
The Miraculous Nature of the Qur'an: A Response to Oliver Leaman

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INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an includes a very peculiar claim, which differentiates it from all the other sacred books. In several verses with some difference in detail, God (Allah), as the speaker in the Qur'an, challenges all created beings, including humans and jinns, to bring about a work that resembles the Qur'an.¹ On the basis of these verses, which are known as "the challenging verses" (*ayat al-tahaddi*), the Muslim tradition holds that the Qur'an is inimitable. Thus the Qur'an is miraculous in the sense that no created being can produce a text similar to it. This doctrine also known as "the inimitability of the Qur'an" (*i'jaz al-Qur'an*) is a deeply discussed issue in the Medieval Age among Muslim scholars.² Oliver Leaman has recently revived this debate by offering a philosophical evaluation of Said Nursi's understanding of the miraculousness of the Qur'an. Leaman argues that Nursi's view is not immune to certain generic criticisms regarding this miraculousness phenomenon. Nonetheless, Leaman's reading of Nursi is at best superficial, since he does not present Nursi's view entirely. I argue that Leaman utilizes the straw man fallacy. As such Leaman's critique directed towards Nursi I'll argue is based on an incomplete presentation of the latter's argumentation, criticizing Nursi on the basis of this incomplete presentation. In what follows, I'll present Leaman's evaluation and critique of Nursi. Secondly, I shall present the aspects of Nursi's view overlooked by Leaman in his critique and propose to show that Leaman's criticisms are not applicable to it.

OLIVER LEAMAN ON NURSI'S VIEW OF THE MIRACULOUSNESS OF THE QUR'AN

To begin with, Leaman does not commit himself to the idea that the Qur'an is miraculous. He tries to understand how Muslim scholars, in general, and Said Nursi in particular, interpret the challenging verses and apprehend what exactly is inimitable and miraculous in the Qur'an. Leaman points out three main views on this issue in the history of Islamic intellectual thought.³ The first view puts forward the content of the Qur'an. This view, according to Leaman, appeals to the truths presented by the Qur'an, and to its maxims and rules appropriate for practical life. For Leaman, considering the content suggesting practical guidance is not a good way to understand the miraculousness of the Qur'an because he thinks that the practical suggestions and instructions of the text can be regarded as appropriate for us to follow *if* we

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¹ There are five verses challenging created beings in this sense. The first one (52:34) challenges them to produce a discourse like the Qur'an; the second (17:88) to produce a book like the Qur'an; the third (11:13) to produce ten chapters like the Qur'anic chapters; the fourth (10:38) to bring about only one chapter. All these four verses were revealed in the late Meccan period. And the fifth and final one (2:23) challenges them to bring about a chapter again, which was revealed in the first year of *hijra* in the Medinan period. See Ali Unal, *The Qur'an with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English* (New Jersey: Light, 2006). All translations from the Qur'an that appear in the article are from this source. The Hindu text *The Vedas* is considered by some people to be inimitable and miraculous, but the text itself does not include any verse that challenges people to bring about a text like it.

² Stefan Wild, "Inimitability", in *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2006), 295.

³ Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 141-64; Leaman, *Controversies in Contemporary Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 26-31.

are already convinced that the text is miraculous. Thus they cannot be used to justify the miraculousness of the Qur'an.⁴ The second view suggests looking at the style of the Qur'an to understand its miraculousness. This view concerns only the stylistic features of the Qur'an and purports to present it as the most excellent composition of sounds and words. For Leaman, this view completely appeals to our aesthetic judgment for deciding whether the Qur'an is miraculous or not. As aesthetic judgments are subjective, some people may consider the style of the Qur'an to be beautiful and others may reject it. Thus, being based on aesthetic criteria, this view is at best suggestive or persuasive, but not conclusive.⁵ The last view presents a more balanced approach and focuses both on the form and content of the Qur'an. For Leaman, this is a more plausible candidate for understanding the miraculousness phenomenon and worth examining in detail.⁶ Leaman considers 'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani and Said Nursi to be significant proponents of the last view. Leaman concentrates on evaluating Nursi's ideas probably because Nursi claims and exemplifies that the miraculousness of the Qur'an can be seen in a very small part of it, consisting of not more than a few verses. Leaman evaluates two main examples from Nursi.

As for the first example, Nursi pays attention to the verses in which God states His own creative action. For example, consider the following verses: "O earth, swallow up your waters! And, O sky, cease [your rain]!" (11:44); "And He directed [His Knowledge, Will, Power, and Favor] to the heaven when it was as a cloud [of gases], and ordered it and the earth, 'Come both of you, willingly or unwillingly!' They said: 'We have come in willing obedience'" (41:11).

