



The Canonical Recitations and the Inimitable Miracle of the Qur'ān

by Dr. Roman Patwary

Recite With Love



Our tradition is filled with prophets given miracles that were passed down to us as vivid stories and lessons to learn therefrom. The sea parted for Mūsā ؑ. The leper was healed and the dead spoke for ʿĪsā ؑ. Our Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was also given similar miracles narrated as discrete events throughout his life. However, he was also given something more. A miracle that would not turn into an “old story” with the passing of time and generations, but one that would remain to be experienced by all. This is our book, the noble Qurʾān.

Throughout the many different fields of Islamic study, the Qurʾān is defined as:

“The muʿjiz word of Allah, revealed to the Seal of the Prophets and Messengers Muhammad ﷺ, through the angel Gabriel ؑ, written in the Maṣāḥif, transmitted to us through continuous narration, whose recitation is an act of worship, beginning with Sūrah al-Fātiḥah and ending with Sūrah al-Nās”.¹

Unlike the companions, we did not see the Qurʾān being revealed to the Prophet ﷺ through the angel Gabriel ؑ, nor did we hear him ﷺ tell us his firsthand accounts. We did not witness the writing and compilation of the Qurʾān in various stages by the great companions. All of this has come to us through the strongest chains of narration, and we accept it wholeheartedly. As reaffirming as these experiences would be for the believer, they are no longer available to us. However, the first part of the definition “muʿjiz word of Allah,” is one that is as available for us to experience today as it was during the very first days of revelation in Mecca.

¹al-Ṣābūnī, *al-Tibyān*, 8.

THE CONCEPT OF I'JĀZ

The above translation of the definition purposely leaves “*muʿjiz*” untranslated as it warrants its own discussion. Linguistically, it is defined as an inability to do something due to weakness. In this sense it is the opposite of “capable.” This can apply to an action, thought, or anything that requires effort.²

In the context of speech, *iʿjāz* refers to speech that is rhetorically and linguistically at a level that exceeds all other possible ways of conveying the same meaning. Simply put, multiple ways exist to express the same idea. However, speech that is *iʿjāz* will express this idea in the best way possible for that context, time, and audience to an undebatable degree.³ The Qurʾān encompasses this from its very first letter to the last. The incapability of all of creation to come with something like it is therefore *iʿjāz*.

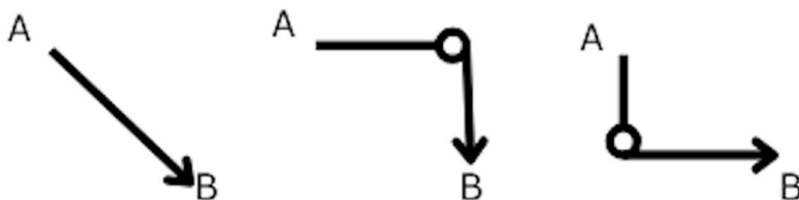
Although there are many different types of *iʿjāz* when it comes to the Qurʾān, linguistic perfection is recognized as the core aspect. ʿAbd al-Karīm Ṣāliḥ writes in his book *Al-Iʿjāz fī Tanawwuʿ Wujūh al-Qirāʾāt* (The Miraculous Nature of the Different Recitations): “This is the aspect by which Allah challenged the Arabs...It is also the root of *iʿjāz*, from which everything else branches off, as Ibn ʿAṭiyyah says in the introduction to his *tafsīr*: The correct view, held by the majority of scholars, regarding its aspect of inimitability, is that it lies in its composition, the soundness of its meanings, and the eloquence of its wording.”⁴

For clarity consider the following figure which we will continue to build on:

²al-Sharīf, *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*, 25.

³al-Jurjānī, *Dalāʾil al-Iʿjāz*, 87.

⁴Ṣāliḥ, *al-Iʿjāz fī Tanawwuʿ Wujūh al-Qirāʾāt*, 16.



