10], pp.223]

**In the words of the famous Hebrew linguist Saadia Gaon:**

Saadia expresses himself unreservedly about his indebtedness to Arabic authors, who served him as models in the composition of his work. *"It is reported," he says, "that one of the worthies among the Ishmaelites, realizing to his sorrow that the people do not use the Arabic language correctly, wrote a short treatise for them. From which they might learn proper usages. Similarly, I have noticed that many of the Israelites even the common rules for the correct usage of our (Hebrew) language, much less the more difficult rules, so that when they speak in prose most of it is faulty, and when they write poetry only a few of the ancient rules are observed, and majority of them are neglected. This has induced me to compose a work in two parts containing most of the (Hebrew) words."* [[11], pp. 39-40]

**The author went on to say:**

The rules of the Hebrew grammar adverted to in the fragments of this work possessed by us - only a little more than the introduction has been preserved - like wise reveal the influence of the school of Arabic grammarians. [[11], pp. 40]

**And in another place in the same book, we read:**

In all probability the language of the Koran had become the vernacular of most of the Jews and the Samaritans soon after the Hegrah. This being the case, it is obvious that Saadia could make use of the literature of the Arabs as well as the works of Judeo-Arabic authors. [[11], pp. 37]

In this post, I tried to deal with I'jaz al-Qur'an, Arab grammarians who worked on the Qur'an and their influence on the Jews. I was surprised when I was looking into the various references on this issue. There is, of course, many other references which I have not yet dealt with. I will be dealing with them as soon as I get them, *Inshallah*.

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