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Şükran Vahide

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UNIVERSAL ASPECTS OF THE QUR'ĀN'S INIMITABILITY AND PROOFS OF PROPHEHOOD: SAID NURSI'S INTERPRETATION

Şükran Vahide*

Abstract: In the face of the threats to religious belief posed by materialistic currents of thought during his lifetime, Said Nursi gave paramount importance to the doctrine of the Qur'ān's inimitability as proof of the authenticity of the Qur'ānic revelation and the prophethood of Muḥammad, such proof having been the primary motive in the doctrine's formulation from the third/ninth century. The Qur'ān's inimitability was established as residing in its composition and unsurpassed rhetorical and literary qualities. Emulating the earlier masters of Qur'ānic exegesis as well as drawing on other sources, Said Nursi adduced numerous proofs and arguments for the Qur'ān's universality, by which was meant its containing multiple levels of meaning so as to address all times and all peoples. Nursi's overarching aim in emphasising specific aspects of the Qur'ān's universality and the attendant proofs of Muhammad's prophethood was to demonstrate their continued relevance in the contemporary world.

Keywords: *Qur'ān's inimitability, Qur'ān's universality, rhetorical exegesis, proofs of prophethood*

INTRODUCTION

This article investigates Said Nursi's interpretation of some of the universal aspects of the Qur'ān's miraculousness or inimitability (*i'jāz al-Qur'ān*) and the proofs these provide for the universal prophethood of Muḥammad. It does not intend to investigate all the universal aspects mentioned or described in Nursi's writings, or enumerate all the sorts of its inimitability generally, which he says is 40¹ or even 200,² as this would go beyond what is possible within the confines of this article. In order to explain his interpretation, therefore, the main sections of the article are preceded by brief sections on the doctrine of the Qur'ān's inimitability, and on Nursi's treatment of the subject in the earlier and later periods of his life. Attention is also drawn, where appropriate, to some of the sources of and influences on Nursi's ideas related to this question. The article also aims to show that Nursi's emphasising universal aspects of the

* Şükran Vahide is a freelance writer and translator who has written extensively on Said Nursi and has translated a large part of his collected works, the *Risale-i Nur*, into English.

¹ See, for example, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Letters 1928-1932*, (Istanbul: Sözlük Publications, 2010), 29th Letter, 3rd Section, 465; Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words* (Istanbul: Sözlük Publications, 2008), Gleams, 770.

² Nursi, *Letters*, 29th Letter, 3rd Section, 465.

Qur'ān's inimitability reflects his desire to demonstrate to all classes of people the continuing relevance of both the Qur'ān and Muḥammad's prophetic mission in an age when religious truth was being increasingly challenged by the rise of materialistic currents of thought.

The Doctrine of the Qur'ān's Inimitability (i'jāz) and Proof of Muḥammad's Prophethood

The notion of *i'jāz*, meaning literally, rendering incapable, is linked to the Qur'ān's challenge (*taḥaddī*) to its opponents and critics to produce even a short discourse equal in eloquence to itself³ and their inability (‘*ajz*) to do this,⁴ from which is derived the term *mu'jiza*, meaning miracle.⁵ The Qur'ān's reputedly unmet challenge is cited as the Prophet Muḥammad's greatest miracle in virtually all the relevant sources, including Nursi.⁶ Despite attempts to either imitate or parody the Qur'ān's eloquence or refute it, at the time of its revelation and subsequently,⁷ the prevailing view is that none has been successful.⁸

It was not until the end of the third/ninth century that *i'jāz* came to be used as the technical term for the Qur'ān's inimitability.⁹ Doctrinal challenges to the new religion of Islam from various quarters in the centuries previous to this, together with contacts with the former religions in the conquered lands and intellectual developments arising from the translation into Arabic of philosophical works have been posited as reasons for the growth of the doctrine.¹⁰ The controversies and polemics concerning the subject of prophethood between Muslims and the People of the Book on the one hand, and between Muslim schools of thought on the other,

³ See, Qur'ān, 2:23-4, 10:38, 11:13, 17:88, 52:33-4.

⁴ See, Richard C. Martin, "Inimitability," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. II, 526-36 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2002-6); Issa Boullata, "The Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur'ān: *I'jāz* and Related Topics," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 139-57; G. E. von Grunebaum, "I'djāz," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. B. Lewis et al., vol. III (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986-2004), 1018. For the main works on the subject and its historical development, see, Abdul Aleem, "I'jazu'l-Qur'ān," *Islamic Culture* 7 (1933), 64-82, 215-33.

⁵ A. J. Wensinck, "Mu'djiza," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. B. Lewis et al., vol. VII (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986-2004), 295.