In these verses, the speaker is God Himself and He gives orders to be executed. As Leaman notices, these orders are totally different from human orders because divine orders result in the realization of the relevant activity, whereas such orders can never be realized if given by human beings. It is the performative meaning of such verses, as Leaman notes, that brings about an extraordinary dimension to the miraculousness phenomenon. Leaman has two observations here. First, he thinks that a small part of the Qur'an, such as these verses, reflects the whole meaning of the Qur'an and these short verses should not be evaluated independently of the whole text. That is to say, arguing for the miraculousness of the Qur'an on the basis of a smaller part thereof does not have any privilege over arguing for the miraculousness of the whole Qur'an. Secondly, Leaman thinks that such verses cannot be used to establish that the Qur'an is miraculous because they can only serve to support such a conclusion if we are already convinced that the speaker of the Qur'an is God. If it is really God who is speaking in the text, then we can easily see the absurdity to expect the same creative activity from creatures. Yet Leaman comments, "This is what the text is supposed to prove," and thus he considers such an argument to be circular.⁷

The second example of Nursi concerns the following verse: "If a breath of Your Lord's punishment touches them" ("*Wa la in massathum nafhatun min 'adhabii Rabbika*") (21:46). According to Nursi, this verse makes us think about the totality of God's punishment by showing the intensity of just a little part of it. Thus the words in this verse are chosen exactly to express the scarcity of the punishment. In Leaman's terms, "This passage stresses the restraint of God's action, and matches it with literary restraint."⁸ Let us see how Nursi interprets this verse from this perspective:

⁴ Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics*, 153, 159–61; Leaman, *Controversies*, 27. Note that Leaman refers to the issues of truth and practical guidance in relation to this approach but does not explicitly mention the future predictions of the Qur'an that had been realized. For example, at the time of Prophet, the Sasanites defeated the Byzantine Romans. The Qur'an (30:4–5) stated that the Romans will defeat the Sasanites in a few years, and it happened as it was predicted. Another example is the 111th chapter of the Qur'an, al-Masad, which is about the Prophet's unbelieving uncle, Abu Lahab, and says the he will enter the hellfire (because he did not confirmed the message of God). This chapter was revealed prior to Abu Lahab's death. Had he wished to negate the Qur'an, he could have simply accepted Islam, since the third verse says, "He will enter to burn in a Fire of blazing flame," yet the fact that he died as a nonbeliever is further testimony to the veracity and miraculousness of the Qur'an insofar as God revealed what He knew would happen by His will.

⁵ Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics*, 154, 158. Note also that Leaman considers the Mu'tazilis to be followers of the second view in *Islamic Aesthetics* but cites them when he presents the first view in *Controversies in Contemporary Islam*. See Leaman, *Controversies*, 27.

⁶ Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics*, 159–64; Leaman, *Controversies*, 28–31.

⁷ Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics*, 162–3.

⁸ Leaman, *Controversies*, 28.

1. The Arabic term *in*, which expresses the if-conditional, plays a role of decreasing the severity of punishment by implying a hypothetical scenario and doubt.
2. The term *massathum* denotes a slight contact or touching. In comparison to other words that may imply firmer or heavier contacts such as hitting, this chosen word serves for the aim of diminishing the effect of the punishment.
3. The term *nafhatun* refers to a light wind in comparison to a storm or strong atmospheric phenomena and also emphasizes scarcity.
4. The term *min*, the preposition *from* in English, implies a departure from the whole and thus a diminished effect.
5. The phrase *‘adhabi Rabbika* (“your Lord’s punishment”) makes use of the divine name *Rabb* (Lord) rather than some other names such as *Jabbar* and *Qahhar* that imply an exercise of power for a much stronger punishment.⁹

In conclusion, an emphasis on scarcity (*qilla*) unifies all the words and their meaning in this verse and integrates the parts into a whole. The parallels between the structures of language and the intended meaning are a highly effective means of conveying the divine message necessary for humanity. Leaman states that, from this point of view, eloquence serves to underscore the basic truths of the Qur’an and to see the world constantly from the perspective of these truths. This close tie between the truths and eloquence helps the believer maintain a straight path until death. In this sense, meaning and style become distinct but interrelated aspects of the miraculousness of the Qur’an.¹⁰

According to Leaman, al-Jurjani’s approach to the miraculousness of the Qur’an, as has been described above, is particularly appealing because, in this view, the style depends upon “entirely objective” elements such as “the economy of expression”, “the variety of ways of illustrating the same point”, “the compelling nature of the prose,” and so on.¹¹ Leaman notes that Nursi is influenced by al-Jurjani’s view and particularly interested in the idea that everything within the Qur’an is in its perfect place and cannot be satisfactorily replaced by something else.¹²

Leaman finds similarities between al-Jurjani’s and Nursi’s respective approaches to the miraculousness of the Qur’an and the design argument for the existence of God. The proponents of the design argument consider certain arrangements of facts to be examples of design from which they make an inference to the existence of a designer. Similarly, Nursi considers the arrangement of the Qur’anic phrases to be in a perfect order. As being part of a perfect order, each phrase indicates “the existence and authority of a divine creator”.¹³

Nonetheless, Leaman points out a classical objection to the design argument, namely, that examples of design might not be as objective as they appear at first glance. For example, some people may consider eye to be a perfect design and others may regard it as an outcome of chance and evolutionary processes. Thus, Leaman concludes, “One can always disagree with the wonderful design that others see in both nature and a text.”¹⁴ For Leaman, al-Jurjani’s and Nursi’s views of the miraculousness of the Qur’an do not rely upon objective standards, but appeal to aesthetic judgments, which can be defended by some and yet rejected by others, and thus, in his view, they do not give any compelling evidence to convince everyone that the Qur’an is miraculous.

⁹ Said Nursi, *Mubakemat* (Istanbul: Sözler Yayınevi, 2004).

¹⁰ Leaman, *Controversies*, 28–9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 30.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

SAID NURSI'S VIEW ON THE MIRACULOUSNESS OF THE QUR'AN

In this section, I present Nursi's view on the miraculousness of the Qur'an by illuminating the aspects that are overlooked by Leaman but play a significant role in Nursi's view. In doing this, I discuss Leaman's criticisms and show that they start from problematic assumptions.

