

What Is The Challenge Of The Qur'ân With Respect To Arabic Prose & Poetry?

Assalamu-alaikum wa rahamatullahi wa barakatuhu:

The Qur'ân in many places challenges the people to produce a sûrah like it. It appears that the Christian missionaries who call [the challenge irrelevant or an utterly subjective criterion](#) are pretty much unaware of how the Arabic poetry and prose compares with the Qur'ân. This article is devoted to deal with one aspect of the Qur'ânic challenge of produce a sûrah like it. What is meant by **sûrah like it** with respect to the Arabic prose and poetry?

The verses of the Qur'ân dealing with the challenge are given below (Hilâlî and Muhsin Khan's Translation):

Say: "If the mankind and the jinns were together to produce the like of this Qur'ân, they could not produce the like thereof, even if they helped one another." [Qur'ân 17:88]

And if you (Arab pagans, Jews, and Christians) are in doubt concerning that which We have sent down (i.e. the Qur'ân) to Our slave (Muḥammad Peace be upon him), then produce a sûrah (chapter) of the like thereof and call your witnesses (supporters and helpers) besides Allah, if you are truthful. [Qur'ân 2:23]

And this Qur'ân is not such as could ever be produced by other than Allah (Lord of the heavens and the earth), but it is a confirmation of (the revelation) which was before it [i.e. the Taurat (Torah), and the Injeel (Gospel), etc.], and a full explanation of the Book (i.e. laws and orders, etc, decreed for mankind) - wherein there is no doubt from the Lord of the 'Alamin (mankind, jinns, and all that exists).

Or do they say: "He (Muḥammad^(P)) has forged it?" Say: "Bring then a sûrah (chapter) like unto it, and call upon whomsoever you can, besides Allah, if you are truthful!" [Qur'ân 10:37-38]

Or they say, "He (Prophet Muḥammad^(P)) forged it (the Qur'ân)." Say: "Bring you then ten forged sûrah (chapters) like unto it, and call whomsoever you can, other than Allah (to your help), if you speak the truth!" [Qur'ân 11:13]

Or do they say: "He (Muḥammad^(P)) has forged it (this Qur'ân)?" Nay! They believe not! Let them then produce a recital like unto it (the Qur'ân) if they are truthful. [Qur'ân 52:33-34]

Abdur Rahîm Green mentions that:

These are the sixteen **al-Bihâr** (literally "The Seas", so called because of the way the poem moves, according to its rhythmic patterns): **at-Tawîl, al-Bassit, al-Wâfir, al-Kamîl, ar-Rajs, al-Khaffî, al-Hazaj, al-Muttakarib, al-Munsarih,**

al-Muktatab, al-Muktadarak, al-Madîd, al-Mujtath, al-Ramel, al-Khabab and as-Saria'. So the challenge is to produce in Arabic, three lines, that do not fall into one of these sixteen Bihâr, that is not rhyming prose, nor like the speech of soothsayers, and not normal speech, that it should contain at least a comprehensible meaning and rhetoric, i.e. not gobbledegook. Now I think at least the Christian's "Holy spirit" that makes you talk in tongues, part of your "Tri-Unity" of God should be able to inspire one of you with that!

To begin with; the Arabic language and Arab speech are divided into two branches. One of them is rhymed poetry. It is a speech with metre and rhyme, which means every line of it ends upon a definite letter, which is called the 'rhyme'. This rhymed poetry is again divided into metres or what is called as **al-Bihâr**, literally meaning 'The Seas'. This is so called because of the way the poetry moves according to the rhythmic patterns. There are sixteen **al-Bihâr** viz; **at-Tawîl, al-Bassit, al-Wâfir, al-Kamîl, ar-Rajs, al-Khafîf, al-Hazaj, al-Muttakarib, al-Munsarih, al-Muktatab, al-Muktadarak, al-Madîd, al-Mujtath, al-Ramel, al-Khabab and as-Saria'**. Each one rhymes differently. For metres of Arabic poetry please see please see Lyall's book [Translations Of Ancient Arabian Poetry, Chiefly Pre-Islamic](#).^[1] He discusses **al-Kamîl, al-Wafir, al-Hajaz, at-Tawil, al-Bassit, al-Khafîf and al-Madîd** briefly.^[2]

The other branch of Arabic speech is prose, that is non-metrical speech. The prose may be a rhymed prose. Rhymed prose consists of cola ending on the same rhyme throughout, or of sentences rhymed in pairs. This is called "rhymed prose" or **sajc**. Prose may also be straight prose (**mursal**). In straight prose, the speech goes on and is not divided in cola, but is continued straight through without any divisions, either of rhyme or of anything else. Prose is employed in sermons and prayers and in speeches intended to encourage or frighten the masses.^[3] One of the most famous speeches involving **sajc** is that of **Hajjâj bin Yûsuf** in his first deputation in Iraq in post-Islamic and [Quss bin Sa'idah](#) in pre-Islamic times.

