

147329 - How can the Qur'an be a miracle for the non-Arabs when it is Arabic and they do not know Arabic?

the question

The Qur'an came as a miracle from Allah to His Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), as it says in the verses of the Qur'an and in the hadeeth of al-Bukhaari, no. 7274. Hence I want to ask: How can the Qur'an be a miracle for the non-Arabs who do not know Arabic, and who formed the majority of inhabitants of the world at that time?

Detailed answer

Firstly:

The hadeeth referred to in the question is as follows:

It was narrated from Abu Hurayrah that the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "There is not a single Prophet who was not given signs so that the people would believed in him because of them. What I have been given is a Revelation that Allah has revealed to me, and I hope that I will be the one with the most followers on the Day of Resurrection."

Narrated by al-Bukhaari (1044) and Muslim (152).

Al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar (may Allah have mercy on him) said: There are several possible interpretations of the hadeeth:

It was said that what is meant is that the miracles of the Prophets have come to an end with the end of their time, and no one witnessed them except those who were present, but the miracle of the Qur'an is ongoing and will continue until the Day of Resurrection. It is extraordinary in its style and eloquence, and in what it foretold of future events of the unseen, so that no era passed except something appeared that the Qur'an said would come to pass, which proves the truthfulness of its claim. This is the strongest of the interpretations of the hadeeth.

It was also said that what is meant is that the miracles of the past were visible and could be seen with the eyes, such as the she-camel of Saalih and the staff of Moosa, whereas the miracle of the Qur'an may be comprehended with the intellect, so the number of those who followed the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) because of it were more numerous, since that which can be seen with the eyes comes to an end when the looking ends, whereas that which may be comprehended with the intellect will continue to be understood by those who come after the first generations.

Fath al-Baari, 9/70

Secondly:

The answer to the question, How can the Qur'an be a miracle for the unlettered non-Arabs who formed the majority of inhabitants of the world at that time? is as follows:

it is known that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was sent among the Arabs, who were distinguished by their great eloquence and beautiful style in speech, so Allah, may He be exalted, made the miracle or sign of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) of the same nature of that by which his people were distinguished, so that the miracle and challenge would be more effective, just as the sign of Moosa (peace be upon him) was his staff or stick, with which he overcame the deceit of the sorcerers, and the sign of 'Eesa (peace be upon him) was the healing of those who had been born blind and of the lepers, because knowledge of medicine was widespread at his time.

With regard to the non-Arabs, in the past and at present, and how the Qur'an may be a miracle for them, and whether they were included in its challenge, this may be explained from several angles:

-1-

Not all Arabs have great knowledge of the Arabic language and its style and eloquence, just as not all non-Arabs are ignorant of the Arabic language. Hence it is known that the miracle and the challenge is addressed to all those who know Arabic, whether they learned it from birth, like

the Arabs, or they learned it later on, like the non-Arabs. Thus it is clear that the case of the non-Arabs is like that of Arabs who have no knowledge of their language.

Abu ‘Abdullah al-Qurtubi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

If it is said: “With regard to reviving the dead, turning the staff into a snake and other, similar miracles, they are very clear and no one who observes that will have any doubt about it. It will be clear to all rational people and no doubt will remain; rather they will all reach a definitive conclusion after seeing that. But this is not the case with regard to your Prophet’s claim of the miraculous nature of the Qur’an, because not everyone will be able to understand its miraculous nature; rather it is only you (Arabs) who can see that, and this applies only to those Arabs who have a good command of the language, as you claim. As for those who do not have a good command of the language, or non-Arabs who do not understand Arabic, they will not understand its miraculous nature. If a non-Arab is asked to speak a word of Arabic, he will not be able to do so, so the fact that he is not able to do that, does not prove that what you are challenging him with is true. Similarly, if an Arab who does not have a good command of Arabic is asked to speak proper Arabic, he will not be able to do so; therefore for him the Qur’an is not miraculous.”