⁶ Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Muhâkemat* (Istanbul: Sözlere Yayinevi, 1977), 148; Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Signs of Miraculousness: The Inimitability of the Qur'ān's Conciseness*, trans. Şükran Vahide, (Istanbul: Sözlere Publications, 2013), 181, 196, 197-8 (Qur'ān 23-24); 225 (Qur'ān 26-27); al-Jāhiz, "On the Prophet's Authenticity," in *Sobriety and Mirth. A Selection of the Shorter Writings of al-Jāhiz*, trans. Jim Colville (London: Kegan Paul, 2002), 128; A. J. Wensinck, "Mu'djiza," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. B. Lewis et al., vol. VII (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986-2004), 295; Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣbahānī, *Dalā'il al-Nubuwwa* (Beirut: Dār al-Nafā'is, 1986), 37; al-Sayyid al-Jurjānī, *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*, vol. viii (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2012), 267-8; Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, Badawī Ṭabāna (intro.), ii, 388, accessed April 25, 2012, <http://www.ghazali.org/2015/09/ihya>; Ḥusayn al-Jisr, *al-Ḥuṣūn al-Ḥamīdiyya li'l-Muḥāfaẓa 'alā al-'Aqā'id al-Islāmiyya* [Cairo: 1905] facs. reprint (Midyat: n.p., n.d.), 55, 59-64; Muḥammad 'Abduh, *al-Islām wa'l-Naṣrāniyya ma' al-'Ilm wa'l-Madaniyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1947-8), 69-72; M. Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Hakīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2007), i, 160-1 (Qur'ān 2:23-24).

⁷ Abdul Aleem, "I'jazu'l-Qur'ān," 228-33; Boullata, "The Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur'ān," 141 fn 3.

⁸ For example, al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2008), i, 352 (Qur'ān 2:24).

⁹ Richard C. Martin, "The Role of the Basrah Mu'tazilah in Formulating the Doctrine of the Apologetic Miracle," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 39, no. 3 (1980), 183; Boullata, "The Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur'ān," 141.

¹⁰ Abdul Aleem, "I'jazu'l-Qur'ān," 69-70; Sophia Vasalou, "The Miraculous Eloquence of the Qur'ān: General Trajectories and Individual Approaches" *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies* 4, no. 2 (2002), 24-9.

led to the subject being formulated within the science of *kalām*,¹¹ with the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān as its basis.¹² It was first Mu'tazilite and then Ash'arite theologians (*mutakallimūn*) that produced works expounding the superior literary merits of the Qur'ān. From the third/ninth century, proof of the Qur'ān's inimitability became increasingly associated with its eloquence in addition to questions associated with the inability to challenge the literary qualities of the Qur'ān.¹³

The grammarian and rhetorician 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078), who was Nursi's chief inspiration in this matter,¹⁴ with his two works *Asrār al-Balāgha* and *Dalā'il al-I'jāz*, "set the Ash'arī theory of the stylistic miracle of the Qur'ān on its strongest intellectual footing."¹⁵ In his detailed analysis and elaboration of the question of *naẓm*, that is, the arrangement of words according to the intended meanings yielded by their syntactic relations, as the key to the Qur'ān's inimitability,¹⁶ he went far beyond his predecessors who had written on it. Subsequently, al-Jurjānī's theories were used in rhetorical interpretation of the Qur'ān, notably by the Mu'tazilite grammarian and man of letters al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) in his *tafsīr, al-Kashshāf*,¹⁷ by the theologian and exegete Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), and by later rhetoricians influential in the formulation of the sciences of rhetoric (*balāgha*). The former authorities are cited by Nursi in his early and later works.¹⁸

Nursi's Treatment of the Qur'ān's Inimitability in the Early and Later Periods of His Life

It will be useful here to make a few remarks about, first, the works of the earlier and later periods of Nursi's life, known as the Old Said and the New Said periods,¹⁹ in which he deals with the Qur'ān's inimitability; second, his treatment of universal aspects of the Qur'ān and proofs of Muḥammad's prophethood; and third, his conception of the Qur'ān.

¹¹ Martin, "The Role of the Basrah Mu'tazilah," 175-89.

¹² Abdul Aleem, "I'jazu'l-Qur'an," 71.

¹³ Vasalou, "The Miraculous Eloquence of the Qur'ān," 33.

¹⁴ For Nursi's laudatory references to 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī in connection with elucidation of the Qur'ān's eloquence and inimitability, see, Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 8, 123-4, 128, 197, 206; Nursi, *Muhākemat*, 68, 79, 98; Nursi, *Words*, 426, 460. In *Signs of Miraculousness*, in a section entitled "On the Appropriate and Effective Use of Parabolic Comparisons," is the direct quotation of a passage from al-Jurjānī's *Asrār al-Balāgha*, see, pp. 123-4. For the original, see, M. Rashīd Riḍā (ed.), *Asrār al-Balāgha* (Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1947), 92-6.

¹⁵ Martin, "Inimitability," 535.

¹⁶ See, Margaret Larkin, *The Theology of Meaning: 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's Theory of Discourse* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1995).

¹⁷ Jārullāh Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf 'an Ḥaqā'iq al-Tanzīl wa 'Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Ta'wīl* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2010).

¹⁸ For al-Zamakhsharī, see, Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 8, 131, 196, 197, 207; Nursi *Words*, 426, 460. For Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, see, Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 8. For the rhetorician Abu Ya'qūb al-Sakkākī (d. 626/1229), author of *Miftāḥ al-'Ulūm*, see, Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 8, 44 fn 4, 49, 197, 199, 206; Nursi, *Words*, 426, 460. For the Arab literary genius 'Amr ibn Baḥr al-Jāhiz (d. 255/868-9), see, Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 8, 197, 198; Nursi, *Letters*, 224.