So, the challenge, as ^cAbdur Raḥîm Green mentions, is to produce in Arabic , three lines, that do not fall into one of these sixteen **al-Bihâr**, that is not rhyming prose, nor like the speech of soothsayers, and not normal speech, that it should contain at least a comprehensible meaning and rhetoric, i.e. not gobbledygook.

The Qur'ân is not verse, but it is rhythmic. The rhythm of some verses resemble the regularity of saj^c, and both are rhymed, while some verses have a similarity to Rajaz in its vigour and rapidity. But it was recognised by Quraysh critics to belong to neither one nor the other category.^[4]

It is interesting to know that **all** the pre-Islam and post-Islamic poetry collected by Louis Cheikho falls in the above sixteen metres or **al-Bihâr**.^[5] Indeed the pagans of Mecca repeated accuse Prophet Muhammad^(P) for being a forger, a soothsayer etc. The Arabs who were at the pinnacle of their poetry and prose during the time of revelation of the Qur'ân could not even produce the smallest sûrah of its like. The Qur'ân's form did not fit into any of the above mentioned categories. It was this that made the Qur'ân inimitable, and left the pagan Arabs at a loss as to how they might combat it as [Alqama bin ^cAbd al-Manaf confirmed](#) when he addressed their leaders, the Quraysh:

Oh Quraish, a new calamity has befallen you. Mohammed was a young man the most liked among you, most truthful in speech, and most trustworthy, until, when you saw grey hairs on his temple, and he brought you his message, you said that he was a sorcerer, but he is not, for we seen such people and their spitting and their knots; you said, a diviner, but we have seen such people and their behaviour, and we have heard their rhymes; you said a soothsayer, but he is not a soothsayer, for we have heard their rhymes; and you said a poet, but he is not a poet, for we have heard all kinds of poetry; you said he was possessed, but he is not for we have seen the possessed, and he shows no signs of their gasping and whispering and delirium. Oh men of Quraish, look to your affairs, for by Allah a serious thing has befallen you.

It is a well-known fact that the Qur'ân was revealed in seven ahruf (or seven forms) to facilitate greater understanding of it among the Arabs who had different dialects. This was also to challenge them on their own grounds to produce a sûrah like that of the Qur'ân. The challenge became more obvious when none of the seven major tribes could imitate it even in their own dialects as no one could claim that it was difficult to imitate due to it not being in their own dialect.^[6]

What Do The Orientalists Say About The Inimitability Of The Qur'ân?

E H Palmer, as early as 1880, recognised the unique style of the Qur'ân. But he seem to have been wavering between two thoughts. He writes in the Introduction to his translation of the Qur'ân:

That the best of Arab writers has never succeeded in producing anything equal in merit to the Qur'ân itself is not surprising. In the first place, they have agreed beforehand that it is unapproachable, and they have adopted its style as the perfect standard; any deviation from it therefore must of necessity be a defect. Again, with them this style is not spontaneous as with Muhammad and his contemporaries, but is as artificial as though Englishmen should still continue to follow Chaucer as their model, in spite of the changes which their language has undergone. **With the Prophet, the style was natural, and the words were those in every-day ordinary life, while with the later Arabic authors the style is imitative and the ancient words are introduced as a literary embellishment. The natural consequence is that their attempts look laboured and unreal by the side of his impromptu and forcible eloquence.**^[7]

The famous Arabist from University of Oxford, Hamilton Gibb was open upon about the style of the Qur'ân. In his words:

...the Meccans still demanded of him a miracle, and with remarkable boldness and self-confidence Mohammad appealed as a supreme confirmation of his mission to the Koran itself. Like all Arabs they were the connoisseurs of language and rhetoric. Well, then if the Koran were his own composition other men could rival it. Let them produce ten verses like it. If they could not (and it is obvious that they could not), then let them accept the Koran as an outstanding evident miracle.^[8]

And in some other place, talking about the Prophet^(P) and the Qur'ân, he states:

Though, to be sure, the question of the literary merit is one not to be judged on *a priori* grounds but in relation to the genius of Arabic language; and no man in fifteen hundred years has ever played on that deep-toned instrument with such power, such boldness, and such range of emotional effect as Mohammad did.^[9]

As a literary monument the Koran thus stands by itself, a production unique to the Arabic literature, having neither forerunners nor successors in its own idiom. Muslims of all ages are united in proclaiming the inimitability not only of its contents but also of its style..... and in forcing the High Arabic idiom into the expression of new ranges of thought the Koran develops a bold and strikingly effective rhetorical prose in which all the resources of syntactical modulation are exploited with great freedom and originality.^[10]