The answer to that is:

We will explain, insha Allah, some aspects of its miraculous nature, of which there are many, some of which can be understood by ordinary people, town dwellers and desert dwellers alike, and these aspects are as clear as turning the staff into a snake and raising the dead. If we assume, for the sake of argument, that it is only miraculous with regard to its eloquence and style, which is different to the style of the speech of ordinary people, then we say that the miraculous nature of the Qur’an, raising the dead and turning the staff into a snake are not going to be understood equally or at the same time by rational people. Rather the one who appreciates the miraculous nature of any miracle is the one who knows how and why that thing is a miracle, as he knows that it is something that cannot be achieved by human tricks and cannot be reached by discovering some material with special characteristics.

It may not be far-fetched to say that a specious argument may be developed in the mind of one who is ignorant of medicine or magic, which prevents him from seeing the miracle; therefore he may say: Perhaps Moosa had some extra knowledge of magic that the sorcerers did not know and had never learned, and by the same token, perhaps 'Eesa had found some stones with special qualities or some other material with special qualities by means of which he was able to achieve what he achieved. Such a specious argument can only develop in the mind of one who is ignorant of medicine and magic. As for the one who has any knowledge of medicine or magic, no such confusion will arise in his mind, because he realises, on the basis of his knowledge and experience, that the miracle performed by a prophet is something that cannot be achieved by means of professional tricks or finding some materials with special characteristics; rather it is a miracle that happens by the will of the Creator of the universe, by means of which He intended to give proof of the authenticity of the one who called people to Him. Thus we conclude that understanding of the miraculous nature of raising the dead and turning the staff into a snake was first reached by the sorcerers and magicians, and it may not have been understood by many of the fools who were ignorant of medicine and magic. The same may be said of the miraculous nature of the Qur'an, without any differences: understanding of it came to those who had knowledge of the Arabic language and would see, based on their knowledge of Arabic, the difference between the Qur'an and regular Arabic speech. Thus they would conclude that it was not within the ability of the Arabs to say things in the same style. If the eloquent Arabs and those who were well versed in Arabic were unable to match it, then others are more unlikely to be able to do so. As we say, if the doctors are unable to raise the dead and heal those who were born blind and lepers, people other than doctors are more unlikely to be able to do so; and if the sorcerers were unable to turn a stick into a snake, then people other than sorcerers are more unlikely to be able to do so.

The statement that matching the Qur'an is something that the Arabs are not able to do, and non-Arabs are not involved in this challenge, is similar to saying that only doctors are unable to raise the dead, and people other than doctors are not involved in this challenge, or saying that only sorcerers are unable to turn a stick into a snake, and people other than sorcerers are not involved in this challenge. As the challenge in the other two cases (raising the dead and turning

the stick into a snake) is expected to be undertaken by those who have the relevant skills, the same applies in the case of the Qur'an. Rather, in the case of the Qur'anic miracle, it has aspects that we will discuss which everyone can understand, whether he is a non-Arab or an Arab, a Magian or a Jew or Christian. We will discuss it below, in sha Allah.

So we may conclude from what we have said that Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) brought the Qur'an, challenged people with it and it is a miracle, and anyone who brings a miracle and challenges others with it is truthful. Therefore the certain conclusion is that Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) is true.

Al-I'laam bima fi Deen an-Nasaarah min al-Fasaad wa'l-Awhaam wa Izhaar Mahaasin al-Islam,
p. 326

-2-

Some of the scholars said that the miracle in the Book of Allah, may He be exalted, is not only in the wording, but also the meanings, the sequence of meanings and the way in which ideas are presented. So the miracle and challenge for the Arabs has to do with the style, and for others it has to do with the fact that no one among the speakers of any other language is able to come up with something similar to the Qur'an in any other language.

Al-Jassaas (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The words of Allah, may He be exalted, (interpretation of the meaning): "Say: 'If mankind and the jinns were together to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce the like thereof, even if they helped one another'" [al-Isra' 17:88] prove the miraculous nature of the Qur'an. Some people say that its miracle is in the wording and style on the one hand, and in the meanings and the sequence in which ideas are presented, on the other hand. They quote as evidence for that the fact that in this verse the Qur'an challenges both the Arabs and the non-Arabs, the jinn and humans. It is well-known that the non-Arabs could not be challenged on the aspect of the wording and style, therefore the challenge for them should have to do with the meanings and the sequence in which ideas are presented.