¹⁹ This periodisation was made by Said Nursi. The Old Said covered the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, from his birth, given either as 1877 or 1873, until the Empire's collapse after the First World War. The New Said emerged in 1920-1921 and covered the first 25 years or so of the Turkish Republic. During this period Nursi wrote the *Risale-i Nur*. He also spoke of a Third Said period, which covered the last ten years of his life, from 1950-1960.

First, in both periods of his life, Nursi was concerned with the question of inimitability and in *Muhâkemat* and *Ishārāt al-I'jāz*²⁰ in the former period, and primarily in the part of the *Risale-i Nur* called the Twenty-Fifth Word (*Mu'cizat-ı Kur'aniye Risalesi*) in the latter period, he is seen to place paramount importance on aspects related to the Qur'ân's eloquence (*balāgha*) and composition (*naẓm*). However, in *Signs of Miraculousness*, following the authorities mentioned above and addressing fellow scholars, he employed the sciences of rhetoric, logic and Arabic grammatical and syntactical analysis to expound the first 40 or so verses of the Qur'ân and disclose the meanings expressed within the subtle interrelations and connections of its words, sentences, verses and even letters. The past masters he was emulating set out to demonstrate that the Arabic rhetorical sciences are prerequisite to discovering and deciphering what God desires to communicate through His Book, and for proof of its inimitable nature.²¹

However, when it came to the New Said a different approach became necessary.²² In the conditions that came to prevail subsequent to the First World War, the need arose for fresh methods that would address not only elite scholars but also Muslims of every class and walk of life. Thus, in the various parts of the *Risale-i Nur* dealing with this subject, the knowledge of Arabic and rhetorical sciences of the Old Said was distilled and presented in expanded, more explanatory ways, together with other aspects of the Qur'ân's miraculousness.

This brings me to my second point: Nursi's treatment of the Qur'ân's universal aspects. Within the field of Qur'ânic exegesis, Nursi employed, together with other disciplines, what is known as rhetorical exegesis, which, as shall be shown, allowed him to deduce the universal aspects discussed below and their related proofs of prophethood. But where, especially in his early works, Nursi was directly inspired by al-Jurjānī and others, and attempted to apply their theories in detail in interpreting the Qur'ân's verses, in drawing attention mostly in his later works to universal aspects of the Qur'ân's inimitability and linking them to proof of the Prophet Muḥammad's mission, he was responding to contemporary needs as he saw them. In intending to offer proofs of the Qur'ân's inimitability and of prophethood to all classes of people, Nursi was breaking new ground.

Third, further matters related to Nursi's proofs are on the one hand the conception of the Qur'ân as being multi-layered and containing in some form, if only by allusion, all knowledge,²³ and on the other the correspondence of the Qur'ân and the universe, which, while neglected by medieval exegetes²⁴ was emphasised by nineteenth and early twentieth-century

²⁰ *Ishārāt al-I'jāz fī Mazān al-Ījāz* (Istanbul: Evkāf al-Islāmiye Matbaası, 1918). There are several editions edited by İhsān Qāsim al-Sālihī and published by Sözlük Yayinevi (6th ed., 2011). Henceforth, *Signs of Miraculousness*, the title of its English translation is used.

²¹ Nursi, *Muhâkemat*, 64; 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, *Dalā'il al-I'jāz* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2007), 63-4, 66-7; Abū Ya'qūb al-Sakkākī, *Miftāḥ al-'Ulūm* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2011), 249; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, i, 6 (Author's introduction).

²² Muhsin 'Abd al-Hamid, "Introduction," in Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 8-10.

²³ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) propounds similar ideas in his *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, Badawī Ṭabāna (intro.), i, 99, 290 and *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān wa Duraruhu* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1988), 22-33; also, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2008), i, 348 (Qur'ān 2:23-24); vi, 253 (Qur'ān 10:38).

²⁴ Ahmad Dallal, *Islam, Science and the Challenge of History* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2012), 117-29.

reformist/modernist scholars in the face of scientific and technology-based European supremacy. As will be shown, central to the arguments Nursi puts forward for the universality of the Qur'ān and the Prophet is the interrelation of the Qur'ān, and by extension the religion and Sharia of Islam, the universe, and Prophet Muḥammad.

NURSI'S INTERPRETATION OF ASPECTS OF THE QUR'ĀN'S INIMITABILITY

Related to its Universality and Proofs of Prophethood

In this article, by the Qur'ān's universality is meant its possessing multiple levels of meanings whereby, being “the pre-eternal Word of God (*kelâm-ı ezelî*),²⁵ it addresses all times and all peoples. Although it was as the New Said with the *Risale-i Nur* that Nursi achieved a more practical application of this conception in his writings, it was clearly a matter that taxed his mind in the earlier period. For, time and again, in *Signs of Miraculousness* he interprets features of the revealed text as addressing all times and peoples. An example is the allegorical verses (*al-mutashābihāt*),²⁶ concerning which, in line with other exegetes and scholars, he says the Qur'ān uses figures of speech that are familiar to ordinary people as a concession to their understanding, since its main purpose is guidance and they form the majority.²⁷ It is for this reason too that he says in reference to the Qur'ān's *naẓm* or composition,

in most places the Qur'ān is not specific and makes its statements general ... [and] has ordered its sentences and positioned them in such a way that numerous different possibilities unfold from its various aspects and [different people] ... may all receive their shares.²⁸

That is to say, according to Nursi, it is by virtue of the manner in which the Qur'ān is composed and ordered that it possesses qualities that may be described as universal. When regarded from the point of view of the Prophet Muḥammad, the recipient of the Qur'ānic revelation, many of its universal aspects mentioned in this article also supply proofs of his prophetic mission.

