

Şarfah: An Examination of the Debate on the Nature of the Qur'an's Inimitability

Abstract: The miraculous nature of the Qur'an is one of the most important topics discussed in the Sciences of the Qur'an (*'ulūm al-Qur'ān*). There are two basic views regarding the inimitability of the Qur'an and the source of its miraculous nature. Most scholars are of the opinion that this inimitability stems from an essential quality within the Qur'an, for example, its eloquence, the loftiness of its meanings, etc. However, a small fraction of Qur'anic researchers say that this stems from something outside the Qur'an itself, i.e., the power and choice of God. The latter state that if the Qur'an were essentially inimitable, then: (1) all of the Qur'an would not be a miracle; (2) it would be easier to distinguish the difference between the Qur'an and an ordinary eloquent sentence, than the difference between an ordinary eloquent sentence and an ordinary uneloquent sentence; (3) the Companions would not mistake texts that did not belong to the Qur'an with the Qur'anic text, and they would not doubt whether something was a part of the Qur'an; (4) and either the Qur'an would not quote human beings from the past, or these quotes would not be parts of the Qur'an. Conversely, those who say that the Qur'an is essentially inimitable say that if the inimitability of the Qur'an stemmed from something outside it, then: 1) the inimitability of the Qur'an would not have to last forever for it to be a miracle; 2) its opponents would not be amazed at the nature of the Qur'an itself, rather, by their inability to imitate it; and 3) that works similar to the Qur'an would have existed before it. Upon careful consideration of the proofs of both sides of this debate, we see that those of the adherents of the essential inimitability of the Qur'an are somewhat stronger. Thus, it is a more acceptable view regarding the miraculous nature of the Qur'an and its inimitability.

Key Words: Qur'an, inimitability, essential inimitability, accidental inimitability, miracle, eloquence.

Introduction

Discussions surrounding the miraculous nature of the Qur'an and its inimitability have intrigued Islamic scholars for many centuries. This intrigue stemmed from the various theological issues that undergird these debates. There is a difference of opinion amongst Qur'anic researchers regarding why the Qur'an is inimitable. Generally speaking, there are two main views in this regard. Most scholars are of the opinion that there is something essential to the Qur'an that does not allow it to be reproduced by man. Its eloquence, the loftiness of its meanings, and its predictions of future events are qualities that human beings are incapable of incorporating in their own works. However, there are a small number of scholars who say that the Qur'an is not inherently inimitable through a theory called *şarfah*. Rather, human beings can also produce something similar to the Qur'an. If they do not, then this is because God prevents them from doing so. Thus, the inimitability of the Qur'an stems from something outside it, i.e.,

the will and power of God.

The scholars of the second group, those who believe in *ṣarfah*, differ amongst themselves regarding how God prevents humans from imitating the Qur'an. Some say that He does not give them the motive to do so. Others say that while humans have the motive to imitate the Qur'an, God does not allow them to make the intention to do so. Finally, a group of scholars say that God removes from people the knowledge of how to imitate the Qur'an when they make the intention to do so. Some say that this removal of knowledge may occur before the Qur'an is revealed, while others say that it only occurs afterwards.

There is also a difference of opinion regarding why certain scholars believe in *ṣarfah*. However, the stronger view is that this theory stems from the arguments for *ṣarfah* that will be discussed hereunder. In the forthcoming, we will discuss some of the arguments for the legitimacy of *ṣarfah* and answer them. Thereafter, we will look at the arguments that the proponents of the essential inimitability of the Qur'an have presented. We hope to show that the inimitability of the Qur'an is essential to it because its arguments are the soundest.

Arguments for *Ṣarfah*

Rational Arguments:

1st Argument: If the Qur'an were Essentially Miraculous, then Its Entirety could not be a Miracle.

If the Qur'an were essentially miraculous, then all of the Qur'an could not be a miracle.

However, the entire Qur'an is a miracle.

Therefore, the Qur'an is not essentially miraculous. ((Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1 (Qum: Ismā'īliyyān, 2013), p. 69.))

We can prove the truth of the first premise of this argument in the following manner:

If the Qur'an, in its entirety, were essentially miraculous, then it could not express one matter with different sentence structures.

However, it does express one matter with different sentence structures.