Some of the scholars insist that its miraculous nature is limited to its style and eloquence of expression. They say: The miraculous nature of the Qur'an has many aspects: its beautiful style, its eloquent and concise wording, the way in which it combines many meanings in few words, in addition to the fact that it is completely free of any words that sound ineloquent or any ideas or meanings that are out of place, as well as being free of any contradictions. All of it, from beginning to end, is consistent, as described above. The words of people, on the other hand, especially if they speak at length, cannot be free of cheap words, corrupt meanings and contradictions. What we have mentioned of the flaws in people's speech are present in the speech of people of all languages; it does not apply only to those who speak Arabic. Thus it is possible that the challenge of the Qur'an may be applicable to the non-Arabs in that way: challenging them to bring something that is free of the faults and flaws referred to above, because saying things in an eloquent manner is not something that is limited only to Arabic, to the exclusion of other languages, even though the Arabic language is the most eloquent. We know that the Qur'an is the pinnacle of eloquence, so it is possible that the challenge to the non-Arabs is by way of challenging them to produce words at the highest level of eloquence in their own languages.

Ahkaam al-Qur'an, 5/34, 35

-3-

There are many aspects to the miraculous nature of the Book of Allah; it is not limited to style and eloquence only. Hence some of the scholars said that the miraculous nature of the Book of Allah which all people, not only the Arabs, may understand, and that Allah's challenge to produce something like it, is only applicable to these aspects. Hence Allah issued this challenge to the jinn as well as to mankind, to produce something like this Qur'an. One of these aspects is that it foretold events that would happen and foretold the time at which they would happen, for example.

Abu 'Abdullah al-Qurtubi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

... The third aspect of the miraculous nature of the Qur'an is what it includes of news of the future before any human even knew anything about it, and foretelling events before they happened. This is something that cannot be known except via the truthful ones who are conveying from Allah, may He be exalted. We will refer to some events just to prove this point in brief, with no need for a lengthy discussion.

For example, Allah, may He be exalted, said (interpretation of the meaning):

“Certainly, you shall enter Al-Masjid al-Haram; if Allah wills, secure, (some) having your heads shaved, and (some) having your hair cut short, having no fear”

[Al-Fath 48:27].

This verse is one of the clearest miracles of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him). Allah, may He be exalted, promised him that He would cause him to enter al-Masjid al-Haram, him and his people, in safety, and that He would grant them the conquest of Makkah in the best state. They kept waiting for that until its time came and Allah fulfilled His promise. Then they entered it as He had promised, and conquered it as they had been foretold.

Al-I'laam bima fi Deen an-Nasaarah min al-Fasaad wa'l-Awhaam wa Izhaar Mahaasin al-Islam, p. 337

There are other opinions too, but what we have quoted above is sufficient, and it is the strongest view concerning this matter.

To sum up: the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was an Arab and the Qur'an is Arabic. He was sent to eloquent, well-spoken Arabs, hence his greatest miracle was the Book of Allah, may He be exalted. They were unable to match its wording, phrases, style and eloquence. Thus the rational people among the eloquent and well-spoken realised that this was not the words of a human being, hence they believed.

As for those Arabs who were not eloquent or well spoken, and the non-Arabs, what is to be mentioned to them is the meanings and rulings of the Qur'an, and those aspects of its miraculous nature that they are able to understand. Thus they may develop conviction based on

the knowledge and understanding that this is not the words of a human being. Hence many of the non-Arabs became Muslim because of coming across the meaning of a verse. In such cases, this non-Arab could not understand its eloquence and style, but its meaning is the reason why he became Muslim. Many such stories have been passed down by numerous narrators, and in our own time there are many more. Those people only became Muslim after they learned what there is in these verses that no human being could have produced, and that at the time of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) there was no technology and no scientific discoveries that could enable him to tell people about these matters. Thus they accepted that this was revelation from heaven, so they became Muslim. Hence we can see the extent to which the hadeeth the questioner referred to is applicable to real facts.

And Allah knows best.