The Source of the Qur'ān's Universality: The Qur'ān's universality and miraculous comprehensiveness stem from the fact that it is “the speech of the Glorious Creator of the universe [and] proceeds from the ultimate degree of His dominicality (or lordship, *rubūbiyet*).” That is, “the Qur'ān is God's Word in respect of His being Sustainer of all the worlds [and] ... God of all beings.”²⁹ Its divine source and being “a pre-eternal address” gives the Qur'ān a

²⁵ For example, Nursi, *Words*, 25th Word, Introduction, 378; Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 40 (Qur'ān 2:1); *Flashes*, 28th Flash, 345.

²⁶ For example, Qur'ān, 7:54, 20:5, 48:10.

²⁷ Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 127-8 (Q 17-20); 188, 191-2 (Q 23-24); Nursi, *Muhâkemat*, 40, 63; al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, iii, 142 (3:7); Jalāl al-Dīn 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (al-Qāhira: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2006), ii, 32.

²⁸ Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 47 (Q 2:2); 54 (Q 2:4).

²⁹ Nursi, *Words*, 12th Word, 4th Principle, 147, 401; Nursi, *Rays*, 11th Ray, 10th Topic, 262-3.

timeless nature; it is a perpetual sign or miracle,³⁰ and in one sense is in a state of continuous revelation. Nursi calls this its “youth.” He says: “It preserves its freshness and youth every age as though newly revealed” and thereby addresses all levels of humankind in every era.³¹ Descending through all the degrees of dominicality and “seventy thousand veils,” the Qur’ān is also multi-layered and multifaceted, and “spreads its light to the thousands of levels of those it addresses, the understandings of which are all different.”³²

Nursi explains and illustrates this aspect of the Qur’ān’s miraculousness in terms of its comprehensiveness (*câmiyet*); that is, the comprehensiveness of its words, meanings, contents, styles and knowledge. Indicating another source of this view, in *Muhâkemat* he cites the *ḥadīth*, “Each verse has an outward (*zāhir*), an inward (*bāṭin*), a moral (*ḥadd*), and an anagogical or mystical (*maṭla’/muṭṭala’*) meaning,³³ and each has roots, and boughs, and branches,”³⁴ suggesting all the words, and even letters and omissions, of the Qur’ān have been positioned in such a way that each has numerous aspects. This, he says, gives “all those it addresses their share from a different door.” The infinite meanings thus expressed by the Qur’ān may be interpreted only in the light of the sciences of Arabic, rhetoric and eloquence mentioned above, and the other religious sciences.³⁵

The Interpretative and Probative Interrelationship of Qur’ān, Cosmos, and Prophet:

A second basis of the Qur’ān’s miraculous universality is the interpretative interrelationship between itself, the universe, and the Prophet, each of which supplies proofs for the others. Nursi depicts a web of relations between the three, which look also to the Creator.

First, there is the mutually interpretative relationship of the Qur’ān and universe, for the Qur’ān is the key to understanding the meaning and purposes of creation; that is, it expounds the divine acts that constitute the cosmos and the names and attributes from which they proceed – what it calls the *āyāt* or signs in the universe.³⁶ In Nursi’s words, the Qur’ān has “an eye that sees and encompasses the whole universe and holds it before it like the pages of a book, describing its levels and worlds.”³⁷ On its revelation, it banished the forlorn meaninglessness and savage darkness of the Age of Ignorance and disclosed the purposeful functions of beings through which they praise, extol and make known their Maker.³⁸ The cosmos thus became a mosque, and since it consists of “words” inscribed by the pen of divine power expressing truths

³⁰ Nursi, *Letters*, 19th Letter, 18th Sign, 227. This is a point frequently mentioned by works discussing the Qur’ān’s inimitability. See, for example: al-Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, ii, 303; Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1988), ii, 101; M. Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Hakīm*, i, 152, 154 (Q 2:23-24).

³¹ Nursi, *Words*, 25th Word, 1st Light, 3rd Ray, 419.

³² *Ibid.*, 1st Ray, 401.

³³ For the two lines of transmission of this *ḥadīth*, see, Gerhard Bowering, “The Scriptural ‘Senses’ in Medieval Ṣūfī Qur’ān Exegesis,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, edited by J. D. McAuliffe, B. D. Walfish, and J. W. Goering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 350-1.

³⁴ Nursi, *Muhâkemat*, 41; Nursi, *Words*, 25th Word, 1st Light, 2nd Ray, 402.

³⁵ Nursi, *Words*, 25th Word, 1st Light, 2nd Ray, 407; also, *Gleams*, 767-8.

³⁶ See, for example, Qur’ān, 30:20-25; 2:164; 3:190-191.

³⁷ Nursi, *Letters*, 19th Letter, 18th Sign, 227.