Nursi has two significant periods within his intellectual career. In his earlier period, which he calls the period of "Old Said", Nursi deals with the issue of inimitability of the Qur'an in two important works: *The Reasonings (Mubaqamat)* and *The Signs of Inimitability (Isyarat al-i'jaz)*.¹⁵ *Mubaqamat* includes a chapter entitled "The Elements of Eloquence" (*unsur al-balagha*) where Nursi presents his view of eloquence and its important elements and aspects by giving several examples both from the Qur'an and from other Arabic literature. In *The Signs of Inimitability*, he analyzes each verse of the Qur'an beginning from the Fatiha until the thirty-second verse of al-Baqara in terms of the view presented in the "The Elements of Eloquence".

In this chapter, we clearly see that Nursi assumes and advocates 'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani's view of eloquence. Al-Jurjani gives meaning priority over words and considers the miraculousness of the Qur'an to be a quality that results from the arrangements of meanings (*nazm al-ma'ani*).¹⁶ As Margaret Larkin and Kees Versteegh point out, for al-Jurjani, words cannot be regarded as eloquent by themselves and always need a proper context to become eloquent. That is to say, when the words are arranged in a perfect way to give the intended meaning, then eloquence appears.¹⁷

Nursi extends al-Jurjani's approach and states that the meanings of the Qur'an have their roots in the truths about the universe. The arrangements of meanings go in parallel with the order of the universe. Thus, meaning is closely connected to truth. However, there is also an emphasis on expressing the meanings, because expressing their arrangement in a correct and complete way is possible only by language. If, for example, you choose an inappropriate word, you may not express the intended meaning correctly or completely. Thus, linguistic expressions or words (*lafz*) produce an important aspect of eloquence as well. However, Nursi's maxim about the link between meaning (*ma'na*) and expression (*lafz*) is that "the words should serve for expressing the meaning not vice versa" or "the linguistic expressions may be polished and decorated only if they do not hurt the meaning."¹⁸ So according to Nursi, what is fundamental in eloquence is the meaning rather than linguistic expressions, although both of them are necessary for a proper account of eloquence.

In *Isyarat al-i'jaz*, Nursi exemplifies in original ways the view of eloquence he describes in "The Elements of Eloquence". Let us look at how he analyzes the eloquence of the Fatiha. Nursi contends that there are four main themes in the Qur'an: the existence and uniqueness of God (*tarwihid*), prophecy (*nubuwwa*), the existence of resurrection and afterlife (*hasbr*), and justice (*'adala*).¹⁹ He argues that these four main themes can be seen in each chapter and even in some verses. The following is the way he sees these themes even in the first verse or the *Basmala* ("Bismillah, ar-Rahman, ar-Rahim").

The verses of the Qur'an are revealed to the Prophet and then, via him, to all people. For that reason, in many places in the Qur'an, God as the speaker addresses the prophet Muhammad by uttering the term "say" (*qul*). Even though there is no explicit *qul* before the *Basmala*, according to Nursi, we can assume that there is an implicit

¹⁵ Nursi, *Mubakamat*; and for its English translation, see Nursi, *The Reasonings*, Risale-i Nur Collection, trans. Hüseyin Akarsu (Somerset, NJ: Tughra Books, 2008). See also Nursi, *İşarat'ül İcaz*, vol. 2 of *Risale-i Nur Külliyatı* (Istanbul: Nesil Yayınları, 2006).

¹⁶ 'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani, *Dala'il al-i'jaz* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1984), 39, 424.

¹⁷ Kees Versteegh, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought III: The Arabic Linguistic Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 87; Margaret Larkin, *The Theology of Meaning: 'Abd al-Qābir Jurjānī's Theory of Discourse*, vol. 79, American Oriental Series (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1995), 140. Larkin's work is a more detailed analysis of al-Jurjani's view of the miraculousness phenomenon.

¹⁸ Nursi, *Mubakamat*, 1.

¹⁹ Nursi, *İşarat'ül İcaz*, 1159.

one because God is talking to His prophet so that he can distribute this message to people. This is the way the *Basmala* indicates prophecy. The names *al-Rahman* and *al-Rabim* are prefixed with the definite article *alif-lam*. The use of “the” implies that there is only one person in question, and so here indicates the existence and uniqueness of God (i.e., the idea of *tawhid*) and that there is no other deity. The name *al-Rahman* implies that God preserves the order and justice in the whole universe, while the name *al-Rabim* implies that only believers will benefit from His mercy in the afterlife. These are the implications regarding *‘adala* and *hasbr*.²⁰ Likewise, Nursi also gives interpretations about how other verses of the *Fatiha* indicate these themes.