If the path from A to B represents expressing an idea, there are an unlimited number of ways to do so. However, the first figure is clearly the best way of expressing this idea. The second and third methods will also get the idea across, but they are replicable (one is simply a mirror image of another) and certainly not the best way to get to point B. The first figure, then, for our purposes, can represent speech that is *muʿjiz*: It is the best way to get to point B (to express an idea) and it is irreplicable.

Classical scholars have described this through the centuries. al-Bāqillānī writes,

“Thus, the combination of these elements in its composition...constitutes a virtue unique to the Qurʾān...Humans have been unable to produce anything like it for multiple reasons...If you contemplate the Qurʾān, you will find these qualities within it to be at the height of nobility and excellence. You will see no words more eloquent, robust, or melodious, nor any composition more beautifully structured or more perfectly harmonious and coherent. As for its meanings...they stand unrivaled in their respective domains, ascending to the highest pinnacles of excellence in their nature and attributes.”⁵

Imam al-Qurṭubī describes this concept in the introduction of his *tafsīr* where he describes the different ways in which the Qurʾān is *muʿjiz*: “The unprecedented composition unlike any composition in the speech of the Arabs or of others, the style which differs from all the stylistic methods of the Arabs. A robustness of expression that could never be produced by any creation, the

⁵al-Bāqillānī, *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*, 15.

capacity to handle and deploy the Arabic language in an unprecedented manner.”⁶

With the above in mind, we can now consider the following:



The path from A to B still represents expressing an idea. However, now there is a point C, which represents a rhetorical nuance or technique that must be incorporated to express this idea in its ideal fashion. Now the first figure is no longer *muʿjiz*, because the best possible way to express this idea must incorporate point C.

THE CHALLENGE

The incapability to find fault with, or to come with something like the Qurʾān is highlighted in multiple places in the Qurʾān in the form of a challenge:

Say, “If all the humans and jinns join together to produce anything like this Qurʾān, they will not (be able to) come up with anything like it, even if they assist one another. –

17:88

If you are in doubt about what We have revealed to Our servant, then bring a Sūrah similar to this, and do call your supporters other than Allah, if you are truthful – 2:23

⁶Ṣāliḥ, *al-Iʿjāz fī Tanawwuʿ Wujūh al-Qirāʾāt*, 16.

It is important to note who this challenge was being issued to. This is illustrated in the following story regarding Ḥassān ibn Thābit رضي الله عنه, a companion and personal poet of the Prophet ﷺ renowned for his eloquence and literary ability.

Al-Nābighah ibn Dhubyān was a judge of poetry, for whom a tent would be erected in the market of ‘Ukāz, where poets would gather. Ḥassān ibn Thābit entered and presented his poetry praising his own people, roughly translating to:

'Our large bowls (for hospitality) gleam in the morning light... and our swords drip with blood from valor.

We are the sons of al-'Unqa' and the sons of Muharriq... How noble are our (maternal) uncles, and how noble are our (paternal) uncles!'"

Al-Nābighah pointed out to him that he could have used another word for “bowls” to indicate a greater number which would serve his purpose of illustrating generosity better. If he had said “sparkle in the darkness,” instead of “gleam in the morning light,” it would have been more eloquent in praise because guests arrive more frequently at night. He also said his swords “drip.” Had he said, they flow,” it would have conveyed a greater outpouring and thus more ferocity in battle.⁷

The people with this level of mastery, passion and scrutiny for literature were challenged to bring something like the Qur’ān. The same people that were able to find so many faults in two lines of poetry by an expert like Ḥassān ibn Thābit رضي الله عنه could not find a single point of objection in the eloquence and rhetoric of the Qur’ān despite being vehemently opposed to it.

⁷al-Iṣḥāhānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 9:384.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

The aforementioned is known and accepted by Muslims throughout the world today but is often taken at face value. What does linguistic inimitability actually mean? Every word of the Qurʾān is in its perfect place such that if it were moved it would cease to be Qurʾān. Even if the general meaning remains the same, that word served a purpose that made it *muʿjiz* – that made it Qurʾān.

