

What We Talk About When We Talk About I'jāz

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Recent conversations with Salman Hameed and Vika Gardner at the [Center for the Study of Science in Muslim Societies](#) (SSiMS, Hampshire College, Amherst, MA) about [their ongoing project](#) made me aware once again of the volume of *i'jāz*-related material in the contemporary discourse over Islam and science, especially represented by videos uploaded on YouTube and other websites.

Classically, the term *i'jāz* indicates the “invalidation of a challenge,” the impossibility of imitating the Qur'ān as to its content and form. In other words the term refers to the theological doctrine according to which a sign of the divinity of the Qur'ān is its incomparability or impossibility to be replicated; the like of the Qur'ān could not be produced even in a joint effort by human beings and supernatural ones.

This teaching is rooted in specific Qur'anic passages such as 17:88: “Say, ‘If mankind and the *jinn*¹ gathered in order to produce the like of this Qur'ān, they could not produce the like of it, even if they were to each other assistants.’”

In the contemporary debate over Islam and science, *i'jāz* is mainly used as a short form for *i'jāz 'ilmī*. The adjective *'ilmī* derives from the substantive *'ilm* that broadly refers to knowledge and can be interpreted as specifically referring to science. The expression *i'jāz 'ilmī* can thus be translated as “scientific miracle” (or “scientific miraculousness”) of the Qur'ān and it denotes an exegetical trend rather than a specific theological teaching. In this piece I will use such expressions interchangeably.

In the *i'jāz 'ilmī* the traditional doctrine of the inimitability of the Qur'ān is reformulated in terms of “scientific inimitability.” In other words, the exegetes who uphold and produce *i'jāz 'ilmī* identify a correspondence between some passage of the Qur'ān and (what they perceive or present as) “scientific data” or “facts” to argue that such correspondence is proof of the divine origin of the Qur'ān itself.

The basic line of the argument is that, given that such accuracy (or the specific piece of information) could not be available to (or achieved by) neither the Prophet nor the scientifically best-informed people at the time of the revelation, the text clearly must have divine origin.

A “scientific miracle” therefore is not supernatural (an example of supernatural miracle can be Moses' or his brother Aaron's staff turning into a snake, mentioned both in the

¹ Cf. the English “genie;” inhabitants of the immaterial (or subtly material) world into which ours is plunged.

Old Testament² and in the Qur'ān³) but the structure of the argumentation with which “scientific” and supernatural miracles are illustrated is *analogous*.

In both cases we have an extraordinary, amazing occurrence (cf. the etymology of the term *miracle*, Lt. *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 divinity.

By “occurrence” we should understand in this context the *match* Qur'anic passage-“scientific information” and *not* the specific content of the “scientific information” *per se*. In other words, the “scientific miracle” of the Qur'ān is *not* aimed at the description of natural phenomena as a miracle of God (albeit this kind of statement is *also* present at various levels of the debate over Islam and science as well, including *i'jāz*). It should also be emphasised that the *i'jāz 'ilmī* is *not* the attempt at explaining miraculous narratives as natural processes either (for example arguing that the parting of the Red Sea was a natural albeit extraordinary or unique hydrogeological phenomenon).⁴

The specific points made, or lines followed, by the advocates of *i'jāz 'ilmī* vary according to what they present or perceive as “scientific.”

They may be classified as follows.

- (a) The Qur'ān contains passages coinciding with scientific *theories*; for instance the theory of an expanding universe.
- (b) The Qur'ān contains passages that describe *natural phenomena* currently ascertained by science but unknown at the time of revelation. For instance: the development of the foetus in the mother's womb or planetary motion.
- (c) The Qur'ān contains passages that accurately describe *specific, circumscribed facts or events* or *occurrences* currently ascertained by scientific investigation (possibly but not necessarily unknown at the time of the revelation). For instance: the preservation of the mummy of the Pharaoh who pursued Moses or the splitting of the Moon.⁵

² Exodus 7:8-12.

³ Q 7:107.

⁴ Furthermore *i'jāz 'ilmī* is *not* a theory according to which a scientist who is confronted with alternative theories should choose the most Qur'anic-compatible one, nor is it related with the discussion of religious guidelines for the ethics of scientific research.

⁵ Some interpreters namely maintain that the Moon's splitting evoked in Qur'ān 54:1 was a real event whose signs have been observed by NASA astronauts. In this case we have a miracle proper (i.e. a supernatural event) whose narrative allegedly matches current scientific observations (scientific miracle of the Qur'ān). But there is also a naturalistic interpretation of the event (i.e. the splitting is said to have

(d) The Qur'ān contains passages that foretell *contemporary scientific-technological developments or inventions*. For example: aviation or the exploration of space.