On the influence of the Qur'ân on Arabic literature Gibb says:

The influence of the Koran on the development of Arabic Literature has been incalculable, and exerted in many directions. Its ideas, its language, its rhymes pervade all subsequent literary works in greater or lesser measure. Its specific linguistic features were not emulated, either in the chancery prose of the next century or in the later prose writings, but it was at least partly due to the flexibility imparted by the Koran to the High Arabic idiom that the former could be so rapidly developed and adjusted to the new needs of the imperial government and an expanding society.^[11]

As the Qur'ân itself says:

And if ye are in doubt as to what We have revealed from time to time to Our servant, then produce a Sura like thereunto; and call your witnesses or helpers (If there are any) besides Allah, if your (doubts) are true. **But if ye cannot- and of a surety ye cannot- then fear the Fire whose fuel is men and stones,- which is prepared for those who reject Faith.** (Qur'ân 2:23-24)

Lastly, the beautiful style of the Qur'ân is admired even by the Arab Christians:

The Quern is one of the world's classics which cannot be translated without grave loss. It has a rhythm of peculiar beauty and a cadence that charms the ear. Many Christian Arabs speak of its style with warm admiration, and most Arabists acknowledge its excellence. When it is read aloud or recited it has an almost hypnotic effect that makes the listener indifferent to its sometimes strange syntax and its sometimes, to us, repellent content. It is this quality it possesses of silencing criticism by the sweet music of its language that has given birth to the dogma of its inimitability; indeed it may

be affirmed that within the literature of the Arabs, wide and fecund as it is both in poetry and in elevated prose, there is nothing to compare with it.^[12]

The above sentences speak of themselves. Summing up: Within the Arabic literature, either poetry or prose, there is nothing comparable to the Qur'ân. Muslims throughout the centuries are united upon the its inimitability.

There is also a talk by Christian missionaries that there are grammatical 'errors' in the Qur'ân. In retort, it can be mentioned that the Arab contemporaries of Muḥammad^(P) were most erudite and proficient in the idiosyncrasies of Arabic speech; and hence, if they had found any grammatical 'errors' in the Qur'ân, they would have revealed it when Muḥammad^(P) challenged them with to do so. Therefore, since they did not take up his challenge on this issue, we can be rest assured that no such grammatical 'errors' exist in the Qur'ân.

Indeed the **grammatical errors** claimed by Christian missionaries have been already **discussed and refuted** in a reputed journal.^[13] It turns out that lack of knowledge of intricate constructions in classical Arabic by Christian missionaries gave rise to so-called grammatical 'errors'.

I'jaz al-Qur'ân (Or Inimitability Of The Qur'ân) & Its Exposition

I'jaz literally means "the rendering incapable, powerless". It is the concept relating to the miraculous nature of the Qur'ân. What constitutes this miracle is a subject that has engaged Muslims scholars for centuries. By the early part of the third century AH (ninth century CE), the word i'jaz had come to mean that quality of the Qur'ân that rendered people incapable of imitating the book or any part; in content and form. By the latter part of that century, the word had become the technical term, and the numerous definitions applied to it after the tenth century have shown little divergence from the key concepts of the inimitability of the Qur'ân and the inability of human beings to match it even challenged (**tahiddi**).^[14]

Thus, the Islamic doctrine of i'jaz al-Qur'ân consists in the belief that the Qur'ân is a miracle (mu'jizah) bestowed on Muḥammad^(P). Both terms, i'jaz and mu'jizah come from the same verbal root. While mu'jizah is the active principle of a'jaza, i'jaz is its verbal noun.^[15]

The early theological discussions on i'jaz introduced the hypothesis of *sarfah* ("turning away") and argued that the miracle consisted of God's turning the competent away from taking up the challenge of imitating the Qur'ân. The implication of *sarfah* is that the Qur'ân otherwise could be imitated. However, ʿAbd al-Jabbâr (d. 1025 CE), the Mu'tazilite theologian rejected *sarfah* because of its obvious weaknesses.

ʿAbd al-Jabbâr rejects the doctrine of *sarfah* for two main reasons. Firstly, because it contradicts the verse of the Qur'ân stating that neither *jinn* nor human can rival the Qur'ân, and secondly because it makes a miracle of something other than the Qur'ân, i.e., the *sarfah*, the prohibition from production, and not the Qur'ân itself. In addition to this, according to 'Abd al-Jabbar, the doctrine of *sarfah* displays four major weaknesses:

1. It ignores the well-known fact that the Arabs of Muḥammad's time had acknowledged the superior quality of speech of the Qur'ân;
2. It is in direct conflict with the meaning of the verses of the Challenge;
3. It implies that the Qur'ân is not a miracle; and
4. It asserts that the Arabs were out of their minds (*khuruj 'an al-'aql*).