Apart from this, Nursi tries to show how the verses and linguistic phrases in this chapter are interconnected to each other. For instance, consider his analysis of the following phrase in the seventh verse: *sirata lladhina an‘amta ‘alayhim* (“the path of those whom You have favored”):

1. There is a relation between this verse and the phrase *al-hamdu li Llab* (“all praise and gratitude are for God”) in the second verse. The term *an‘amta* (favors) shows the reason for praise and gratitude. We thank God because He favors us.
2. This verse is also connected with the phrase *Rabbi l-‘alamin* in the second verse. *Rabb* is a name of God and has the connotation of someone who trains and educates. The perfection of training is parallel to the continuation of favoring.
3. This verse is also related to the phrase *al-Rahmani r-Rabim* in the first verse because the term *alladhina*, or the relative pronoun “they”, refers to the prophets, truthful men, pious men, and martyrs, and they are the people shown the mercy of God. That these four groups of people are under the extension of this verse is known by means of the following passage of the Qur’an: “those are in the company of those whom God has favored—the prophets, the truthful ones, the witnesses, the righteous ones” (4:69).
4. It is related to the fourth verse, *Maliki yawmi d-din* (“The Master of the day of Judgment [religion]”) because the most perfect favor is the religion or to have the right religion.²¹
5. It has the following relevance to the phrase *iybaka na‘budu* (“You alone do we worship”) in the fifth verse: we pray and worship together with all believers to You, and these four groups of people are leading our prays.
6. It is also related to the phrase *iybaka nasta‘in* (“from You alone do we seek help”) in the fifth verse because these four groups are objects of favor and help.
7. It is also related to the phrase *ihdina* (“Guide us”) in the sixth verse. These four groups of people are guided and we can attain guidance if we obey them.
8. It is also related to the phrase *sirata l-mustaqim* (“the right path”) again in the sixth verse. The right path is their way.²²

Nonetheless, for Nursi the miraculousness of the Qur’an is not limited to its eloquence as described above. In “The Elements of Eloquence”, Nursi argues that there are six aspects of inimitability of the Qur’an: (1) news about future events; (2) the fact that there are no discrepancies and contradictions among the verses; (3) that its style resemble neither poetry nor prose, but it is something in between;

²⁰ Ibid., 1159.

²¹ Ali Unal translated *yawm al-din* as the Day of Judgment but Nursi interprets *al-din* as religion.

²² Nursi, *İşarat’ül İcaz*, 1161–4.

(4) that it comes from an illiterate person (*ummi*) without formal education (i.e., the prophet Muhammad); (5) that it includes truths beyond human capacity to obtain; (6) its eloquence. Nursi considers the eloquence (*balagha*) of the Qur'an to be the highest aspect of its inimitability. He adds that the aspect of eloquence in the Qur'an is beyond the capacity of human beings,²³ which implies that the Qur'an is inimitable even in terms of its eloquence by itself without considering the other aspects.

In his later career, which he calls "the period of New Said", Nursi begins to write his *Risale-i Nur Collection* and dedicates himself to advocating the fundamental belief system of Islam against any kind of criticism that may confuse people's mind. This is a period in which there were many challenges concerning the status of the Qur'an as well. Ranging from its grammar and style to its content and core propositions about human nature and the universe, many things were questioned at that time. We observe that in this period of his life, Nursi tries to defend the Qur'an against the multiplicity of objections as much as he can.

In such a social context, Nursi remarks, "There are forty aspects of the inimitability of the Qur'an for forty different types of people."²⁴ We see clearly here how he explicitly relativizes the aspects of inimitability. He also admits that one aspect of inimitability accepted by a certain group of people may not be understood by another.²⁵ One aspect of inimitability, for instance, is the frequent repetitions within the Qur'an. As a response to the challenges that aim to show that the Qur'an is imperfect, because it includes many repetitions, Nursi advocates the usage of repetitions. According to Nursi, the Qur'an is not only a literary work but also a book that guides people, teaches them how to act, and even how to pray. If you educate and train somebody, you should emphasize the important points by repeating them. The repetitions within the Qur'an also appear with slight differences in each different context and thus bring certain nuances to the meaning of the text.²⁶ In these senses, repetitions are not points of imperfection but of perfection, which are not seen by some people. Nursi considers repetitions to be "a flash of inimitability" and people who argue against them are unable to see where the perfection associated to them lies. Anybody can write a book that has repetitions for the purpose of education. Thus, repetition is a miraculous aspect of the Qur'an not in the sense that it is impossible to perform such a task but in the sense that it is a perfection that is not seen or recognized by some people.

Most of the aspects of inimitability Nursi mentions in this period should be considered to be perfections in the sense explained above. He extensively analyzes different types of perfections, which he did not deal with in detail in his earlier period even though he pointed out some of them. He continues to give analyses of eloquent perfection that presupposes appropriate relations between linguistic expressions and their meanings. Apart from that, he also gives purely stylistic analyzes, which focus only on linguistic expressions (*lafz*).

One of the original aspects of the Qur'anic style he discovers in this period is his recognition of the orderly arrangement of some phrases in the Qur'an when written in a special form. Nursi recognizes that if the Qur'an is written in a special manner, which is later called "the Hüsrev type of handwriting" (*Hüsrev hattı*), some special words are repeated in an orderly manner. For instance, there are eight or nine instances of the word *Allah* (God) in the same perpendicular line in many pages of the Qur'an.

²³ Ibid., 1233.

²⁴ Nursi, *Mektubat*, vol. 1 of *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* (Istanbul: Nesil Yayınları, 2001), 440.

²⁵ Ibid., 542.

²⁶ Nursi, *Sözler*, vol. 1 of *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* (Istanbul: Nesil Yayınları, 2001), 95, 176.