³⁸ Nursi, *Rays*, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 158; Nursi, *Words*, 13th Word, 152-3, 25th Word, 3rd Light, 1st Gleam, 447-8.

similar to the Qur'ān, is itself a “mighty Qur'ān.”³⁹ In this sense, the universe expounds the Qur'ān's verses.⁴⁰

Based on the conception of the universe as a book or exhibition are proofs of the universe's “Maker, Writer, and Insciber,” and of the Prophet Muḥammad, who is its “herald, ... discoverer, ... master and ... teacher.”⁴¹ These roles stem from one of Muḥammad's chief functions and proofs: his disclosing and teaching the divine purposes in the universe's creation and “the meanings of that mighty book.”⁴² By virtue of the Prophet's comprehensive functions and the proofs he embodies,⁴³ he is known as “the supreme sign of the book of the universe.”⁴⁴

Nursi argues also that, as the proclaimer of divine unity, the Prophet's cause is verified and confirmed by the evidence of divine unity the universe offers; that is, his cause is verified by the whole universe.⁴⁵ This goes for all the tenets of belief.⁴⁶

Moreover, just as the Creator showed through the Prophet's miracles and the “thousands of proofs of his prophethood” which He created that Muḥammad was speaking not on his own accord but was the conveyor of His speech, so the Qur'ān which came to him shows through its 40 aspects of miraculousness, outer and inner, that Muḥammad was God's interpreter.⁴⁷ Indeed, the Qur'ān was itself a miracle of his,⁴⁸ and as stated previously, was declared to be his supreme miracle in proof of his claim to prophethood.⁴⁹

Nursi backs up the reciprocal proofs he offers of the Qur'ān's miraculousness and Muḥammad's prophethood by presenting them temporally at the junction of past and future. Just as “the points of agreement” of the prophets and scriptures of the past, and of the saints and scholars inspired by the Prophet who came after him, despite their widely differing ways, are “encompassed” by the Qur'ān,⁵⁰ so too, the former prophets' consensus, deeds and miracles, and their predictions of Muḥammad's prophethood offer powerful proofs of it, as do the subsequent saints and scholars who through his instruction and teaching reached the highest stations.⁵¹ In *Signs of Miraculousness*, Nursi elaborates on his assertion that past, present and future united in affirming Muḥammad's prophethood.⁵²

³⁹ Nursi, *Words*, 12th Word, 1st Principle, 145.

⁴⁰ See, Nursi, *al-Mathnawī al-'Arabī al-Nūrī* (Istanbul: Sözlür Yayinevi, 1994), 109.

⁴¹ Nursi, *Rays*, 15th Ray, 1st Station, 3rd Part, 600.

⁴² Nursi, *Rays*, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 154, 155; Nursi, *Flashes*, 13th Flash, 3rd Point, 4th Matter, 406-8; Nursi, *Words*, 19th Word, 4th Droplet, 244-5; Nursi, *Letters*, 19th Letter, 18th Sign, 229-30; Nursi, *Rays*, 15th Ray, 1st Station, 3rd Part, 591-2.

⁴³ Nursi, *Rays*, 11th Ray, 10th Topic, 262-3.

⁴⁴ Nursi, *Words*, 19th Word, 1st Droplet, 243.

⁴⁵ Nursi, *Letters*, 19th Letter, 18th Sign, 228.

⁴⁶ Nursi, *Rays*, 15th Ray, 1st Station, 3rd Part, 594.

⁴⁷ Nursi, *Letters*, 19th Letter, 19th Sign, 229; 18th Sign, 226; Nursi, *Rays*, 15th Ray, 1st Station, 3rd Part, 595.

⁴⁸ Nursi, *Words*, 25th Word, Conclusion, 457.

⁴⁹ Nursi, *Muhâkemat*, 148; Nursi, *Words*, 20th Word, 2nd Station, 271, 272; Nursi, *Letters*, 19th Letter, 18th Sign, 219.

⁵⁰ Nursi, *Letters*, 19th Letter, 18th Sign, 226.

⁵¹ Nursi, *Rays*, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 153-4.

⁵² Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 182 and ff. (Q 23-24).

The enduring relevance of Muḥammad's prophethood is further shown by the continuing efficacy down the ages of the Islamic religion and Sharia, which are grounded in the Qur'ān and the Prophet's practices (*sunna*), the chief reason for which efficacy according to Nursi is the correspondence and congruence between the Islamic Sharia and the universe. The Sharia comprises principles that are comprehensive in that they encapsulate religious and philosophical truths, and legal ordinances, both of which are in harmony with cosmic truths and laws. Nursi sees a corresponding and perfect order (*nizam, nazm*) in the Islamic religion and the universe due to their proceeding from the same Creator and Orderer.⁵³ This correspondence allows him to subsume the laws governing voluntary human actions and the cosmic laws under the "laws of divine practice" or natural laws.⁵⁴ That is to say, "success" or the achievement of worldly goals and eternal happiness is dependent on compliance with both sets of laws. As evidence for this, Nursi cites Muḥammad's achievements in transforming the nomadic Arabs and establishing the nascent Islamic state – only one of his miracles – which for Nursi constitutes a proof that Muḥammad adhered to the truth. The Sharia's "preserving the balance of the natural laws" down the tumultuous long centuries, also demonstrates their interconnection and conformity.⁵⁵ Examples of this are given below.