This doctrine, in fact, implies that they could have produced a rival to the Qur'ân, but simply decided against doing so. It effectively calls into question either their motives or their sanity. Therefore, according to ʿAbd al-Jabbâr the correct interpretation of *sarfah* is that the motives to rival the Qur'ân disappeared (*insarafah*) because of the recognition of the impossibility of doing so.^[16]

ʿAbd al-Jabbâr insisted on the unmatched quality of the Qur'ân's extra-ordinary eloquence and unique stylistic perfection. In his work [al-Mughni](#) (The Sufficient Book), he argued that eloquence (*faṣḥah*) resulted from the excellence of both meaning and wording, and he explained that there were degrees of excellence depending on the manner in which words were chosen and arranged in any literary text, the Qur'ân being the highest type.^[17]

al-Baqillanî (d. 1013 CE), in his systematic and comprehensive study entitled [l'jaz al-Qur'ân](#) upheld the rhetorically unsurpassable style of the Qur'ân, but he did not consider this to be a necessary argument in the favour of the Qur'ân's uniqueness and emphasized instead the content of revelation.

The choice and arrangement of words, referred to as *nazm* was the focus of discussion by al-Jahîz, al-Sijistanî (d. 928 CE), al-Bakhî (d. 933 CE) and Ibn al-Ikshid (d. 937 CE). al-Rummanî and his contemporary al-Khattabî (d. 998 CE) discussed the psychological effect of *nazm* of the Qur'ân in their [al-Nukat fî l'jaz al-Qur'ân](#) and [Bayan l'jaz al-Qur'ân](#), respectively.

The author who best elaborated and systematized the theory of *nazm* in his analysis of the *ijaz* is ʿAbd al-Qahir al-Jurjanî (d. 1078 CE) in his [Dalâ'il al-l'jaz](#). His material was further organized by Fakhr ad-Din al-Razî (d. 1209) in his [Nihâyat al-l'jaz fî Dirâyat al-l'jaz](#) and put to practical purposes by al-Zamakhsharî (d. 1144 CE) in his exegesis of the Qur'ân entitled [al-Kashasâf](#), rich in rhetorical analysis of the Qur'ânic style.^[18]

Hardly anything new has been added by later authors.

Is The Bible Inimitable?

Anyone who has read the history of the Bible as a text as well as [the constantly changing canon at the whims of the leaders of the Church](#) and some 300,000+ variant readings in the New Testament itself would suggest that no book in history enjoyed such a reputation. The process of serious editing through which the Christian Bible went through is unparalleled in its almost 2000 year history. This would itself make the Bible an inimitable book.

As far as the language of the Bible and its stylistic perfection is concerned, the Bible does not make any such claim. Therefore, it not does challenge the mankind of produce a few verses or a chapter like it. Further, it is a Christian claim that the Bible contains scribal and linguistic errors. The language in which the Greek New Testament was written is demotic Greek which itself has little or no regard for grammatical rules of classical Greek. Comparing the stylistic perfection of the Qur'ân versus stylistic imperfection of the Bible, von Grunebaum states:

In contrast to the stylistic perfection of the Kur'an with the stylistic imperfections of the older Scriptures the Muslim theologian found himself unknowingly and on purely postulative grounds in agreement with long line of Christian thinkers whose outlook on the Biblical text is best summed up in Nietzsche's brash dictum that the Holy Ghost wrote bad Greek.^[19]

Futher, he elaborates the position of Western theologians on the canonization process and composition of the Bible:

The knowledge of the Western theologian that the Biblical books were redacted by different writers and that they were, in many cases, accessible to him only in (inspired) translation facilitated admission of formal imperfections in Scripture and there with lessened the compulsive insistence on its stylistic authority. Christian teaching, leaving the inspired writer, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, free in matters of style, has provided no motivation to seek an exact correlation between the revealed text on the one hand and grammar and rhetoric on the other. It thereby relieved the theologian and the critic from searching for a harmony between two stylistic worlds, which at best would yield an ahistoric concept of literary perfection and at worst would prevent anything resembling textual and substantive criticism of Revelation....

In Christianity, besides, the apology for the "low" style of the Bible is merely a part of educational problem - what to do with secular erudition within Christianity; whereas in Islam, the central position of the Kur'an, as the focal point and justification of grammatical and literary studies, was theoretically at least, never contested within the believing community.^[20]

That pretty much sums up the Bible, its stylistic perfection (or the lack of it!) and the position of Western theologians.

And Allah knows best!