(e) The Qur'ān displays numerical patterns that correspond to the *numerical patterns exhibited by natural phenomena and/or occurring in scientific laws*. This might be called numerological *i'jāz*.

(f) Permanent or widespread natural phenomena (for example the shape of the continents or of an animal's skeleton) match some proper *symbols or terms* of Islam, such as the *shahāda* (i.e. the declaration of one's belief in the oneness of God and the acceptance of Muhammad as His Prophet), the name of God, or the positions of the prayer. No direct reference is made in this case to Qur'anic passages. We might call this "*i'jāz* without Qur'ān." The *i'jāz* without Qur'ān seems to be a rather amateurish, homemade product; it requires minimal or even non-existent theological and scientific knowledge to be produced and its existence and emergence can be related to the increasing availability of computer programmes that allow easy manipulation of images.⁶

i'jāz (*'ilmī*) and scientific miracle of the Qur'ān (or "of Islam") appear thus to be umbrella expressions under which different lines of exegesis can actually be pursued. Each interpreter can emphasise one or more of the points above. For instance, an advocate of the scientific miraculousness of the Qur'ān might highlight the accuracy of some descriptions in the Qur'ān but ignore (or even reject) numerological interpretations thereof. It should also be pointed out that the different lines can merge due to the nature of the (allegedly) scientific matter mentioned (that for instance may involve theoretical as well as factual elements that are not always separable).

happened according to natural laws) still framed in the *i'jāz 'ilmī* discourse. For different interpretations see Görke 2010.

⁶ It can be debated if we should group those cases in which *specific configurations of circumscribed natural phenomena are said to recall or match symbols or terms proper of Islam* under *i'jāz* (for instance when the name of God is said to appear in a sliced fruit or in the clouds). A distinct if analogous case, less apt to be categorized under *i'jāz* but still relevant in the reconstruction of the contemporary landscape of the debate over Islam and science, is constituted by *those cases in which supernatural (or at least highly anomalous) phenomena are said to recall symbols and terms proper of Islam*, such as the case of the narrative, circulating on the Internet as early as 2009, of Qur'anic verses appearing on a baby's skin in Dagestan (See: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/6401541/Koran-verses-appear-on-skin-of-miracle-Russian-baby.html>. I am only mentioning this as an example for a more general category and I shall refrain from discussing the veracity of such narrative here). Finally, for the sake of completeness we should also mention the existence of the discussion of *Qur'anic para- or pseudo-technology*: it has been claimed for instance that the Qur'ān has special powers that can be intercepted, channelled, transmitted and used through technological devices (recalled in Guessoum 2011, 5-6).

A point frequently stated in the context of *i'jāz* (but not exclusively in it) is that the Qur'ān invites observation of natural phenomena and to consider them as signs of God. The mention of natural phenomena as signs (Ar. *āyāt*) in the Qur'ān is a fact, however the advocates of *i'jāz* may emphasise the frequency of such references as well as their accuracy. It can be debated if such point taken in isolation is *sufficient* to detect the presence of an *i'jāz*-like discourse. One might also ask, especially after considering point (a): if an author believes (say) in biological evolution and he or she states that the Qur'ān *supports* it, or that it is in *harmony* with it, is that classifiable as an expression of *i'jāz*? A possible response to such questions is that we may only talk of *i'jāz* proper when it is explicitly stated or implied that there is a *match* between the Qur'ān and “science” and that such match *demonstrates* the divine origin of the Qur'ān.

The thesis of the scientific precision of the Qur'ān can be supported together with the thesis that Jewish and Christian scriptures are not as accurate or are even untenable from a logical or scientific perspective, due to the errors interpolated by the humans who have transmitted or manipulated such texts. In this sense *i'jāz 'ilmī* can go hand in hand with the doctrine of *tahrīf*, the “distortion” or “alteration” of Jewish and Christian scriptures. However this is not always the case.

Obviously an author or critic who deems worthless or ill founded the whole debate over the harmony of Islam/religion and science will be inclined to reject *i'jāz per se*. Other authors might recognize that the match between scripture and information presented as scientific can be argued for with different degrees of quality when it comes both to textual exegesis and to the accuracy of scientific information. For instance arguing that the foetus develops in the mother's womb is fairly accurate if compared to the statement that the Moon was split some 1,400 years ago as verified by NASA astronauts, which is simply untrue (unless, of course, you advocate a literal reading of the scriptures, believe in supernatural miracles, and add some conspiracy theory to the picture, but this would lead us too far from the scope of the present discussion). It is also admissible that some types of *i'jāz* as described in the typology above can hardly be reconciled with scientific information whatsoever (numerology and manipulated images of continents and skeletons cannot count as scientific information, not even as a simplified or popularized one).