Nursi's analyses of the perfection of the content include social-economic principles, ways of looking at reality and the universe in general, predictions about the future, and so forth. His remarks on these matters do not imply any linguistic or stylistic perfection. For instance, by referring to the verses (2:43) and (2:275),²⁷ he explains why charity is necessary and why charging interest is defective for a stable society. To Nursi, there are two sentences that give rise to a disaster in a society: "I should not be hungry but I don't care about others" and "You will work and I will gain profit from you." The two ideas expressed in these sentences gave rise to a big social disaster in Europe. The upper economic class became oppressive and merciless to the lower class by uttering the first sentence, and the second idea triggered the rage and resentment among people in the lower class against the upper one. The result was a clash between the two economic classes that destroyed Europe. For Nursi, the Qur'an cures the first idea by necessitating charity and cures the second by forbidding charging interest.²⁸

As we have seen, Nursi understands the main aspect of the miraculousness of the Qur'an in terms of an interrelated link between its style and content but also suggests that there are miraculous aspects ranging from purely formal properties to truths that do not have to be related to any stylistic qualities. Leaman overlooks these aspects of the miraculousness phenomenon; however, this is not a major defect in his interpretation. The main problem lies in his interpretation of Nursi's view on the miraculousness of the Qur'an as understood even only in terms of eloquence. Leaman does not seem to have understood what conclusion Nursi derives from this miraculousness phenomenon and the exact structure of Nursi's argument for that conclusion.

As presented above, Leaman thinks that the miraculous phenomenon—the sublime structure of the Qur'an, which is a perfect combination of form and content—points to the existence of a divine being much the way that the design of the world indicates a designer. That is to say, such an argument for the existence of God is similar in its logical structure to the argument from design. Thus, for Leaman, such an argument would be at best persuasive as the design argument is but not conclusive. However, Leaman is mistaken in his interpretation of the logical structure of Nursi's argument that concerns the miraculousness of the Qur'an. Nursi does not try to prove the existence of God from the miraculousness phenomenon. The existence of God is not intended to be established but is presupposed by Nursi's argument. Following the mainstream Ash'ari view, Nursi holds that the existence and uniqueness of God must be proved without appealing to the Qur'an. Otherwise the argument would be circular.²⁹ The Ash'aris argue that the existence and uniqueness of God must be initially proved on the basis of an inference from the observable world. Only then can miracles serve to establish something, which is to confirm the truthfulness of a prophet who claims to deliver a message from God, whose existence and uniqueness have been already accepted.

Versteegh notes that the issue of the miraculousness of the Qur'an entered the kalam books from the ninth century onwards. The place one can find this issue is the context of prophecy.³⁰ This is a significant observation because it shows that the *mutakallimun* or scholastic theologians intended to use the inimitability of the Qur'an (*i'jaz al-Qur'an*) not to justify the existence of God but rather the prophecy claim of Muhammad. Thus, from the Ash'ari point of view, Muhammad presented the Qur'an as a message of God to all humanity but did not

²⁷ "Establish the Prayer, and pay the Prescribed Purifying Alms [the *Zakab*]; and bow [in the Prayer, not by forming a different community or congregation, but] together with those who bow [the Muslims]" (2:43); "As to those who devour interest [even though they seem, for a time, to be making a profit], they turn out like one whom Satan has bewitched and confounded by his touch [and they will rise up from their graves in the same way before God]. That is because they say interest is just like trading, whereas God has made trading lawful, and interest unlawful. To whomever an instruction comes from his Lord, and he desists [from interest], he may keep his past gains [legally], and his affair is committed to God [If he repents sincerely and never again reverts to taking interest, he may hope that God will forgive him]. But whoever reverts to it [by judging it to be lawful], they are companions of the Fire; therein they will abide" (2:275).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

²⁹ Nursi, *İşarat'ül İcaz*, 1242.

³⁰ Versteegh, *Landmarks*, 120.

appeal to the Qur'an to prove the existence and uniqueness of God. Rather, he drew attention to the observable world to support his claim concerning God. This is indeed what the Qur'an guided him to do. Muhammad showed many miracles, among which the Qur'an itself is the greatest, in order to support the claim that he is a true messenger of God. Thus, for Nursi and the Ash'aris, the miraculousness of the Qur'an does not prove the existence of God but justifies the truthfulness of the prophet Muhammad, who presented the Qur'an to people as an indubitable message of God.

Why is this point important? It is important because identifying clearly what the miraculousness of the Qur'an purports to justify affects the plausibility of the argument to a great extent. Leaman identifies the aim of Nursi's argument with supporting the existence of God and thus diminishes the strength of the argument, which indeed purports to confirm the prophecy claim of Muhammad. Leaman is aware that prophetic miracles are always associated with a prophecy claim within the kalam tradition that Nursi follows. Leaman mentions the well-known distinction between *mu'jizat* and *karamat*. The former concern the extraordinary phenomena associated with prophets and the latter concern the extraordinary phenomena associated with pious people who are not prophets.³¹ However, Leaman pays no attention to the claim of prophecy connected to miracles when he evaluates the link between miracles and what they are supposed to indicate. Nursi says:

The miracle is the confirmation by the Creator of the cosmos of his [Muhammad's] declaration of prophethood; it has the effect of the words "You have spoken truly!". Suppose that you said in the assembly of a ruler, while being observed by him, "The ruler has appointed me to such-and-such a position." At the time when you were asked for a proof of your claim, the word *yes* uttered by the ruler would sufficiently support you. Or, if the ruler changed his usual practice and attitude at your request, this would affirm your claim even more soundly and more definitely than would the word *yes*.