To illustrate this in a simple example, the following are two very similar verses:

Do not kill your children due to fear of poverty. We provide for them and for you. 17:31

Do not kill your children due to poverty. We provide for you and for them. 6:151

In the first verse, poverty is not present, but there is a fear that an extra mouth to feed will push the family into poverty. The concern is about the extra mouth that will need feeding. In this case, Allah providing for the children is mentioned first.

In the second verse, poverty is already present. The concern is with the family that already exists before the child arrives. Allah reassures them by mentioning that He provides for them first, then the future children.⁸

The slight difference in the order of words makes each verse perfect for its context. To fully appreciate this, one has to consider the context in which these verses were recited. They were read from memory by a man ﷺ that could not read or write to a hostile audience that were seething for any minor mistake or slip that could prove that this is all fabrication. This audience was not simply laymen, but the utmost scholars of language and poetry as mentioned in the story above. Furthermore, the Qurʾān was revealed over a period of twenty-three years in bits and pieces. For one man to keep all this in his mind for that

⁸al-Kirmānī, *al-Burhān*, 114.

period of time, and reveal it in pieces to a hostile audience with no editorial process, while maintaining the level of eloquence and rhetoric to the level of single letters and particles, is not humanly possible.

THE CANONICAL READINGS

This now brings us to an aspect of the Qurʾān that is perhaps less spoken about in this context – the canonical readings.

Currently, the vast majority of the Muslim world recites the Qurʾān in the way transmitted by Imam Ḥafṣ, while parts of North Africa may recite in the reading of Imam Qālūn or Imam Warsh. Despite the widespread use of the recitation of Imam Ḥafṣ in our time, it is in no way any more authentic or legitimate than the other authentically transmitted readings. If one were to live their entire life reading Qurʾān and praying in the recitation of Imam Khallād, for example, all their worship would be valid from a technical standpoint. If one goes through life and only ever learns the recitation of Imam Abū al-Ḥārith, and never recites a single page in the recitation of Imam Ḥafṣ, it is no different than someone who goes through life knowing nothing but the recitation of Imam Ḥafṣ.

Imam Ibn al-Jazarī, the authority in this field writes:

“It is obligatory to accept everything authentically reported from the Prophet ﷺ regarding this matter; no one in the Ummah is at liberty to reject it, and belief in it is mandatory. And indeed, it is all revealed by Allah, for each recitation stands in relation to the others just as one verse does to another; one must believe in all of them and follow the meanings they convey, both in terms of knowledge and practice”⁹

Consider the example of someone who is tasked with finding a flower and comes across a garden filled with roses, magnolias, tulips, and various other types of flowers. Each flower on its own would fulfill his task of finding a flower. None

⁹Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, 2:148.

are more legitimate of a flower than another. If he picks one, it would suffice in fulfilling his task. If he picks multiple, he will start to appreciate certain aspects of different flowers that he would not with just one, however his task would still be fulfilled by just picking one. Every recitation is sufficient to fulfill the core purpose of the Qurʾān being a guidance for humanity. But when we start studying multiple, we notice subtleties and a beauty we otherwise would not have. And for Allah is the highest of examples.

IʿJĀZ AND THE CANONICAL READINGS

Once we establish that it is indisputable that all of the canonical recitations are equal and have authentic chains going back to the Prophet ﷺ, we have to extend the aforementioned definition of the Qurʾān to all its authentic recitations.

“The muʿjiz word of Allah, revealed to the Seal of the Prophets and Messengers Muhammad ﷺ, through the angel Gabriel ؑ, written in the maṣāḥif, transmitted to us through continuous narration, whose recitation is an act of worship, beginning with Sūrah al-Fātiḥah and ending with Sūrah al-Nās.”¹⁰

Every recitation fits this definition equally. While we are accustomed to going through the Qurʾān in the recitation of Ḥafṣ, researching and delving into the inimitable eloquence and rhetoric, we can do the same for every other recitation and find it just as fruitful, mesmerizing, and muʿjiz.