The Qur'ān's Universality in Respect of Its Knowledge: A third basis of the Qur'ān's universality is the comprehensiveness of the knowledge it contains. One aspect of this Nursi explains as the Qur'ān having a different kind of miraculousness corresponding to the understanding of all the classes of humanity and its indicating its miraculousness to each in a different way.⁵⁶ That is, the guidance and knowledge it imparts is suitable to each class it addresses. In the Twenty-Fifth Word, Nursi describes these various kinds of miraculousness, which number 40, in the light of certain verses.⁵⁷ He claims that all the Qur'ān's verses have "an aspect which looks to each class."⁵⁸ But what it teaches is the same; it is rather that its "lessons" have different levels and each class of men understands them according to its degree.⁵⁹ It follows from this that the Qur'ān contains, in some form, knowledge pertaining to all areas of human life. This again highlights the temporal dimension of the proofs, for down the ages scholars of every branch of science and knowledge and followers of all the spiritual paths, under the tutelage of the Prophet Muḥammad, have received instruction, guidance and inspiration from it pertaining to their own field.⁶⁰

[The Qur'ān] is both a book of wisdom and law, and a book of prayer and worship, and a book of command and summons, and a book of invocation and divine knowledge – it is book for all spiritual needs; and it is a sacred library offering books appropriate to the ways

⁵³ Nursi, *Letters*, 19th Letter, 19th Sign, 230-1.

⁵⁴ Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 238-9 (Qur'ān 2:27).

⁵⁵ Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 186-7 (Qur'ān 2:23-24).

⁵⁶ Nursi, *Letters*, 19th Letter, 18th Sign, 219-20.

⁵⁷ Nursi, *Words*, 25th Word, 1st Light, 2nd Ray, 402-6; Nursi, *Letters*, 29th Letter, 3rd Section, 465.

⁵⁸ Nursi, *Flashes*, 12th Flash, 2nd Important Matter, 102.

⁵⁹ Nursi, *Words*, 25th Word, 1st Light, 3rd Ray, 424-5.

⁶⁰ Nursi, *Rays*, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 153, 159; Nursi, *Words*, 19th Word, 13th Droplet, 249; 25th Word, 1st Light, 2nd Ray, 415; Nursi, *Letters*, 19th Letter, 18th Sign, 227.

of all the saints and veracious, and the purified and the scholars, whose ways and paths are all different.⁶¹

According to Nursi, the Prophet was the supreme interpreter of the knowledge contained in these numerous books comprising the Qur'ān, and was its guide and instructor, providing powerful proofs of his prophethood.

To illustrate this aspect of the Qur'ān's universality included here are two related topics that Nursi mentions or elaborates. The first is knowledge related to social and legal matters, which formed the basis of the religion and Sharia of Islam and gave rise to the reputedly miraculous changes wrought by Islam in the world of humanity; the second concerns knowledge related to science and scientific advances. But firstly it should be noted that a significant feature of the Qur'ān that allows it to address the peoples of all times and places – its perpetual youth – is its expressing its guidance in the form of universal principles. Nursi propounds these in connection with various fields of knowledge, including the two mentioned here. As he explains it, by mentioning certain apparently irrelevant events, the Qur'ān is alluding to instructive principles that are relevant to all people at all times. Only the tips of universal truths and laws are shown, and in a form that is familiar and accessible to ordinary people, the majority of those the Qur'ān addresses. Among the examples he gives from which universal principles may be deduced are the teaching of the names to Adam (Qur'ān 2:31), and the historical stories about Moses and the children of Israel.⁶² This Qur'ānic method is linked to its miraculous conciseness (*ījāz*),⁶³ a rhetorical device that is “one foundation of the Qur'ān's inimitability.”⁶⁴ Regarding the first example, Nursi draws a connection between the teaching of the names and the innumerable sciences and branches of knowledge concerning the universe, and the divine attributes, which were taught to man by virtue of his comprehensive disposition and abilities due to which he was accorded the vicegerency of the earth. Nursi subsequently elaborates on this in connection with the miracles of the prophets and human scientific and technological progress, which is mentioned below.⁶⁵

Knowledge related to social and legal matters: A further example of the Qur'ānic method of guidance are certain minor events the Qur'ān mentions involving the Prophet's Companions that were intended to be understood as universal principles in the establishment of Islam and codification of Sharia, the benefits of which would be seen in the future.⁶⁶ Since discussion of social and legal matters was not Nursi's primary concern, he neither specifies which events nor where they appear in the Qur'ān nor does he elaborate on them, but in another passage he notes

⁶¹ Nursi, *Words*, 19th Word, 13th Droplet, 250; 25th Word, Introduction, 376-7; Nursi, *Rays*, 11th Ray, 10th Topic, 268.

⁶² Nursi, *Words*, 20th Word, 1st Station, 253-9; Nursi, *Rays*, 11th Ray, 10th Topic, 263.

⁶³ For an explanation of Qur'ānic usage of the literary device of *ījāz*, see, Salwa M. S. El-Awa, “Linguistic Structure,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 69-70.