In the same way, the Noble Messenger (upon whom be blessings and peace) claimed: "I am the envoy of the Creator of the universe. My proof is that He will change His unbroken order at my request and my prayer."³²

Thus, the Qur'an is a *mu'jiza* (i.e., a prophetic miracle) in the sense Nursi describes and must be considered to be evidence for the truthfulness of Muhammad. Given this, Nursi puts much stress on the concept of God and the idea of *tawhid*—the uniqueness of God. He presents a multitude of arguments that aim to prove the existence of God, Singular and Transcendent, utilising only our observations of the universe and to show how the universe serves to understand various attributes of God. Nursi points out that the Qur'an describes God coherently with the results we acquired from our observations of the universe. Thus, the universe confirms the essential message of the Qur'an, namely, *tawhid*. This is a crucial point because any prophecy claim or message that is supposed to be sent from God must be coherent with our observations of the universe. If anybody claims that he is a prophet and brings a message from God, from Nursi's point of view, he must primarily declare the idea of *tawhid*. If not, his claim is immediately rejected. Thus, the

³¹ Leaman, *Controversies*, 27.

³² Nursi, *The Letters*, Risale-i Nur Collection, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözler, 2001), 120. See also his *Mektubat*, vol. 1 of *Risale-i Nur Külliyatı* (Istanbul: Nesil Yayınları, 2001), 388.

idea of *tawhid* gives us a criterion to examine any prophecy claim, and we can make sense of a significant aspect of the challenging verses in the following way. The speaker of the Qur'an is God. He is unique, transcendent, all-powerful, all-knowing, and so forth. These are the points we come to know from our observations of the universe. If anyone wants to meet the challenge of the Qur'an, he must come up with a message from this God. The speaker of his text must be this God.

Recall Leaman's evaluation of Nursi's analysis of the following verse: "O earth, swallow up your waters! And, O sky, cease [your rain!]" (11:44). Leaman rightly notes that this is a divine order and does not resemble human orders because God has power to realize what He orders in this verse. This verse is a "performative utterance", a term introduced by John Austin to refer to the sentences whose utterance leads to an action.³³ It is like a father naming his baby by saying "I name you 'John'." By saying this, the name of the baby becomes "John" because his father is the appropriate person to give his name. On Austin's view, performative utterances do not attain truth-values (truth or falsity) because they do not describe a case. Rather they are either happy (successful) or unhappy (unsuccessful). There are certain conditions under which they can be regarded as happy, and he calls them "felicity conditions".³⁴ If a father names his baby, a felicity condition for the act of naming is satisfied, but it is not satisfied when a doctor names the baby (of course independently of his parents' intention). Similarly, to issue an order like the one in the verse above (11:44), one must satisfy the condition of having power over earth and sky. Thus, a human being cannot even pretend to give such an order because of their apparent weaknesses. As a result, they cannot meet the challenge of the Qur'an to bring about a similar text—even such a short verse. In addition, in order to see this force of the verse above, we do not have to consider the total world of meanings of the Qur'an as Leaman suggested. Instead, an appreciation of the idea of *tawhid* is sufficient to understand that people cannot meet the challenge of producing such a verse because they do not possess divine attributes. Nonetheless, people's inability to produce a similar verse, or a text, does not conclusively establish that the text in question has a divine origin. How do we know positively that the Qur'an is a real message from God? As we recall, concerning Nursi's analysis of this verse, Leaman commented that it works as an argument for the miraculousness phenomenon only if we already know that the author of the Qur'an is God. But how do we know it? To summarize Nursi's argument the Qur'anic description of God and His action in the universe are confirmed by arguments based on our observation of the universe. This is a sure indication that the Qur'an is not an ordinary and unimportant text to be rejected. It is a text worth considering seriously. Yet we need more premises to definitely establish that it really comes from God.

Toward the conclusion that the Qur'an has a divine origin, I should point out a key premise in Nursi's argument, which is entirely overlooked by Leaman. In relation to the Qur'an, Nursi claims that there are only two valid options concerning the claim of prophecy. The Qur'an is either revealed to Muhammad by God (thus Muhammad is honest and truthful in his claim) or the book is forged and composed by him. If Muhammad composed it by himself, then he would be the most immoral and dishonest liar in this world because he spoke in the name of God and presented his ideas as the view of God. However, this cannot be true because Muhammad was known as a very honest,

³³ John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

truthful, and moral person even by Meccan unbelievers. As such there is no other option than to consider the claim of prophecy as valid.³⁵

Nursi does not consider any other option regarding this case to be genuine. He rejects the proposal that Muhammad was possibly hallucinating or deceived by a demon though being honest in his vision and experience. Nursi reasons as follows. Muhammad or his friends near him were quite intelligent to be able to distinguish delusion from reality. Muhammad changed the lifestyle of a community, directed many wars and won most of them. His Companions conquered many lands and fought with Byzantine and Persia and ultimately came out victorious. These achievements certainly need to rely on some strategies developed by highly intelligent people. These intelligent Companions found no mark of delusion in Muhammad and obeyed his orders and suggestions as much as they could.³⁶

We may consider intelligent (yet immoral) leaders of the twentieth century such as Hitler and Stalin as counterexamples to this argument. However, the analogy does not work here because Muhammad is charged with delusion, not with obsession—a more appropriate property to describe the psychological state of the tyrannous leaders of the twentieth century mentioned above. In addition, these leaders never claimed to have revelation from God.

Since we have only two options in question, one cannot say, for instance, that Muhammad was honest, had a moral character *and* forged a book entitled “the Qur’an”. This is inconsistent because the Qur’an by itself declares that the worst wrongdoer is the person who fabricates falsehood against God (6:93).³⁷ Therefore Muhammad says the truth and the Qur’an has a divine origin.³⁸ Keep in mind that we have already accepted the necessary existence of a divine being (the Creator of the universe) to be able to propose this argument.