So, if the Qur'an were essentially miraculous, then all of the Qur'an could not be a miracle.

We can prove the truth of the first premise of this argument in the following manner: The underlying idea behind this premise is that if we say there is a hierarchy to sentence structures, then the one that falls outside of the power of man would only be the highest of these. The lower levels would be the ones that other beings could produce. This is because there is a similitude between an agent and its effect.

If there were a specific type of sentence structure man is essentially incapable of producing, then the various sentence structures that could convey a single meaning would be subject to gradation. This implies that the highest of these sentence structures would be the one that could not be produced by man. And those that can be produced by him would fall on a lower scale of the hierarchy of these sentence structures. If this were true, those lower grades would not be miraculous, and therefore, the entire Qur'an would not be miraculous. This is because the Qur'an expresses similar meanings using different sentence structures, some of which—based upon the abovementioned line of reasoning—cannot be inimitable and miraculous. However, the entire Qur'an is miraculous.

This argument for *ṣarfah* is clearly invalid. It is true that if certain forms of speech were miraculous and others were not, then there would be a hierarchy to forms of speech. However, we cannot say that the essentially miraculous form of speech could only be the one situated at the highest degree in this hierarchy. It is also equally possible for there to be a number of forms of speech that are lower than the singularly highest possibility, but which are still essentially inimitable and miraculous.

Secondly, the primary reason used to substantiate this argument—that there is a necessary similitude between the agent and its effect—is not only false, but incapable of being applied to the case at hand. This proposition apparently stems from the philosophical principle that an effect must be similar to its cause. Thus, if the cause of the inimitability of the Qur'an were the eloquence that God placed in it, then that eloquence would have to be infinitely great, just like its cause, which is God. In conclusion, anything lower than the highest levels of eloquence could not be a part of the Qur'an—since it would not stem from God—and would be imitable. However, this philosophical principle has long been proven invalid—as noted by many great Islamic philosophers. ((Mullā Ṣadrā is of the opinion that the simpler a reality is, the more meanings it will contain in itself. “A simple reality is all things.” The more meanings it contains, the more effects it will be able to produce. Based on this reasoning, this sage disagreed with the Peripatetic philosophers who said that since the human soul is a simple being, it can only have one type of effect, i.e., intellection, and that the rest of the effects that we see within the human being must be carried out by faculties that serve as tools for the human being. According to Mullā Ṣadrā, “The soul in its unity is all of its faculties and their effects are contained within its effect.” The same can be said of God, who is the simplest of all beings.))

Thirdly, even if this principle were true, it could only be applied to the first effect of God, i.e., the being that is immediately produced by Him. It could not be applied to those beings that are created by God through a medium, as is the case with the Qur'an. According to Qur'anic scholars, the Qur'an's verses were revealed in various ways to the Prophet (ﷺ). Only certain verses were revealed to him (ﷺ) directly.

The others were revealed through the medium of an angel or even several angels.

Finally, this argument relies upon a false assumption, i.e., that the Qur'an repeats the same ideas in different words. According to most experts in the field of Qur'anic studies, there is no real repetition in the Qur'an. Meaning, although basic Qur'anic ideas may be repeated, specific meanings are not.

2nd Argument: If the Qur'an Were Essentially a Miracle, It Would Be Easier to Distinguish the Difference between the Qur'an and a non-Qur'anic Eloquent Sentence, than the Difference between a non-Qur'anic Eloquent Sentence and an Uneloquent Sentence.

If the Qur'an were essentially a miracle, then it would be easier to distinguish the difference between the Qur'an and an ordinary eloquent sentence, than the difference between an ordinary eloquent sentence and an ordinary uneloquent sentence. This is because the disparity between the former two would be more than the difference between the latter two.

However, this is not true. In other words, distinguishing between the Qur'an and a non-Qur'anic eloquent sentence is not easier than distinguishing between a non-Qur'anic eloquent sentence and an uneloquent sentence.

Therefore, the Qur'an is not essentially a miracle. ((Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *Tamhīd al-Uṣūl* (Qum: Rā'id, 1394), p. 483-4.))

