Chapter 17

The “Scientific Miracle of the Qurʾān”

Map and Assessment

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1 Introduction

According to a popular exegetical trend, the Qurʾān is characterized by the presence of scientific notions that are described with amazing accuracy despite the fact that those very notions were completely unexplored in the Prophet’s time; as such, they are believed to be evidence of the text’s divine origin. This trend, which has antecedents in nineteenth century Egypt, was popularized by the works of a French physician, Maurice Bucaille (1920–98), and a Canadian embryologist, Keith Moore (b. 1925), and currently flourishes on the Internet as well as in TV programs. The line of interpretation it follows reformulates the traditional doctrine of the formal inimitability of the Qurʾān (iʿjāz) in terms of “scientific inimitability” or “scientific miraculousness” (iʿjāz ʿilmī), and it is sometimes widened to include the hadīth as well. On the one hand, it is a fact that there are allusions to natural phenomena in the Qurʾān, and the producers of this line of interpretation (who usually lack formal theological training) express a genuine and laudable desire to harmonize religion and science. On the other hand, their methods have major methodological flaws and they have made significant error, and so have been criticized from their earliest works.

This study, after developing a precise classification of iʿjāz ʿilmī, summarizes and discusses the criticism levelled at it, and examines how the scientific interpretation of the Qurʾān is liable to blend with pseudo-science to the detriment of a solid harmonization of science and religion and a genuine appreciation of natural science (here meant as the construction of knowledge about the natural world through repeatable experiments, mathematical models, and acceptance of results after peer review). Furthermore, the study offers some ideas that can be implemented in order to address iʿjāz ʿilmī in the Muslim world effectively and fairly.

The first section traces a taxonomy of iʿjāz ʿilmī, with a particular focus on material that can currently be located on the Internet; the second summarizes different aspects of criticism of iʿjāz ʿilmī; and the third highlights the main conclusions and contains some proposals concerning how to address iʿjāz ʿilmī.
One or Many Scientific Miracles?

Classically, the term *iʿjāz* indicates the “invalidation of a challenge,” i.e. the impossibility of imitating the Qurʾān in both content and form. In other words, the term refers to the theological doctrine according to which a sign of the divinity of the Qurʾān is its incomparability or the impossibility of replicating it; the like of the Qurʾān could not be produced even in a joint effort by human and supernatural beings. This teaching is rooted in passages such as Q 17:88: “Say, ‘If mankind and the *jinn* gathered in order to produce the like of this Qurʾān, they could not produce the like of it, even if they were to each other assistants.’”

In the contemporary debate over Islam and science, *iʿjāz* is mainly used as a short form of *iʿjāz ʿilmī*. The adjective *ʿilmī* derives from the noun *ʿilm*, which traditionally refers to knowledge (*al-maʿrifa*) and can be interpreted as specifically referring to natural science. The expression *iʿjāz ʿilmī* can thus be translated as the “scientific miracle” (or “scientific miraculousness”) of the Qurʾān. It denotes an exegetical trend rather than a specific theological teaching. From now on I will use such expressions interchangeably.

In the *iʿjāz ʿilmī* the traditional doctrine of the inimitability of the Qurʾān (*iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*) is reformulated in terms of “scientific inimitability.” In other words, the exegetes who uphold and highlight *iʿjāz ʿilmī* identify a correspondence between a passage or passages of the Qurʾān and what they perceive or present as “scientific data” or “facts” in order to argue that such correspondence is proof of the divine origin of the Qurʾān itself. The basic line of the argument is that, given that such accuracy (or the specific piece of information) could not have been available to, or arrived at, either by the Prophet or by the most scientifically informed people at the time of the revelation, the text clearly must have a divine origin. A “scientific miracle,” therefore, is not a supernatural deed (an example of a supernatural miracle can be Moses’s or his brother Aaron’s staff turning into a serpent, mentioned in both the Old Testament and the Qurʾān2) but the structure of the argumentation in which “scientific” and supernatural miracles are presented is *analogous*. In both cases there is an extraordinary, amazing occurrence (cf. the etymology of the word *miracle*, Latin *mirari*, “to be amazed”) that cannot or could not be performed nor repeated by human beings alone, and whose occurrence implies or demonstrates the existence and power of the divine.

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1  Cf. the English word “genie”; inhabitants of the immaterial (or subtly material) world into which ours is plunged.
2  Exodus 7:8–12 and Q 7:107.