Now we must choose between these two options because only one of them is true. Nursi argues that we do not even have to appeal to miracles in order to identify the true option. He draws attention to the case of ‘Abd Allah ibn Salam, a Jewish scholar, who visited Muhammad and said, “There is no lie in this face,” and then became a Muslim. According to Nursi, even a small sign for the truthfulness of Muhammad is sufficient for his prophecy.³⁹ He gives the following illuminating analogy.

Let us imagine a tall minaret the top of which touches the skies, and at the base of which a well has been dug reaching to the center of the earth. Two groups are disputing over proving where between the top of the minaret and the bottom of the well a man should be whose call to prayer is heard by all the people throughout the country. The first group says: “He is at the top of the minaret reciting the call to prayer to the universe. Because we hear it, it is living, it is elevated. For sure, not everyone can see him in that high situation except according to their degree; yet everyone can see him in a position, on a step, when he climbs it and when he descends. They know from this that he ascends it, and wherever he appears, he is someone of high stature.” The other satanic and foolish group says, however: “No, his position is not the top of the minaret; wherever it is he appears, his place is the bottom of the well.”⁴⁰

³⁵ Nursi, *The Letters*, 366–74; and *Mektubat*, 493–5.

³⁶ Nursi, *The Letters*, 366; and *Mektubat*, 494.

³⁷ The whole verse: “Who is more in wrong than he who fabricates falsehood in attribution to God, or says, ‘I receive Revelation from God,’ when nothing has been revealed to him, and he who claims, ‘I will produce the like of what God has sent down?’ If you could but see how it will be when those wrongdoers find themselves in the agonies of death when the angels [appointed to take their souls], stretching forth their hands [say]: ‘Yield up your souls! Today you will be recompensed with the punishment of humiliation for having continuously and persistently spoken about God other than the truth, and in persistent arrogance scorned His Revelations.’”

³⁸ Nursi, *The Letters*, 366; and *Mektubat*, 494.

³⁹ Nursi, *The Letters*, 121; and *Mektubat*, 388.

⁴⁰ Nursi, *The Letters*, 396.

In this analogy, the call for prayer is the prophecy claim of Muhammad. It is heard by all the people throughout the country, namely, that he announced he has brought the message of God to everyone. The first group is the believers in his message. They accept that he is a true messenger of God by all his miracles. That is to say, the true place of the person who calls to prayer is at the top of the minaret. The other group is the people who deny the prophecy of Muhammad. In other words, they believe that his true place is the bottom of the well. Now, everybody “can see him in a position, on a step, when he climbs it and when he descends”. Walking on steps or being seen on a certain step in the analogy refers to the signs of his honesty and truthfulness. The disagreement between these two groups turns around whether seeing him on a step supports the thesis of the first group or that of the second. Nursi continues,

Now, the battlefield of these two opposing groups is the long distance stretching from the top of the minaret to the bottom of the well. The people of light, called God’s Party, point out the muezzin at the top of the minaret to those with an elevated view. And to those whose sight cannot rise that far and to the shortsighted, they show that supreme muezzin on a step each according to his degree. A slight hint is enough for them and proves that the muezzin is not a lifeless mass like a stone, but a perfect man who climbs upwards and appears and makes the call to prayer when he wishes. As for the other group, known as Satan’s Party, they pronounce stupidly: “Show him to everyone at the top of the minaret, or else his place is the bottom of the well.” In their stupidity they do not know that his not being shown to everyone at the top of the minaret arises from everyone’s sight not rising that far. Also, in exaggerated fashion, they want to claim possession of the whole distance with the exception of the top of the minaret.⁴¹

Nursi asserts that seeing the person who calls to prayer (i.e., the muezzin) on a step supports the thesis of the first group and considers the second group’s attempt to make use of this observation on their behalf to be a sophistry. To see Nursi’s argument more clearly, examine the following passage:

Then someone appears in order to solve the dispute between the two communities. He says to Satan’s Party: “You inauspicious group! Had the position of that supreme muezzin been the bottom of the well, he would have to have been lifeless, inanimate, and powerless like a stone. It could not have been him who appeared on the well’s steps and minaret’s degrees. Since you see him there, he is certain not to be powerless, lifeless, and without reality. His position will be at the top of the minaret. In which case, either show him at the bottom of the well—which in no way can you do, nor could you make anyone believe that he is there—or be silent! The arena of your defence is the well’s bottom. The remaining arena and long distance is the arena of this blessed community; wherever they show him to be other than the bottom of the well, they will win the case.”⁴²

⁴¹ Ibid., 397.

Nursi uses the analogy of stone to dramatize the hypothetical scenario in which Muhammad is considered to be dishonest and lying to people. A stone is an inanimate and heavy object that cannot walk up the stairs and thus must be located at the bottom of the well. Similarly, if Muhammad is considered to have forged the Qur'an and deceived people, then, in Nursi's terms, that "would necessitate his descending from the highest of the high to the lowest of the low, and from the degree of being the source of accomplishments and perfections to the level of being a mine of trickery and intrigue; he could not remain between the two. For one who lies and fabricates in God's name falls to the very lowest of degrees".⁴³ In such a case, like a stone he could not find a place other than the bottom of the well. Because of this, any sign of his honesty, truthfulness that ranges from ordinary to the miraculous, supports the other option, namely, that he is a true messenger of God.