This argument can be refuted in a number of ways. First of all, it seems that the proponent of this argument assumes that if the Qur'an were essentially a miracle, then it would be easier for *all* human beings to distinguish the difference between the Qur'an and an ordinary eloquent sentence, than the difference between an ordinary eloquent sentence and an ordinary uneloquent sentence. If true, then we cannot agree with the first premise of this argument. This is because there is no necessary connection between the antecedent and the consequent here. In other words, while it is true that the consequent is false, and not everyone can distinguish the difference between the Qur'an and an ordinary eloquent statement easier than between an uneloquent statement and an ordinary eloquent one (in other words, the second premise is true), there is no connection between this and the Qur'an's being essentially miraculous. This is akin to saying that if the works of Shakespeare were really much better than that of a high-school English teacher, then everyone could distinguish between these two easier than they could distinguish between the works of the aforementioned English teacher and that of their pupil. This is clearly a false statement. Rather, the person for whom it is easier to understand the difference in question is the one who is an expert in the field in which the work of arts are produced. If this is what the proponent of this argument is trying to state (that is, if the Qur'an were essentially a miracle, then it would be easier for an *expert of Arabic literature* to discern between the Qur'an and a non-Qur'anic eloquent sentence, than between that non-Qur'anic eloquent sentence and an uneloquent

sentence), then the first premise of the argument is valid. Nevertheless, the second premise is false. This is because history tells us that the pagan Arabs clearly discerned the difference between the Qur'an and their eloquent poems much more easily than the difference between the latter and ordinary speech.

3rd Argument: If the Qur'an Were Essentially Miraculous, then the Companions Would not Make Mistakes in Distinguishing It.

If the Qur'an were essentially a miracle, the Companions would not mistake texts that did not belong to the Qur'an with the Qur'an, and they would not doubt whether something was a part of the Qur'an.

However, the Companions of the Prophet (ﷺ) did in fact confuse the Qur'an with texts that were not part of the Qur'an, and they sometimes rejected an actual part of the Qur'an. The proof for this is that Ibn Mas'ūd was not sure whether surahs 113 and 114 were actually a part of the Qur'an or not.

Therefore, the Qur'an is not essentially a miracle. ((Muḥammad Hādī Ma'rifat, *al-Tamhīd fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, vol. 4 (Qum: Jāmi' al-Mudarrisīn, 1394), p. 171.))

The answer to this argument is similar to that of the previous one. The proponent of this argument is under the assumption that in order for the Qur'an to be essentially inimitable, it has to be infinitely greater than the most eloquent of human speech. In this case, it would be easily recognizable and distinguishable. However, we showed why this assumption is incorrect in the answer to the previous argument.

4th Argument: There Is no Reason to Believe that the Qur'an is Inimitable.

If it were impossible for human beings to produce the likes of the Qur'an, this would mean either: (1) they could not utter the words that it is composed of; or (2) they could not combine those words, one after the other; or (3) they could not have knowledge of how to combine them in such a manner that produced a miraculous text.

However, all of the abovementioned options are incorrect.

So, the Qur'an is not essentially miraculous.

The impossibility of all the options mentioned in the consequent of the second premise of the argument is self-evident. Otherwise, if it were impossible for us to utter the words the Qur'an is composed of, or if we could not combine them, then we would be unable to read the Qur'an. This is because we have to pronounce these words, and combine them together in order to read them. However, we do read the

Qur'an. Therefore, both of these options are wrong.

Also, we cannot say that it is impossible for us to have knowledge of what combination of words produces a miraculous text, since this would necessitate that we would be unable to grasp the miraculous nature of the Qur'an. However, we do grasp this. Therefore, this option is also incorrect. And, if all of these options are incorrect, then the Qur'an is not essentially miraculous.

This argument is clearly invalid. Our point of contention is whether a human being can *invent* something like the Qur'an, not whether or not he can unconditionally *produce* it. While it is true that in order to be able to invent something, you have to be able to produce it, the converse of this statement is not true. If someone could not copy the Mona Lisa, he certainly would not be able to invent it. However, it is not true to say that if someone was able to copy it, then he could also invent it.

5th Argument: If the Qur'an Were Essentially Miraculous, It Would not Quote Others.

If the Qur'an were essentially miraculous, then it would either not quote human beings from the past, or, if it did, these quotes would not be parts of the Qur'an.