Needless to say, recognizing that the information presented as scientific in *i'jāz* can be more or less accurate is not tantamount to stating that *i'jāz* can be a scientific enterprise proper, not even in limited cases.

Attempts at “scientifically” *reading* the Qur'ān date back at least to the efforts of the Egyptian Tantāwī Jawharī (1862-1940), author of *Jewels in the Interpretation of the Holy Qur'ān, Containing Marvels of the Beauties of the Creation and Wonderfully Luminous Divine Signs* in 26 volumes. However, as Majid Daneshgar has recently [showed](#),⁷ such

⁷ See Daneshgar 2014.

reading is not necessarily tantamount to subscribing to the thesis of the “scientific miraculousness.” What Tantāwī Jawharī was rather engaged in, according to Daneshgar’s interpretation, is the *understanding* of Qur’anic verses through scientific data. It is however likely that an enthusiastic or unsophisticated reader might easily confuse the theoretical framework and purpose of the two interpretations.

Another term used almost interchangeably with *i’jāz* (*‘ilmī*) is Bucailleism (or Bucaillism), from the name of the French physician Maurice Bucaille (1920-1998) who in his immensely popular book *The Bible, the Quran and Science* (1976) as well as in other writings and conferences expressed the idea of harmony between Qur’anic content and “scientific” data with unprecedented clarity and the aura of a Western convert and a successful medical doctor.

Bucaille especially stressed that the Qur’ān was astonishingly accurate about the causes of the death of the Pharaoh who pursued Moses during the exodus, whose mummy he was convinced to have identified among those conserved at the Egyptian museum in Cairo. Bucaille was also an advocate of the thesis of the corruption of Jewish and Christian scriptures, which he emphasises in his works. The identity of the mummy and the match with Qur’anic verses is presented in his main book as his own finding, but his works contain plenty of examples of a match between Qur’anic verses and scientific information that he might have taken from pre-existing texts (or perhaps learnt indirectly through conversations).

Having conducted some research on Bucaille I can state that we currently are not in a position to tell in detail which other works may have influenced the French author albeit it seems clear that he did rely on predecessors. However it should also be emphasised that *i’jāz ‘ilmī* is *not* Bucaille’s invention, that the ideas he popularized in his writings *included, but were not limited to*, those of the “scientific miraculousness” of the Qur’ān, and also that Bucaille *did not pursue all of the exegetical lines* listed above: for example numerological speculations are absent from his writings.⁸ For all these reasons the label “Bucaill(e)ism” should not be considered as completely accurate in a scholarly discussion.

Bucaille’s work inspired a flood of similar ones, usually produced by authors trained in natural science or engineering and with no formal theological training. *I’jāz* and/or Bucailleism does not meet with unanimous consent in the Muslim world; for instance it has been criticised by Muslim interpreters (theologians and scientists alike) as leading to poor theology (i.e. to treating the Qur’ān as a scientific encyclopaedia), as the vehicle of pseudoscience or utterly untrue information, and as the expression of an unhealthy inferiority complex towards “Western” science.⁹ However it remains a popular genre

⁸ See Bigliardi 2014a, 25-27 and 181-183.

⁹ See Guessoum 2008 for a more detailed historical reconstruction and an overview of critical positions including Guessoum’s one. Regarding the “psychological” objection we should also observe that one might regard the matter the other way round, i.e., as a somewhat *commendable* opening of religion towards

that flourishes not only in print but also on TV and on the Internet. A contemporary successful advocate of *i'jāz* is, for instance, the Egyptian geologist and TV personality Zaghloul El-Naggar (b. 1933) who even works within a Commission *ad hoc* funded, *inter alia*, by the Egyptian government.¹⁰ Another advocate of *i'jāz* is the Turkish religious leader and TV preacher Harun Yahya, who contributes to spread such ideas together with his vocal criticism of Darwinism.

Already in [Islam and the Quest for Modern Science](#) I have tried to reflect in depth about the phenomenon of *i'jāz* and its nuances, taking it seriously rather than rejecting it right away and wholesale as academically worthless. I have tried to emphasise that Bucaille might still be deemed unscientific and unscholarly but that his ideas are not as simplistic and one-dimensional as his critics may present them. I have also pointed out that, whereas there is little doubt that *i'jāz* is more often than not associated with pseudoscience or with the diffusion of simply untrue information wrapped in “scientific garb,” we still have no exact data available as to the way in which *i'jāz*-related institutions and initiatives compete in specific countries and contexts for the allocation of funding, be it public or private. We can also not evaluate whether and up to what extent *i'jāz* really has the power to distract from science proper (for instance students at high school level) or whether it is rather a genre that is mainly consumed by audiences or readerships that would not be engaged in scientific enterprises anyways (at an active or politically decisional level). It is my hope that projects such as Hameed and Gardner’s one will provide us with more complete and solid data regarding such audiences and interactions.