As Nursi points out in the analogy, everyone cannot see the muezzin at the top of the minaret. That is to say, not everybody has witnessed all the miracles he showed. In addition, not everybody can appreciate certain miraculous aspects of the Qur'an. Nonetheless, according to Nursi's argument, this insufficiency and lack of witnessing do not undermine the ability to judge that the Qur'an has a divine origin and Muhammad is a prophet.

Let us reconsider Leaman's criticism. As you may recall, Leaman finds similarities between the argument from design and the argument from the miraculousness of the Qur'an. For him, the design argument does not objectively imply the existence of a designer, and likewise the miraculousness of the Qur'an does not objectively show that it comes from a divine being. Both the phenomena of design and miraculousness of the Qur'an are subject to subjective aesthetic judgments that may differ from people to people.

Leaman's appeal to the design argument misleads him in his analysis of the miraculousness of the Qur'an, in general, and Nursi's argument, in particular. Nursi does not only rely on some wonderful aspects of the Qur'an in arguing for its divine origin. He initially identifies two inconsistent options for the origin of the Qur'an and affirms its divine origin by denying the other on the basis of any evidence that supports the truthfulness of the prophet Muhammad. The wonderful aspects of the Qur'an can also be considered to be evidence among many others for his truthfulness because they support his claim that the Qur'an is inimitable. Yet, for Nursi, everybody may not understand and appreciate all the wonderful and miraculous aspects of the Qur'an. Some of these aspects may require an aesthetic appreciation and they are therefore subjective.

The subjectivity in question is not necessarily something that concerns only a given individual. Some eloquent aspects of language may have an inter-subjective basis in a certain linguistic community. For example, imagine a poet whose poems are highly esteemed by a circle of poets but also disregarded by another circle. This case indicates the difficulty to find aesthetic criteria accepted by everybody. However, it also shows that people can agree upon certain aesthetic criteria, and judge works of art on the basis of such common criteria.

The Qur'an was revealed in a linguistic community that had a certain sense of literary beauty and eloquence. Literary discourse came into prominence among the Arabs of the pre-Islamic era. Poetry was so admired in Mecca that the best seven poems were written in golden ink

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 371.

and hung on the walls of the Kaaba each year. The Prophet primarily challenged these people to bring about a text like the Qur'an. Although nobody has the sense of eloquence those Meccans had, according to Nursi, everybody can understand that the Meccan unbelievers were not able to respond to that challenge. Nursi makes use of the following classical argument proposed by Jahiz to justify this point.

There were many famous poets and people who had a talent of literacy among the Meccan unbelievers. However, they preferred to exercise oppressive power over the Muslims, forced them to leave Mecca, and fought them after they left instead of producing a work like the Qur'an. Yet, producing a work like the Qur'an was the easiest way to prevent the growth of the Muslim community because if the challenge of the Qur'an were satisfied, no one would have believed it anymore and Islam would have disappeared from the earth. And this should have been very simple and easy for them because of their skills and proficiency in poetry, prose, or literature in general. Since they were not able to perform such a task, they preferred the more difficult way of fighting. As a consequence, their lives, properties, and economies fell into danger. No plausible men would prefer such a harmful way, if the other easier way were available. This fact shows that the way of producing a work like the Qur'an was closed for them and they were unable to do it, although they extremely needed it.⁴⁴

The argument continues: We know that there was no real response to the Qur'an's challenge at that time for the following reason. If there were such a response, it would be known among the Arabs because that was really what they needed. If it were known, it could not have remained hidden because the unbelievers, who were more powerful than the Muslims, would not have allowed it to remain hidden. Yet there is no such work known in history. There are some writings belonging to Musaylima (Muslim ibn Habib), who lived during that time. The Meccan unbelievers did not seriously consider Musaylima's work as a counter-challenge to the Qur'an and preferred the more difficult way as mentioned above.⁴⁵

The inability of the Meccans to meet the challenge of the Qur'an showed that the eloquence of the Qur'an was far beyond their capability. In relation to the aspect of eloquence they were incapable of producing, a miraculous aspect of the Qur'an became apparent and served to support Muhammad's claim of prophecy.

CONCLUSION

According to Nursi, there are as many as forty different aspects of the miraculousness of the Qur'an. Everybody may not appreciate the perfection of all these aspects. Certain aspects can be considered to be relative to certain groups of people. However, a certain aspect for the right person may help them see the inimitable character of the Qur'an when that person judges the aspect in question against the prophecy claim of Muhammad. For Nursi, even a minor sign of the honesty and truthfulness of Muhammad is sufficient to evaluate his prophecy claim without considering any miracles. Nursi's argument for the divine origin of the Qur'an does not appeal to some characteristics of the text to support the existence of God. Rather, the argument builds on other arguments that infer the existence and uniqueness of God from the universe and presents the Qur'an as a message from this God via His messenger Muhammad. Muhammad, with the Qur'an at his hand,

⁴⁴ Nursi, *Sözler*, 162-3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

stated that the book is a message from God and challenged people who had doubt about his prophecy. Without considering this background and the role of the prophecy claim, one cannot understand the function of the miraculousness phenomenon and what it aims to prove. Leaman commits exactly the mistake of ignoring these dimensions of Nursi's argument. The argument Leaman ascribes to Nursi is much weaker than its original form and thus much easier to criticize. By presenting Nursi's argument this way and criticizing it severely, Leaman thus commits the fallacy of straw man.