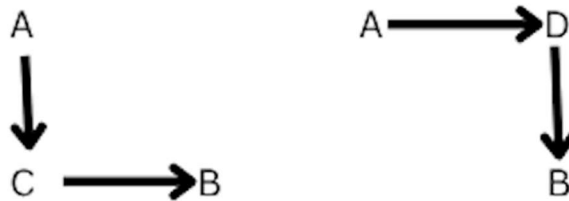
In fact, scholars throughout the centuries have held the very concept of differing *qirāʾāt* as a proof of inimitability on its own. ʿAbd al-Karīm Ṣālīḥ addresses this in *Al-Iʿjāz fī Tanawwuʿ Wujūh al-Qirāʾāt* in great detail:

“Among the aspects of the iʿjāz (inimitability) of the Noble Qurʾān is the multiplicity of its readings...The Qurʾānic readings are among the most prominent means that realize the inimitability of the Noble Qurʾān, owing to their expressive dimensions that achieve

¹⁰al-Ṣābūnī, *al-Tibyān*, 8.

the utmost correspondence to what the circumstances of those being addressed require...each reading may carry its own distinct meaning and consideration, with both considerations intended...For a single word being revealed according to two readings means nothing other than that each reading carries its own consideration such that both considerations are intended, as indicated by the context. Each reading carries its own benefit and potential signification, such that the multiple readings of a single word complement one another, differing in how their meanings serve to convey the intended sense in a way that corresponds to people's circumstances.”¹¹

Going back to our previous figure:



We mentioned before that C represents a rhetorical aspect that must be incorporated for the speech to be expressed in the most ideal way. However, there may sometimes exist a different rhetorical aspect that is equally as ideal but different than the one represented by point C. The second figure above illustrates this. The paths taken to get to B, to express an idea, are equal. However, they get there using equal, yet different aspects of eloquence, C and D. Although personal stylistic preferences may still exist, they both end up in point B. This is the different recitations.

Consider the verse:

¹¹Ṣāliḥ, *al-Iʿjāz fī Tanawwuʿ Wujūh al-Qirāʾāt*, 8.

يَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الْخَمْرِ وَالْمَيْسِرِ ۖ قُلْ فِيهِمَا إِثْمٌ كَبِيرٌ وَمَنْفَعٌ لِلنَّاسِ وَإِثْمُهُمَا أَكْبَرُ مِنْ نَفْعِهِمَا

They ask you about wine and gambling. Say, “In both there is great sin, and some benefits for people. And their sin is greater than their benefit.” 2:219

In the recitations of Imams Ḥamzah and al-Kisāʿī, “*kabīr*” is read as “*kathīr*” resulting in the translation: “....in both there is abundant sin...” One can appreciate that the general meaning here does not change. However, as we have established that part of the *ijāz* of the Qurʾān is using the best possible way to express an idea, words cannot simply be interchangeable without consequence.¹² If one were to replace “*kabīr*” with the word “*ʿaẓīm*,” for example it would still give the same general meaning, but that would no longer be Qurʾān.¹³ There is something then, in these two specific words, *kabīr* and *kathīr*, that qualify them in this context to be Qurʾān, while all other possible synonyms are not. In terms of our previous figure, *kabīr* and *kathīr* are points C and D. These two words are *muʿjiz* in this context, while all other possibilities are not.

QIRĀʾĀT AND DIVINE SPEECH

Imam Ibn al-Jazarī expands this further speaking of the different recitations:

*"And among these benefits is what this contains of the utmost eloquence, the perfection of iʿjāz, the extreme of concision, and the beauty of brevity — since each reading stands in the place of a whole separate verse. For the variation of wording in a single word stands in the place of multiple verses — and had the meaning of every wording been made into its own independent verse, the resulting lengthiness would not be hidden."*¹⁴

¹²al-Bāqillānī, *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*, 16.

¹³ This is in the context of defining what is considered Qurʾān. Issues of whether the prayer would be valid or not if such a substitution were made is a separate issue and is discussed in books of *fiqh*.

¹⁴Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, 2:150.

Imam Ibn al-Jazarī stipulates that what the Qurʾān is able to do with a substitution of a single word would normally take multiple verses to accomplish. But Allah ﷻ is able to do that with the substitution of one word – the epitome of eloquence, brevity, and as Ibn al-Jazarī writes “the perfection of *iʿjāz*.”