⁶⁴ Nursi, *Words*, 20th Word, 1st Station, 255; also, 15th Word, addendum, 206-7; 25th Word, 1st Light, 2nd Ray, 410-13.

⁶⁵ See section below: Knowledge related to science, fourth part.

⁶⁶ Nursi, *Rays*, 11th Ray, 10th Topic, 264.

that they would also function as “sacred principles” for the social and political scientists of the future.⁶⁷

However, Nursi frequently cites as one of the Qur’ān’s most striking miracles and as incontrovertible proof of Muḥammad’s prophethood the revolution the Qur’ān, and the religion and Sharia of Islam based on it, brought about in human society, as well as in the selves of people in their individual, social and political lives, both at the time of its revelation and down the subsequent centuries.⁶⁸ That is, Islam supplies the principles for human happiness in this world and the next. For Nursi, this is linked to the correspondence between the laws of Islam and Sharia, and the universal laws of nature,⁶⁹ which was discussed above. Fairly detailed examples of this in Nursi’s writings are his comparisons between the principles that he asserts underlie Islamic civilisation on the one hand and modern or Western civilisation on the other, and some of their social, economic and political consequences.⁷⁰ Frequent examples are the proscription of interest and usury, and obligatory payment of the purification tax, which Nursi claims are “healing antidotes for the fatal poison in society,” that is, the injustices that give rise to class conflict and revolution. These he describes to illustrate the Qur’ān’s universal principles and the miraculousness of its perpetual youth, as though it was in a state of constant revelation: “The Qur’ān grows younger as time grows older; its signs become apparent.”⁷¹

Knowledge related to science: Above, the mutual relationship of the Qur’ān and the cosmos was discussed briefly as a second basis of the Qur’ān’s miraculous universality. To expand on this concept and describe a further area of its universal knowledge, that pertaining to science, I shall here note briefly Nursi’s approach to four related questions: first, his utilising scientific facts in his proofs of questions of faith taught by the Qur’ān; second, his reply to doubts about the Qur’ān’s vague and unspecific way of depicting the natural world; third, the Qur’ān’s factual statements about natural phenomena that in time have been verified by scientific advances; and fourth, the Qur’ān’s allusions to future scientific discoveries. These questions are a clear example of the apologetic nature of scholarly works dealing with the Qur’ān’s inimitability, which in this case takes the form of the defence of divine revelation against the attacks of modern science, just as other challenges were an important factor in the formulation of the doctrine in the early centuries of Islam, as mentioned in the first section of this paper. We shall now address each of these points in turn.

- (1) In various passages in the *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi employs what may be called scientific facts when describing the orderly and beneficial processes of the natural world in order to put forward proofs of the main tenets of belief and increase in knowledge of the Maker.⁷² His main purpose is to use such facts within the method he developed of deciphering –

⁶⁷ Nursi, *Letters*, 19th Letter, 18th Sign, 219.

⁶⁸ Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 185-7, 198 (Q 23-24); Nursi, *Words*, 19th Word, 7th and 8th Droplets, 245-6; Nursi, *Rays*, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 151-2, 157;

⁶⁹ Nursi, *Letters*, 19th Letter, 19th Sign, 230-1; also, Nursi, *Muhâkemat*, 5, 136.

⁷⁰ Nursi, *Words*, 12th Word, 1st, 2nd and 3rd Principles, 143-6; 25th Word, 1st Light, 3rd Ray, 419-24.

⁷¹ Nursi, *Words*, Gleams, 768.

⁷² For example, Nursi, *Rays*, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 133; Nursi, *Words*, 32nd Word, 1st Stopping-Place, 622 fn 3.

by practising reflective thought (*tefekkiir*) on the natural world and deductive reasoning (*istidlâl*) – the meanings beings express, a method which was derived from the Qur’ân. This is in contrast to the secular or scientific method, which treats beings as indicating no metaphysical truths beyond themselves.

- (2) The fact that the Qur’ân is unspecific about the formation of the physical world and does not depict it in any detail, as the modern sciences do, gave rise to doubts and criticism, which prompted Nursi to reply that since principally the Qur’ân addresses ordinary believers, as required by eloquence it depicts natural phenomena in general terms commensurate with their understanding so as to guide them to its main “aims.” Nevertheless, the Qur’ân also “plants signs and indications” to the truth [meaning cosmic truths revealed by science], concealed in the apparent meanings for “investigators of reality” (*ehl-i tahkîk*).⁷³ Here, he is again linking a characteristic of the Qur’ân to its universality.
- (3) The Qur’ân’s factual statements about natural phenomena that in time have been verified by scientific advances does not appear to be of much concern to Nursi; he merely uses some of these verses in his proofs of the tenets of belief, for instance, the resurrection of the dead. An example is the verse, “Seeing that He has created you in successive stages,” (Qur’ân 71:14) which Nursi expounds by describing the stage-by-stage development of the human being according to precise laws, and the providing of sustenance from dispersed elements and particles. The crux of his argument is the cosmic order, which is testified to by the physical sciences. This “perfect, intentional order” on the one hand demonstrates an array of divine attributes that require the resurrection of the dead, and on the other, as Nursi argues, itself requires the resurrection.⁷⁴
- (4) The allusive, polyvalent nature of many Qur’ânic verses, in this case, those alluding to the discoveries of modern science, was a matter of primary concern to Nursi in so far as it is the concomitant of the conceptions of the Qur’ân as having multiple levels of meaning and as containing in some form all knowledge. This multiplicity of meaning is the basis of the universality of the Qur’ân and it is the interpretation of such verses that necessitates the application of the rhetorical, linguistic and religious sciences.