However, the Qur'an does quote human beings from the past, and these quotes are definitely a part of the Qur'an.

Therefore, the Qur'an is not essentially miraculous. ((Kamāl al-Dīn 'Abd al-Wāḥid al-Zamalkānī, *al-Burhān al-Kāshif 'an I'jāz al-Qur'ān* (Baghdad: Maṭba'at al-Ānī, 1396 A.H.), p. 53.))

This argument can be answered in two ways. First, it is based on the idea that the Qur'an quotes these individuals verbatim. This is debatable, as most of the people that it quotes were not Arabic speakers. Secondly, even if we assume that the Qur'an directly quotes human beings, this would not invalidate the essential inimitability of the Qur'an. This is because the Qur'an does not appear to challenge human beings to imitate a single verse of the Qur'an; rather, the Qur'an only challenges human beings to imitate the entire Qur'an, ten chapters from the Qur'an, or even a single full chapter. In essence, the fallacy in this argument lies in that its proponent assumes that the Qur'an challenges human beings to imitate individual verses.

6th Argument: If the Qur'an Were Essentially Inimitable, then Words Would not Indicate Their Meanings through Coining.

If human beings could not imitate the Qur'an, it would mean that they could not indicate certain meanings (i.e., the meanings of the Qur'an) by means of

certain words (i.e., the words of the Qur'an). If true, it would mean that the quality of the indication in this instance would by its very nature not be man-made.

However, this is not the case, since words indicate meanings because man coins words to indicate them. He does this because in his social interactions, he needs words to indicate meanings.

Thus, it is wrong to say that human beings cannot imitate the Qur'an. ((Muhammad Husayn al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'an*, vol. 1 (Qum: Ismā'īlīān, 2013), p. 69.))

This argument can be answered in the following manner: We agree with the fact that coining, that is, the attribute of indication ((Also called, "signification.") that individual words have—stems from humans. However, this does not imply that only humans coin the combination of words—in the form of sentences and paragraphs—to indicate meanings. If the latter is what the proponent of this argument is claiming, then the falsity of the consequent can be called into question, even though there may be a necessary connection between the antecedent and the consequent of the first premise. However, if the former is what he is claiming—i.e., that humans coin individual words to refer to certain meanings—then there is no necessary connection between the antecedent and the consequent, even though the antecedent may in fact be false.

7th Argument: The Qur'an Is Subject to Being Abrogated.

The Qur'an is subject to being abrogated.

That which is essentially miraculous is not subject to being abrogated.

Thus, the Qur'an is not essentially miraculous.

We can prove the second premise of this argument in the following manner:

That which is essentially inimitable is not capable of being imitated by anyone, even God. Otherwise, it would not be essentially inimitable. This is because if it were capable of being imitated—even by God—then when it was imitated, its essential quality would cease to exist. In this case, it would not be essential to it. This goes against the assumption.

That which is incapable of being imitated—even by God—is incapable of being abrogated—even by God.

Thus, that which is essentially miraculous is not capable of being

abrogated—even by God.

This argument is clearly invalid. The fallacy in the argument stems from the word “essential” used in the phrase “essential inimitability.” Apparently, the person making the argument assumes that this essential inimitability is absolute and related to all beings, even God. No one ever made such a claim. “Essential inimitability” implies that the Qur’an is not capable of being imitated by *man* due to a quality, which is essentially inherent within it, not because of some extraneous factor. Thus, this argument also rests on fallacious grounds.

Religious Arguments

1st Argument:

In the 31st verse of *Sūrat al-Anfāl*, God relates the following from the disbelievers: “If we wished, we *could* have said something similar to it (i.e., the Qur’an). It is nothing but the stories of the ancients.”

Although God does not explicitly state here that the disbelievers are lying, the 30th to 32nd verses of this chapter relate certain false claims of the disbelievers. This is a clue that this claim is also probably false. This probability renders this argument indecisive.

2nd Argument:

In the 146th verse of *Sūrat al-A’rāf*, God states: “I will turn away from My signs those who are unjustly proud in the Earth; and if they see every sign, they will not believe in it; and if they see the way of rectitude, they do not take it for a way; and if they see the way of error, they take it for a way; this is because they rejected Our communications, and were heedless of them.”