Revisiting our example above:

يَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الْخَمْرِ وَالْمَيْسِرِ ۖ قُلْ فِيهِمَا إِثْمٌ كَبِيرٌ وَمَنْفَعٌ لِلنَّاسِ وَإِثْمُهُمَا أَكْبَرُ مِنْ نَفْعِهِمَا

They ask you about wine and gambling. Say, “In both there is great sin, and some benefits for people. And their sin is greater than their benefit.” 2:219

The majority recitation emphasizes the gravity of the sin one incurs when they are involved with gambling and alcohol.¹⁵ It is in accordance with the classification of intoxicants and gambling as major sins.

The recitations of Imams Ḥamzah and al-Kisāʾī use the word “abundant” instead of “great,” alluding to quantity instead of quality. This can be understood in the light of the statement of the Prophet ﷺ, where he denounces not only the one who drinks alcohol, but also the seller, the buyer, the carrier, the one who presses the grapes, etc.¹⁶ By the time the alcohol makes it to the consumer, there have been a large number of people who have already incurred sin.

The point Imam Ibn al-Jazarī makes is apparent. Just in the explanation above we can appreciate how much more verbose we have to be to express what Allah ﷻ expressed with the substitution of a single word. One recitation highlights the gravity of the sin linguistically, whereas the other does the same by alluding to the far-reaching effects of it. Different but not contradictory. Individually sufficient, but together even more comprehensive, and both inimitable in their

¹⁵al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, 326.

¹⁶al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, 401.

eloquence and rhetoric. The “variation” is simply an extension of that inimitability.

THE CHALLENGE AND THE GIFT

Variations in different *qirāʾāt* are therefore not merely always phonetical or dialectical differences and interchangeable synonyms, but carefully and divinely selected alternatives that embody all the characteristics of divine speech. It is a variation that captures all the utmost – *muʿjiz* – ways to express an idea and packs it with meaning to a level that is humanly impossible. The challenge to bring something like it stands unmet. Instead of the different readings being a source of uneasiness and doubt, it is a further proof of the miraculous nature of the Qurʾān. Ibn al-Jazarī writes:

*“Among them is the great proof and clear significance of this, as despite the abundance and diversity of this difference, there is no contradiction in it. Rather, it all confirms one another, clarifies one another, and bears witness to one another in one style and manner. This is only a profound sign and conclusive proof of the truthfulness of the one who brought it ﷺ.”*¹⁷

On the opposite end of those wishing to challenge and disprove are the believers who are looking to learn and appreciate. In this is a profound gift from Allah ﷻ. He gave us these readings as an additional means of reading, understanding, learning, and reflecting. If one spends his/her life delving into and implementing the Qurʾān through one recitation, what a worthy life that would be. But the Most Merciful expands that for us and gives us the opportunity to multiply that many times over by trying to understand the deeper meaning and lessons of these different recitations. In the words of Imam Ibn al-Jazarī:

¹⁷Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, 2:151.

*“Among these is the immense reward granted to this Ummah, in that they devote their utmost effort to pursuing the meanings of those (readings), deriving wisdom and legal rulings from the implications of every word, and uncovering its hidden secrets and subtle indications...Thus, their Lord answered them: "I never let the work of any worker among you—whether male or female—go to waste," for the reward is commensurate with the exertion.*¹⁸

¹⁸Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, 2:152

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Roman Patwary grew up in Queens, New York. He completed his memorization of the Qur'ān in 2011 while attending college. He then pursued a career in medicine while continuing his studies in Qur'ānic recitation and the Arabic language. During this time, he earned a certificate in the foundational Islamic sciences, certifications in multiple traditional Islamic texts, and certification in the ten canonical *qirā'āt* (variant recitations of the Qur'ān). He is currently pursuing a master's degree in Arabic Language and Literature. Roman serves as a *khatīb* and *imām* at local *masājīd*, delivering weekly *khutbahs*, leading prayers, and teaching. Professionally, Roman is a practicing physician. He resides on Long Island, New York with his wife and children.

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