The view that the Qur’ân contains such predictive verses found expression in the genre of exegesis known as scientific exegesis or *tafsîr ‘ilmî*,⁷⁵ which seeks to show that the Qur’ân predicts the discoveries of modern science and to interpret the Qur’ân in the light of science’s findings. It was revived towards the end of the nineteenth century⁷⁶ as an attempt to prove the veracity and miraculous nature of the Qur’ân in the age of science, when revealed religion generally was under attack in the name of science. The influence of this genre is to be seen in

⁷³ Nursi, *Muhâkemât*, 13; also, 145; Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 192-3 (Q 23-24).

⁷⁴ Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, Q 2:4, 59-61, 63-5; Nursi, *Words*, 29th Word, 2nd Aim, 542-3.

⁷⁵ Rotraud Wielandt, “Exegesis: Modern,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ân*, vol. 2 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2002-6), 129-31; Ahmad Dallal, “Science and the Qur’ân,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ân*, vol. 4 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2002-6), 552-7; al-Dhahabî, *al-Tafsîr wa’l-Mufasssîrûn* (al-Qâhira: Dâr al-Ḥadîth, 2005), ii, 417-32.

⁷⁶ J. J. G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 35-9.

Nursi's exposition of the Qur'ān 2:31-33, where he suggests that by mentioning the miracles of the prophets the Qur'ān is indicating the future scientific discoveries and technological progress to be made by the human race and is thereby urging and encouraging its members to achieve them.⁷⁷ This interpretation links human progress to the miracle of Adam known as the teaching of the names and extends the Qur'ān's miraculous universality into the modern age. In doing so, it carries over the relevance of Muḥammad's prophethood into the modern world and establishes his universal significance, since the Qur'ān was Muḥammad's supreme miracle and he was the Seal of the Prophets. Furthermore, the former prophets' miracles were like a single confirmatory miracle of Muḥammad's claims to prophethood, who with his universality manifested the divine names comprehensively.⁷⁸

CONCLUSION

With effect from the earliest works setting out proofs of Muḥammad's prophethood, the inimitable Qur'ān was advanced as his supreme miracle in proof of his supreme prophetic status. It was in this context that what came to be accepted as the doctrine of the Qur'ān's inimitability developed, which was centred on the Qur'ān's unsurpassable linguistic and literary qualities, and particularly on its *nazm* or composition. The following points may be made concerning Nursi's treatment of these questions, which also situate his ideas in a broader historical perspective.

Nursi's intention in focusing on the Qur'ān's inimitability as proof of the Qur'ān being authentic divine revelation and of the genuineness of Muḥammad's prophetic mission, was to defend the fundamentals of the Islamic religion in the face of the rise and pervasive influence of materialistic and scientific currents of thought. This apologetic aim was similar to the purpose of Islamic scholars in the third/ninth to fifth/eleventh centuries when faced with the challenges that originally impelled them to formulate the doctrine of the Qur'ān's inimitability.

This similarity in purpose was matched in Nursi's early works by his emulation of the literary masters of the earlier centuries who marked the high point of the exposition of the Qur'ān's rhetorical and literary excellence. Rhetorical and linguistic exegesis are among the several genres the influence of which is seen in Nursi, and are further traditional strands of his treatment of the present question.

It was also Nursi's apologetic aim that prompted him to emphasise universal aspects of the Qur'ān's inimitability and of Muḥammad's prophethood. However, within this broader objective, his emphasis on those universal aspects and the plethora of proofs and arguments he adduces for them appear to be quite original. But where Nursi's method here is innovatory, diverse influences are to be seen on the bases of his arguments. One of these bases, the conception of the Qur'ān as multivalent and multilayered, and containing if only allusively all knowledge is associated with Sufistic interpretations. While another basis, the correspondence

⁷⁷ Nursi, *Words*, 20th Word, 2nd Station, 260-75; Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 271-7 (Q 31-33).

⁷⁸ Nursi, *Words*, 20th Word, 2nd Station, 271.

of the Qur'ān, and by extension the Sharia and Islam, and the universe was given prominence by modernist/reformist Islamic scholars in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Further, the portrayal of the Qur'ān and universe as two books, though stressed by some modernist Islamic thinkers, has much older and wider significance. Nevertheless, Nursi's emphasising the mutually interpretative and probative relationship of the two books and his adding to his proofs of the Prophet Muḥammad's crucial function as the discloser and teacher of the two books' meanings appear also to be original. Finally, in Nursi's desire to demonstrate the compatibility of reason and science with the Qur'ān and Islam, especially in his early works, there is clear influence of modernist/ reformist Islamic thinkers and their apologetic stance, but when he links science and progress to the Qur'ān's miraculous universality and to proof of the continuing relevance of Muḥammad's prophethood, his interpretation and treatment of these questions may again be seen as original.

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