Among the authors that I have personally been most engaged with, the one who shows the most articulate position in dealing critically and normatively with *i'jāz* is Nidhal Guessoum. Guessoum is very critical of pseudoscience and untrue information, as it is to be expected from a physicist who is also very concerned with educational issues. However he empathically understands the kind of fascination that Bucailleism can exert on a scientifically uninformed mind (having gone through the same process in his youth), and he also points out the good intentions of most authors engaged in the production of the texts devoted to the genre. Moreover, Guessoum recognizes that different readerships can be convinced by different discourses, so that *i'jāz* up to an extent might even prove harmless while reassuring some Muslim audiences.¹¹ When Guessoum advocates a moderate approach towards the interpretation of the Qur’ān in light of modern science I think he basically refers to two points: (a) that such interpretation should not be practiced exclusively; (b) that the scientific information should be accurate.

science; for instance Johannes J. G. Jansen pointed out: “(...) one cannot help admiring the courage of certain scientific exegetes of the Koran. Whereas in Christianity it took centuries before the Churches “admitted” certain scientific truths, often after bloody struggles, many modern Moslem scientific exegetes of the Koran boldly claim that the Koran, the backbone of Islam, already contains the modern sciences and their principles, and all this with a courage and vigour that deserves a nobler aim” (Jansen 1974, 54).

¹⁰ See [Bigliardi 2014a](#), 112-113. More knowledge about this Commission is still a *desideratum*.

¹¹ See [Bigliardi 2014a](#), 154-155.

To these points I might add the following suggestions.

First, that the authors interested in developing a critical, normative, inside-the-debate point of view and interested in shifting from mere polemics to the proposal of articulated educational initiatives competing with *i'jāz*, should begin with a recognition of empirical data about the production and consumption of *i'jāz* itself. Hence a project like the one currently developed at SSiMS can prove significant to external observers of the debate and participants alike.

Second, in order to better articulate such proposals they should take into account the nuances of the material usually propagated under the label “scientific miracle of the Qur’ān” and the like, a variety that is probably not entirely clear to the producers and consumers themselves of *i'jāz*. The typology that I have sketched here can of course be further discussed and improved; however it might constitute a good starting point.¹²

Third, they should insist that *i'jāz* albeit varying in content and quality is anyhow, by definition, *something different and separate from science proper*.

Fourth, they should emphasise that even “good” *i'jāz* (i.e. *i'jāz* based on fairly accurate scientific data as well as on a non-far-fetched textual exegesis) might be deemed astonishing, amazing, and surprising, but not *demonstrative* as to the divine origin of the Qur’ān, at least not in the same sense of a “scientific demonstration;” a category, one might argue, not applicable to religious matters (the category of “sign” in the sense of “something *pointing at* something else” seems more appropriate to me in this regard, and more consistent with Qur’anic lexicon). This should contribute to further dispelling the confusion between “scientific interpretation” and science proper. This last line should also be integrated by emphasis on the fact that the character of such signs, besides not being demonstrative in a strictly scientific sense, is not *exclusively demonstrative* either (one should not, for instance, forget the classical doctrine of *i'jāz*).

Finally as I have pointed out both in *Islam and the Quest for Modern Science* as well as in the discussion in this collective,¹³ albeit the adversaries of (“bad”) *i'jāz* might be more interested in “localized interventions” aimed at correcting with their writings (from time to time) the unscientific/pseudoscientific/untrue information that might be associated with specific *i'jāz* narratives, an author with a theological inclination interested in developing a theoretical framework useful to *understand* and *criticise i'jāz* while at the same time developing a radically different approach to textual exegesis might fruitfully

¹² The typology might even be corrected because of the discovery or development of new lines or arguments. For example I am personally not aware of the existence of any interpreters who claim the match between *phonetic* patterns in the Qur’ān and natural ones but it seems likely that they might eventually emerge.

¹³ See Bigliardi 2014a, 199-203.

adopt what Damian Howard [defines](#) as a post-liberal, cultural-linguistic paradigm¹⁴ that has already been adopted by Christian theology, and what I (perhaps less clearly) suggested in terms of a “Latourian approach.”

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¹⁴ See Howard 2014.