Apparently, this verse has nothing to do with the topic at hand. This is because the word *āyāt* (signs) is a reference to the cosmological signs of God’s power that exist in the external world, not the verses of the Qur’an.

What is more, it states that the pride of these individuals prevents them from believing in God, even though they witness the signs of God’s power in the horizons.

Arguments Against *Ṣarfah*

1st Argument: The Opponents of the Qur'an Were Amazed at the Eloquence of the Qur'an.

If the Qur'an were not essentially a miracle, rather, God prevented its opponents from imitating it, then these opponents would not be amazed at the nature of the Qur'an itself, rather, by their inability to imitate it.

However, history tells us that they were actually amazed at the Qur'an itself.

The Qur'an is essentially miraculous and inimitable. ((Muḥammad ibn 'Umar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Nihāyat al-Ījāz fī Dirāyat al-I'jāz* (Qum: Rā'id, 1394), p. 26-27.))

2nd Argument: The Inimitability of the Qur'an is Eternal.

If the Qur'an were not essentially a miracle, rather, God prevented its opponents from imitating it, then the inimitability of the Qur'an would not have to last forever for it to be a miracle. In other words, if God prevented the opponents of the Qur'an from imitating it once, even though they had the power to do so, then it would be enough to convince them that it came from God.

However, the inimitability of the Qur'an is eternal and must last forever. Apparently, the truth of this premise rests upon certain verses of the Qur'an that indicate human beings will never be able to produce the likes of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an is essentially a miracle and inimitable. ((‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, *al-Risālah al-Shāfiyah* (Qum: Maktabat Ayat-Llah al-Mar‘ashīal-Najafī, 1396), p. 146-148.))

It seems that this argument is somewhat problematic. Apparently, the only thing that can be gathered from the verses of the Qur'an is that the Qur'an will *never* be reproduced by humans. It does not say that it *cannot* be reproduced by humans. This is while the consequent of the first premise allows for it to be reproduced later on without contradicting its miraculous nature. Thus, the matter that has actually been affirmed in the consequent has not been negated in the second premise. This objection seems warranted enough, unless someone could prove that the emphasis that the Qur'an places on this matter

proves that it will not occur and, what is more, that it is also impossible.

3rd Argument: The Qur'an was not Preceded by Anything like It.

If the Qur'an were not essentially a miracle, rather, God prevented its opponents from imitating it, then something like the Qur'an would have existed before its revelation, or its opponents would not have been able to distinguish whether the Qur'an is essentially miraculous, or whether God was preventing them from imitating it.

However, nothing similar to the Qur'an existed before its revelation, and the opponents of the Qur'an were able to distinguish where its inimitability lied. The proof for the verity of this premise lies in the fact that if works actually existed that resembled the Qur'an and that predated its revelation, then the opponents of the Qur'an would have mentioned it when they were challenged to imitate it. That they did not shows that nothing like the Qur'an existed before it.

Thus, the Qur'an is essentially miraculous. ((Muhammad al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqilānī, *I'jāz al-Qur'ān* (Qum: Maktabat Āyatullah al-Mar'ashī an-Najafī, 1398), p. 30.))

4th Argument: If the Inimitability of the Qur'an Stemmed from Something Outside It, then It Should Have Used the Least Eloquent of Words.

If the inimitability of the Qur'an stemmed from the fact that God prevented its opponents from imitating it—even though they essentially had the power to do so—then it would have been better for God to have used the least eloquent of words in the Qur'an. This is because its opponents would have felt the power of God and their own inability to oppose it in a more tangible manner. In this way, the miraculous nature of the Qur'an would have been better felt by them.

However, the Qur'an does not use the least eloquent of words.

The inimitability of the Qur'an does not stem from the fact that God prevents its opponents from imitating it. ((Ibid.))

Conclusion

Now that we have seen the arguments for and against the theory of the accidental inimitability of the Qur'an, we can conclude that this theory is logically unsound and religiously unacceptable. Therefore, the only rationally and religiously acceptable theory is to say that the Qur'an is essentially inimitable and miraculous.

And all praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the worlds.

Sayyid Shiraz Husain Agha teaches the rational sciences in the seminary of Qum, Iran.